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ARISTOTELIAN THEOLOGY AND ONTOLOGY: THE PROBLEM OF THE PRIME MOVER AND THE FIRST PRINCIPLES

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Abstract

The problem of the Aristotelian First Unmoved Mover presents hermeneutical challenges to researchers. What mean matter, movement and potentiality in Aristotle's metaphysics? How does actuality and final cause cooperate to secure motion, explaining the Being and the Unity? What is the causal connection between the Prime Mover and the particular objects and how could it explain the multiple Moved Movers? Why the Unmoved Mover is defined as the thought that thinks on itself and in which way the prototype of Substance can transform the relationship between the Aristotelian ontology and theology?

Keywords: Unmoved Mover, substance, thought, actuality, potentiality, motion, causality.

Matter, Movement and Potentiality

At the end of Book Θ, Aristotle suggests that the priority of actuality has a very important hermeneutics: "Obviously, therefore, the substance or form is actuality. According to this argument, then, it is obvious that actuality is prior in substantial being to potency; and as we have said, one actuality always precedes another in time right back to the actuality of the eternal prime mover. But actuality is prior in a stricter sense also; for eternal things are prior in substance to perishable things, and no eternal thing exists potentially."² This idea introduces the Unmoved Mover as a warrantor for the motion of the First Moved Mover. For Aristotle, every potency is simultaneously potential in regard to its opponent, and the actuality represents the finality of any potency. Therefore, what "can" generate Being exists and does not exist at the same time.³ Aristotle succinctly formulates the contingency argument: "Nothing, then,

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² Aristotle, *Metaphysics* Θ 1051b 6-8.

³ In addition to these, the fragment represents a notion of a contingent being which implies the existence of a necessary being. This argument is used by Thomas Aquinas for proving the existence of God, in the beginning of *Summa Theologiae*, and Ross considers it as a special type

which is in the full sense imperishable is in the full sense potentially existent (though there is nothing to prevent its being so in some respect, e.g. potentially of a certain quality or in a certain place); all imperishable things, then, exist actually. Nor can anything which is of necessity exist potentially; yet these things are primary; for if these did not exist, nothing would exist.”⁴ Aristotle put the problem of contingent beings in the context of contingent movements, suggesting that this particular motion is eternally developed because it contains an eternal element. The argument is consistent with the idea that eternal things (in this case, the Unmoved Mover) are never contingent, nor potential.⁵

When the Book Λ discusses the problem of the First Principle, Aristotle presents three different types of substances: 1) physical and perishable; 2) physical and imperishable (the celestial spheres); 3) non-physical (the unmoved movers). The first two types belong to the physics, while the third belongs to a different science, probably the metaphysics.⁶

Under these circumstances, Aristotle affirms that it is impossible to generalize the principles of physical substances (perishable substances). Their only quality is that of being analogue: “They [the principles] are (1) the same or analogous in this sense, that matter, form, privation, and the moving cause are common to all things; and (2) the causes of substances may be treated as causes of all things in this sense, that when substances are removed all things are removed; further, (3) that which is first in respect of complete reality is the cause of all things.”⁷ This fragment evokes the *Physics*, where Aristotle demonstrates that an endless movement requires a necessary being or a compulsory warrantor for the First Mover’s motion.⁸

The prime reality, guaranting a ceaseless and circular motion, is a physical, incorruptible and non-generated being (an imperishable substance). This type of substance is necessary because the movement is endless: “For substances are the first of existing things, and if they are all destructible, all things are destructible. But it is impossible that movement should either have come into being or cease to be (for it must always have existed), or that time should. For these could not be a before and an after if time did not exist.

of a “theological argument” (W. D. Ross, *Aristotle’s Metaphysics*, volume 2, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1924, p. 179). Also, the Unity is manifested in the case of non-material particulars, though it lacks potency (the Matter is the source for every potency). Consequently, the non-material entities are not contingent, because the contingency is a compound of Matter and Form, and the Matter and Form are not corruptible. Once more, the Form is an essential Unity and, in the case of a concrete particular, the Form is the principle of Unity; thus, if the Unity and the Form are convertible terms, one can state that the non-material hypostases of Being are non-contingent.

⁴ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1050b 18-20.

⁵ *Ibidem* 1050b 2.

⁶ *Ibidem* 1069b 2.

⁷ *Ibidem* 1071a 34-37.

⁸ Aristotle, *Physics* 266a 6-9.

Movement also is continuous, then, in the sense in which time is; for time is either the same thing as movement or an attribute of movement. And there is no continuous movement except movement in place, and of this only that which is circular is continuous.⁹ The circular movement is seen as a continuous motion because it has no beginning nor end, as well as the straight-lined movement.¹⁰ The comparison between the continuous motion and the endless time suggests that the world knew both an *a priori* time (prior to the initial time) and an *a priori* movement (prior to the first motion) and, because the system seems to be incoherent, the research will follow a straight-line movement.

