

THE METAPHYSICAL ORIGIN OF THE TWO-FOLD CONCEPTION OF HUMAN  
SELFHOOD IN ARISTOTLE'S *NICOMACHEAN ETHICS*

by

Joseph Gerbasi

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis aims to unearth the root of the apparent contradiction in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* between the endorsement of the life devoted to, on the one hand, the practical good, and, on the other hand, the theoretical good. This will be accomplished through a detailed study of the theoretical thinking from which Aristotle's conception of human ethics originates in the first place. In doing so, it finds that Aristotle's development of an autonomous realm of human activity is motivated not, as is commonly held, by a common-sense rejection of the lofty idealism of his predecessors (indeed, such common-sense *presupposes* the existence of that realm); but rather, by a theoretical insight into how the divine aspirations of his predecessors may be more perfectly fulfilled. In *Nicomachean Ethics* there is a tension, as well as a balance, between mortal contingency and philosophical transcendence more systematic and deliberate than previously understood.

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS USED

### WORKS OF ARISTOTLE

<i>APo.</i>	<i>Posterior Analytics</i>
<i>DA</i>	<i>De Anima</i>
<i>DC</i>	<i>De Caelo</i>
<i>DM</i>	<i>De Motu Animalium</i>
<i>EE</i>	<i>Eudemian Ethics</i>
<i>EN</i>	<i>Nicomachean Ethics</i>
<i>GA</i>	<i>De Generatione Animalium</i>
<i>GC</i>	<i>De Generatione et Corruptione</i>
<i>Met.</i>	<i>Metaphysics</i>
<i>MM</i>	<i>Magna Moralia</i>
<i>Phys.</i>	<i>Physics</i>
<i>Pol.</i>	<i>Politics</i>
<i>Top.</i>	<i>Topics</i>

### WORKS OF PLATO

<i>Alc. I</i>	<i>Alcibiades I</i>
<i>Men.</i>	<i>Meno</i>
<i>Pha.</i>	<i>Phaedo</i>
<i>Phil.</i>	<i>Philebus</i>
<i>Rep.</i>	<i>Republic</i>
<i>Symp.</i>	<i>Symposium</i>
<i>Tim.</i>	<i>Timaeus</i>

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Situating Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*

Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (henceforth *EN*) begins with an ineluctably metaphysical suggestion:

Every art and every investigation, similarly every act and choice, seems to aim at some good (ἀγαθοῦ τινός); therefore it has been well said that the good (τἀγαθόν) is that at which everything aims.<sup>1</sup>

The transition from the indefinite to the definite article – from *some* good to *the* good – provides a salient challenge for interpretation. It is often held that *EN* puts aside the question of ‘the good’ and is satisfied to investigate the nature of the ‘human good’. According to Aristotle, ‘the Good’ is the object of ‘theology’, the highest form of theoretical wisdom.<sup>2</sup> While theoretical wisdom belongs to the scientific part of the soul, whose objects of thought are immutable, practical wisdom belongs to the logistical part, whose objects of thought are mutable.<sup>3</sup> According to this (overly) clear-cut distinction, the good to be investigated in the imperfect world of human activity seems to be what Aristotle calls the ‘human good’. Hence the view is commonplace that, in Aristotle's *EN* at least, the Platonic/Idealist project of determining human wisdom on the basis of knowledge of the divine, first principle of all things – the Good itself – is rejected in favour of a more down-to-earth analysis of practical life. Jaeger formulates this notion with characteristic eloquence, in reference to Aristotle's development of the sense of the term ‘φρόνησις’ (‘practical wisdom’):

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<sup>1</sup> *EN* 1094a1-3: πᾶσα τέχνη καὶ πᾶσα μέθοδος, ὁμοίως δὲ πράξις τε καὶ προαίρεσις, ἀγαθοῦ τινὸς ἐφίεσθαι δοκεῖ: διὸ καλῶς ἀπεφώνησαντο τἀγαθόν, οὗ πάντ' ἐφίεται. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Greek, Latin and French are my own.

<sup>2</sup> *Met.* 982b7-11; 982b29-983a11; 1026a16-22.

<sup>3</sup> *EN* 1139a12-16.

In the *Protrepticus*, *phronesis* retains the full Platonic sense of the *Nus* [sc. νοῦς] that in contemplating eternal being is at the same time contemplating the highest good. There only the philosopher lives the life of *phronesis*. The *Nicomachean Ethics*, on the other hand, does not make moral insight dependent on knowledge of the transcendental; it looks for a ‘natural’ foundation of it in practical human consciousness and in moral character.<sup>4</sup>

According to Jaeger, for the early, Platonic Aristotle, “*phronesis* is the transformer that converts the knowledge of the eternal Good into the ethical movement of the will, and applies it to the details of practice”. He contrasts this with the mature, uniquely

Aristotelian view of *EN*, according to which φρόνησις:

is *the* ‘state of capacity to act’, and no man ever does anything without it. The philosophical knowledge of God is no longer its essential condition. That knowledge is a source of higher insight revealed to few mortals, but this does not mean that practical wisdom is confined to the narrow circle of philosophers. Thus Aristotle tries to understand the fact that unphilosophical morality exists by reference to the autonomous conscience and its inward standard. Only at the end does he add the contemplative life to this picture, and even then he does not make moral virtue completely dependent on it.<sup>5</sup>

Although Jaeger’s developmental thesis is no longer authoritative, the view that the foundation of Aristotle’s proper ethical theory moves away from considerations of what is beyond man, grounding man’s good in man himself, is widespread and deeply rooted.<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, so ingrained is this notion that it is uncritically presupposed in the prevalent debate in English-language scholarship of the past few decades, namely, the question whether Aristotle maintains an inclusive or dominant conception of happiness. The stage for the inclusive/dominant debate was set when Hardie claimed that Aristotle had confused two conceptions of happiness in his ethical thought: “fumbling”, on the one

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<sup>4</sup> Jaeger (1934) 236.

<sup>5</sup> Jaeger (1934) 240.

<sup>6</sup> See also Bréhier (1938) 244: “All Platonic thought rested on a perfectly intimate union between intellectual, moral and political life: philosophy, through science, attained virtue and the capacity to govern the city. All this is dissociated for Aristotle: the moral or practical good, i.e. that which man can attain through his actions, has nothing to do with that Idea of the Good which dialectic put at the summit of beings.”



hand, “for the idea of an inclusive end, or comprehensive plan” according to which a man may “attain at least his more important objectives as fully as possible”, while, on the other hand, making “the supreme end not inclusive but dominant, the object of one’s prime desire, philosophy”.<sup>7</sup> Later, Ackrill (1974) problematized this distinction, arguing that Aristotle in fact had an “inclusive” understanding of happiness; the important thing was to understand precisely what is meant by ‘inclusion’. He argued that, in fact, Aristotle does not wholly instrumentalize the various activities of human life for the sake of philosophy, but makes them *constitutive* of human happiness, as ends in their own right. Scholars continue to take the same approach: namely, seeking to harmonize Aristotle’s claim that the best life is devoted to theoretical philosophy with his claim that practical activities have their own independent value.<sup>8</sup> In the terms of this debate, Aristotle’s concern is with individual happiness, and, even when he discusses divine contemplation in Book 10, with how such contemplation promotes individual happiness.

Undoubtedly, this interpretation is plausible *prima facie*. Aristotle’s *EN* seems to treat primarily human ἀρετή (usually translated as ‘virtue’) and εὐδαιμονία (usually translated as ‘happiness’). Furthermore, Aristotle sometimes seems to claim that the object of investigation is not just any good but specifically the ‘human good’.<sup>9</sup> Again, he often claims that the purpose of his study is not simply to know the good theoretically,

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<sup>7</sup> Hardie (1965) 279.

<sup>8</sup> That being said, within this general approach there is a great variety of particular ones. See, for instance, Cooper (1975), Eriksen (1976), Kraut (1989) and Richardson-Lear (2004). Richardson-Lear’s book is notable, in that its chief claim, that practical wisdom imitates theoretical wisdom, is, roughly, also what I argue for in this thesis. However, I do not believe that her interpretation penetrates deeply enough into Aristotle’s understanding of theoretical wisdom. Specifically, her book does not consider the intrinsic identity between theoretical wisdom and the theoretical good. She attributes to Aristotle’s first mover 1) immovability and 2) non-instrumental desirability, which, while correct attributions, are only negative; thus Aristotle’s own account of the determinate activity of the theoretical good (and in turn theoretical thinking), of which the human/practical good (and in turn human/practical thinking) might be an imitation, is still needed.

<sup>9</sup> *EN* 1094b7, 1098a16; cf. 1102b2-12 and 1141b3-8.

but to become good in action.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, the possibility of humans partaking in divine contemplation is questioned by Aristotle himself.<sup>11</sup> Finally, his polemic against the possibility of a universal idea of the good in 1.6 might suggest an utter rejection of a single and absolute measure of the many categories of goodness.

Nonetheless, there is reason to believe that this kind of interpretation is incomplete, and that the pursuit of happiness is not the ultimate horizon of Aristotle's ethical thought. To start, the first lines of *EN*, as we have seen, suggest that the ultimate aim of its inquiry – and indeed all inquiry – is *the Good* (τἀγαθόν). Aristotle does not begin to refer to the Good as εὐδαιμονία until 1.4, that is, until after the proem in which the plan of the work is set out. Thus some scholars must ignore or skirt around the opening lines and the first three chapters of Book 1, which pose the Good as the object of inquiry.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, while the end of *EN* transitions smoothly into Aristotle's *Politics*, the exact purpose of what appears to be its conclusion – an extended affirmation that the life of theoretical contemplation, the life of the divine, partakes most in *eudaimonia* – is problematical on this view. If *EN* is a study of practical life, and theoretical contemplation is beyond practical life, why would Aristotle find the consummation of *EN* to be in a description of theoretical contemplation?<sup>13</sup>

A related problem is that of the nature of the science of *EN*. Those who search in *EN* for an answer to the question of which kind of life Aristotle would recommend for

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<sup>10</sup> 1095a5-6; 1103b27.

<sup>11</sup> 1177a12-b35.

<sup>12</sup> For example, Kraut's book begins: "In the opening pages of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle asks: what is the good for a human being? ... We are told, at an early point (I.4), that the human good consists in εὐδαιμονία (conventionally translated "happiness") ... My aim in this book is to understand the answer Aristotle gives to this question". See also Hardie (1979) 1. Yet, as we shall see in my exposition, the inquiry into happiness and the human good is inextricable from the inquiry into the good itself.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Reeve (2013) 40-41.

human happiness, tend to implicitly presuppose that Aristotle's *EN* has as its aim to answer this question, and, at worst, reduce *EN* to a sort of how-to manual for being good.<sup>14</sup> Gerson, criticizing the debate between the 'dominant' and 'inclusive' reading on the grounds that it produces a "false dichotomy", asserts that "the question of which particular goods a human being should pursue at any one time is below the threshold of scientific inquiry".<sup>15</sup> However, even if we were to suppose that *EN* aims rather to provide more general, speculative truths about human conduct, we would still need to reckon with Aristotle's peculiar methodological statements: not only does he say that the purpose of *EN* is to become good, but he also repeatedly reminds his audience that he expects them to already possess the virtues under investigation.

While this last point – that Aristotle's audience must *already* be virtuous -- complicates the question of to what kind of scientific inquiry *EN* belongs, it also allows for an answer to that very question. Opinions have traditionally wavered between whether the science of *EN* is practical, theoretical, or an amalgamation of both.<sup>16</sup> However, this question, as Burnyeat points out, depends on a prior interpretation of what the practical and theoretical sciences are in the first place.<sup>17</sup> Happily, recent phenomenological approaches, both English and Continental, have taken into account Aristotle's unique methodological requirement of the actual presence of his objects of inquiry, and thus have paved the way for a comprehensive understanding of the science of *EN*. English-language scholarship on *EN* is most familiar with the form of the phenomenological approach through Nussbaum's application of Owen's articulation of

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<sup>14</sup> For example, Ackrill (1974) complains that Aristotle does not give us a "recipe" for the proper combination of theoretical and practical pursuits (p. 355).

<sup>15</sup> Gerson (2005) 259.

<sup>16</sup> Joachim (1951) 13-18; Irwin (1978) 261; Broadie (2002) 265.

<sup>17</sup> Burnyeat (1980) 90 n.16.

Aristotle's 'dialectical' method in *Physics*.<sup>18</sup> Owen showed that Aristotle's logical argumentation and empiricism were mutually determining: Aristotle substantially equivocates language and phenomena such that, not only does he reformulate language in view of phenomena, but phenomena in view of language. Nussbaum drew out the consequences of this position in her application of it to Aristotelian ethics.<sup>19</sup> The first principles of ethics, preserved and presented through a variegated cultural discourse, are reworked by Aristotle in view of the conflicts within that discourse; such a reworking is possible because language is inextricably tied to the way people live and feel. Aristotle's ethics is thus a (cultural) self-evaluation whereby we come to a greater appreciation of the way we live (reflected in the way we speak). As I will show later on, the danger with this approach is its anti-systematic and relativistic presuppositions, which annul any possibility of knowledge of an absolute good, and thus assert *a fortiori* the total independence of ethics from metaphysics.<sup>20</sup>

Interpreters explicitly engaged in postmodern thought reject more self-consciously a systematic, theoretical basis for Aristotelian ethics. Heidegger's theory of the onto-theological constitution of metaphysics – of the distance between the fundamental contingency of philosophy and its eternal aspirations – has incited many to view Aristotle's work as an impossible approach towards the ideal of eternal presence by way of phenomenological reflection on human life.<sup>21</sup> Thus Aubenque, for instance,

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<sup>18</sup> Nussbaum (1986); Owen (1961).

<sup>19</sup> Nussbaum (1986) 240-263.

<sup>20</sup> The anti-foundational presuppositions of phenomenology have come to prevail in English-speaking scholarship also through the 'Virtue Ethics' movement, which originated, in the work of Philippa Foot and Elizabeth Anscombe, as a return to Aristotle by way of Wittgenstein. For the history of this movement, see Coope (2006).

<sup>21</sup> The implications of Heidegger's insight in relation to *EN* is perhaps most clearly expressed in his *Sophist* lectures (1997) 15ff. His interpretation has permeated English scholarship through the work of Arendt,

explains what Jaeger thought was a retreat from transcendent metaphysics by way of a post-modern (or, according to Aubenque, pre-metaphysical) denial of the transcendent.<sup>22</sup> He argues that Aristotle establishes a worldview according to which “the existence of the prudent man precedes the determination of the essence of prudence”.<sup>23</sup> This “existential intellectualism” establishes an indefinite, and therefore independently human, realm of activity.<sup>24</sup> While I take issue with several aspects of this interpretation, primarily the un-Aristotelian notion of man as the source of value opposed to a cosmos without value, its recovery of the self-reflective and dialectical character of Aristotelian science makes possible the solution to the actual problematic with which Aristotle’s *EN* is concerned. One of the central purposes of this thesis is to situate Aristotle’s dialectical method within that problematic, and, thus, to find a systematic principle for interpreting the dialectical movement of *EN*.<sup>25</sup>

What then is the problematic underlying Aristotelian ethics? No one will deny that Aristotle’s turn to human life – however the precise nature of this turn is understood – is *from* a Platonic/Socratic idealist position. How does Aristotle himself understand this departure? Aristotle’s famous refutation of an ‘idea’ of the Good in 1.6 shows that such a departure is in question, but its negative character does not disclose any further, precise

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Strauss and Gadamer, among others. More recently Baracchi (2008) argues that while “metaphysics as the beyond of phusis remains essentially unthinkable for Aristotle and that the Aristotelian reflection rather develops on the hither side of nature” (p. 19), Aristotle aims for an impossible “unity of *logos* and *praxis*” (p. 306).

