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Abstract: Aristotle (384-322 BC) was an ancient Greek philosopher, pupil of Plato, and tutor of Alexander the Great. His works span the topics of biology, metaphysics, mind, logic, language, science, epistemology, ethics, and politics. Aristotle held that there are many divine beings, but a supremely divine being is the first cause of the universe and the goodness of all other beings. This divine being plays a fundamental explanatory role in Aristotle's thought.

1. Life and works

Aristotle was born in 384 BC in the Macedonian city of Stagira. Shortly after the death of his father Nichomachus, Aristotle traveled to Athens and studied with Plato (see [wbiee0301](#)) at the Academy. By 342 BC he had become tutor to Alexander the Great. During Alexander's conquest of Asia, Aristotle founded his own school in Athens: the Lyceum. After Alexander's death, Aristotle fled to Chalcis where he died in 322 BC.

It would be difficult to overstate Aristotle's impact on philosophy. His views dominated the Western intellectual landscape following the recovery of his works in the medieval period, and views inspired and informed by Aristotle's are prominent contenders in philosophy today.

In addition to influencing philosophy through his substantive views, Aristotle helped shape the discipline by providing a way of partitioning philosophical inquiry. The fraction of his works we have are the first recorded systematic treatments of the subjects that still comprise major areas of philosophy: metaphysics, mind, logic, language, philosophy of

science, epistemology, ethics, and politics.

In dividing areas of philosophical inquiry Aristotle proceeds first according to the aim of the science. Theoretical sciences aim at knowledge of truth, practical sciences at action, and productive sciences at beautiful or useful products (*Metaphysics* E). The remaining divisions are based on differences between objects of study. The highest branch of science is theoretical and treats the noblest subjects: he calls this first philosophy. The question of what first philosophy consists in has special relevance here, since he indicates in his *Metaphysics* that it must be theology.

2. Theology

In *Metaphysics* E 1 Aristotle makes the case for first philosophy as a study of “being qua being,” (1025b2). Sciences such as mathematics and natural philosophy, he argues, take for granted the existence and essences of their objects. But we must have a science that can pronounce on the question of whether these objects genuinely have being. Aristotle argues that natural philosophy and mathematics study being in a circumscribed way: natural philosophy treats changeable, material objects, and mathematics treats unchangeable, immaterial objects. An architectonic science will uncover the principles and causes of being in the unqualified sense (that is, not just as material or as changeable, but as being). If there is something that exhibits being in an unqualified way, then the science of this must be prior to natural philosophy and mathematics. He concludes that there must be three theoretical sciences: natural philosophy, mathematics, and theology (1026a19-20). Aristotle concludes by noting how this placement of theology fits the general methodological principle that “the most honorable science must deal with the most honorable class of subject”; since the divine is the noblest thing, study of the divine is the noblest science (1026a21-22).

What Aristotle means by “theology” is difficult to discern, both because it is not what we typically mean when we use the term and because of an interpretive problem it appears to create. Some interpreters attribute to Aristotle inconsistent views about the enterprise of first

philosophy based on his remarks about theology in *Metaphysics E* (Bonitz 1890). If theology is first philosophy, then its subject matter is circumscribed to one *kind* of being, namely, the divine. But if first philosophy studies being universally, then all beings should fall under its purview. On what is called the developmental reading, the claim that first philosophy is theology belongs in Aristotle's earlier thought, which is less developed and closer to that of his teacher, Plato (Jaeger 1948). On what is called the deflationary reading, "being qua being" is a property, and so study of this will not entail any ontological commitments about beings such as god, but rather operates at the conceptual level (Owens 1951).

Recently the debate about whether Aristotelian theology is about universal or circumscribed being has seen renewed interest in the Thomistic and Averroist interpretations. On a prominent Thomistic reading, there are many modes of being, but first philosophy studies, primarily, the core mode. The supremely divine being exemplifies this mode, therefore the proper ontological object of first philosophy is the divine (see eopr0295, eopr0038, eopr0024). However, an understanding of all other modes of being (e.g. being qua material being) is parasitic on understanding of being qua being; and so by studying that which exhibits being in the focal sense, first philosophy will also shed light on all other kinds of being (Frede 1987, Duarte 2007).

3. *The Unmoved-Mover*

In his study of universal being, Aristotle aims to give an account of reality that preserves the appearances, adequately explains its foundations, and make progress in solving certain perennial puzzles. In doing so, Aristotle finds need to invoke the divine at several points.