Aristotle demonstrates that anything that can be moved can also be unmoved: “But if there is something which is capable of moving things or acting on them, but is not actually doing so, there will not necessarily be movement; for that which has a potency need not exercise it.”¹¹ This fragment is a testimony for the association of Matter and potentiality.¹² For Aristotle, the substances like the ultimate warrantor of motion must be actual: “There must, then, be such a principle, whose very essence is actuality. Further, then, these substances must be without matter; for they must be eternal, if anything is eternal. Therefore they must be actuality.”¹³ The material things are perfect candidates for eternity because they are divisible and therefore corruptible, unlike immaterial things, indivisible and incorruptible. The matter is the source of potentiality, and every potential thing will ask for a prior actuality as cause of its own actuality.

The movement is a physical element and such a motion needs space, consequently, Matter. In addition, the material but eternal celestial spheres are mobile, though unsusceptible of destruction, hence the Aristotelian decision to think that their “special” kind of matter could allow a potentiality and therefore a possible immobility.

Actuality and Final Cause

Aristotle affirms that the Platonicians do not have a right approach to motion and alteration¹⁴: “This is why some suppose eternal actuality – e.g.

⁹ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1071b 5-11.

¹⁰ Aristotle, *Physics* 262a 12.

¹¹ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1071b 13-14.

¹² Constantine Georgiadis, “Aristotle’s Theology and its Influence on the Philosophers of Islam, Judaism and Christianity”, p. 13.

¹³ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1071b 20-23. Aristotle uses the plural form of nouns to express the idea of multiple unmoved movers, which he treats as an explanation for the celestial motion. The same condition of immortality is applied to the First Unmoved Mover.

¹⁴ According to Ross, an eternal movement needs an eternal substance, able to cause motion by itself. This function could be accomplished by the Platonician Forms, though they are unable

Leucippus and Plato; for they say there is always movement. But why and what this movement is they do not say, nor, if the world moves in this way or that, do they tell us the cause of its doing so. Now nothing is moved at random, but there must always be something present to move it; e.g. as a matter of fact a thing moves in one way by nature, and in another by force or through the influence of reason or something else.”¹⁵ In other words, none of the Platonic principles uses alteration in a positive manner. Aristotle notices that the First Unmoved Mover produces motion and alteration, inducing evolution and change to every individual substance through a principle of continuous movement. In these conditions, every concrete particular needs motion to meet the Being, because a prior actuality should “move” itself in order to (pro)create something. Aristotle thinks that *a priori* actuality explains the actual cause of movement and alteration through its ambivalent potentiality. The Unity, the Being and the actuality cooperate to secure motion (they are warrantors for the existence of cosmos) because the immaterial substances represent essential unities¹⁶ of the Unmoved Mover.

Aristotle introduces the importance of the *a priori* actuality when he approaches the problem of potentiality. The potentiality is still prior to actuality, while the actuality logically depends on potentiality. Nevertheless, some problems arise: “Yet there is a difficulty; for it is thought that everything that acts is able to act, but that not everything that is able to act acts, so that the potency is prior. But if this is so, nothing that is need be; for it is possible for all things to be capable of existing but not yet to exist.”¹⁷ This inference states that there is no being or existence without an *a priori* actuality, because every potentiality is available for a certain thing and for its opposite. To assert the anteriority of potentiality means to disregard the necessity of an actual cause and the principle of sufficient reason.¹⁸ On the contrary, the aristotelian argument of motion requires a circular, continuous movement and a cause of motion: “There is therefore also something which moves it. And since that

to produce any movement, because the capacity to produce motion must be fully exercised and not only possessed. Its essence should not be a force but the actual activity, otherwise its action could not be completed, nor its change necessarily eternal. In conclusion, this substance must be immaterial, because it is eternal (See W. D. Ross, *Aristotle's Metaphysics*, volume 2, p. 180).

¹⁵ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1071b 14-16; *Ibidem* 1071b 33; *Ibidem* 1072a 1.

¹⁶ Since the non-material entities are essential unities, the one that certifies the movement (the First Unmoved Mover) seems to be actual and conjunct. As a result, Aristotle introduces the idea of participation and a formal Unity, because all the non-material unities seem to participate to an absolute Unity. In fact, this process tries to show that every formal or essential substance is an expression of an unified principle of its own particulars; the concrete particular unifies itself in the couple Matter-Form or in a certain potentiality aiming toward its final actualisation.

¹⁷ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1071b 25.

¹⁸ Aristotle's critique of Plato's motion suggests that the Platonicians cannot reason upon motion and alteration; on the contrary, they represent the Being through a passive and inactive principle (like in the case of Parmenides).

which moves and is moved is intermediate, there is something which moves without being moved, being eternal, substance, and actuality.¹⁹ Consequently, in virtue of connections between Matter and potentiality or immaterialness and actuality, and because the immaterial substance represents an essential unity, the Unmoved Mover becomes a primary Unity, Being and Substance. But how does it cause the motion?