<sup>22</sup> Aubenque (1963). Cf. also Brague (1988).

<sup>23</sup> Aubenque (1963) 35.

<sup>24</sup> Aubenque (1963) 51. For an elaboration of this aspect of Aubenque’s interpretation, see Brague (2000).

<sup>25</sup> While scholarly attempts to understand any kind of systematic pedagogical movement in *EN* are rare, some scholars, informed in one way or another by the insights of phenomenology, have been able to make steps in this direction. E.g. Monan (1968), Smith (1994 and 2000) Tessitore (1996). However, neglecting the precise nature of Aristotle’s conception of theoretical wisdom (which, according to my interpretation, is the formative principle of that movement) they have not been able to explain, as I do, the unity of purpose and method in *EN*.

significance.<sup>26</sup> Therefore we must look to Aristotle's own interpretation of his departure from idealist ethics at 6.13. This interpretation does not attest to an abandonment of an absolute good in favour of a human good. Rather, here Aristotle indicates his disagreement with Socrates by showing his profound agreement with him. What is more, he asserts that he has succeeded where Socrates had failed. The antepenultimate conclusion to Aristotle's account of the intellectual virtues is that, though certain men acquire virtue not from teaching but by nature (φυσική ἀρετή), true goodness (κυρία ἀρετή) requires wisdom (φρονήσις). From this he concludes that Socrates (as representative of a philosophical tendency) was both correct and mistaken in holding that all virtues are forms of wisdom:

For he erred in believing that all virtues are wisdoms (φρονήσεις), though he said beautifully that there is no virtue without wisdom (φρονήσις). The proof: everyone nowadays, having said that virtue is a state of the soul (ἔξις) and in respect to what things it is, propose that it is a state of the soul according to right reason (κατὰ τὸν ὀρθὸν λόγον), and right reason is reason according to wisdom (κατὰ τὴν φρόνησιν). Somehow everyone has the sense that such a state of the soul is virtue, viz. according to wisdom (κατὰ τὴν φρόνησιν). Yet a small modification is necessary. For virtue is not merely a state of the soul according to (κατὰ) right reason, but rather with (μετὰ) right reason. And right reason about the virtues is wisdom. And so while Socrates believed that the virtues are reasons (λόγοι) – since they are all sciences (ἐπιστήμαι) – I say that they are with reason (μετὰ λόγου).<sup>27</sup>

To a contemporary reader accustomed to abstract treatments of morality, Aristotle's account of virtue as good state of the soul acquired by habit (ἔξις) -- a "holding" or "having" goodness -- is striking. As we see here, however, Aristotle treats this notion of

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<sup>26</sup> Cf. Gadamer (1980) 129: "Aristotle's restriction of his inquiry to the concerns of practical philosophy does not silence the question of just what constitutes the common property in all being-good".

<sup>27</sup> *EN* 1144b20-30: ὅτι μὲν γὰρ φρονήσεις ᾗτο εἶναι πάσας τὰς ἀρετάς, ἡμάρτανεν, ὅτι δ' οὐκ ἄνευ φρονήσεως, καλῶς ἔλεγεν. σημεῖον δέ: καὶ γὰρ νῦν πάντες, ὅταν ὀρίζωνται τὴν ἀρετὴν, προστιθέασι, τὴν ἔξιν εἰπόντες καὶ πρὸς ἅ ἐστι, τὴν κατὰ τὸν ὀρθὸν λόγον: ὀρθὸς δ' ὁ κατὰ τὴν φρόνησιν. εἰκόασι διὸ μαντεύεσθαι πῶς ἅπαντες ὅτι ἡ τοιαύτη ἔξις ἀρετὴ ἐστίν, ἢ κατὰ τὴν φρόνησιν. δεῖ δὲ μικρὸν μεταβῆναι. ἐστὶ γὰρ οὐ μόνον ἢ κατὰ τὸν ὀρθὸν λόγον, ἀλλ' ἢ μετὰ τοῦ ὀρθοῦ λόγου ἔξις ἀρετὴ ἐστίν: ὀρθὸς δὲ λόγος περὶ τῶν τοιούτων ἢ φρόνησις ἐστίν. Σωκράτης μὲν οὖν λόγους τὰς ἀρετὰς ᾗτο εἶναι (ἐπιστήμας γὰρ εἶναι πάσας), ἡμεῖς δὲ μετὰ λόγου.

human virtue as commonplace.<sup>28</sup> Rather, Aristotle seems to be concerned with showing 1) that wisdom causes the virtues and 2) how wisdom causes the virtues. Furthermore, it is in the latter that Aristotle believes his important innovation to reside.

Let us begin with the first claim. The ambiguity of the term ‘φρονήσις’ has been foundational in the debates concerning Aristotle’s turn towards ethics. For in *EN* Aristotle uses the term for what seems to be the consummate virtue of the practically-oriented intellect. Such a consistent, terminological use of the word exists neither in Plato’s dialogues nor in the other extant Aristotelian texts. The purpose of book 6 of *EN* is to distinguish between practical wisdom (φρονήσις), which knows the human good, and theoretical wisdom (σοφία), which knows the Good itself. Yet, here Aristotle uses ‘wisdom’ (φρονήσις) in a non-technical sense, as is plausible upon consideration of the following two facts. First, Aristotle is using the term in reference to Socrates’ claims, and so consistently with his loose usage. More convincing is the fact that, here, he seems to use the term interchangeably with both ‘science’ (ἐπιστήμη) and ‘reason’ (λόγος), of which the former, at least, he explicitly distinguishes from ‘φρονήσις’ in its strict terminological sense.<sup>29</sup> It is not hard to see why Aristotle should equivocate his carefully wrought distinctions: Aristotle is asserting in the spirit of Idealism the priority of the spiritual over the material or, in other words, that knowledge, wisdom, or reason is the cause of what good there is in human action.

It is not as easy to understand Aristotle’s innovation to Idealism. The crucial distinction lies in Aristotle’s use of ‘μετά’ and ‘κατά’. But what exact causal relation

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<sup>28</sup> We see the notion treated in a matter-of-fact way also in *Phil.* 11d.

<sup>29</sup> *EN* 1140b31-1141a8. Cf. 1139a12-16.

between knowledge and virtue does each of these prepositions denote? According to the view to which Aristotle is opposed, the virtues themselves are theoretical entities, not subject to change, but nonetheless the source of the mutable virtue of a particular soul; a man is courageous by partaking in the universal form of virtue, and he partakes in it by being of such a state of soul that he knows it and wills it. To return to Jaeger's formulation, "*phronesis*," according to idealism, "is the transformer that converts the knowledge of the eternal Good into the ethical movement of the will, and applies it to the details of practice".

The received story goes that Aristotle distinguishes himself from Ethical Idealism by dividing wisdom into practical and theoretical. Practical wisdom is not simply knowledge of a set of moral ideas or doctrines which could be known outside of the conditions in which they are to take place. We cannot know what a courageous action is until we are presented with the opportunity to be courageous. I will attempt to explicate the precise activity of practical wisdom in Chapters 4 and 5, but for now let us acknowledge that to make the particular choices that constitute virtuous actions belongs to practical wisdom, and not to theoretical wisdom. It might seem, then, that theoretical wisdom plays no major role in practical life. Theory would belong to practice only as a good – whether as the most desirable good or as an unattainable good - which might or might not be chosen for the sake of *eudaimonia*.<sup>30</sup> This is the unspoken presupposition of those who claim that the crowning achievement of *EN* is the development of a conception

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<sup>30</sup> Aristotle does at one point make similar claim to this one. Specifically, at 1144a1-3 Aristotle remarks that both sorts of wisdom have intrinsic worth at the very least insofar as they are the virtues of particular parts of the soul. However, Aristotle does not seem to consider the point to be of great consequence.



of an autonomous human sphere of goodness, apart from considerations of an absolute good.

But this view, I will demonstrate, must be complemented with an understanding of how practical wisdom is subordinate to theoretical wisdom both ontologically and epistemologically. Specifically, it will be seen that Aristotle derives his vision of the practical good from his insight into the theoretical good, with the result that theoretical wisdom remains *the* end, the systematic aspiration and absolute fulfillment, of practical life. The epistemological implication is equally surprising: namely, practical wisdom is contained within theoretical wisdom, i.e. it is known through theoretical wisdom. Paradoxically, then, Aristotle's discovery of a properly human good comes about within an affirmation on the dependence of the human good on its divine, and (so it seems) transcendent, source.

We may clarify these prefatory statements by turning to Aristotle's own statements on the matter. The question of the relation of the two wisdoms is certainly not a foreign concern for Aristotle. In fact, Aristotle ends his treatment of the intellectual virtues by clarifying the sense in which theoretical wisdom is authoritative over practical wisdom:

Practical wisdom is not authoritative (κυρία) over theoretical, just as the science of medicine is not authoritative over health. For the former does not make use of the latter, but rather sees that it comes about. The science of medicine gives orders *for the sake of* health, but not *to* health.<sup>31</sup>

This medical analogy refers to a point that Aristotle makes slightly earlier. There, he says that theoretical contemplation (σοφία) causes happiness “not as the science of medicine

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<sup>31</sup> EN 1145a6-9: ἀλλὰ μὴν οὐδὲ κυρία γ' ἐστὶ τῆς σοφίας οὐδὲ τοῦ βελτίονος μορίου, ὥσπερ οὐδὲ τῆς ὑγείας ἢ ἰατρικῆς· οὐ γὰρ χρῆται αὐτῇ, ἀλλ' ὁρᾷ ὅπως γένηται· ἐκείνης οὖν ἔνεκα ἐπιτάττει, ἀλλ' οὐκ ἐκείνη.

causes health, but as health causes health”.<sup>32</sup> That is to say, practical wisdom does not simply treat theoretical wisdom as a means to happiness. We do not contemplate to be happy: happiness simply *is* contemplation, as health simply *is* what a doctor aims to produce in his patient. Now, it is not precisely the case that a patient wishes to *be* health. The analogy of health is imperfect, and the reasons for this will be treated in later chapters. Suffice to say that Aristotle wishes to claim that practical wisdom is ordered by theoretical contemplation. Theoretical wisdom is not one aim of practical wisdom among others – theory is the fulfillment of practical thinking and as such it is that which intrinsically orients the structure of practical wisdom.

Let me remark on a surprising consequence of Aristotle’s claim. Just as the perfect success of medicine would be the production of absolute health, the perfect employment of practical wisdom would be the realization of theoretical contemplation. Of course absolute health (just as immortality) is not a realistic aspiration for composite human nature, and perhaps theoretical wisdom is not either. Again, this will be discussed later. What I want to point out is simply that the distinction between theory and practice must somehow disappear in the consummation of practice. Reeve articulates this ambiguity quite lucidly in order to distinguish Aristotle’s distinction of the two from the modern opposition between theory and praxis:

While in many ways apt, this opposition is also somewhat misleading. For what makes something *praktikos* for Aristotle is that it is appropriately related to *praxis* or action, considered as an end choiceworthy because of itself, and not – as with “practical” – that it is opposed to what is theoretical, speculative, or ideal. Hence *theoretikos* activities are more *praktikos* than those that are widely considered to be most so.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> EN 1144a2-5.

<sup>33</sup> Reeve (2002) 57.

What is the root of this ambiguity? It is perhaps not controversial to say that theoretical contemplation is the ultimate purpose of practical life: to say, for instance, that war is waged for the sake of peace, and that peace enables the leisure possible for philosophy. However, it is not straightforwardly intelligible how practical activity systematically depends on theoretical. This is especially so, considering that Aristotle's doctrine of ethics aims in part to show how man can be good, and know this good, in his own right, without being a god. That being said, it would be foolish to ignore Aristotle's word on the matter. Aristotle concludes Book 6 with the remark that to suppose that practical life determines theoretical would be as absurd as to say that "political science (πολιτική) rules (ἄρχειν) the gods, since it makes orders about what goes on in the city (τὰ ἐν τῇ πόλει)". We cannot take this final statement as an analogy: here Aristotle literally subordinates the science of *EN*, i.e. political science (πολιτική), however internally autonomous it may be, to the divine. Aristotle's development of the form of wisdom by which human life is arranged is from the perspective of divine knowing. Let us investigate the latter, so that we may, in turn, more clearly understand the former.

## **1.2: Theoretical wisdom within *Nicomachean Ethics***

The widespread neglect of the precise nature and significance the theoretical life in respect to Aristotle's *EN* is facilitated by the absence of any thorough treatment of it in *EN*. In Book 6, which treats the intellectual virtues, Aristotle portrays theoretical wisdom in relation to practical - as what the practical is not, or, as we have just seen, serves. Theoretical wisdom is the virtue of the "scientific part" (ἐπιστημονικόν) of the soul, its object is what does not "admit of being otherwise" (ἐνδέχονται ἄλλως ἔχειν), and its thinking is either true or false (without qualification); by contrast, practical wisdom is of

the “calculating part” (λογιστικόν) of the soul, its objects do “admit of being otherwise”, and its truth or falsity is in respect to desire.<sup>34</sup> These distinctions are preliminary and under closer scrutiny will prove to be not so clear-cut. In his subsequent descriptions of the intellectual virtues, Aristotle makes only a few perfunctory remarks about theoretical wisdom (σοφία).<sup>35</sup> He says that it is the most precise (ἀκριβεστάτη) science, the head of the sciences (ὡσπερ κεφαλὴν ἔχουσα), and knowledge of the most honourable things (τιμιώτατα); it is knowledge of both principles and what follows from them -- both intellect (νοῦς) and science (ἐπιστήμη). It will be the task of the next chapter to understand what is presupposed in these statements.

In the final remarks of the treatment of theoretical wisdom in *EN*, it might seem as though Aristotle wishes to deny the importance of theoretical wisdom for understanding the practical good. But such an inference is not necessary. First, Aristotle argues that knowledge of the human good is not the highest kind of wisdom.<sup>36</sup> This, he says, is obviously true considering that man is not the best thing in the cosmos; knowledge of the good of the best thing would be the highest wisdom. Given this fact, it follows that knowledge of the human good is a different knowledge than knowledge of the highest good: if knowledge of the human good were also knowledge of the highest good, there would be multiple knowledges of highest goods and multiple highest goods; but it is absurd to say that there is more than one highest good.<sup>37</sup> We must be careful not to mistake Aristotle’s intention here. Aristotle only means to distinguish practical from theoretical wisdom. He does not necessarily wish to preclude any causal relation between

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<sup>34</sup> *EN* 1139a3-23.

<sup>35</sup> *EN* 1141a9-20.

<sup>36</sup> *EN* 1141a21-29.

