

# Stoehr, Tyler

## Aristotle's Vision of God: Moving Beyond the Unmoved Mover

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In *Physics* VIII and *Metaphysics* Λ Aristotle paints a portrait of a God that has typically dominated theological discussions in both the philosophical and Christian traditions of the West. This God is form without matter,<sup>1</sup> pure actuality,<sup>2</sup> pure thought,<sup>3</sup> indivisible,<sup>4</sup> incorporeal,<sup>5</sup> and the ultimate cause of the universe.<sup>6</sup> However, during my research I came across many passages in Aristotle's works (particularly in the *Nicomachean Ethics*) that seemed to contradict the portrait of *Physics* VIII and *Metaphysics* Λ. For instance, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book X Chapter 7, Aristotle writes:

But such a [divine] life [i.e. a life of pure contemplation] would be too high for man; for *it is not in so far as he is man that he will live so, but in so far as something divine is present in him*; and by so much as this is superior to our composite nature is its activity superior to that which is the exercise of the other kind [practical] virtue. If reason is divine, then, in comparison with man, *the life according to it is divine in comparison with human life*. But we must not follow those who advise us, being men, to think of human things, and, being mortal, of mortal things, *but must, so far as we can, make ourselves immortal, and strain every nerve to live in accordance with the best thing in us; for even if it be small in bulk, much more does it in power and worth surpass everything.*<sup>7</sup>

In this passage we get the explicit assertion that rationality does not originate with man, but with the God. In other words, Aristotle is arguing that we are not rational because we are men, but because there is an element of the divine within us, in virtue of which we can partake of the divine life. Hence knowledge of God and the principles by which he is bound becomes important not just because these principles apply to the physical world (which is the assertion made in *Physics* and *Metaphysics*), but because *they enable us to live like God*, which life “in power and worth [surpasses] everything.” Thus in this passage we can clearly see how Aristotle's God is not simply an Unmoved Mover whose existence is completely disconnected with everything human. On the contrary, according to this passage God has a very important role to play in man's life, for God becomes the model of the highest activity available to man and the exemplar of the highest, most joyful form of life. In short, this passage implies that God is an *ethical* as well as a metaphysical postulate within Aristotle's philosophy.

Spurred on by other passages like the one above, I set out to discover whether the typical philosophical and Christian interpretations of Aristotle's theology were correct. That is, I wanted to discover whether Aristotle's Unmoved Mover was indeed merely a postulate occasioned by metaphysical necessity (which is the typical philosophical/Christian interpretation) or something more ethically relevant (which is what Aristotle seemed to be implying in his other writings). My conclusion was that when *all* of Aristotle's writings are considered a very different vision of God emerges, one that differs from the Unmoved Mover of the philosophical and Christian traditions in many important respects.

My main obstacle in this project was its scope. Initially I had planned to treat *all* of the literature relating to Aristotle's theology in both the philosophical and Christian traditions, but I soon realized that such an endeavor would far exceed the time constraints I was under at the time, so I decided to limit myself to the philosophical tradition (within which there is a surprising paucity of literature relating to Aristotle's theology) and the writings of St. Thomas Aquinas. This too proved too formidable a task, and in the end my thesis dealt solely with Aristotle's writings and an unraveling of (1) his vision of God as found in *Physics* and *Metaphysics* and (2) an analysis of how said vision changes when other key passages are included in a more comprehensive treatment of Aristotle's theology.

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<sup>1</sup> "Aristotle," *The Concise Encyclopedia of Western Philosophy*, ed. Jonathan Rée and J.O. Urmson, 3rd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2005) 30.

<sup>2</sup> "Aristotle" 31. T.H. Irwin, "Aristotle," *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward Craig, vol. 1 (New York: Routledge, 1998) 424.

<sup>3</sup> "Aristotle" 34, 36. Alan D. Code, "Aristotle," *Encyclopedia of Classical Philosophy*, ed. Donald J. Zeyl (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1997) 78. Irwin, "Aristotle" 424. Stephen Menn, "Aristotle," *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Donald M. Borchert, 2nd ed., vol. 1 (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 06/08/31 2005) 278.

<sup>4</sup> "Aristotle" 30.

<sup>5</sup> Irwin, "Aristotle" 424.

<sup>6</sup> Irwin, "Aristotle" 424. Menn, "Aristotle" 276.

<sup>7</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* X.7.1177b25-1178a1. Emphasis added.