The First Unmoved Mover expresses its own actuality, individual substance or the substance through movement; in other words, it shows a substance whose movement is a particular finality, an expression of its own being and a teleology or a copy of the Unmoved Mover, resulted from desire. According to Aristotle, while the First Moved Mover acts like an agent of motion, providing movement for the whole system, the Unmoved Mover acts like a final cause ("something for which").²⁰ Afterwards, Aristotle discusses the problem of what moves other things without being moved, demonstrating the existence of the object of desire when this desire results from an opinion of a positive element, initialized by the object itself. However, the desire is moved through the Intelligibility, whose primary element is the actual substance. The Unmoved Mover is the warrantor of circular locomotion, always united and immovable. Its movement shows the perfect example of Being that imposes motion to all other elements²¹: "That a final cause may exist among

¹⁹ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1072a 24-26.

²⁰ Aristotle states that the Being is an equivocal *pros hen*, therefore he is obliged to explain that there is a causal connection between Being (or primary beings) and all other beings, otherwise the unity and the possibility of the science whom he searched cannot be established (See L. P. Gerson, *Plotinus*, pp. 86-87). However, there is a causal and physical relationship which connects all substances, under the appearance of a continuous movement. Under these conditions, the Unmoved Mover becomes final cause and warrantor of the locomotor continuity. Later, Gerson's causality is not necessary anymore, because this time the *pros hen* equivocalness is epistemologically analysed, in opposition with the ontological force.

²¹ Randall says that, for Aristotle, the perfect action of the highest world activity is the only legitimacy and reason for the existence of the universe. Also, God is immanent in universe because His cosmos is intelligible, transcending the entire world through its final ideal: therefore, God is both formal and final cause (See J. H. Randall, *Aristotle*, p. 141 and p. 143). The idea that the Unmoved Mover is a final cause looks right, and, in addition, the new status eliminates the necessity for introducing a formal cause. The analogy of the Unmoved Mover seen as a general of the universal army (Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1075a 11) justifies again the argument of immanence: Aristotle suggests that the universal Good is an individual entity and, in the same time, a logical taxonomy of all of its parts, in the same way as an army identifies its own good in the general's figure and in his military orders. The general is independent of these orders, while the orders depend on him. This is though an incomplete analogy, because the general could not be a general without an army, and the Unmoved Mover could not be the Prime Mover without the cosmos. Georgiadis notices that the critics should only analyze the metaphor itself, and not its differences, because only the cosmos (the universal order) matters, and there are no proves that this order is created by God; additionally, Aristotle would rather suggest that God and the world exist independently of each other (See Constantine Georgiadis, *op. cit.*, p. 15). Also, Fuller thinks that

unchangeable entities is shown by the distinction of its meanings. For the final cause is (a) some being for whose good an action is done, and (b) something at which the action aims; and of these the latter exists among unchangeable entities though the former does not. The final cause, then, produces motion as being loved, but all other things move by being moved.”²² In the case of immobile things, for instance, the Unmoved Mover involves the good or the finality of a certain action (a Prime Moved Mover), while other general cases present a final cause (the good of a certain object) applied to moveable things. Therefore, the Unmoved Mover is the object of love that causes movement, because every moving thing causes motion by itself (in a cosmological order of motion). The other things are moved by this continuous movement and their being or unity results from an impulse that imitates or understands the Unmoved Mover.²³ Additionally, the physical or natural substances that represent concrete, altered particulars (the empirical objects) require motion for their own evolution; they manifest their unity and being in virtue of substantial Form. So, if the Unmoved Mover is immovable and unalterable, it perfectly manifests being and unity. In other words, every substance naturally manifests being and unity and the Unmoved Mover cannot have such a metaphysical connection with the Being and the Unity because Aristotle already criticized the causal inefficacy of Plato’s Theory of Forms. A substance cannot give being and unity to other substance because substances already have being and unity by themselves; the creation of corruptible substances may require movement, but the Unmoved Mover could never offer being and unity to other substances.

The function of the Unmoved Mover is to certify the motion²⁴: a perfect entity and a final cause of movement for the Prime Moved Mover.²⁵ However, the actuality of the potential movement of the First Moved Mover must be a

this Aristotelian fragment is biased, presenting God as an essential being situated outside the natural order (See B. A. G. Fuller, p. 142).

²² Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1072b 3-5. Tredennick translates as: “That the final cause may apply to immovable things is shown by the distinction of its meanings. For the final cause is not only ‘the good for something,’ but also ‘the good which is the end of some action.’ In the latter sense it applies to immovable things, although in the former it does not; and it causes motion as being an object of love, whereas all other things cause motion because they are themselves in motion.” (Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, translation by Hugh Tredennick, Loeb Classical Library, London, 1956).