<sup>37</sup> *EN* 1141a29-b1.

the two. Aristotle's subsequent remark might suggest otherwise, but in fact does not. I refer to his claim that theoretical knowledge is "of the most honourable things", and that, therefore, some men, such as Thales and Anaxagoras, may have been theoretically wise (σοφοί), without being practically wise (φρονίμοι). Again, this is not to say that theoretical wisdom is not a necessary condition for understanding practical wisdom. Aristotle's point is simply that theoretical wisdom is more desirable than practical wisdom. Thales and Anaxagoras were not called prudent, not because they might not have been able to be (as though the two types of wisdom were mutually exclusive), but because they simply did not bother to "seek" human goods.<sup>38</sup>

It is worth observing that Aristotle's denial of the identity of practical and theoretical wisdom relies on a denial of the identity of human being and divine being, and, correspondingly, of the human good and the divine good. As I will explain, Aristotle understands reality to be a self-related activity, identifying the being, goodness and knowledge of a thing at once. In this sense, we will be able to say that Aristotle's doctrine of practical wisdom is motivated by a desire to understand the properly human *self*.<sup>39</sup> But this fact is striking when we consider also that Aristotle suggests that theoretical wisdom, i.e. knowledge of the divine good, could be a possession of man. For, according to Aristotle, knowledge of the divine good, as I will soon discuss in more detail, is itself the divine good. This brings us to the end of *EN* and the great difficulty with absolutely separating practical and theoretical wisdom. Namely, theoretical wisdom is the highest

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<sup>38</sup> *EN* 1141b3: οὐ τὰ ἀνθρώπινα ἀγαθὰ ζητοῦσιν.

<sup>39</sup> My use of 'self' throughout this thesis refers only to the sense stated above, namely the self-relatedness that unites being, knowing and goodness; no reference to later conceptions of human selfhood is thereby intended. Aristotle himself uses the word 'self' (αὐτός) relationally, that is, in opposition to 'other' (ἄλλος); but implicit in this use is the whole philosophical system which this thesis aims to outline. Thus I do at least wish to acknowledge Aristotle's place within the philosophical tradition which makes an ethical principle out of the Delphic injunction to 'know thyself'. Cf. O'Daly (1973) 7-19.

good of man, yet theoretical wisdom is too good for the possession of man; man is, in one sense, a theoretical being, and, in another sense, a non-theoretical being. As Nagel puts it, “it is because he is not sure who we are that Aristotle finds it difficult to say unequivocally in what our eudaimonia consists.”<sup>40</sup> Aristotle shows an acute awareness of this problem, along with, strangely, a denial of it, in his extolment of the theoretical life in 10.7:

If happiness is activity according to virtue, it is reasonable that it should be according to the best virtue; and the best virtue will be of the best part of us – whether this is intellect (νοῦς) or whatever else seems to rule and lead us by nature, and to have cognizance (ἔννοιαν ἔχειν) about what is noble and divine, either because it itself is divine, or because it is the most divine part of us ... Such a life would be higher than the properly mortal: not insofar as he is mortal will man achieve it, but insofar as there is something divine in him ... Nor ought we to obey those who warn man to think man’s thoughts, and the mortal to think mortal things, but we ought as much as we are able to become immortal (ἀθανατίζειν) and to do everything in respect to living according to the best thing in us ... And each man seems to be this part, if indeed it is his ruling and better part. And indeed it would be strange if one were not to choose the life of oneself (αὐτός) but instead the life of an other (ἄλλος).<sup>41</sup>

To bring out what is truly puzzling about these passages, let us preliminarily consider Aristotle’s conception of theoretical wisdom itself. Aristotle holds that the highest theoretical wisdom is knowledge of the causes and principles of beings, and that the highest of which is the final cause, or the Good.<sup>42</sup> The Good, as I will discuss shortly, is self-thinking thought. Thus this wisdom is theology in two senses: it is not only to know

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<sup>40</sup> Nagel (1972) 253.

<sup>41</sup> *EN* 1177a12-17, 1177b27-29, 1177b32-35 and 1178a2-4: εἰ δ’ ἐστὶν ἡ εὐδαιμονία κατ’ ἀρετὴν ἐνέργεια, εὐλογον κατὰ τὴν κρατίστην: αὕτη δ’ ἂν εἴη τοῦ ἀρίστου. εἴτε δὴ νοῦς τοῦτο εἴτε ἄλλο τι, ὃ δὴ κατὰ φύσιν δοκεῖ ἄρχειν καὶ ἡγεῖσθαι καὶ ἔννοιαν ἔχειν περὶ καλῶν καὶ θείων, εἴτε θεῖον ὄν καὶ αὐτὸ εἴτε τῶν ἐν ἡμῖν τὸ θειότατον ... ὁ δὲ τοιοῦτος ἂν εἴη βίος κρείττων ἢ κατ’ ἄνθρωπον: οὐ γὰρ ἢ ἄνθρωπος ἐστὶν οὕτω βιώσεται, ἀλλ’ ἢ θεῖόν τι ἐν αὐτῷ ὑπάρχει ... οὐ χρὴ δὲ κατὰ τοὺς παραινούντας ἀνθρώπινα φρονεῖν ἄνθρωπον ὄντα οὐδὲ θνητὰ τὸν θνητόν, ἀλλ’ ἐφ’ ὅσον ἐνδέχεται ἀθανατίζειν καὶ πάντα ποιεῖν πρὸς τὸ ζῆν κατὰ τὸ κράτιστον τῶν ἐν αὐτῷ ... δόξειε δ’ ἂν καὶ εἶναι ἕκαστος τοῦτο, εἴπερ τὸ κύριον καὶ ἄμεινον. ἄτοπον οὖν γίνοιτ’ ἄν, εἰ μὴ τὸν αὐτοῦ βίον αἰροῖτο ἀλλὰ τινος ἄλλου.

<sup>42</sup> *Met.* 982b7-8.

God, but it is knowledge that belongs to God.<sup>43</sup> To know the first principle, is to actually join in God's self-contemplation. Here lies the problem: to be able to say what theoretical wisdom is, Aristotle would have to cross the mortal boundary of practical activity into the perspective of theoretical wisdom – that is, ἀθανατίζειν. Somehow, it seems, this boundary is breached as the culmination of *EN*; that is to say, somehow Aristotle leads his audience from a reflection of the particular goods of human action, into an encounter with the divine. Could it be, then, that this human, practical reflection, brings us, as mortals, to the very doorstep of the activity of God – the self-contemplating of the Good itself? This, I propose, is indeed what Aristotle had in mind when composing *EN*.

My elaboration of this interpretation of Aristotle's doctrine of the human good, of its inherent tension and attempted reconciliation, will take the following form. First, it is necessary to explain what it means for the divine to be a self-related thinking. The proceeding chapter, then, has this as its task. Further, if I am correct to claim that it is from that notion that Aristotle derives his understanding of the human good, it must be possible that the divine good contains knowledge of what is other, and less good, than it. Therefore in this chapter I argue also for this possibility, by showing how Aristotle grounds the substantial existence of nature in the divine self-thinking. This foundation being established, Chapters 3, 4 and 5 investigate Aristotle's portrayal of man's relation to the divine. Chapter 3 describes the structure of the dialectical thinking by which man's intellect joins in the divine's thinking of nature, and, at once, in its very self-thinking. This, for Aristotle, is the activity of the *best* part of man's self. The purpose of Chapter 4 is to interpret Aristotle's doctrine of the practical good, and to show that it entails a vision

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<sup>43</sup> *Met.* 983a6-10.

of human activity according to which man can embody the divine in his composite nature and, thereby, achieve deiformity in his *whole* self. These studies culminate in Chapter 5, in which I argue that *EN* is a radically pedagogical text, the guiding principle of which is the theoretical good, and the intended effect of which is the most complete enactment of practical wisdom – a concrete unity of the theoretical and the practical. This interpretation will be substantiated by an exegesis of the decisive moments of the dialectic of *EN*.



## CHAPTER 2: THE DIVINE

### 2.1: In-Itself and Self-Relation

Let us set out, from the start, our interpretation of Aristotle's particular sort of philosophical Idealism, according to which the absolute Good is a perfect self-related activity. The notion of 'self-relation' is an appropriate term for what I will show to be Aristotle's development of the notion of 'in-itself' (καθ'αυτόν). The 'in-itself' is meant to attribute a self-subsistence, a total freedom from external circumstances. According to Aristotle, the search for theoretical wisdom is a search for the causes and principles of that which occurs in the world which we experience.<sup>44</sup> He explains that the idealism of his predecessors emerges from the inability to find a stable cause within that world, and that it therefore seeks the causes of things in their intelligible aspects, in their 'forms'.<sup>45</sup> This establishes an ontological duality: a reality 'in-itself' separated from and acting upon a mutable reality, which we experience through sensation, as though upon matter. In what follows I argue that Aristotle's development of this idealism consists of primarily two aspects. First, there is Aristotle's attempt to overcome the opposition between form and matter by re-conceptualizing form and matter as actuality and potentiality, respectively. An actuality, then, is a 'self-relation' because its self-identity is in and through its inner plurality.<sup>46</sup> On this basis, Aristotle argues that there is only one thing that is 'in-itself',

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<sup>44</sup> *Met.* 982a1-2.

<sup>45</sup> *Met.* 987a29ff.

<sup>46</sup> Oehler (1974) has shown the importance of relationality for Aristotle's conception of knowledge. Oehler does not, however, think that there is any content in the self-related thinking of the divine. I will argue against this interpretation in the second part of this chapter.

because perfectly ‘self-related’, namely, νοῦς.<sup>47</sup> Before elaborating these two points, let me adumbrate their ethical significance: if νοῦς is the only complete self-relation, the only true self, then man’s selfhood – and the good proper to that selfhood -- must be νοῦς, or be through νοῦς.<sup>48</sup>

The consequence of the separation between form and particular is that a third principle is necessary to reconcile the separation. For, as we see in Plato’s *Parmenides*, an unchanging idea cannot be the cause of the change in something other than it, without itself changing, that is, without ceasing to be ‘in-itself’. Intellect is often treated by Plato as the divine principle that orders the particulars of the world of nature with a view to what is best.<sup>49</sup> Thus the proper unity of beings which the divine mind contemplates resides within another principle, that of goodness. Whether or not Plato himself held that the Good is also a form is a question that does not concern us here.<sup>50</sup> What is important is that the idealist view with which Aristotle is engaged fails to give any explanation of the good other than as a universal form, and that Aristotle is therefore engaged with the question of how a cosmic intellect may order nature in light of the Good itself.

With the conception of being as actuality, Aristotle succeeds at explaining how the Good actually works as a principle in nature. Aristotle claims that the Platonists failed to do this because they conceived of the Good merely as another form.<sup>51</sup> That is, the Good was treated by them as a universal term applicable to all good things. This, in

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<sup>47</sup> In the following I translate ‘νοῦς’ diversely -- intellect, Intellect, mind, Mind, thinking, thought -- in order to maintain a continuous recognition of what any translation into the English language fails to express: the sense of a dynamic unity of activity, essence, and existence.

<sup>48</sup> For my use of ‘self’, see note 39 above.

<sup>49</sup> *Phil.* 28c ff; *Pha.* 97c; *Tim.* 37d. cf. Menn (1995).

<sup>50</sup> At *Rep.* 509b, Plato’s Socrates famously asserts that the good is beyond both being and knowing.

<sup>51</sup> *Met.* 988a8-11.

effect, would be to empty the term ‘good’ of any precise significance. Aristotle’s criticism brings out the inadequacy of reconciling something’s particularity with its intelligible form by way of another form: the reason why a third principle is needed in the first place is that an unchanging form cannot be mixed with the changing without losing its immutability. Aristotle nonetheless finds in his predecessors recognition of the constituent causes of mutable beings. These causes - the formal, material, efficient, and final cause – are reworked throughout the course of *Metaphysics* so as to reflect their real unity, as will show in the next chapter. In book Lambda, or, as Ross calls it, the “cornerstone” of *Metaphysics*, Aristotle uses his developed formulations of these principles to make intelligible the single first principle of all, the unmoved mover, the Good.<sup>52</sup> For Aristotle, form is no mere idea, but that which something *actually* is; matter, on the other hand, strives to become that which it actually is, and, because it contains an inherent desire to become it, *potentially* is it. A boy, for example, is *potentially* a man, and, when he grows into a man, will have *actually* become what he is. This idea will be elaborated throughout the course of this chapter. For now, let us remark that this way of thinking of a being allows for a stable unity of principles in which motion can take place and in which the intelligible aspect of the being has causal priority. The growth of a boy into a man occurs in a particular changing substance, and its course is determined by its formal end – by what it is to be a man.

The causal priority of actuality to potentiality is the basis for Aristotle’s argument that there is a single principle at work in all of nature. A boy cannot come into being except from the seed of an actual man; knowledge of health, by which the doctor

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<sup>52</sup> Ross (1924) cxxx.

produces health, comes from the observation of actual healthy men. The growth of an animal and the perfection of a substance through art are both realizations of a principle that is already implicit in an undeveloped substance. Yet particular substances exist in a particular order within the whole of nature. Aristotle, assuming an eternal motion of the universe, must posit a prior actuality to cosmic motion. The details of Aristotle's exposition of the motion of the cosmos are difficult and controversial, and I will not treat them here. It is clear, however, that Aristotle must infer from cosmic motion a prior cause. Further, since this cause is the source of all motion, it itself cannot be moved – it must be the stable activity within which the motion of the cosmos occurs.

This “principle” (ἀρχή), on which “heaven and nature hang” is the primary object of theoretical wisdom.<sup>53</sup> It alone is the independent, separate, “in-itself” being. Aristotle's doctrine of actuality and potentiality enables an understanding of *what* this cause is “in-itself”. The first principle, since it is eternally actual, must be in a constant state of completeness; in other words, its potentiality must be no different from its actuality. Aristotle identifies this actuality with self-thinking thought (νόησις νοήσεως). This identification manifestly goes hand-in-hand with one of the central insights of his psychological works: namely, knowledge is the identity or assimilation of the form of the knowing mind with the form of the object of knowing; the knowing faculty *becomes* the form that it knows.<sup>54</sup> It follows that the intellect that knows its own form is always in possession of itself, and therefore is always in perfect actuality. This is what I am calling the “self-related” nature of the first principle. In thinking itself, the divine intellect's

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<sup>53</sup> *Met.* 1072b13-14.

<sup>54</sup> *DA* 429a10-429b10.

becoming is no other than its being, the subject of its change no other than the very object that it seeks.

The question of whether this identity of actuality and potentiality is in fact a simple being, free from composition, is one of the great difficulties for interpreters of Aristotelian thought.<sup>55</sup> At the very least, the appearance of composition certainly comes from our mode of arriving at knowledge of it. As Menn says, knowledge of the first principle as a mover is only “relational”; it is not to know its “essence”, but only “what it does”.<sup>56</sup> This distinction proves to be too simple upon consideration of Aristotle’s treatment of the “essence” of the first principle. In the *ordo cognoscendi*, at least, Aristotle’s idea that the first principle is “in-itself” through being self-related depends, on the one hand, on his conception of being as actuality and as potentiality and, on the other hand, on his particular psychology of νοῦς. This problem is possibly rooted in the nature of Aristotle’s philosophical method, as we shall see in the next chapter.

