

Aristotle's Prime Mover

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Sources: *De Anima* III.5, *Metaphysics* XII (especially 7 & 9), *Physics* VIII (especially 8-10).

Characteristics of the Prime Mover (Divine Nous):

- First principle
- First mover (logically, not temporally); itself unmoved and unmovable/unalterable
- Substance (and arguably form) without matter
- Self-thinking thought
- Eternal and in eternal possession of its object (thought); therefore always active and never passive, always actuality and never potentiality.
- Simple and one
- Final cause; that for the sake of which; moves others by love; produces movement through infinite time (not a temporal first cause)
- Necessary
- Most good
- Living, insofar as thought itself is the highest expression of life
- No magnitude (and so neither finite nor infinite)
- Without parts and indivisible

The Ordered Universe:

- “[T]he universe is of the nature of a whole” (*M* XII.1). “[T]he world is not such that one thing has nothing to do with another, but they are connected. For all are ordered together to one end” (*M* XII.10). “There always was motion and always will be motion throughout all time” (*P* XIII.9), i.e., the universe is eternal; not created or generated *ex nihilo*. The Prime Mover is the original source of motion in the universe and is the ordering principle that makes the universe a whole. The Prime Mover, God, the Divine, “encloses the whole of nature” (end of *M* XII.8).

Human Nous and Divine Nous:

- Men participate in the divine insofar as they contemplate the higher things (*NE* and *M* XII.7).
- Can the human soul survive death? In *Metaphysics* XII.3 Aristotle suggests that it can, “albeit not all soul but [only] the reason.”

Contra Plato (*M* XII.5-6):

- For Plato everything in the phenomenal world is a mere imperfect, particular manifestation of the Ideas or Forms. Each Idea or Form is universal in the sense of being one. In *Metaphysics* XII (and also in *NE*), Aristotle rejects universals of this sort. “The primary principles of all things are the actual primary ‘this’ and another thing which exists potentially. The universal causes, then, of which we spoke do not *exist*. For the *individual* is the source of the individuals. For while man is the cause of man universally, there *is* no universal man” (*M* XII.5). For Plato, the Agathon (the Good), at least in the *Symposium* and the *Republic* and prior to the *Sophist*, is beyond being. One might argue that Plato’s “mature metaphysics” expressed in the *Sophist* precludes this, however.
- For Aristotle it is particulars that exist and the forms are always forms of individual particulars. Aristotle’s universals are not physically separable and independently existing things but rather are aspects of the nature of particulars, which we can separate out mentally by a process of abstraction. For example, the universal ‘man’ does not exist for Aristotle except insofar as it can be located in all the individual men who have ever lived, are living, or will ever live. The same might be said of the Prime Mover; insofar as it is the first mover, the organizing principle of the universe, and encloses the whole of nature, it might be reasonable to say (although I’m not certain that Aristotle would agree) that it is the form of reality, the logical structure of reality. Arguably the *Metaphysics* introduces separable substances, but even so for Aristotle nothing, not even the Prime Mover, is beyond being.