²³ Except for the cases that involve the rational souls and possibly the secondary unmoved movers.

²⁴ In *Physics* VIII, Aristotle approaches the problem of the Prime Mover, demonstrating its immaterial nature and its function in motion (warrantor of movement). The existence of an eternal, immovable and particular substance does not require a difficult analysis because it causes motion under conditions of infinite time. Consequently, what causes infinite movement or the motion of an eternal time does not have a valid configuration in an empirical universe, temporally limited. Also, the argument is additional to the demonstration of its immateriality.

²⁵ As an example of love, the First Unmoved Mover shows a physical image of the eternal contemplation, this image being the eternal movement of the sphere (See Sarah Broadie, *What Does Aristotle’s Prime Mover Do?*, p. 2).

distinct entity, or in the case of this being the motion is an activity and the actuality is motion. Hence, the First Moved Mover imitates (materially and physically) the perfection of the First Unmoved Mover.²⁶

Plato's conception of *mimesis* represents a major problem for Aristotle because the division between Form and Matter makes the creation of representation and imitation impossible. However, without the imitation of participation, the *mimesis* does not represent anymore a problem (as for Plato), but an attempt to circumscribe the object of desire: the Unmoved Mover is desired by the First Moved Mover. The desire is, consequently, expressed through *mimesis*, imitating the absolute physical actuality or the circular movement (already introduced through the desire of the absolute finality). To know the object means to identify with it, despite empirical limits; accordingly, the First Moved Mover loves the Unmoved Mover and wishes to become like it, actualizing its own version of perfection, the circular motion.

The obvious objection, remarked by Broadie²⁷, is that the real existence of such a perfect cause is not necessary for the actualization of the element that makes the *mimesis*, because its existence could be hypothetically stipulated. Aristotle's partial solution for the problem of separation of Forms discusses the reintegration of Form and Matter in such a way that the imitator could obtain the ontological criteria required by actualization and procreation. Under these circumstances, the process presents three major considerations. Firstly, Aristotle introduces an Unmoved Mover situated in a perfect actuality, because every movement contains by definition a potentiality whose actualization is impossible. Secondly, if the First Moved Mover allows the intervention of illusion (for instance, if its actual movement is wrongly certified by the existence of a hypothetical, inexistent Unmoved Mover), the elimination of this illusion could also be valid, inducing, by extension, the extinction of the cosmological motion; on the contrary, if the Unmoved Mover exists and the First Moved Mover is wrong in this matter, the motion is eliminated again and the introduction of an illusory object becomes an unacceptable hypothesis. Thirdly, the difference between Plato's *mimesis* and Aristotle's imitation are antagonistic: in Plato's case, the imitators of the universal substances lack Form or Substance, therefore essence, so their identification with models fails;²⁸ in

²⁶ Ross thinks that God is the efficient cause only because He is the final cause itself, though this does not mean that His being means pure potentiality (something which never reaches its end) but He is an eternal and actual being. Consequently, for Ross, God is an immortal being whose influence is so strong that anything happens in the universe depends on Him (W. D. Ross, *Aristotle's Metaphysics*, volume 2, p. 1981).

²⁷ Sarah Broadie, *op. cit.*, p. 3; L. P. Gerson, *op. cit.*, p. 139.

²⁸ If Plato's empirical objects were a perfect match for the Forms, then the necessity of imitation would be excluded. The affirmation does not imply though that the First Moved Mover is identical with the First Unmoved Mover when the First Moved Mover is actualized. The

Aristotle's case, on the contrary, both imitator and imitated object contain common and complete elements, so the models can be imitated and transformed into desirable objects. In conclusion, Plato's Forms fail the test of motion because the physical object does not have a substantial element to imitate the paradigm, while Aristotle solves the problem with the help of the reintegration of Matter and Form. Consequently, if the imitator's being and unity are metaphysically derived from the being and the unity of the First Principle, the result will be a metaphysical order that Aristotle associates with Plato's metaphysical hierarchy, obviously rejected. Briefly, Aristotle strongly rejects a gradual univocity of Being.

Univocity, Causality and the Unmoved Mover

Some critics²⁹ suggest that a certain fragment of the Aristotelian *Metaphysics* presents a causal connection between the being of the Unmoved Mover and the one of the particular objects (such a gradual univocity requires a single and perfect notion of Being, the particular things having a similar type of substance, proportional to the perfect example of Being): "Now we do not know a truth without its cause; and a thing has a quality in a higher degree than other things if in virtue of it the similar quality belongs to the other things as well (e.g. fire is the hottest of things; for it is the cause of the heat of all other things); so that that causes derivative truths to be true is most true. Hence the principles of eternal things must be always most true (for they are not merely sometimes true, nor is there any cause of their being, but they themselves are the cause of the being of other things), so that as each thing is in respect of being, so is it in respect of truth."³⁰ Accordingly, the idea that the principles of eternal objects are cause of being for other things is configured by the actuality that warrants the movement, independently of the causal connection involved in the process of gradual univocity.³¹ Nevertheless, what is caused by $\alpha\tau\tau\omicron\nu\ \tau\omicron\nu\ \epsilon\iota\nu\alpha\iota$ could simply refer to the cause of generation of substances³²; consequently,

thinking of the First Moved Mover belongs to a sensible and completely actualized substance, while the one of the First Unmoved Mover represents the complete actuality of an immaterial substance.