For the present purposes, however, it is sufficient to recognize that Aristotle identifies the Good itself with the activity of the intellect. No longer, as for Aristotle’s predecessors, does Intellect merely think the Good and bring it into the world of becoming, but, rather, Intellect thinks the Good through thinking itself. The Good *is* thought thinking itself; and through self-relation it is “in-itself”. The implications of this point for Idealistic ethics are profound. Let us recall Aristotle’s criticism of Socrates on the grounds that he believed all the virtues to be “wisdoms”, “reasons” and “sciences”.<sup>57</sup> The meaning of this is that is that particular virtues are instances of their formal,

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<sup>55</sup> De Koninck (1994) persuasively argues that Aristotle is fully aware of this problem and engages with it in *De Anima* 3.6.

<sup>56</sup> Menn (1992) 546.

<sup>57</sup> *EN* 1144b1-32.

intelligible realities. A man would become courageous through instantiating ‘courage in-itself’. Now, however, it seems that there is no ‘courage-itself’; for selfhood, as it were, belongs to self-related activities. Really, this point is in complete accordance with Aristotle’s primary criticism of idealism, namely that, the Idealists mistake the intelligible aspect of a thing for an actual thing, and believe it to be the thing in-itself, separate from its particular instance. Thus, according to Aristotle, the idealists not only fail to recognize particular beings in their complete, material existence, but also attribute to the divine -- to the really “in-itself” – that which is not properly independent of material conditions.<sup>58</sup> ‘Man’, according to Aristotle, cannot exist apart from a particular man, one might say, flesh and all.<sup>59</sup> From this we may gather some of the significance of Aristotle’s criticism of idealistic ethics. For Aristotle courage can actually exist only within particular material conditions – in a particular man, at a particular time and place etc. To apply an idea of “courage”, abstracted from its material conditions, to a different particular situation would be to impose a foreign principle on a situation which might demand its own, appropriate course of action. In one instance it might be courageous to choose to speak frankly to one’s superior, and in another instance it might be courageous to choose to charge headlong into battle, but in neither case can the decision be determined prior to the conditions in which the choice is made.

One then might ask, what can be known about courage independently from its conditions? This question involves the main difficulty of Aristotle’s revision of idealist ethics. Namely, how can Aristotle reconstitute the idealist teaching after having destroyed its false idols? For, as we have seen, Aristotle believes himself to have shown that

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<sup>58</sup> *Metaphysics* 997b5-12; 1049b27-1041a1.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. *Met.* 1003b23-34.

wisdom is the *sine qua non* of the virtues. Yet, we have also seen that Aristotle divides Socratic *phronesis* into two: theoretical wisdom and practical wisdom. Furthermore, he suggests that theoretical wisdom determines practical wisdom because it is the ultimate good of practical wisdom. I am adding to this what Aristotle does not explicitly say but presupposes – that theoretical wisdom essentially constitutes, and *knows*, practical wisdom. In a certain sense, then, theoretical wisdom will have a non-trivial influence on whatever Aristotle takes virtue to be. Here is the obvious problem: if, say, courage cannot be thought apart from its material embodiment, how can a pure, self-thinking thought think it without having its purity tarnished? Indeed, if self-thinking thought is the only good in-itself, we must ask Aristotle how a good in-itself could possibly determine and know what it is not, and – what we shall soon recognize to be the same question -- how what is not the absolute good can be good at all.

## **2.2: Self-Thinking as Principle of Nature**

The rest of this chapter will begin to answer this question by, for the moment, forgetting about ethics. We should first investigate how the divine can know the imperfect substances in the realm of nature, this being a significantly less controversial idea. Afterwards, we may apply our findings here to the special case of ethics. Specifically, I argue that the Good itself thinks what is other than it as an imperfect realization of it. Thus the thinking of the first principle does not lose its self-relation – its “in-itself” – in thinking what is other than it. The question of whether self-thinking thought can think what is less perfect than it has been a source of controversy in modern scholarship. This controversy reflects a great metaphysical subtlety. The need for the self-thinking of God to think what is other than itself arises because this thinking must be the

cause of the order of the universe. But the universe contains many degrees of imperfection. Thus it must be explained how the divine can relate (or be related) to what is imperfect without any imperfection being attributed to it.

Aquinas concisely articulates one form of the necessary solution:

Since God is his own self-thinking, and himself is the most worthy and powerful being, it is necessary that his self-thinking be perfect: therefore he perfectly thinks himself. And the more perfectly an origin (*principium*) is thought, so much the more is its effect thought in it (*in eo*). For what has an origin is contained in the power of that origin. Therefore, since, as has been said, heaven and all nature hang on the first principle (*principium*), which is God, it is clear that God knows all things by knowing himself.<sup>60</sup>

For Aquinas, everything, because it is caused by the divine, is in the divine, which is nothing other than its own self-thinking. That is to say, the first principle of everything contains everything in its self-thinking activity. Because, however, Aristotle nowhere explicitly describes how this might be so, we must ask whether this is an authentically Aristotelian solution.<sup>61</sup>

At the very least, the *problem* is Aristotelian. To present the problem perhaps too neatly: the first principle as causal and immanent is an object of desire, a good; while it as perfect and free from potentiality is Intellect. We have already seen that Aristotle believes that knowing is the identity of the form of the knowing mind with the form of the object of knowing and that the mind that knows itself, since it is always in possession of itself, is always in actuality. Yet, in chapter 9 of Lambda, Aristotle poses as a *problem* this consequence that the divine mind can think what is other than itself and thereby order

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<sup>60</sup> *Sententia libri Metaphysicae* 12. Lect.11, n.2615.

<sup>61</sup> For the many commentators, modern and pre-modern, who ascribe to such an interpretation, see De Koninck (1994) 473-474, 511-12.



nature in all its varying degrees of perfection.<sup>62</sup> “Surely”, Aristotle says, “it would be absurd for it to think certain things”; in other words, if the divine intellect were to think what was other than itself, it would take on the imperfection that belongs to that less perfect object, and thus become imperfect. In such a circumstance, its unity of thinking and being would be sundered; it would take on the potential to *not* think, and be inactive “as a man who is sleeping”; thinking for it would become “toilsome”. However, it would be a mistake to take the problematic character of these statements as conclusive. That the divine thinking should be tarnished by knowing what is less perfect is closely tied to Aristotle’s attempt to balance, on one side, the separation necessary to maintain the perfection of the divine, and, on the other, the immanence necessary to maintain the causality of the divine -- a classic controversy in Aristotelian scholarship.<sup>63</sup> In the concluding chapter of Book Lambda, Aristotle shows not only a great awareness but an affirmation of the ambiguous role of the Good in nature:

We must consider in which of the two ways the nature of the whole has the highest good, either as something separate and in-itself, or as its order. Or is it both, as an army? For the good is both in the order of the army and in the general.

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<sup>62</sup> *Met.* 1074b15-34.

<sup>63</sup> Brunschvicg (1922); more recently, Broadie (1993). Bodéüs (2000) provides the most drastic solution to this problem, by denying that Aristotle presents a philosophical theology at all, or, at least, one according to which the divine self-thinking of Book Lambda serves both as a transcendent monotheistic deity and as a systematic principle of all being and knowing. To put it too simply, Bodéüs argues that Aristotle never substantially modifies his traditional religious faith (deeply entrenched in practical life) in a multiplicity of gods who are living immortals and who concern themselves with the affairs of mortals. Bodéüs’ book serves as a useful corrective for those interpretations that deny altogether the religious dimension of Aristotle’s thought; but its positive conclusions unnecessarily deny that any unified, philosophical system is possible. Throughout the course of my argument we shall see that my interpretation of Aristotle’s philosophical theology (according to which there is one supreme deity) makes room for Aristotle’s polytheism (by arguing that there is multiplicity within that deity), and concern for both providence and piety (by arguing that the practical good is known by and is for the sake of the supreme deity); but without presupposing, as Bodéüs does, an absence of systemic unity in Aristotle’s philosophy and, more specifically, a total separation of the concerns of ethics from those of metaphysics.

And it is more so in the general; for the general is not good because of the order, but the order is good because of the general.<sup>64</sup>

He proceeds to explain how the parts of the whole of nature exhibit their own goodness by playing a particular role in the whole order, an order determined by the Good itself:

All things are ordered somehow, but not similarly, both fishes and birds and plants, and not in such a way that there is not relation in one thing to another, but there is some relation. For all things are ordered in relation to one thing.<sup>65</sup>

It is logical that to each place in this order there corresponds an intelligible form, a thought that is “ordered”. Thus, while the order of nature is determined by “one” overarching thing, it must be admitted that Aristotle’s introduction of thought as a principle of motion in 12.7 would make little sense if there were only *one* thought that acted as principle within that order:

[The prime mover] moves in the following way. The object of desire and the object of thought move without being moved. The primary objects of these are the same. For what appears desirable is the object of craving, while what is really desirable is the object of will primarily. We desire because something appears to us; it does not appear because we desire it. For thought is the principle. And thought is moved by the object of thought, and one of the two columns of contraries is thinkable in itself.<sup>66</sup>

Here Aristotle is arguing that the intrinsic principle of motion in nature (i.e. desire) has an intelligible form – a thought or object of thought -- as a prior principle. Aristotle defines a natural object as that whose principle of motion comes from within.<sup>67</sup> Yet “nature”, as Aristotle also points out, refers both to the thing in which the movement happens, and the

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<sup>64</sup> *Met.* 1075a12-16: ἐπισκεπτόν δὲ καὶ ποτέρως ἔχει ἢ τοῦ ὄλου φύσις τὸ ἀγαθὸν καὶ τὸ ἄριστον, πότερον κερχωρισμένον τι καὶ αὐτὸ καθ’ αὐτό, ἢ τὴν τάξιν. ἢ ἀμφοτέρως ὡσπερ στρατεύμα; καὶ γὰρ ἐν τῇ τάξει τὸ εὖ καὶ ὁ στρατηγός, καὶ μᾶλλον οὗτος; οὐ γὰρ οὗτος διὰ τὴν τάξιν ἀλλ’ ἐκείνη διὰ τοῦτον ἐστίν.

<sup>65</sup> *Met.* 1075a16-19: πάντα δὲ συντέτακται πως, ἀλλ’ οὐχ ὁμοίως, καὶ πλωτὰ καὶ πτηνὰ καὶ φυτὰ: καὶ οὐχ οὕτως ἔχει ὥστε μὴ εἶναι θατέρῳ πρὸς θάτερον μηδὲν, ἀλλ’ ἔστι τι. πρὸς μὲν γὰρ ἐν ἅπαντα συντέτακται.

<sup>66</sup> *Met.* 1072a26-31: κινεῖ δὲ ὧδε τὸ ὀρεκτόν καὶ τὸ νοητόν: κινεῖ οὐ κινούμενα. τούτων τὰ πρῶτα τὰ αὐτά. ἐπιθυμητόν μὲν γὰρ τὸ φαινόμενον καλόν, βουλευτόν δὲ πρῶτον τὸ ὄν καλόν: ὀρεγόμεθα δὲ διότι δοκεῖ μᾶλλον ἢ δοκεῖ διότι ὀρεγόμεθα: ἀρχὴ γὰρ ἡ νόησις. νοῦς δὲ ὑπὸ τοῦ νοητοῦ κινεῖται, νοητὴ δὲ ἡ ἑτέρα συστοιχία καθ’ αὐτήν.

<sup>67</sup> *Phys.* 199b27ff.

thing to which the movement tends – both the matter and the form.<sup>68</sup> Hence for Aristotle a natural substance is a particular thing whose matter contains the intrinsic urge to become a certain, intelligible being: an acorn becomes a tree, a youth becomes a man.<sup>69</sup> But the acorn cannot desire the tree unless the tree exists as an object of desire; thus in some sense the thought of the tree must be prior to its generation from the acorn, not in the thinking of the acorn (a questionable interpretation), but in the thinking of the first principle. This point will be explained in more detail shortly, but for now let us notice in it the difficulty under discussion. Namely, Aristotle is here describing how a single principle, which is itself pure thought, moves the multiple, distinct substances of nature. Does an acorn become a tree by desiring God? Why does it become a tree rather than become God? Aristotle's answer must be that the acorn desires God through desiring the tree. In a sense, then, the tree – or the thought of the tree – must be *in* that first principle.

We may begin the attempt to make the “in” intelligible by noticing that Aristotle refers to *multiple* objects as the objects of thought which cause motion, namely, those in the Pythagorean table of contraries.<sup>70</sup> Its significance for Aristotle is clearly attached to the fact that “beings and substances are composed of contraries”.<sup>71</sup> Aristotle evokes the Pythagorean table of contraries, in which a variety of contraries – ‘limit’ and ‘unlimited’, ‘unity’ and ‘plurality’, etc - are opposed, in order to praise the Pythagorean insight that one of two contraries is somehow a good.<sup>72</sup> Aristotle furthers this insight by suggesting that the good contrary is the ontological and epistemological source of the other, that “the

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<sup>68</sup> *Met.* 1015a8-12.

<sup>69</sup> *Met.* 1015a14-19.

<sup>70</sup> For Aristotle's allusions to the Pythagorean table of contraries elsewhere, see Ross (1924) 2.376.

<sup>71</sup> *Met.* 1004b30-1.

<sup>72</sup> *EN* 1096b6ff.

second column of contraries is privative” or, in Ross’ terms, “in each case the negative is known not *per se* but as the negation of the positive term”.<sup>73</sup>

Aristotle’s belief that the Good is identical to νοῦς is the core of his development of the theory of the inner contrariety of substance, by which Aristotle tries to answer the question how the divine knows what is other than it. In the final chapter of Lambda, Aristotle summarizes what he believes to be the accomplishment of the *Metaphysics*, and compares his doctrine to those of his predecessors. He makes this connection explicit in a passage, of which, so far as I have found, modern commentators have not grasped the full significance:

Anaxagoras makes the Good a principle because it causes motion; for Intellect moves things, but moves them for some end, which is other than it, unless we are correct. For the art of medicine is somehow the same thing as health. And it is absurd not to make a contrary to the Good and Intellect. For those who talk about contraries do not make good use of them, unless someone revises their doctrines.<sup>74</sup>

Let us note the following points: first, Aristotle praises Anaxagoras for making Intellect the efficient cause and the Good the final cause of motion. Second, he reproaches him for not making them the same principle. Third, Aristotle believes that the identity of health and the art of medicine to be proof of this. This third point is somewhat more enigmatic. Fourth, and most enigmatically, Aristotle suggests that his view allows for contraries to belong to this first principle in the proper way. Now, it makes some sense that, if health, which is the desired end of medicine, is the same as medicine, then the Good, which is the desired end of Thinking, should be the same thing as Thinking. However, it is less

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<sup>73</sup> *Met.* 1004b27-8; Ross (1924) 2.376.

<sup>74</sup> *EN* 1075b7-13: Ἀναξαγόρας δὲ ὡς κινεῖ τὸ ἀγαθὸν ἀρχήν: ὁ γὰρ νοῦς κινεῖ. ἀλλὰ κινεῖ ἕνεκά τινος, ὥστε ἕτερον, πλὴν ὡς ἡμεῖς λέγομεν: ἡ γὰρ ἰατρικὴ ἐστὶ πως ἡ ὑγίεια. ἄτοπον δὲ καὶ τὸ ἐναντίον μὴ ποιῆσαι τῷ ἀγαθῷ καὶ τῷ νῷ. πάντες δ’ οἱ τὰναντία λέγοντες οὐ χρῶνται τοῖς ἐναντίοις, ἐὰν μὴ ῥυθμίση τις.

clear what Aristotle has in mind when speaking of contraries in respect to the first principle. To this, then, we must now turn.

