Aristotle argues for the existence of an Unmoved Mover responsible for the existence of all motion, in book XII of his *Metaphysics*, building on his earlier two distinctions between form and matter and actuality and potentiality to present his conception of the divine. These distinctions prove to be very useful for Aristotle in several other areas of his philosophical analyses. However, his conception of the Unmoved Mover is not without its problems, which will be discussed in the following. It will be argued that Aristotle’s conception of the Unmoved Mover fails at explaining the existence of motion in the universe due to several objections, one being the vagueness of his concept of desire and the exact relation between God and us, all particular sensible things. To establish this, a discussion of his distinctions between form and matter and actuality and potentiality is necessary before presenting and analyzing his argument for the Unmoved Mover. This discussion will rely on Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* (specifically Books I, II, VI, and VII) and Jordan’s *Western Philosophy* (specifically pages 137 – 149).

Let us begin with a discussion of Aristotle’s conception of substance, which he builds on to draw his distinction between form and matter. For Aristotle, substance, or *ousia*, is that which has the most being, or the fullness of being. Other things exist simply in virtue of standing in some relationship to substance, their existence being dependent on substance. Aristotle then moves on to distinguish between form and matter. The form of a human, for example, would be humanness, while the
matter would be the chunk of meat, skin, and bones. Aristotle contends that both form and matter are essential for the existence of a particular substance. Matter particularizes (it is a particular hunk of matter), but the form universalizes (to say one is a human is to put one into a class that many others are in). Aristotle then distinguishes between potentiality and actuality. For example, a man that is not building a house has the potential to build it. When he builds it, he actualizes that potential. When one is asleep, one has the potential to wake up. When one wakes up, one actualizes that potential. This distinction relates to matter and form. Aristotle associates potentiality with undeveloped capacities in the matter of a substance, while actuality is associated with a finished condition of form in which these capacities are fully developed. Thus, taking the house as an example, a house is the actuality of which the matter of bricks was the potentiality. Matter is potency in the sense it can take on various forms, but in another sense it is actuality because it is eternal. Matter has always and will always exist, according to Aristotle. Form is actuality, as no form comes into existence or ceases to exist.

Having provided an explanation of these two key distinctions, it is now possible to explicate and analyze Aristotle’s argument for the Unmoved Mover, which he presents in book XII of the *Metaphysics*, particularly sections 6 and 7. He begins by asserting that substances are the primary beings, as he has already discussed previously in the *Metaphysics*. Thus if all substances are perishable, all things are also perishable. There are however two things that are not perishable, i.e. time
and motion. Time, he says, cannot have come into being and cannot cease to exist either, since that would naturally mean that there was a time before time or a time after time (ceased). Also, motion must be equally continuous with time, as time is either the same as motion or an attribute of it. Thus, in a sense, he measures the passing of time by motion. As Aristotle states, “But it is impossible, anyway, for movement either to come into being or to perish, since it has always existed. Nor can time do either of these things, since there could not be anything ‘prior’ or ‘posterior’ if there were no time; and movement is as continuous as time, since time is either the same thing as movement or is an affection of it,” (Aristotle 124). Furthermore, the only continuous type of motion, he says, is local motion, or a change of place. And the only continuous change of place is circular motion. As he states, “Movement, however, is only continuous when it is movement in place—and circular movement at that,” (Aristotle 124). Motion, for Aristotle, is eternal. So he continues by saying that there must be an eternal circular motion, and to produce such eternal motion there must be an eternal substance. This eternal substance, therefore, must be capable of causing motion, and it must not only have this potentiality to cause motion, but exercise it (i.e. actuality). As Aristotle states, “How will anything be moved, unless there is some cause that exists in actuality? Wood, certainly, will not move itself; the art of carpentry will have to act upon it. That is why some thinkers say that there is an eternal actuality—Leucippus and Plato, for instance, who say that there is always movement,” (Aristotle 125).
As such, the essence of this eternal substance must be actuality, not potentiality. If it was potentiality, it would be possible for it to not exercise this potential, and motion therefore would not be eternal (necessarily everlasting). Thus this substance whose essence is actuality must be immaterial, since it is everlasting. This, Aristotle says, is confirmed by experience and argument since there is something which moves with unceasing circular motion, namely the starry heavens. As he states, “There is something that is always being moved in an incessant movement, and this movement is circular (as is evident not only from argument but also from observation); and so the first heaven will be eternal,” (Aristotle 126). So naturally there must be something that moves it. That which moves things and is moved is an intermediate, with which Aristotle is not satisfied, because that would entail it is both actuality and potentiality. He says there must be something which moves without itself being moved. As he states, “This will be something eternal, it will be a substance, and it will be an actuality,” (Aristotle 126). Therefore, finally, it is the Unmoved Mover that must be eternal, substantial, and a purely actual being.