²⁹ L. P. Gerson, *op. cit.*, p. 133 and p. 139.

³⁰ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 993b 23-31.

³¹ L. P. Gerson, *op. cit.*, p. 333.

³² Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1161a 16, 1162a 7, 1165a 23. Gerson rejects this hypothesis: firstly, the principles of the eternal objects, unlike parents (this is the Aristotelian example), do not have a cause of being and, secondly, the cause of being is obviously non-equivalent to a cause of "becoming a being". Even though, Aristotle does not state such a cause for principles. Therefore, if Gerson says that the eternal objects, and not their principles, participate to being, and if these eternal principles govern the Unmoved Mover and the First Moved Mover, they are the ultimate cause for the generation of all other objects, because the

according to *Physics* and *Metaphysics*, the previous fragment shows that the principles of eternal objects cause the being of all other objects (non-eternal) through movement. In other words, the paradigm solves the particular problem of causal participation, a gradual univocity opposed to the dependence of Being and Unity upon substance.

In the same time, the being of accidents seems to be directly proportional to the being of concrete particulars and, if the accidents are dependent upon substance, the relationship does not imply a derivable characteristic but only that the accidental being is a consequence of the substantial being: the elements of each category represent real *onta*, while the accidental being is a way of Being; in this case, the real dependence is not a waste of Being and reality, as it happens in Plato's case.³³ However, both the accidents and the other significances of substance (generated, inanimate or eternal) exist *per se*, the only difference being that the latter can be dependent or independent, eternal or contingent. The Unmoved Mover does not represent anymore (as the example of fire from *Metaphysics II*) the emanational cause of material substances³⁴ but only the Aristotelian final cause (the contemplation as the highest actuality of the human soul). Therefore, if the movement is involved in the evolution of material world, the motion required by generation will be fully accomplished and, in the same time, the substance will claim its own being and unity.

The Unmoved Mover acts as a warrantor for the first, eternal and circular motion of *Physics*. Hence, the Unmoved Mover is desired by the First Moved Mover, but not desired by the other objects (despite this fact, an exception could occur if the Unmoved Mover becomes an exemplar cause of human contemplation, the man accomplishing his own actuality through the contemplation of the Unmoved Mover). To suggest that the being and the unity of other objects are spread through the Unmoved Mover, or that these objects aim toward a transcendental Being and Unity would represent a regression to the Platonician Forms and imitation. One could state, then, that the substances manifest being and unity in virtue of their own substantial status.

Concerning the restoration of Form and Matter, Aristotle is situated in opposition with Plato's metaphysical hierarchy. The idea that all objects

genesis requires movement and the motion is the essence of that relationship. In conclusion, Gerson admits the necessity of efficient causality, though he imposes simultaneously the notion of a gradual, univocal causality; in fact, he arguments the function that the final causality has in the process of warranting the efficient cause or the movement, seen as an unitary element of the system (See L. P. Gerson, *op. cit.*).

³³ Martha Husain, "The Multiplicity in Unity of Being Qua Being in Aristotle's *Pros Hen* Equivocity".

³⁴ In this case, it is not anymore efficient cause. Georgiadis thinks that, for Aristotle, people want a certain thing because it is good, so this thing is not good only because people want it. Therefore, the thinking becomes a principle, and its objective, rational value proves the existence of the Aristotelian Prime Mover. Additionally, the First Unmoved Mover uses both the final and the efficient causality (See Constantine Georgiadis, *op. cit.*, p.14).

possesses being and unity through imitation is invalid if the substances become vectors of Being and Unity. In other words, Aristotle could rebuke Plato for his apparently unreasonable Forms, and, in the same time, he could affirm that his own Unmoved Mover is not necessary for the distribution of being and unity because this process represents a function accomplished by the substances themselves and not by another entity, be it perfect or eternal.

The corruptible substances have being and unity in the same manner as the incorruptible substances have their own, even if the process is differently realised, directly proportional to every distinct, particular substance. Nevertheless, the Unmoved Mover is necessary for movement, and, in addition, the motion guarantees the being of all other objects, because it is compulsory for technical and natural procreation. The existence of motion allows primary movements or facilitates the relationships between the act and potency, without which no generation would be possible: “for an animal is something perceptible, and it is not possible to define it without reference to movement – nor, therefore, without reference to the parts’ being in a certain state”.³⁵ In fact, Aristotle offers a kinetic system that functions as warrantor to the motion of a certain element, whose actuality is the movement itself; later, he will reveal a mechanism of imitation that allows all participants to have an active participation, the process involving both the imitated object and the imitator.