To this end, Chapters 7 and 8 of book Zeta of *Metaphysics* are particularly important, because, there, Aristotle is concerned with how form can be an active cause in reality through the activity of intellect. One of the aims of this treatment is to refute the view that has the consequence that intellect must be separated from the Good. This view is that form, which is good and orderly, is the contrary of matter, which is bad and disorderly. For, since contraries cannot coexist in the same thing at the same time, the contraries of form and matter would have to be forced together by the activity of a third principle -- Mind. But in such a case the mind would be different from the form which is good. This is the sense in which Aristotle elsewhere denies that the Good can have a contrary principle (viz. matter).

Aristotle innovates significantly when he claims that the cause of the unity of form and matter is not the mind, but the very form of the *techne* in the mind. The form of health is the cause of the change of a sick man into a healthy man. Furthermore, the form of the *techne* is the form that is the natural actuality of the substance, that is, the good of the substance. Health is the actuality and good of a sick man. The mind of the doctor, only by abstracting it from a real individual healthy man, and, one must add, by becoming that very form, is able to move other potentially healthy men into this form. I will elaborate the importance of this after filling out more completely our understanding of Aristotle's conception of substance.

Aristotle's subsequent claim about medicine contains the important insight that form is not contrary to the matter upon which it works and therefore is not compromised by it. Aristotle says that "contraries somehow have the same form".<sup>75</sup> Health, he continues, which is the knowledge in the doctor's soul and the form of an actual healthy man, is, by its absence, also the substance of sickness. In other words, the formal knowledge of an object implies the formal knowledge of its object's contrary.<sup>76</sup> The important consequence is that privation is not matter, but is itself a form that is logically contained in the form of which it is a privation.

What then is matter? Matter is the potential to become one or the other of these two contraries. Aristotle draws our attention to a linguistic ambiguity to make this very point. One says, in Greek as in English, that the art of medicine makes both 'a man' (ὁ ἄνθρωπος) and 'a sick man' (ὁ κάμνων) healthy.<sup>77</sup> But medicine makes the man healthy, only insofar as he is sick, not insofar as he is a man. The man is the potential to be formed either by sickness or by health.

Finally, we must observe the structure of this contrariety. As we should expect, Aristotle develops what is for the Idealists a merely abstract structure of contrariety (e.g. the Pythagorean table of contraries) in its composite unity with the processes of life and nature. Aristotle's subsequent reflection on medicine shows how this same structure of form, privation and underlying substance, contains a variety of grades of forms, each of which are constituted by intermediate structures of similar type. Aristotle simulates the thinking (νοήσις) involved in making health out of a sick man in the following way:

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<sup>75</sup> *Met.* 1032b1-6.

<sup>76</sup> Cf. also *Met.* 1046b11-14.

<sup>77</sup> *Met.* 1033a6-14.

Since health is such-and-such (τοδι), it is necessary, if the subject is to be healthy, to have this other such-and-such, for example homogeneity; and if it is to have homogeneity, it must have, say, heat. And thus the doctor continues thinking until he arrives at what he himself can finally do. The motion from this point is called “production” (ποιήσις).<sup>78</sup>

Aristotle later refers to this point as the point where the thing “is potentially present”.<sup>79</sup>

There, he also elaborates the meaning of this “production”:

In medical treatment, the starting-point [of production] is perhaps the heating of the patient; and this the doctor produces by friction. Heat in the body, then, is either a part of health, or is followed (either directly or through several intermediaries) by something similar which is a part of health.<sup>80</sup>

Let us take the following two points from Aristotle’s explanation. First, the structure of thinking that proceeds from the desired form to the potentiality, and the structure of causality that leads from the potentiality to the desired form are logically the same.

Second, this structure proceeds through intermediary stages in a series.

Because of the distinctions we have observed between privation and matter, we must understand these intermediate motions to be from one form to another, that is to say, from one kind of potentiality for one of two contraries to another. It is crucial to notice that the movement is not simply from the matter of a substance to its form. Just as an actual healthy man must actually contain heat before he can be healthy, so must the form of health logically imply the form of heat. Moreover, the form of heat will imply the form of cold. Therefore, until the final stage is reached, the substance must still be potentially informed by a privation. A heated sick man is not yet a realization of a healthy man.

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<sup>78</sup> *Met.* 1032b7-11: ἐπειδὴ τοδι ὑγίεια, ἀνάγκη εἶ ὑγιὲς ἔσται τοδι ὑπάρξει, οἷον ὁμαλότητα, εἰ δὲ τοῦτο, θερμότητα: καὶ οὕτως αἰ νοεῖ, ἕως ἂν ἀγάγη εἰς τοῦτο ὃ αὐτὸς δύναται ἔσχατον ποιεῖν. εἶτα ἤδη ἢ ἀπὸ τούτου κίνησις ποίησις καλεῖται.

<sup>79</sup> *Met.* 1032b21: ὑπάρχει δὲ τοδι δυνάμει.

<sup>80</sup> *Met.* 1032b25-29: ἐν τῷ ἰατρεύειν ἴσως ἀπὸ τοῦ θερμαίνειν ἢ ἀρχῇ (τοῦτο δὲ ποιεῖ τῇ τρίψει): ἢ θερμότης τοῖνον ἢ ἐν τῷ σώματι ἢ μέρος τῆς ὑγείας ἢ ἔπεται τι αὐτῇ τοιοῦτον ὃ ἔστι μέρος τῆς ὑγείας, ἢ διὰ πλειόνων.

Furthermore, the form at the start of the thinking or *noesis* logically is what determines all the subsequent forms and their contraries, as well as the realization of these forms in time.

This is a more complete explanation of what Aristotle suggests elsewhere, concerning the determination of lesser motions by a higher actuality. In both the first book of *Metaphysics* and of *EN*, Aristotle claims that the role of the master craftsman is to order all the subordinate arts to a higher goal. In a famous passage in *Physics*, Aristotle alludes to the sequential order of technical production, wherein each thing done enables the realization of a further thing to be done, and ascribes this order to nature.<sup>81</sup>

Now we are prepared to understand Aristotle's claim that medicine and health are the same in the context of the identity of Intellect and the Good. Let us recall the difference between productive and contemplative thinking. In the productive sciences the thought and the object of thought are the same only when the thought is abstracted from its matter, i.e. when the potential belonging to an individual is ignored. In such a case the mind *becomes* the science of medicine, i.e. it *becomes* the form of health abstracted from a healthy individual. Without digressing too far into the details of Aristotle's doctrine of sense-perception, let us elaborate this point. According to Aristotle, the intellect cannot have a perfect capacity to become that which it knows through sense-perception. For the objects of sense perception are composite. To think an object of sense perception (for example, to think a healthy man) is to think it incompletely. We perceive its colour, shape, size, and think these attributes as formal ideas, and can think them apart from the actual healthy man as 'health'. Yet human thought, which cannot think a composite being

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<sup>81</sup> *Phys.* 199b27ff.



as whole, must constantly return its attention to the thing as whole; Aristotle does this by employing a word that transcends words and points to the actual thing, to a *this* (τόδε). Health actually occurs in *this* man, or in *that* man – never in “man”. Yet the potentiality of the *this* is never an object of thought. Here is where health fails to provide a perfect analogy with thought thinking itself. For the theoretical thinking whose object is thinking itself is immediately self-related and so fully conscious of its own particularity. Aristotle, at pains to express, in terms of discursive thought, how natural objects contain within themselves the principle of their growth, can only say that nature is like a “doctor healing himself”.<sup>82</sup> Thus, when Aristotle says that “health and medicine are in some way the same”, he does not want his audience to think of the divine intellect either as the mind of a doctor or as the art of medicine itself, but as an unimaginable unity of both -- a perfectly self-related form. In this sense he believes that the divine thought is itself the form at the start of the series of formal privations from it.

Of what, then, is Mind the actuality? And what are the privative forms of Mind? At the start of the first chapter of book Lambda, Aristotle proposes that substance might be the first part of the serial order of the whole; Aristotle argues in book Lambda that Mind is the most perfect substance. It follows that Mind is the actuality at the top of the series of substance.<sup>83</sup> Most of all, we should recall Aristotle’s reference to the structural table of contraries in chapter six of book Lambda of *Metaphysics*. From what we have discussed so far, it is highly plausible that there Aristotle is proposing that Mind is the

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<sup>82</sup> *Phys.* 199b31-32.

<sup>83</sup> This claim might also find support by Aristotle’s application of his categories to the notion of substance at *EN* 1096a25. There, with no accompanying explanation, Aristotle places “the god and mind” at the highest level.

highest realization of an intelligible series of substances that constitute the order of nature. Intellect is the actuality of actualities.<sup>84</sup>

If we accept this (and it seems that we have good reason to), it follows that any degree of privation from perfect Thinking is a privation of substance, and that this privation is a contrary that is contained within and determined by the form and actuality of that Thinking. Each natural substance, “whether fish, bird, or plant”, attains the divine perfection by realizing, as its own perfection, one or another of the intermediary stages in the series of the highest actuality of substance.

Now, we have seen that the highest actuality is a self-related being, a conflation of what a thing is with what it becomes. This insight allows us to see what it means for different kinds of substances to be privations of thinking substance. Since, for Aristotle, a substance in the fullest sense is that which is self-related, imperfect substances are imperfect through being imperfectly self-related. This explains why Aristotle transitions from his introduction of the cosmic, governing actuality to a description of nature as cyclical.<sup>85</sup>

Here Aristotle takes up Plato’s suggestion, presented from the mouth of Diotima, that reproduction is the means by which individuals seek immortality; death is overcome

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<sup>84</sup> We may shed light on the fact that Aristotle is able to maintain a monotheism of transcendence at the same time as a polytheism of immanence, by considering the different modes of knowing assumed in his theology. The self-thinking thought is the first principle considered in respect to itself, while its privative forms are the first principle considered in respect to the multiple potentialities which, taking on those forms, constitute the order of the cosmos. The latter perspective is that by which mortal thinking arrives at self-thinking thought through the study of nature, as we shall see in Chapter 3. To fully answer Bodéus’ challenge (see note 62 above), I must show that Aristotle believes that this immanence reaches the practical concerns of humans – this I do in Chapters 4 and 5.

<sup>85</sup> *Met.* 1072a7ff.

by the perpetuation of one's body in individual offspring.<sup>86</sup> According to this view, a corruptible being can partake in the ultimate object of desire -- "to be always and immortal" (ἀεί τε εἶναι καὶ ἀθάνατος) – by virtue of a cyclical movement within a species. More precisely, an animal is a substance – a self-relation – insofar as the actuality of one individual seeks to cause itself by causing another, for instance when an actual man produces a potential man, i.e. a boy. The imperfection of such a substance resides in the fact that its means of self-relation is through another individual; one's progeny is not quite one's "self". Yet the progeny is not entirely other either: in natural circumstances, oak begets oak, bird begets bird. In *De Anima*, Aristotle makes this same point, describing the natural reproductive and nutritive power of the soul as:

the ability to make another as though its self (τὸ ποιῆσαι ἕτερον οἶον αὐτό), an animal into an animal, a plant into plant, so that they may partake in the eternal and divine as much as they can; for all things strive for this, and for the sake of this act according to nature.<sup>87</sup>

Aristotle follows this description by clarifying how it makes the first stage of Diotima's mysteries intelligible, without falling into an abstract idealism:

Since [living beings] cannot share in the eternal and divine by continuity (συνεχεία), because no perishable thing can remain one and the same, they share in this, as much as they can, some more and some less; what persists is not the self but an "as though" self (οὐκ αὐτὸ ἀλλ' οἶον αὐτό), not one in number, but one in form.<sup>88</sup>

Thus for Aristotle the cycle of reproduction is the self-production of an individual within its species; yet, because the species is not wholly the individual, the form is not wholly the individual. In other words, the self-identity of a living being is not perpetual by virtue

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<sup>86</sup> *Symp.* 207c-e.

<sup>87</sup> *DA* 415a24-b2: τὸ ποιῆσαι ἕτερον οἶον αὐτό, ζῶον μὲν ζῶον, φυτὸν δὲ φυτόν, ἵνα τοῦ ἀεὶ καὶ τοῦ θεοῦ μετέχωσιν ἢ δύνανται· πάντα γὰρ ἐκείνου ὀρεγεται, κακείνου ἕνεκα πράττει ὅσα πράττει κατὰ φύσιν. Cf. also *Met.* 1033b32-34.

<sup>88</sup> *DA* 415b3-8: ἐπεὶ οὖν κοινωνεῖν ἀδυνατεῖ τοῦ ἀεὶ καὶ τοῦ θεοῦ τῇ συνεχείᾳ, διὰ τὸ μηδὲν ἐνδέχεσθαι τῶν φθαρτῶν ταῦτό καὶ ἓν ἀριθμῷ διαμένειν, ἢ δύναται μετέχειν ἕκαστον, κοινωνεῖ ταύτῃ, τὸ μὲν μᾶλλον τὸ δ' ἥττον· καὶ διαμένει οὐκ αὐτὸ ἀλλ' οἶον αὐτό, ἀριθμῷ μὲν οὐχ ἓν, εἶδει δ' ἓν.

of inhabiting an eternal order with all its individuality intact; rather, its participation in eternity demands the constant transformation of what is other than it into a particular embodiment of it. A living being is self-related through an other “as though” a self.

Aristotle’s astronomical theories, difficult as they are for interpretation (not to mention sometimes tentative, by Aristotle’s own admission),<sup>89</sup> nonetheless quite clearly exhibit the same logic of self-relation. Aristotle himself says that they are based on his metaphysics more than on own astronomical observations.<sup>90</sup> He supposes that the number of the celestial bodies corresponds to the different grades of being. That is to say, Aristotle includes the various motions of the heavenly spheres among the imitations of the first principle which mediate between its being and those in the sublunary realm.<sup>91</sup> For Aristotle, a planet is fully self-satisfied but for its desire to move in space. However, the circular motion of the undying celestial bodies is the closest physical approximation to the first principle, for there is a minimal disparity between its motion and the goal of its motion.<sup>92</sup> This holds true most of all for the outermost heaven, which “embraces” the other celestial motions, and whose own motion, according to Aristotle, is wholly “without effort”.<sup>93</sup>

Yet cyclical motion is not excluded from even the lowest entities in nature, and is in fact what *makes* them enduring entities at all. In *Metaphysics* Θ Aristotle says that the eternal actualities are imitated (μιμεῖται) by those things which are constantly undergoing

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<sup>89</sup> *Met.* 1073b11-17

<sup>90</sup> *Met.* 1073b11-16.

<sup>91</sup> *Met.* 1073a14-1073b17.

<sup>92</sup> *Met.* 1073a32-33; *DC* 286b10-287b22; *Phys.* 261b27-265a12.