He conceives of the divine as a first cause of the universe. To the modern ear, it is easy to hear this as signaling a cosmological argument (see eopr0282), as though the divine causes the event of creation by preceding it. But Aristotle believes that the universe is eternal; thus there is no need to bring in a divine being to explain its beginning (*Physics VIII*). Additionally, Aristotle claims there are four kinds of cause, each

of which must be invoked to give a full account of the universe. Efficient, material, formal, and final causes must be put to work in a complete account (*Metaphysics* Γ). In a complete account of an oak tree, Aristotle will invoke the wood the tree is made of as the material cause, the acorn as the efficient cause of the tree's coming to be, the form of the oak as the formal cause in virtue of which the tree belongs to that kind, and the best life-activity of the oak as the final cause—that for the sake of which it possesses certain powers and actualizes them.

We might think that Aristotle could give an account of the universe without any first cause by identifying the four causes for each kind of thing in a piecemeal way. But Aristotle sees two questions such an account would not answer: (1) How do the finite motions of finite entities compose an infinite series of motions? (2) What determines the natures of those entities? He argues that there must be an unmoved-mover: a being whose motion can explain the motion of all movable things, but whose motion does not itself require further explanation. Secondly, according to Aristotle, everything in nature tends toward the realization of its end because that end is good and desirable (*Metaphysics* Λ 8). But what explains the desirability of all finite ends is their resemblance to, and participation in, an infinite good or end. The unmoved-mover is supremely desirable, not wanting for anything; it moves everything else in the universe by being supremely good and desirable, such that other things seek to imitate it.

4. *Pure actuality*

In the argument for the unmoved-mover, Aristotle invokes the notion of motion. A complete metaphysics will have to give an account of what motion is. For Aristotle, motion is a kind of change, and an understanding of the principles of change is the key to understanding composite material beings. Here again, Aristotle's supremely divine being plays a key role.

Aristotle develops his theory of change such that it is equipped to solve a series of Presocratic puzzles. The Eleatic philosophers

Parmenides and Zeno famously argue that a rational investigation of the matter gives the lie to the apparent reality of change (*Physics* VII). Parmenides famously asserts the principle that we cannot reason or speak sensibly about nonbeing; for nonbeing does not exist, so there is nothing for us to speak or reason *about* with respect to nonbeing. This principle proves to be an obstacle to explaining the kind of change that occurs when something comes into existence. For example, if I brew a pot of coffee in the morning it seems a change has occurred: when I woke, there was no coffee, but now there is. To countenance this change, though, I have to refer to the nonbeing of the coffee when I woke up, violating Parmenides' principle. Suppose we concede to Parmenides that there is no change from nothing to something, but we still want to countenance changes in the properties of existing things. When my coffee sits on the counter for an hour, it changes from being hot to cold. Here too, unfortunately, we will have to speak of nonbeing. For my coffee must have been not cold at an earlier time to have become cold at a later time. Thus again, I must violate Parmenides' principle to countenance the property change.

Aristotle's positive account of change gets around this latter problem by invoking three concepts: potentiality, actuality, and substance. Substance is the being that undergoes the change and persists through it. Potentiality is a power to be affected or to be otherwise. Actuality is what is present and existing (*Metaphysics* Θ 6, 1048b1). Here is the important move: every potentiality is a potential to be some actuality, and every potentiality is grounded in the existence of some actuality in a substance. For instance, my coffee has the actual property hot when first brewed; in virtue of what it is actually, namely hot, it is potentially cold. We can correctly say that it is not cold, since hot and cold are contraries, but we are not ascribing the nonexistent property "not-cold" to the coffee. When the coffee becomes cold, the potentiality to be cold becomes an actuality. So Aristotle can explain change without violating Parmenides' principle in referring to nonbeing. Simply put, in any change, there is a substance, x , that persists through the change, an

actual property, G, in virtue of which the substance has the potentiality to be F, and the actuality F, which the substance acquires in the change.

Aristotle explains that pure actuality—something that is not in potentiality in any respect—must be invoked to ground changes like this. Every actuality is prior “in form and substance” to a corresponding potentiality. “Thus it is obvious by this argument that actuality is prior in substantiality to potentiality, and that in point of time, as we have said, one actuality presupposes another right back to that of the prime mover in each case,” (1050b4-6). Since change always involves potentiality as well as actuality, and potentiality is always potentiality for some actuality, every change requires for its explanation some actuality, and this will be true until we get to the case of the formal and final cause of change that is not itself susceptible to change: the unmoved-mover.

5. *Mind*

What does pure actuality look like? Aristotle’s answer again invokes the divine unmoved-mover.