Under these circumstances, the physical and cosmological problems are solved through the idea of substance and its relationships with the First Moved Mover; in addition, the kinetic actuality of the First Moved Mover is connected to the First Unmoved Mover through an exemplar *mimesis*. Once again, contrary to the Platonician hierarchy for whom the paradigm was totally unknown, this new element is now able to cause and determinate motion through its own nature. The Aristotelian intervention introduces a warrantor of motion situated in continuous movement, while the prior actuality requires an actual and immovable warrantor of motion. The primacy of substance states that every substance has being and unity in virtue of its own substantiality and requires a physical and a metaphysical warrantor, the first offering existence to the concrete particulars, and the latter providing the movement used in the process of generation. These cosmological warrantors of actuality and movement are both causes and different explanations, evolving in the space of unitary entities.

The Problem of Substance: Theology and ontology

As a matter of fact, Aristotle treats Substance like a principle, including it in one of his multiple definitions of metaphysics. In the Book Γ , he pretends

³⁵ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1036b 27-30.

that the principal subject of metaphysics is the Being understood as a Being, while in the Book E, the theology: “It is clear then that it is the work of one science also to study the things that are, *qua* being. But everywhere science deals chiefly with that which is primary, and on which the other things depend, and in virtue of which they get their names. If, then, this is substance, it will be of substances that the philosopher must grasp the principles and the causes.”³⁶

Later, Aristotle says that “the first science deals with things which both exist separately and are immovable. Now all causes must be eternal, but especially these; for they are the causes that operate on so much of the divine as appears to us. There must, then, be three theoretical philosophies, mathematics, physics, and what we may call theology, since it is obvious that if the divine is present anywhere, it is present in things of this sort. And the highest science must deal with the highest genus.”³⁷

It may be noticed that in the beginning of the Book E Aristotle affirms that “We are seeking the principles and the causes of the things that are, and obviously of them *qua* being”³⁸; in addition to this, a fragment of the book Γ presents similar statements³⁹: “If, then, this is substance, it will be of substances that the philosopher must grasp the principles and the causes.”⁴⁰ In other words, the two metaphysical conceptions have a common denominator; in the same time, the principles and the causes of beings can be successfully approached through the research of the most excellent substance, the Unmoved Mover.⁴¹ And, while the principles and the causes of all things refer to the Aristotelian causality, the Prime Mover remains the single cause of all beings.

Hence, if the Books Γ and E are consistently included in the summary of the Book K, it is obvious that the Aristotelian ideas of theology, ontology and metaphysics are strongly related. Also, if the Unmoved Mover becomes the First Principle, an exemplar entity of Being and Unity and, through the First Moved Mover, the ultimate cause for all substances⁴², the comprehension of

³⁶ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1003b 15-19.

³⁷ *Ibidem* 1026a 17-24.

³⁸ *Ibidem* 1025b 1.

³⁹ Natorp affirms that the attempt to identify the theology and the first philosophy belongs to a belated intervention, because the Book K (chapters 1-8) mainly compresses the Books B, Γ and E. (See G. Patzig, “Theology and Ontology in Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*”, p. 35). On the contrary, Jaeger suggests that these theological references belong to a Platonic moment from Aristotle’s youth, contrasted with his mature first philosophy (Werner Jaeger, *Aristotle: Fundamentals of the History of His Development*, p. 218).

⁴⁰ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1003b 19.

⁴¹ The plural form (“principles” and “causes”) introduces the presence of the Prime Moved Mover and the theory of multiple movers. Also, Aristotle summarizes his reflections on the Unmoved Mover in the sentence “On such principle, then, depend the heavens and the world of nature” (Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1072b, 13; *Ibidem* 1073a 23).

⁴² All sensible substances need motion in virtue of their own generation, guaranteed by the First Moved Mover whose movement, in its turn, is guaranteed by the Unmoved Mover.

substantial causes will require the hermeneutics of most excellent substance.⁴³ Concerning the Book E, Patzig thinks that Aristotle certainly rejects a contradiction between a first philosophy acting as an universal theology and a first philosophy acting as a theology (treating exclusively the subject of Divinity). Moreover, the first philosophy represents a special type of theology, that can be simultaneously considered an ontology. Aristotle's intention is to create a metaphysical discipline: in one hand, a first and general philosophy and, on the other hand, a Substance superior to all other substances.⁴⁴ However, even if the *Metaphysics* does not analyse only the problem of divinity, the Unmoved Mover is fundamental for the research of Being *qua* Being because it is the primary example of Being and the principle of all other beings. Once again, the substances are presented as essential unities belonging to an "ontological abstraction".⁴⁵ Patzig affirms that, for Aristotle, the metaphysics is a "double paronymic science" legitimated by the *pros hen* equivocality; furthermore, this specific relationship appears between sensible substances and the Unmoved Mover, as well as between attributes and sensible substances. However, the assumption that the *pros hen* equivocality represents an intra-category is invalid, because there is no reason to apply it to different types of substances (sensible, material-eternal, immaterial); all the substances are vectors of Being and Unity and have, inherently, their own being and unity. Therefore, concerning the Prime Mover, the predication of Being and Unity intersects with the sensible matter, introducing potentiality into the primary actuality of the sensible substance; nevertheless, despite impediments and differentiation, the substance is not equivocally used in the case of concrete particulars.