<sup>93</sup> *DC* 284a2-18.

change (τὰ ἐν μεταβολῇ ὄντα).<sup>94</sup> Fire and earth, he continues, have their motion “according to themselves and in-themselves (καθ'αὐτὰ ... και ἐν αὐτοῖς)”. We find the clearest expression of this point in a beautiful passage from *De Generatione et*

*Corruptione*:

We say that in all things nature eternally (ἀεὶ) strives for the better (τὸ βέλτιον), and it is better to be than not to be ... but this cannot belong to all things, seeing that they are too far from the [first] principle (ἀρχή). God, therefore, following the course which still remained open, completed the universe (τὸ ὅλον) by making generation continuous (ἐνδελεχῆ). For in this way he would most string together being, because the eternal coming-to-be of coming-to-be is closest to substance (οὐσία). And the cause of this, as has been said, is cyclical motion; for such is the only continuous motion. Therefore even the other things which change into one another by being acted upon or by their [own] potential, e.g. the simple bodies, imitate circular motion. For when air comes-to-be from water, and fire from air, and water back from fire, we say that coming-to-be has “come around in a cycle”, since it has turned back again.<sup>95</sup>

Hence it is clear that Aristotle believes that the self-related activity of God descends even to the most simple and basic beings, and that it is the very cause of whatever perfection there is in their motion.

We may now venture a conclusion about Aristotle’s understanding of the first principle, and its relation to all else. Aristotle believes that the formal structure to which material conforms is not determined by that material, but rather by its highest formal realization – which is the self-related activity of Mind thinking itself, or the Good.

Mind’s knowledge of its contrary form is contained within its knowledge of itself, just as the art of medicine knows both health and sickness. Moreover, the contrary to Mind is

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<sup>94</sup> *Met.* 1050b28-35.

<sup>95</sup> *GC* 336b27-337a7: ἐπεὶ γὰρ ἐν ἅπασιν ἀεὶ τοῦ βελτιονοσ ὀρέγεσθαί φαμεν τὴν φύσιν, βέλτιον δὲ τὸ εἶναι ἢ τὸ μὴ εἶναι (τὸ δ' εἶναι ποσαχῶς λέγομεν, ἐν ἄλλοις εἴρηται), τοῦτο δ' ἀδυνατον ἐν ἅπασιν ὑπάρχειν διὰ τὸ πόρρω τῆς ἀρχῆς ἀφίστασθαι, τῷ λειπομένῳ τρόπῳ συνεπλήρωσε τὸ ὅλον ὁ θεός, ἐνδελεχῆ ποιήσας τὴν γένεσιν· οὕτω γὰρ ἂν μάλιστα συνείροιο τὸ εἶναι διὰ τὸ ἐγγύτατα εἶναι τῆς οὐσίας τὸ γίνεσθαι ἀεὶ και τὴν γένεσιν. τούτου δ' αἴτιον, ὥσπερ εἴρηται πολλακίς, ἡ κύκλω φορά· μόνη γὰρ συνεχῆς. διὸ και τᾶλλα ὅσα μεταβάλλει εἰς ἄλληλα κατὰ τὰ πάθη και τὰς δυνάμεις, οἷον τὰ ἀπλᾶ σώματα, μιμεῖται τὴν κύκλω φορᾶν· ὅταν γὰρ ἐξ ὕδατος ἀὴρ γένηται και ἐξ ἀέρος πῦρ και πάλιν ἐκ πυρὸς ὕδωρ, κύκλω φαμὲν περιεληλυθέναι τὴν γένεσιν διὰ τὸ πάλιν ἀνακάμπτειν.

not a material potentiality but a formal privation. While the material of the planets permit them to achieve a self-related motion in space, their matter does not permit them to become exactly what they strive to be – absolutely undetermined by any motion and space. The free self-determination of the divine intellect thinks this privation as its contrary to itself, but is not determined by it. Moreover, the divine’s various privations are the intelligible objects of desire that, as desired, determine the actual motion of all natural beings. It makes sense, then, to say that, for Aristotle, Mind thinking itself is no different than Mind thinking the logical structure of nature.<sup>96</sup> Its self-relation extends to everything that is apparently other than it; and everything that, properly speaking, is a substance is such by virtue of being thought within the thinking self-relation of the Good.

Now, with some understanding of Aristotle’s teaching on the proper object (and subject) of theoretical wisdom, we have a mainstay to which we may secure ourselves, and thereby avoid following the easy charms of contemporary (anti-)metaphysics in our attempt to understand Aristotelian ethics. It remains for us to investigate Aristotle’s two-fold teaching on how man relates to the absolute principle. Among other things, we have seen that Aristotle’s theory of substance affirms that being and goodness are one. The question of what is man’s good, then, is no different than asking what is his real self. But, as controversies surrounding *EN* attest, Aristotle does not provide an unambiguous answer to the question of what man’s good – and therefore his true self -- actually is. The

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<sup>96</sup> Doull (1982) situates Aristotle’s attempt to demonstrate this point within the context of Hellenic thought: “As the poets already taught, God knows the necessary as himself. Aristotle asks *how it is possible* [my emphasis] there should be a universal science of all natural genera (p. 144). Cf. also Fraser (1999): “The self-thinking of God is, like human thinking, a form of mediated self-reference. But it is timeless and indivisible: God comprehends all of the substantial forms of things as a single and indivisible whole (1075a5-10). The self-thinking of God provides a transcendent grounding for the species-forms which is still fully compatible with their causal immanence in the sub-lunary world. The separation of the divine mind is not a physical separation, but a separation between two orders or grades of being: between the order of pure noetic formality, and the order of materiate instantiation.”

next chapter of this thesis will work out man's *theoretical* self, that is, how he *becomes* or *joins in* the divine self-thinking: namely, a dialectical ascent in and through the study of the principles of nature, a *meta*-physics. This will set the stage for subsequent chapters, in which we investigate how Aristotle's practical philosophy provides an alternative vision of man's true self, and an alternative way to achieving deiformity, which, revolutionary as it might seem relative to the over-idealizing teachers of his day, in fact serves to recover what in traditional Athenian culture is a real expression of the divine.

## CHAPTER 3: THE THEORETICAL SELF

### 3.1: The Pedagogical Intellect

The present chapter will serve two purposes in my argument as a whole. In what has preceded, we have traced a major interpretive controversy about Aristotle's *EN*, i.e., over what is the highest good for man, to deeper a problem: what for Aristotle is the route whereby mortal man can live in accordance with the divine? Here I will attempt to explain Aristotle's more direct answer, namely, that we live most divinely by engaging in the theoretical activity of the divine. Direct, in a certain sense, as this answer may be, considerable labour will be required to reconstruct Aristotle's implicit understanding of how theoretical thought actually takes place in a mortal. In this we shall make use of recent interpretations of Aristotle's philosophical method, which, while rightly recognizing its "dialectical" or "phenomenological" character, are not sufficiently grounded in Aristotle's metaphysical thought. Thus we arrive at the second purpose of this chapter. For, just as in subsequent chapters I will argue that Aristotle's notion of practical wisdom and the practical good are derived from his conception of theoretical wisdom and the theoretical good, so also will the method of acquiring theoretical wisdom prove essential to our understanding the sort of thinking that belongs to *EN*.

Let me begin from what is perhaps an obvious observation. The divine life of the intellect I have outlined in the preceding chapter is not man's experience of intellect. In *De Anima* Aristotle asks why, if thinking is a perfect activity to which no corporeal obstruction belongs, we are not "always thinking".<sup>97</sup> Obviously, there must be a sense in

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<sup>97</sup> *DA* 430a5-6.



which intellect *qua* divine and perfect, and intellect *qua* mortal and imperfect are different. In *De Anima* 3.5 Aristotle expresses this difference with notoriously Apollonian lucidity:

Since, just as in all classes of nature, there is, on the one hand, a material in each thing (i.e. that which is potentially everything), and a cause which is poetic in the sense that it makes all things (the [latter relating to the former as] e.g. an art to its material), it is necessary for these distinctions to be in the soul too.

And such a mind [as treated in the preceding chapter of *De Anima*] exists by virtue of becoming all things, while the other by virtue of making all things; this is as a certain state, like light; for, in a certain way, light makes potential colours into actual colours.

This mind is separate and impassable and unmixed, since it is activity in its very substance (for the active is always more praiseworthy than the passive, and the principle than the matter).

Actual knowledge is identical to the thing (τὸ πρᾶγμα); but, in an individual, potential knowledge is temporally prior, while, absolutely speaking, it is not temporally prior. It does not at one time think, and at another not think. Separated, it alone is that which is, and this alone is immortal and eternal (we do not remember since, while this one is impassible, the pathetic intellect is perishable); and, without this, nothing thinks.<sup>98</sup>

Aristotle draws a distinction between a “poetic” (usually translated by “agent”) intellect and a “pathetic” (or “passive”) intellect. The former “makes all things”, while the latter “becomes all things”. In my interpretation of this controversial passage, I follow the tradition, going back at least to Alexander of Aphrodisias, and finding modern proponents such as Victor Caston and Aryeh Kosman, that identifies the first intellect

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<sup>98</sup> *DA* 430a10-25: ἐπεὶ δ' ὡς περ ἐν ἀπάσῃ τῇ φύσει ἐστὶ τι τὸ μὲν ὕλη ἐκάστῳ γένει (τοῦτο δὲ ὁ πάντα δυνάμει ἐκεῖνα), ἕτερον δὲ τὸ αἴτιον καὶ ποιητικόν, τῷ ποιεῖν πάντα, οἷον ἢ τέχνη πρὸς τὴν ὕλην πέπονθεν, ἀνάγκη καὶ ἐν τῇ ψυχῇ ὑπάρχειν ταύτας τὰς διαφοράς. καὶ ἔστιν ὁ μὲν τοιοῦτος νοῦς τῷ πάντα γίνεσθαι, ὁ δὲ τῷ πάντα ποιεῖν, ὡς ἕξις τις, οἷον τὸ φῶς· τρόπον γάρ τινα καὶ τὸ φῶς ποιεῖ τὰ δυνάμει ὄντα χρώματα ἐνεργεῖα χρώματα. καὶ οὗτος ὁ νοῦς χωριστός καὶ ἀπαθής καὶ ἀμιγῆς τῇ οὐσίᾳ ὧν ἐνεργεῖα. αἰεὶ γὰρ τιμιώτερον τὸ ποιοῦν τοῦ πάσχοντος καὶ ἡ ἀρχὴ τῆς ὕλης. τὸ δ' αὐτὸ ἐστὶν ἢ κατ' ἐνεργεῖαν ἐπιστήμη τῷ πρᾶματι· ἢ δὲ κατὰ δύνάμιν χρόνον· ἀλλ' οὐχ ὅτε μὲν νοεῖ ὅτε δ' οὐ νοεῖ. χωρισθεὶς δ' ἐστὶ μόνον τοῦθ' ὅπερ ἐστὶ, καὶ τοῦτο μόνον ἀθάνατον καὶ αἰδῖον (οὐ μνημονεύομεν δέ, ὅτι τοῦτο μὲν ἀπαθές, ὁ δὲ παθητικὸς νοῦς φθαρτός), καὶ ἄνευ τούτου οὐθὲν νοεῖ.

with the divine intellect of *Metaphysics*, and the second with the mortal.<sup>99</sup> The pathetic intellect, then, is that which Aristotle has somehow been describing throughout *De Anima*, an intellect which is “potentially all things”, and which through sense perception arrives at a state of active knowing. The “poetic” intellect, on the other hand, is the perfect intellect which we have been discussing and which figures predominantly in *Metaphysics* 12.7 and 9; that is to say, it is the actuality which is causally prior to the process of coming-to-know, somewhat like – to use Aristotle’s analogy -- a craft is causally prior to the matter in which it realizes its product. That said, Aristotle’s attempt to describe the productive process of the poetic intellect – the mechanism by which the otherwise potential intellect becomes active -- implies the insufficiency of such analogies. Following Socrates’ description of the Good as the sun, the luminous source of being and knowing, Aristotle describes the poetic intellect’s particular kind of “making” as similar to how “light makes potential colours into actual colours” (recall that for Aristotle the divine intellect is nothing other than the Good itself). In some sense, then, Aristotle is describing a kind of union of an individual thinker with the eternal thinking of God, through some mode of partaking in its luminosity.

Many questions have emerged from commentary on this passage over the millennia, and I will not attempt to give a full-fledged interpretation of this passage. I would like only to examine how the distinction between the two intellects helps us to understand how Aristotle’s philosophical method is dialectical, aporetic and pedagogical

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<sup>99</sup> E.g. Caston (1999); Kosman (1992). The contemporary rival interpretation to this view, often traced back to Aquinas’ doctrine that the agent intellect belongs to each individual mortal, believes that Aristotle treats the agent intellect as a human, psychological mechanism. In my view, however, these approaches need not conflict. For, if there Aristotle does indeed find in the theoretical activity of wisdom a continuity or identity between the human and the divine, it should follow that the agent intellect is both divine and human, as well as that *by which* the human intellect becomes divine.

at once. To establish my interpretation in a preliminary way, let us remark on how Aristotle's doctrine of the poetic and pathetic intellect is entirely applicable to his notion of teaching and learning; indeed Aristotle describes the union between god and man in the same way as the union between teacher and student. In an important passage of *Physics*, Aristotle again uses the language of “poetic” and “pathetic” to describe the process of learning.<sup>100</sup> There, Aristotle raises a “specious” (*logike*) aporia that arises out of his doctrine of motion: since motion requires one thing which is a mover and another thing which is moved, it seems as though *one* motion would include *two* distinct actualities – one in the mover and another in the moved. Interestingly, Aristotle uses the example of pedagogy to answer this aporia. He argues, in essence, that, while teaching (which he calls a “*poesis*” or “making”) is distinct from learning (which he calls a “*pathesis*” or “suffering”), their actuality is one.<sup>101</sup> According to this argument, the process of a student’s coming-to-know is a movement from a potential to an actual state of knowing. Since, for Aristotle, the intellect “becomes” what it knows, potential mind *becomes* actual mind, i.e. the activity itself of knowing. But this active knowing is none other than that belonging to the teacher. Aristotle says that the movement happens *in* the student while it is *of* the teacher. To put it another way, the poetic and pathetic intellects are not two different beings, but rather two different perspectives, as it were, of the same intellectual act. Another way to put Aristotle’s point is that, though the knowledge of one thinker is the *same* as another, it is *understood* or *manifest* differently according to its stage of realization in the mind of the one who is learning it. While Aristotle, for instance, may be in full possession of theoretical wisdom, it is not expected that his

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<sup>100</sup> *Phys.* 3.3; cf. also 255a33-255b5.