In characterizing actuality, Aristotle first distinguishes complete and incomplete activities. Motion is an incomplete activity. Motions like building a house involve potentiality, because that for the sake of which it occurs—erecting the house—has not yet come to be as long as the motion is happening. A complete activity, like thinking, is complete while ongoing because its end is contained in the activity (*Metaphysics* I 4). Since the supremely divine being is purely actual, it cannot be in motion. The kind of actuality it exhibits must be complete activity. Moreover, because the divine being is the ultimate final end of the universe, it must be the best thing there is. So its activity will be the best kind of activity.

The best activity, according to Aristotle, is contemplation (*noesis*). His rationale for this unfolds in his *De Anima*. In the first two books, he has used the hylomorphic account of change to explain the activities that characterize plants and animals—nutrition and perception; then he extends this account to explain the activity characteristic of human beings—thought/contemplation. While activities like perceiving require

bodily organs (eyes, ears, etc.), contemplation is superior because it operates through no bodily organ.

In a passage that has been the site of a long controversy, Aristotle says that there must be a kind of thought that doesn't merely understand all things, but which produces other things by bringing them from potentiality to actuality (*De Anima* III 5). That which engages in such contemplation is "in its essence actuality." And because the best kind of activity is this kind of thought. The Averroists argue that Aristotle is indicating that the unmoved-mover will be this superior kind of thought; Aquinas and other interpreters in the Christian tradition reject this reading, maintaining instead that thought-thinking-itself refers to the activity of the immortal human soul.

6. *Practical philosophy*

Aristotle's supremely divine being is the universe's final end. Ends have the character of goodness for Aristotle (see eopr0154). So the goodness that belongs to this being is the good itself; its goodness is "the cause to other goods of their being good" (*Eudaemian Ethics* I 8, 1217b5).

Aristotle claims that the supremely divine being enjoys the best kind of life, exemplifying goodness to the maximal degree. In *Metaphysics* Λ, for instance, he says that life is most fully realized in the activity of rational thought; the best kind of rational thought is of the highest objects, and as the supremely divine being continuously engages in such thought, it exhibits the best kind of life. Additionally, the supremely divine being's life is also most pleasant, as active contemplation is the most pleasant activity. This idea is the basis of the account of pleasure. Pleasure on his view attends activity, and the more godlike the activity, the more proper and better the pleasure attendant on it. Lower beings like humans participate in pleasure by enacting what is most divine in them (*Nicomachean Ethics* VII 8).

The supremely divine being's life sets a standard according to which other lives are judged. Aristotle characterizes the final end a human life aims at as what we call "happiness," (1095a19). As he fills out his account of happiness it becomes clear that the happiness humans enjoy

can only be understood as an approximation of the life of the supremely divine being. As he explains, “If then, the happiness which God always enjoys is as great as that which we enjoy sometimes, it is marvelous; and if it is greater, this is still more marvelous” (Metaphysics Λ 1072b29-30). Since the supremely good and happy life is the life of contemplation, and human beings are able to engage in contemplation, the best human life will be the life of contemplation (*Nicomachean Ethics* X 8, 1179a).

Aristotle argues that virtue—good habits or character traits—are necessary for human happiness. By acquiring and exercising virtues, we enact what is most divine in us. Only if we have the virtues will we feel pleasure in performing the best kinds of activities, and so our lives will more closely resemble the supremely pleasant, active life of the divine.

For Aristotle, ethical inquiry prepares the way for the science of politics. His idea is that the good of individuals is subordinated to and ordered to the good of a political community. And so it is necessary to understand what is good for individual human beings, that is, happiness, to rightly order human communities. To the extent that the supremely divine being plays a role in grounding Aristotle’s ethics, it also grounds his politics.

While contemplation is the best theoretical activity for a human being, what about the best practical activity? Political action approximates divine activity more closely than does individual action because it “secures the good of the state... a nobler and more divine achievement,” (*Nicomachean Ethics* I 2). Its object is a higher good—the good of the whole community—than the object of individual action—an individual’s good.

Aristotle admits that the best kind of political constitution is not likely achievable. Instead he characterizes such an arrangement as the city of our prayers (see eopr0310). Perhaps the implication is that some divine help would be necessary for its realization. In this city, every citizen has complete virtue and works towards a good nobler than her own, namely, the common good of all citizens.

Aristotle does not think humans can enjoy complete friendship with a

divine being, because even a virtuous human being is unequal to the divine. Aristotle likens the relationship of humans and the divine to the friendship between a parent and child (*Nicomachean Ethics* VIII 14). Even by honoring the divine being, a human does not give the being what it deserves. Nevertheless, he says, a human can be called virtuous if she renders the divine being all she can. Finally, Aristotle thinks humans most nearly resemble the divine being when engaged in the activity of contemplation, since this is the proper activity of the divine.

See Also

eopr0024
eopr0038
eopr0039
eopr0112
eopr0133
eopr0154
eopr0295
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