Later, the process that substantializes the concrete particulars is denied by a difficulty of Plato's metaphysical hierarchy: for Aristotle, the sensible particulars receive substantiality, consequently, the Unmoved Mover exercises its status as a Substance and manifests Being and Unity by excellence, failing Matter and pretending that all formal substances represents essential unities. For Patzig, the metaphysical structure of substance is inconsistent with his "double ontological paronymy", because the substantial analysis has no essential reference to the Prime Mover.⁴⁶

Also, if the substantial functionality focus on a primary, ontological efficacy of distributing Being and Unity to the Unmoved Mover or to the

⁴³ If the Aristotelian theology exclusively treated an unity that thought on itself, the metaphysics would become a kind of Parmenidean science or another strange category.

⁴⁴ G. Patzig, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

⁴⁵ The term "ontological abstraction" is distinguished from the other epistemic abstractions belonging to the concrete particulars. The notion appears in the Aristotelian meditation of Book H6, where Aristotle says that the immaterial things are essential unities (See Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1045b 23-24).

⁴⁶ G. Patzig, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

sensible substances, the previous difficulty seems to vanish. As a vector of Being and Unity, the signification of Substance rests the same: the Prime Mover exhibits Being and Unity in a perfect way, while the sensible substances present identical characteristics, except an inferior degree. In the end, the Unmoved Mover is seen as a warrantor for the motion of the First Moved Mover, whose motion allows the sensible substances to identify being and generation. Finally, Aristotle naturally eludes a discussion on the Unmoved Mover from the central Books of *Metaphysics*; on the contrary, they focus on the sensible substances that compose the metaphysical structure of the Aristotelian movers.⁴⁷

The Unmoved Mover or the Thought that Thinks on Itself

Aristotle's Unmoved Mover is involved in the thinking on its own being, representing a perfect Mind that thinks on itself. Aristotle suggests, as it was shown before, that the immaterial objects are essential unities and the Unmoved Mover is, without any doubt, such an unity. The lack of Matter proves the absence of potentiality, alteration or motion and, in these conditions, the Unmoved Mover is unable to modify its cognitive structure because it is pure and united actuality. Its being is unalterable and manifests a perfect activity, that of thinking on itself. In other words, its being, unity and thought are identical.

Aristotle affirms that the existence of the Unmoved Mover is similar to the good that man temporarily enjoys, an essential function, exercised through its own actuality and confused with its happiness because the contemplation is the thought of the Unmoved Mover: "And it is a life such as the best which we enjoy, and enjoy for but a short time (for it is ever in this state, which we cannot be), since its actuality is also pleasure. (And for this reason are waking, perception, and thinking most pleasant, and hopes and memories are so on account of these). And thinking in itself deals with that which is best in itself, and that which is thinking in the fullest sense with that which is best in the fullest sense."⁴⁸

The thought represents the absolute form of existence, manifested through the actuality⁴⁹. Aristotle remarks that the Unmoved Mover thinks on itself without stop, suggesting that the Thought, the Intellect and the Intelligibility are identical: "And thought thinks on itself because it shares the nature of the object of thought; for it becomes an object of thought in coming into contact with and thinking its objects, so that thought and object of thought

⁴⁷ This inference is valid because sensible substances are corruptible and undergoing generation; their alteration and creation require motion warranted by the cosmological system of movers.

⁴⁸ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1072b 16-20.

⁴⁹ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, translation by Tredennick, p. 149.

are the same. For that which is capable of receiving the object of thought, i.e. the essence, is thought. But it is active when it possesses this object.”⁵⁰

Aristotle asks himself if the identity between thought and its object is a valid cognitive conception, because the majority divides the thought and its object in two different objects. For instance, Plotinus argues against the Aristotelian paradigm of the Unmoved Mover, replying negatively to Aristotle’s interrogation; therefore, he affirms that the Unmoved Mover is a secondary principle in his hypostatic system. Hence, Aristotle maintains in some cases the identity between knowledge and object: “Since, then, thought and the object of thought are not different in the case of things that have not matter, the divine thought and its object will be the same, i.e. the thinking will be one with the object of its thought.”⁵¹