<sup>101</sup> *Phys.* 202b35: μία ἔσται ἡ ἐνέργεια.

audience, i.e. his students, be in full possession of that knowledge for teaching to occur. In fact, if the student already knew in the fullest sense what the teacher was to teach, there would be no need for teaching. Nonetheless, the process of learning depends on a ground which is not yet manifest to his audience at the start of the investigation. Because this ground is none other than the actuality of both the completed knowledge of the teacher and the developing knowledge of the student, the end result of the investigation can be said to be a union, or one might also say a recognition of the identity, of the mind of the teacher and student -- of the "agent" (*poetikos*) and "passive" (*pathetikos*) intellect.<sup>102</sup>

This process, I claim, describes not only the process of personal instruction, but also major parts of Aristotle's strategy of presentation in his texts. Furthermore, it is only in this context that we can understand what contemporary commentators call Aristotle's "dialectical" method. While Aristotle's doctrine of the "agent intellect" has until modern times been widely recognized to be integral for understanding Aristotle's epistemology, contemporary approaches to understanding Aristotle's philosophical method tend to shy away from what Aristotle believes to be its theological goal, and so fail to adequately arrive at the essence of Aristotle's method. I aim to redress this deficiency. The goal of dialectic, I will argue, is causally prior to the dialectical process itself; dialectic is the enactment of the self-thinking thought that is the Good, and it is enacted through, and in order to realize, the activity of the Good. That which holds for natural substance, therefore, holds for various levels of inadequate conceptions of the Good in human

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<sup>102</sup> Aristotle does not seem explicitly concerned (as later thinkers are) with the question about the location of poetic and pathetic minds in an individual thinker, that is to say, whether the difference between poetic and pathetic intellect is mere illusion, and the assimilation of the one to the other is the disappearance of that illusion, or whether the difference between poetic and pathetic intellect is in some deeper sense real, and the assimilation of the individual with the first cause cannot be absolute.

thinking: both are understood by Aristotle to be teleological processes, that is, both are imperfect realizations of the end to which they are inherently drawn to become.

The great difficulty with arriving at a coherent explanation of Aristotle's theoretical epistemology is that, while Aristotle's words on the matter are suggestive, they leave much to be filled in. Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, which deals with the consummate form of knowledge, the divine first principle of all, begins with a clear outline of the stages of knowing that must precede it. Human knowledge, Aristotle says, begins in a bestial mode -- sensation (αἴσθησις) and imagination (φαντασία); memory (μνήμη) allows us, along with other animals, to retain sensations and images, which can then be synthesized into a unitary experience (ἐμπειρία); experience is the mode of knowing particular things (τὰ καθ' ἕκαστόν), and can be surpassed by science (ἐπιστήμη) and the productive form of science, art (τεχνή), which emerge from multiple experiences through our ability to isolate in our thinking what is universal (τὸ καθόλου) in those experiences. Aristotle adds that science knows what is universal in the experience of something because it knows the cause (αἰτία) of that thing, and it is from this last point that the question of wisdom (and *Metaphysics*) emerges. With the leisure afforded by the technological advancement of civilization, thought was freed from necessity, and could seek its own end, that is, what Aristotle loosely calls the "first causes and principles".<sup>103</sup> I have already given a somewhat detailed interpretation of what Aristotle believes the object of wisdom to be: namely, νοῦς, the Good itself whose perfect self-contemplation constitutes the formal structure of reality. It is not, however, clear from Aristotle's

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<sup>103</sup> *Met.* 981b28-29: τὰ πρῶτα αἴτια καὶ αἱ ἀρχαί.

account of learning at the beginning of *Metaphysics* how a human being *develops* wisdom from the earlier forms of knowledge.

This difficulty is not simply due to Aristotle's omission of an explanation: it comes from the nature of the thing itself. Because the first principle is a perfect self-related activity, its intelligible and the existential components are identical. Such a being is universal since it is the cause of *all* things, yet it is *particular* because it is unique.

Yet how this intelligible identity could be known by a mortal is nowhere explained by Aristotle. While his *Posterior Analytics* in part seeks to grasp the emergence of knowledge of universal principles of particulars from experience of those particulars, the work famously ends with the proclamation that the cause of scientific knowledge is  $\nu\omicron\upsilon\zeta$ .<sup>104</sup> In this instance, Aristotle does not explain *why*  $\nu\omicron\upsilon\zeta$  is the first principle of knowledge, and here too the question arises, how does one arrive at the first principle of knowledge? The problem, analytically stated, is this: all scientific demonstration proceeds from a first principle;  $\nu\omicron\upsilon\zeta$  is the first principle of all scientific demonstration; if  $\nu\omicron\upsilon\zeta$  were known by scientific demonstration, then it would be demonstrated from another principle, and thus it would not be the first principle. We would seem to be left with either a *reductio ad infinitum*, or with a necessary ignorance about the ground of human knowledge.

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<sup>104</sup> *APo.* 2.19. Here I am identifying the “ $\nu\omicron\upsilon\zeta$ ” of *Posterior Analytics* with the divine  $\nu\omicron\upsilon\zeta$  of *Metaphysics*. On my reading, there is no reason to separate them. Since, for Aristotle, the formal structure of thought is the same as the formal structure of reality, the unifying principle of universally valid knowledge and particular experience must be the same principle that unites the universal causes of beings and particular beings.

### 3.2: Dialectic, Theory and Phenomena

In what follows, we shall attempt to make passage to this ground of knowledge, with the help of recent phenomenological readings of Aristotle corrected by our understanding of Aristotle's own intentions. What is generally called Aristotle's "dialectical" or "phenomenological" method emerged when, around the end of the 1950's, the English-speaking academic world was taking the linguistic turn. While this kind of interpretation is in many ways true to Aristotle's method, it has yet to be adequately situated within that method's metaphysical and systematic basis in Aristotle.

In "*Tithenai ta phainomena*" Owen observed that there was an "apparent discrepancy" between Aristotle's explanation of the method of deductive science and his actual method of investigation into first principles. He argued that Aristotle's approach to understanding first principles was neither deductive nor empirical, but more like what Aristotle called "dialectic". Let me first point out that the idea that Aristotle employs dialectic for this purpose is not in itself what is peculiar about the reading of Owen and others influenced by phenomenology. Indeed, Burnet had already claimed in 1900 that Aristotle's moral philosophy proceeded dialectically.<sup>105</sup> For Aristotle, dialectic, in its most general sense, is the art of controversy, whereby two opposed positions are examined and the difficulties in affirming the truth of either position (i.e. the impasses, or *aporiai*) become manifest.<sup>106</sup> Aristotle himself describes dialectic as useful for reaching the first principles of a science.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Burnet (1900) xxxix-xlvi.

<sup>106</sup> *Top.* 104bff.

<sup>107</sup> *Top.* 101a36-b4.

However, characteristic of the “dialectical” approach informed by phenomenology is the recognition of the *intrinsic* relation of language and opinion to their first principles. Dialectic is not simply the interrogation of received opinion, by whatever means of argumentation are most effective for recognizing first principles; but rather seeks from those opinions the principles *implicit* in those opinions. The *locus classicus* for the exposition of this doctrine is Aristotle’s preface to his study of *akrasia*.

There he says:

It is necessary, as in other investigations, for us to lay down the appearances (φαινόμενα) and first going through the impasses (διαπορεῖν) to demonstrate (δεικνύναι) all the opinions (ἔνδοξα) concerning these states of mind (ταῦτα τὰ πάθη) or, if that is not possible, most of them or the most chief of them (κυριώτατα). For, if both the difficulties are solved and the opinions remain, the demonstration would be sufficient.<sup>108</sup>

The common interpretation is this. Aristotle takes as the starting-point of his studies the reputed opinions (“*endoxa*” and “*phainomena*” which Owen showed to be synonymous in this and many other instances) of his cultural tradition. The conflicts between these opinions are then made explicit. This explication allows for a reformulation of the opinions in order to make them cohere. The most comprehensive and consistent reformulation of them is then taken to be the “demonstration” of the first principles of the science in question.<sup>109</sup> The major Anglophone studies of this method tend to isolate their interpretations of the method from the question of metaphysical presuppositions, of Aristotle’s and of their own, and are only so helpful for our purposes.<sup>110</sup> Notable,

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<sup>108</sup> EN 1145b2-7: δεῖ δ’ ὥσπερ ἐπὶ τῶν ἄλλων, τιθέντας τὰ φαινόμενα καὶ πρῶτον διαπορήσαντας οὕτω δεικνύναι μάλιστα μὲν πάντα τὰ ἔνδοξα περὶ ταῦτα τὰ πάθη, εἰ δὲ μὴ, τὰ πλεῖστα καὶ κυριώτατα: ἐὰν γὰρ λύηται τε τὰ δυσχερῆ καὶ καταλείπηται τὰ ἔνδοξα, δεδειγμένον ἂν εἴη ἰκανῶς.

<sup>109</sup> For a more in-depth account of the orthodoxy established by Owen’s interpretation, see Nieuwenburg (1999).

<sup>110</sup> See Barnes (1980) and Irwin (1988).



however, is the interpretation of Nussbaum, who articulates with consistency and clarity the philosophical root of Owen's position:<sup>111</sup>

Aristotle tells us that his method, 'here as in all other cases', is to set down what he calls *phainomena*, and what we shall translate as 'the appearances'. Proper philosophical method is committed to and limited by these. If we work through the difficulties with which the *phainomena* confront us and leave the greatest number and the most basic intact, we will have gone as far as philosophy can, or should, go.<sup>112</sup>

In respect to Aristotle's ethical philosophy, this method is supposed to be possible because the opinions in question are directly related to life as we live it. Opinions, or 'appearances', are evaluated with the tool of the law of non-contradiction; nevertheless "we can have truth only *inside* the circle of the appearances, because only there can we communicate, even refer, at all".<sup>113</sup> Essential to this interpretation is the notion that opinions are generated "on the basis of some communal experience or experiences".<sup>114</sup> This interpretation certainly resembles Aristotle's actual statements about the relation between thought and action in *EN*, which I will discuss in Chapter 5. There we can evaluate whether this approach undermines the possibility of an absolute basis for morality, which appears to be a reasonable corollary.<sup>115</sup>

Since I wish to show that Aristotle's dialectic of ethics reflects his dialectic of theoretical science, I will for now focus on interpreting the latter. And indeed the radical

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<sup>111</sup> Wians' (1992) criticism of Nussbaum's interpretation does not deal with what is fundamentally true in it, and so does not provide an alternative other than the same one-sided empiricism against which Nussbaum's position is a reaction.

<sup>112</sup> Nussbaum (1986) 240.

<sup>113</sup> Nussbaum (1986) 257.

<sup>114</sup> Nussbaum (1986) 249.

<sup>115</sup> Cf. Monan (1961) 269: "Aristotle assumes value language as a rational ultimate, as source which will reveal the ingredients of virtuous conduct not by being justified through an appeal to a previously elaborated set of metaphysical principles, but through a patient analysis of the conditions which the value of language itself imposes. To this extent we would characterize the method as pre-metaphysical, phenomenological – though the metaphysic of value to which it leads never receives adequate expression".

character of the phenomenological interpretation of Aristotle's method is even more apparent, as well as more apparently problematical, in Aristotle's theoretical works, of which the objects of inquiry, we may state without controversy, are, as Aristotle understands them, unchanging and prior to human activity. Owen argued that Aristotle equivocates "*endoxa*" and "*phainomena*", showing that Aristotle's interest in things that "appear" was not only that of a scientific empiricist, who took as his first principles inferences made through sensory observation; but rather that Aristotle's search for the first principles of reality is *shaped* by the language and ideas of his tradition. Nussbaum emphasizes the pre-scientific, cultural background which, she supposes, makes science possible at all:

When Aristotle sits on the shore of Lesbos taking notes on shellfish, he will be doing something that is not, if we look at it from his point of view, so far removed from his activity when he records what we say about akrasia. He will be describing the world as it appears to, as it is experienced by, observers who are members of our kind. Certainly there are important differences between these two activities; but there is also an important link, and it is legitimate for him to stress it. We distinguish sharply between 'science' and 'the humanities'. Aristotle would be reminding us of the humanness of good science.<sup>116</sup>

According to this view, culturally-conditioned appearances (presumably, the kind proper to our "humanness") determine the content of rational thought. That Aristotle tends to open his theoretical works with an examination of the opinions of his predecessors is a commonplace. However, it has often been assumed that Aristotle's engagement with these opinions is perfunctory, anachronistic, or biased.<sup>117</sup> Particular to the phenomenological interpretation is the claim that the ideas of Aristotle's predecessors provide the unique conditions in which Aristotle's unique doctrines can occur.

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<sup>116</sup> Nussbaum (1986) 274-75.

<sup>117</sup> For a thorough criticism of such views, see Lowry (1980).

Methodological statements of Book *α* of *Metaphysics*, placed between the more explicitly historical dialectic of Book A and the more explicitly aporetic dialectic of Book B, corroborate this interpretation. Aristotle presents theoretical inquiry as a collective effort which is accomplished through combining multiple, partial perspectives:

Theory about truth (ἡ περὶ τῆς ἀληθείας θεωρία) is in one sense difficult, in another easy. Proof is that, while no one adequately grasps<sup>118</sup> it, we do not all fail; rather, each says something about nature (φύσις), and contributes a little or nothing to it, but from everything together something great results.<sup>119</sup>

The accumulation of various perspectives has a more substantial effect on the inquiry than simply providing us with many hypotheses to be considered or rejected as we deem fit; Aristotle agrees with historicist phenomenology in holding that the collaborative effort of various thinkers is to some extent responsible for shaping the way the inquiry itself appears to us:

It is right to be grateful not only to those whose opinions we share, but to those who have spoken superficially. For they too have contributed something. For by their preliminary work they have formed our present state of knowing (ἔξις). If there had been no Timotheus, we would not possess much of our music; if there had been no Phrynis, there would have been no Timotheus. Likewise for those who spoke about the truth; while we have taken certain perspectives (δόξαι) from some, and they in turn came to be because others had.<sup>120</sup>

Tredennick translates ‘ἔξις’ here as “mental experience”.<sup>121</sup> While Tredennick’s translation thus captures Aristotle’s historicism, it does not, for my purposes, suggest the incompleteness of this historicism taken absolutely, as does “state of knowing”. The

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<sup>118</sup> While some read 'θιγεῖν', others have 'τυχεῖν' ('happen upon'). While the former alludes to the 'grasp' by which simple truth is known (discussed below), the latter would pun on 'fail' (ἀποτυγχάνειν), but, so far as I can tell, would carry less conceptual significance.

<sup>119</sup> *Met.* 993a30-b4: ἡ περὶ τῆς ἀληθείας θεωρία τῇ μὲν χαλεπῇ τῇ δὲ ῥαδία. σημεῖον δὲ τὸ μήτ' ἀξίως μηδένα δύνασθαι θιγεῖν αὐτῆς μήτε πάντας ἀποτυγχάνειν, ἀλλ' ἕκαστον λέγειν τι περὶ τῆς φύσεως, καὶ καθ' ἓνα μὲν ἢ μηθὲν ἢ μικρὸν ἐπιβάλλειν αὐτῇ, ἐκ πάντων δὲ συναθροισζομένων γίνεσθαι τι μέγεθος.

<sup>120</sup> *Met.* 993b11-19: οὐ μόνον δὲ χάριν ἔχειν δίκαιον τούτοις ὧν ἂν τις κοινώσαιο ταῖς δόξαις, ἀλλὰ καὶ τοῖς ἐπιπολαιότερον ἀποφνημαμένοις: καὶ γὰρ οὗτοι συνεβάλλοντό τι: τὴν γὰρ ἔξιν προήσκησαν ἡμῶν: [15] εἰ μὲν γὰρ Τιμόθεος μὴ ἐγένετο, πολλὴν ἂν μελοποιίαν οὐκ εἶχομεν: εἰ δὲ μὴ Φρῦνις, Τιμόθεος οὐκ ἂν ἐγένετο. τὸν αὐτὸν δὲ τρόπον καὶ ἐπὶ τῶν περὶ τῆς ἀληθείας ἀποφνημαζομένων: παρὰ μὲν γὰρ ἐνίων παρειλήφαμέν τινας δόξας, οἱ δὲ τοῦ γενέσθαι τούτους αἴτιοι γεγονόσιν.