Thus, in sum, Aristotle begins by asserting that motion is eternal. It is without beginning and end. This eternal, or everlasting, motion cannot have occurred by itself. To look at this from the perspective of actuality and potentiality, eternal motion can be said to be the continuous actualization of potentiality. Potentiality can be actualized only by something that is actual. Thus eternal motion can
only be actualized by something eternally actual. Aristotle believes the stars continuously move in circular orbits, so there must be some eternally actual agent that moves the stars, or the starry heavens. This agent, however, cannot be potentiality, because potentiality entails a possibility to not become actual, and this agent Aristotle speaks of cannot have possibly not been actuality because a non-actuality cannot be responsible for everlasting motion. The agent thus is pure actuality. And since it is pure actuality, and not potentiality, it must be immaterial, since matter is associated with potentiality. This pure form must move without being moved because if it is moved it will change, and change entails matter or requires it, and the agent has already been established as immaterial due to its actual essence. This agent Aristotle speaks of is the “Unmoved Mover,” or God. God is the “Unmoved Mover” partly because if God moved then his moving would be produced either by himself (which is nonsensical according to Aristotle) or by something else, and if the latter, then God would not be the source of all motion.

Aristotle sums up his conception of God, “We assert, then, that God is an eternal and most excellent living being, so that continuous and eternal life and duration belong to him. For that is what God is… That there is an eternal and immovable substance separate from sensible substances is, then, clear from what we have said. We have also shown that it is not possible for this substance to have any magnitude; it is without parts and is indivisible; for it is moving things throughout an infinite time, and nothing that is finite has an infinite potency.
We have also shown that nothing can happen to it, and that it is not capable of being changed; for all other kinds of movement are posterior to movement in space. It is plain, then, why these things are as they are,” (Aristotle 128).

It is important to note, however, that Aristotle’s conception of God is most definitely not like the Judeo-Christian-Islamic conception of a personal creator of the universe that is concerned with the affairs of humanity. It cannot engage in physical activity. It has to be unmoved because movement entails change. For Aristotle, God is a pure mind contemplating itself, thus the object of God’s knowledge is itself. God is not a divine creator for him, because there is no time that the universe was created. Matter is eternal for Aristotle, for the reasons he mentions about time. Thus, God is not providing for us and is not personal for Aristotle. We see here Aristotle’s pioneering attempt to explain the universe in a non anthropomorphic manner.

A seeming contradiction arises, though, with Aristotle’s conception of the Unmoved Mover. If it is responsible for the motion of the spheres (in the “heavens”), in the sense of physically moving the outer sphere, then that means the actuality (the Unmoved Mover) had the potentiality to move. But the Unmoved Mover must be pure actuality, as potentiality entails materialness and not being eternal, but the Unmoved Mover must be eternal as has already been discussed. Also, it seems strange to speak of something unmoving that produces motion. How can something unmoving produce motion? It certainly cannot move anything via physical contact.
Aristotle’s Unmoved Mover