Next, the interrogation analyses the particular structure of the Thought that thinks on itself. Norman argues that the “narcissistic” idea of the Thought that thinks on itself (some critics talk about the narcissism of the First Principle, because it loves itself and it thinks only on itself, nothing else being worthy of its thought) is incorrect and comes from an inadequate comprehension of the Thought.⁵² According to this statement, the idea of a Mind that thinks on itself is better expressed in *On the Soul* III.4, where Aristotle develops a double cognitive typology, the criterion of difference representing a potential thought situated in an external or internal context (the two cognitive typologies concentrate over a potential intellect in relation to the external Forms or to itself, in the case if it truly possesses the knowledge of all Forms)⁵³: “Once the mind has become each set of its possible objects, as a man of science has, when this phrase is used of one who is actually a man of science (this happens when he is now able to exercise the power on his own initiative), its condition is still one of potentiality, but in a different sense from the potentiality which preceded the acquisition of knowledge by learning or discovery: the mind too is then able to think itself.”⁵⁴ The first type of thought shows that intellect is potential because it does not possess its object, while the second type presents an active intellect in virtue of that specific possession.⁵⁵ Therefore, Norman thinks that the potential intellect becomes identical with the objects of thought, unlike the

⁵⁰ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1072b 20-24.

⁵¹ *Ibidem* 1075a 3-5.

⁵² Richard Norman, “Aristotle’s Philosopher-God”, *Articles on Aristotle* IV, ed. Barnes, Schofield, Sorabji, Duckworth, London, 1979, p. 93.

⁵³ Aristotle, *On the Soul* 429b 5. In both of these cases, a potential intellect is situated in relation to a certain element, be it an external Form or itself, suggesting a duality of Thought: the thinker and the object of its thought (so, two distinct entities). Therefore, this duality is the essence of the criticism that Plotinus makes against Aristotle.

⁵⁴ *Ibidem* 429b 5-9.

⁵⁵ Richard Norman, *op. cit.*, pp. 94-95.

actual intellect that was already identical to them, even before⁵⁶ it had thought on itself.⁵⁷ However, if an intellect is potential in regard to an external object, then that particular possession⁵⁸ requires a specific motion and, under these circumstances, the Unmoved Mover could not be anymore proportional to the Thought because, unlike material substances, The Prime Mover does not have potentiality but it is always actual.

Consequently, Norman continues the Aristotelian argument from *On the Soul* and comments the *Metaphysics* Λ9. Briefly, he says that the Aristotelian question (“What does the Unmoved Mover think?”) involves only one of the two forms of thought. So, the interrogation applies to the intellect (the capacity to think) or to the thought (potential or actual) and inquires about the nature of this object of thought (external thing or mental structure). In the end, if the essence of the First Unmoved Mover is not the Thought but the potentiality, its state will be determined by an external and non-contemplative object (so not by itself) and it will cease to be the highest reality.⁵⁹

Finally, the general interpretation of how the First Unmoved Mover thinks on itself focus on the highest Good, because nothing else is worthy enough: “Further, whether its substance is the faculty of thought or the act of thinking, what does it think of? Either of itself or of something else; and if of something else, either of the same thing always or of something different. Does it matter, then, or not, whether it thinks of the good or of any chance thing? Are there not some things about which it is incredible that it should think? Evidently, then, it thinks of that is most divine and precious, and it does not change; for change would be change for the worse, and this would be already a movement.”⁶⁰ In spite of that, the thought on itself should not be represented as a totally exclusive thinking, because every actual, theoretical thought is involved in a process of thinking on itself. In fact, the continuous and abstract thinking could never be eliminated because it is distinguished from the human thought through its own eternity. If the Unmoved Mover does not think at external objects, then it thinks on itself. Under these conditions, one could state that it is impossible for it to think at particular, contingent objects if these ones are created and later destroyed, because such knowledge would introduce an alterity in the space of Being. Nevertheless, the Unmoved Mover is a completely actual and thoughtful entity whose structure cannot be modified, since to think at “x” while “y” is already being thought means that the intellect is in a relation of potentiality with “y”. The Unmoved Mover thinks on itself

⁵⁶ In this case, the adverb “before” relates to the logical priority and not to a temporal one (if the Unmoved Mover eternally thinks on itself, the temporal distinctions are totally excluded).

⁵⁷ Richard Norman, *op. cit.*, p. 95.

⁵⁸ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1074b 28.

⁵⁹ Richard Norman, *op. cit.*, pp. 94-98.

⁶⁰ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1074b 15-28.

because the process represents the highest way of being or the perfect unity: the primary Substance. In other words, Aristotle says that to think the Thought itself means to think both the Being and the Unity.⁶¹

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⁶¹ This prototype of substance is simultaneously a continuity between the Aristotelian theology and ontology. However, the idea does not suggest that the ontology is reducible to theology, or that the latter represents the climax of the former; on the contrary, it shows that the ontology collaborates with the highest principle, the divine Unmoved Mover or the prototype of the Substance itself.