This is where Aristotle posits his notion of desire to overcome this seeming contradiction. God is the object of desire for the spheres. Their desire for God is what moves them. One can describe this phenomenon somewhat like God being a magnetic force, insofar as the spheres and all things for that matter are attracted to God. Thus as Aristotle states, “The final cause then moves things because it is loved, whereas all other things move because they are themselves moved,” (Aristotle 127). An analogy can be drawn to plants that move due to their “desire” to be under the sun. Thus it is not through physical contact that the Unmoved Mover causes the motion of the spheres and all else; rather it is through their desire to associate themselves with God that they move, the stars rotating in orbits, circular movement being the primary kind of movement in space (the spheres). Thus the Unmoved Mover, or prime mover, is the final cause of change, but not necessarily the efficient cause. It is the “cause” just by being the final goal of the universe, inspiring desire which moves the spheres.

Although Aristotle’s conception of the Unmoved Mover is an insightful attempt at accounting for motion in the universe, it can be argued that it fails due to several objections, one being the vagueness of his concept of desire and the relation between God and us, all sensible things. For Aristotle, God is a changeless form that exists apart from us sensible things (God is immaterial). But how is it that the sensible particular things can be related to this immaterial form? Was it not Aristotle himself who criticized Plato for asserting that the eternal forms Plato
Janua Sophia

Plato postulates the existence of what he calls eternal Forms, which particular objects in the sensory world imitate and from which they derive their existence and nature. Thus a desk participates in the Form of Hardness and is an imitation and reflection of that Form. These Forms are eternal and unchanging, while the sensory world is not. Plato attempts to explain the relationship between the forms and the particulars via the use of his participation metaphor: an object is beautiful, for example, because it participates in the Form of Beauty. But what exactly does “participates” mean? This was a problem Plato could not overcome. And now here Aristotle is posting the existence of a form that is immaterial, existing apart from sensible things in that it is insensible.

It may now be asserted that Aristotle does not say that the sensible things partake in God (the immaterial form) as Plato does, so he does not run into the same problem. Rather, sensible things desire God or aspire to identify with God which causes their movement. In response, if Aristotle already rejected “partaking” as explaining the relation between the form and the particular sensible things as nothing but a metaphor or “empty word,” then how is it any less objectionable for Aristotle to speak of God as causing motion by being what sensible things desire as the object of their “love”? “Love” and “desire” do not seem any less metaphorical than “partake” does, and are vague words that do not explain the exact relation between the sensible things and god, and how it is that god
causes their motion, especially for things lacking consciousness ("Love" and "desire" must be taken metaphorically, otherwise all things would be conscious which Aristotle rejects).

An alternative response can be proposed to this objection as to how an immaterial Unmoved Mover causes motion, which may overcome the objection that Aristotle faces upon positing his vague concept of desire. It is agreed with Aristotle that God did not physically move the spheres Himself. Rather, the question of how an immaterial God moves material things is illegitimate for the following reason. If God is immaterial, then God is not bound by space. If God is not bound by space, then He cannot be bound by time, as space and time are necessarily linked. If God is not bound by time nor space, then applying any sort of reasoning characteristic of material, physical things (such as the fact that only material things can affect other material things) is no longer valid, as physical causality is dependent upon and only exists within a temporal, spatial world. We have no understanding of a-temporal or a-spatial causation. As such, understanding how something demonstrated to be immaterial affects material things is beyond our capacity of knowledge or understanding, since we are bound within the realm of time and space.

One may now object as to the necessary connection between space and time, arguing that space and time are not logically, necessarily linked. Thus the rest of this argument would not follow. In response, even if one were to assume God is bound only by time and not space, then
the same argument would follow, as temporal causality and all natural laws only apply to a temporal world.

One may now object by saying that this explanation is not really one at all, as it is just saying that the relationship between God and material things is simply mysterious and beyond human comprehension. In response, the explanation is not pleading ignorance per se, but just the unsoundness of bounding an immaterial being to any natural laws—such as spatial causation.

The objector may now ask how it can be said that God caused the motion anymore, if causation is illegitimate to apply to an immaterial God. In response, the objection is not that causality is not applicable to God. Rather this argument is objecting to the attempt of understanding how God caused the motion in terms of the temporal and spatial sphere, which wrongly subjects an immaterial being to the laws of spatial causality. Thus thinking of an immaterial God as having a spatially causal relationship with the world is inaccurate, as one end of the relationship, namely God, clearly has no spatial characteristics. This does not mean that God does not work through other forms of causation.

So, what form of causation does God work through? The causation is obviously non-spatial causation. What exactly non-spatial causation is like is, in principle, beyond our understanding, seeing that we exist within a spatial world. This lack of understanding however is not evidence against the possibility of such causation. Numerous examples of entities science has posited is in principle beyond our comprehension and yet science
Aristotle’s Unmoved Mover

recognizes their “necessary” existence, such as the initial singularity or the singularity of a black hole, a dimensionless point of infinite density “where” the known laws of physics are no longer applicable. Thus if it has been demonstrated that God is necessarily immaterial, then it would follow His “causation” cannot be the causation we are familiar with (as otherwise God would have to exist within the material realm, which is impossible for Aristotle). As such, it is inferred His causation is unlike our own, not bound by space (or arguably time as well).

A second objection may be raised against Aristotle’s argument. Aristotle says time cannot come into being or cease to be, so it must be eternal, because otherwise there would be a time before time was or there will be a time after time ceased. However, this does not follow. If time had a beginning (or end) at time T1, then there would be no time before it, since saying there is a time before it is saying that time did not actually begin at T1 but before T1. Thus saying time had a beginning does not necessarily entail the contradiction Aristotle points out, namely that there was a time before time. The alternative would merely be existence not bound by time, which is necessary to make sense of there being a beginning of time as Aristotle posits. However, it is understood that temporal terms such as “before” have been used to describe that existence not bound by time, which seems contradictory, but the nature of our temporal existence makes discussing such an existence not bound by time impossible without unintentionally employing temporal terms. It is understood, however, that the terms are not
characteristic of that existence but just evidence of our own limited capacities of describing it accurately.

Aristotle may object here, by asserting that by saying there was anything prior to time is to say that there was a time in which that previous “existent” existed, even if it was before the beginning of time. Thus one is still falling into the contradiction.

In response, this argument is stating that existence “before” time is not bound by time at all. There is nothing inherently contradictory about the possibility of an existence not bound by time; it just is not characteristic of our own personal experiences with existents, but that does not mean it is logically impossible. Of course its existence has not been demonstrated either, but it is posited simply as an alternative to saying there was a time before time, which Aristotle rejects due to the contradiction. Thus saying that time had a beginning is still possible without running into the contradiction he thinks is inevitable.

Now, even if we were to proceed with the assumption that time is eternal and thus motion is as well (according to Aristotle), it would not follow that the eternal motion still needs a cause for that motion, namely an unmoved mover. If the motion is eternal, hence has and always will exist, then it is not evident that a cause for the motion is still in need.

Here Aristotle may respond by asserting that the motion needs an actualizer to set things into motion; otherwise nothing will ever be moving. Everything will simply be in a state of potentiality.
Aristotle’s Unmoved Mover

In response, if the motion was eternal as Aristotle holds, then it was actual all the time. So if motion was always actualized, then an actualizer is no longer needed or possible. Only that which was at some point in the state of potentiality needs an actualizer, but Aristotle clearly argues that there was never a potential for motion itself since, for Aristotle, motion is eternal and always actual. Thus, only if motion is not eternal and with a clear beginning can Aristotle appeal to the necessity of an actualizing agent to cause the motion, namely the Unmoved Mover.

As has been seen through a discussion and evaluation of Aristotle’s argument for the Unmoved Mover, the argument fails in establishing the clear relation between God and all sensible things, despite the vague concept of desire posited, although it does make much headway with Aristotle’s distinctions between form and matter and potentiality and actuality. This does not, however, dismiss various other developments in Aristotle’s argument for the Unmoved Mover, nor the possibility of responding in an alternative way to the initial objection of how an Unmoved Mover causes motion.

Works Cited