<sup>121</sup> Tredennick (1933) *ad loc.* For Aristotle’s use of ‘ἔξις’, cf. *APo.* 99b32 (discussed later in this chapter).

phenomenological interpretation can find textual confirmation in such statements of Aristotle, but, I claim, must go further than historicism. It is a mistake to reduce Aristotle's object of dialectical inquiry entirely to a linguistic or cultural artifact; for this is to reduce thought itself to being a *product* of historical-dialectical activity. Hence, such an interpretation descends into an empiricism of another, non-scientific sort. Since there is no natural, universally valid, principle to be found through this kind of dialectic, there is no basis for determining which opinions truly are the "most chief of them". Reflection on our conceptual heritage may allow for a more precise, or consistent, articulation of that heritage, but, without an absolute standard, it cannot establish its truth. Nussbaum's claim that the law of non-contradiction serves as a rational standard, while at the same time not admitting it to go beyond the *phainomena*, raises the following dilemma: either the law of non-contradiction does not belong to the *phainomena*, in which case there would in fact be something accessible by thought apart from *phainomena*, or the law of non-contradiction is itself a *phainomenon* and so cannot provide a trans-cultural standard at all.<sup>122</sup>

To put aside the question of whether it is philosophically (un-)justifiable to reduce knowledge to language in this way, it seems to me that the reduction is certainly not Aristotelian. Aristotle is undeniably sensitive to the influence of inherited ways of speaking on thinking -- but he is equally aware of its limitations and dependence. In the following I aim to show that Aristotle subordinates the phenomenological, emergent

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<sup>122</sup> As I interpret Aristotle's law of non-contradiction (LNC), the LNC is merely a logical expression of the structure of substance itself; substance cannot admit of contraries and neither can the LNC. This, I take it, is the reason that Aristotle associates substance with the LNC at the end of *Metaphysics* Γ. I do not wish to develop this interpretation here, but only point out that both the transcendence and immanence of the LNC can be preserved, if we understand the LNC to be the logical expression of the structure of substance, seeing that Aristotle, as I am arguing, reconciles the transcendence and immanence of substance.

character of philosophy, identified by the above school of interpretation, to a higher ontological principle – the active νοῦς, the Good itself, which, from a transcendent standpoint, determines the course of mortal thinking and speech.

The preface to *Physics* gives occasion for a consideration of Aristotle’s ideas about the determination of thought by its final goal, as well as indicating the role played by language in mediating this determination. There Aristotle explicitly takes up the relation of words to thought (τὰ ὀνόματα πρὸς τὸν λόγον), saying that a name:

indicates a certain whole (ὅλον τι) indistinctly, for instance “circle”. But its definition (ὀρισμός) distinguishes into particulars (εἰς τὰ καθ’ ἕκαστα). Just so, children at first call all men ‘father’ and all women ‘mother’, but later distinguish each one.<sup>123</sup>

The meaning of this statement is not immediately apparent, even with the aid of both examples, and so its context must be considered. Specifically, the statement comes as the conclusion to Aristotle’s prefatory remarks on the proper path of inquiry and learning:

The path is from what is more knowable and clear to us, to what is more clear and knowable by nature. For what is knowable for us and what is knowable absolutely are not the same. Therefore it is necessary to advance from what is less clear by nature (though more clear to us) to what is more clear and knowable by nature.<sup>124</sup>

According to Aristotle, the importance of language in philosophical inquiry lies in just this: its immediate clarity and familiarity to us. However, Aristotle thinks that this initial familiarity is not ultimate, and must be superseded by a more absolute kind of knowledge. In his explanation of this we return to the above-noted idea of words indicating wholes indistinctly:

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<sup>123</sup> *Phys.* 184b10-14: ὅλον γὰρ τι καὶ ἀδιορίστως σημαίνει (οἷον ὁ κύκλος), ὁ δὲ ὀρισμὸς αὐτοῦ διαρεῖ εἰς τὰ καθ’ ἕκαστα. καὶ τὰ παιδία τὸ μὲν πρῶτον προσαγορεύει πάντας τοὺς ἀνδρας πατέρας καὶ μητέρας τὰς γυναῖκας, ὕστερον δὲ διορίζει τούτων ἑκάτερον.

<sup>124</sup> *Phys.* 184a17-21: πέφυκε δὲ ἐκ τῶν γνωριμωτέρων ἡμῖν ἡ ὁδὸς καὶ σαφεστέρων ἐπὶ τὰ σαφέστερα τῆ φύσει καὶ γνωριμώτερα· οὐ γὰρ ταῦτά ἡμῖν τε γνώριμα καὶ ἀπλως. διόπερ ἀνάγκη τὸν τρόπον τοῦτον προάγειν ἐκ τῶν ἀσαφεστέρων μὲν τῆ φύσει ἡμῖν δὲ σαφεστέρων ἐπὶ τὰ σαφέστερα τῆ φύσει καὶ γνωριμώτερα.

Now, those things which are at first more evident and clear to us are muddled (συγκεχυμένα); and, from these, the elements and principles become known later to those who analyse them. Therefore it is necessary to proceed from generalizations (τὰ καθόλου) to particular things. For the whole (τὸ ὅλον) as presented by sense-perception is more familiar. And a generalization is somehow a whole – for a generalization embraces many things as though they were its parts.<sup>125</sup>

On this account, words are “generalizations”, indicating the “muddle” of elements and principles given through sense-perception. The task of thinking, according to Aristotle, is to distinguish in language the parts of these sensory “muddles”, and arrive at the particular things underlying them. Aristotle’s example of defining the circle illustrates this meaning of the “particulars” (τὰ καθ’ ἕκαστα).

However, the purpose of breaking down the linguistic muddle into its parts through analysis is to reassemble its constituents into a true grasp of the cause as a whole. Aristotle elsewhere calls this reassembled whole a “the concrete whole” (τὸ σύνολον).<sup>126</sup> Importantly, the concrete whole is the cause of the confused, “universal” whole; in this sense, the cause of the process of knowing pre-exists the process – it is both as beginning and end of the movement of thought. To convey this point is perhaps Aristotle’s intention in supplementing the mathematical example of the circle with the domestic example. A child first associates ‘mother’ with the experience of its mother, and in search of its mother refers to all women as ‘mother’, and has achieved clarity of thought when it attributes the general name to the concrete particular in respect to which the name first arose – the actual mother.

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<sup>125</sup> *Phys.* 184a21-26: ἔστι δ' ἡμῖν πρῶτον δῆλα καὶ σαφῆ τὰ συγκεχυμένα μᾶλλον· ὕστερον δ' ἐκ τούτων γίνεται γνῶριμα τὰ στοιχεῖα καὶ αἱ ἀρχαὶ διαιροῦσι ταῦτα. διὸ ἐκ τῶν καθόλου ἐπὶ τὰ καθ' ἕκαστα δεῖ προίεναι· τὸ γὰρ ὅλον κατὰ τὴν αἴσθησιν γνωριμώτερον, τὸ δὲ καθόλου ὅλον τί ἐστίν· πολλὰ γὰρ περιλαμβάνει ὥσπερ μέρη τὸ καθόλου.

<sup>126</sup> *Met.* 1034a5-7; 1035b28-30; 1037a32. Aristotle refers to the concrete whole as being both particular and universal, formal and material. At 995b35-6 he says: “by ‘concrete whole’ I mean whenever something predicated of matter”.

This observation, however, must be qualified. Aristotle does not hold a simple correspondence theory of truth, as the example of the child returning to its mother might suggest, according to which truth is nothing other than an accurate representation in the mind or in speech of an external object.<sup>127</sup> A brief consideration of Aristotle's account of sense-perception in *De Anima* suffices to correct this misconception. Indeed, Aristotle grants that sense-perception cannot occur without external objects of sense-perception.<sup>128</sup> The actual perception, however, is one activity.<sup>129</sup> This one activity occurs within the perceiver.<sup>130</sup> Consider now that activity is always causally prior to potentiality; that is to say, the motion of a being is directed by the actuality which is intrinsically desired by that being. Thus there must be an intrinsic potentiality within the objects of sense-perception to be perceived. This is to affirm that the world *can* be perceived, but without the naiveté of empiricism and solipsism. Against empiricism, Aristotle recognizes that perception is not an immediate assimilation of its faculties to its objects; rather, the assimilation is to the form of the perception which is separated (i.e. abstracted) from the particular object of perception.<sup>131</sup> Against solipsism, on the other hand, Aristotle holds that, say, when a tree falls in a forest and no one is around to hear it, sound occurs only *potentially*; for sound is a potentiality for the activity for hearing.<sup>132</sup> Jonathan Lear, taking seriously the application of Aristotle's understanding of physics to knowledge itself, marks its (to us) extremely counter-intuitive consequences:

If, in Aristotle's world, form which exists as a potentiality is in part a force toward the realization of form at the highest level of actuality, then *one ought to*

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<sup>127</sup> Commentators often find support for a correspondence theory of truth at *Met.* 1011b26-27.

<sup>128</sup> *DA* 417b24-8.

<sup>129</sup> *DA* 425b26-426a1.

<sup>130</sup> *DA* 426a2-19.

<sup>131</sup> *DA* 429a10-429b10.

<sup>132</sup> *DA* 426a20-6.

*conceive of perceptible forms embodied in physical objects as forces directed toward the awareness of form.* For it is only in the awareness of a perceiver that perceptible form achieves its highest level of actuality. The sensible form of a tree is a real force in the tree toward being perceived as a tree. The perceiving of the tree must occur in the sense faculty of a perceiver, but the perceiving itself is nevertheless the highest realization of sensible form.<sup>133</sup>

Sense-perception, then, is the active union of two natural potentialities, the faculties and objects of sensation. Keeping this in mind, we can avoid the possible misunderstanding that arises from the above claim that the movement of thought is determined by its particular object. The particular that is responsible for the movement is not simply the object of perception; rather, it is the active unity of the faculty of perception with its object – the perceiving itself.

But to perceive a sensible form of a substance is not to *think* it, properly speaking. This is where knowledge and opinion come in. In *De Anima* 3.3, Aristotle distinguishes thought from sensuous experience. Aristotle recognizes that perception is only a partial knowledge of a substance – it is the mind abstracting a sensible form from its origin. Thought is the return of that perception to this origin; this is what Aristotle means when he says that knowledge is concerned with *causes*. His exposition of the difference between thought and perception takes its start from the recognition of the fact of error – while a perception is neither true nor false, only thoughts can be false. The reason is that thinking (of sensible substances) is a relation of multiple elements: ‘This woman’ is simple, and neither true nor false, whereas the complex, ‘This woman is my mother’, is one or the other. When the child calls a woman ‘mother’, it is forming a judgment about (and so distinct from) its experience: ‘this woman is my mother’. Only by going above

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<sup>133</sup> Lear (1988) 109. It should be added to this explanation that Aristotle does not mean to imply that a tree exists so that *we* can perceive it. Recall from the previous chapter that all nature formally subsists in *God’s* thinking. We are here asking how we may join in that thinking.



experience in this way can the child mistake the particular woman for which the name is intended; only in the synthetic cognition of predication does correct (and incorrect) thought about sensible substance appear. I say that this complex structure of thought is 'correct', only insofar as it correctly distinguishes that which is particular and sensible in the object of thought, from that which is intelligible in it. In *Categories* Aristotle draws particular attention to the way linguistic statements are made. There, he describes, *inter alia*, how the thing about which we speak must be a particular individual, while the thought that is attributed in speech to an individual is not itself an individual. To continue with the above example, the child experiences the 'this' and attributes to the 'this' the otherwise abstract idea of one's mother.

As we have seen, this division in predication -- between a thing's particularity and its intelligibility -- reflects the division in the unity of a concrete whole. From this it is becoming clear how thought itself contains a similar division as substance. It is now becoming clear that, just as substance contains the division, so does thought. We have discussed above how Aristotle assumes, in his presentation of sense-perception, the unity of the inner divisions of the concrete whole: the activity of perception is independent from, and is the ultimate cause of, both the perceiver and the thing from which the perceived form is abstracted. This unity belongs *a fortiori* to thought: neither subject nor predicate is the thought; rather, thinking is the two held together in an active unity, more or less perfectly according to the independence of the intelligible aspect of the subject of thought.<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> From this it is clear that perception is not only an instrumental stage in the development of thought, but imitates it imperfectly, i.e. is a privative form of thinking substance. Perception is like self-thinking

In the emergence of scientific thinking from experience, the problematic of Aristotelian dialectic arises: what is the *cause* of the emergence of science from experience? In other words, given that science is of causes, what is the science of science? At the start of *Metaphysics*, where Aristotle explicitly asks this question, it is not yet explicit that its answer will be the identity of thought and being in νοῦς. Rather, the first principle is sought in its particular, sensible manifestation, on the one hand, and in the form by which it is thought, on the other. As the opening of *Physics* shows us, Aristotle believes that language reflects the more or less confused unity of these things, to be untangled in a more complete activity of thought.

### **3.2.1: The Most Difficult Aporia**

For this reason, Aristotle's theoretical works begin not with an examination of just any received opinions, but with two very particular and, as is gradually revealed throughout that examination, opposed positions, which reflect the division within substance itself. The first book of *Metaphysics* is devoted to laying out an opposition between one group of thinkers ('idealists', 'logicians' or 'dialecticians'), who hold that the primal cause of being resides in its formal and intelligible part, with another ('materialists' or 'physicists'), who consider the immediate particularity of a being to be its ontological ground. Aristotle gathers his tradition into two camps, both fighting for the preeminence of one of the two sides of substance they have grasped, and both failing to

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thought, insofar as it is an actuality, which exists for its own sake because it is desirable for its own sake; but it is unlike self-thinking thought insofar as its self-subsistence is imperfect. That is, the self-relation of that actuality (i.e. its becoming itself through the intrinsic desire for itself inherent in potentiality) cannot occur without extrinsic causes (i.e. the objects of perception). Thus perception is not only an imitation of thought; its incompleteness heralds its more perfect realization as only a part of the whole that is thought.

grasp substance as a whole by their adherence to only one aspect of it. In both camps, there is an attempt and a failure to separate experience from knowledge. While the first camp holds that knowledge is identical to experience; the latter camp seeks knowledge that is purified of experience.<sup>135</sup> Both groups fail to escape the confusion of thinking and experience that is presented in language. The physicists call the given phenomena 'experience'; the idealists think they have separated thinking from experience and call it 'knowledge' (in fact they succeed only in reproducing the confusion of experience in an imaginary, ideal world).<sup>136</sup> Aristotle wants to really distinguish the thinking from the experience, the formal and material components of beings, and arrive at a third thing: their living, actual relation.

This problem applies to every level of natural substance. Aristotle's *Physics* begins with an investigation of the doctrines of idealists such as Parmenides and Melissus (1.2-3), followed by the varieties of physicists (1.4), and then the commonality of the two (1.5-7). His investigation of animal substance lays out explicitly this pattern. Aristotle begins *De Anima* by explaining in what sense that work is a theorizing about the soul (τὸ θεωρεῖν περὶ ψυχῆς).<sup>137</sup> He poses the science of the "dialectician" (διαλεκτικός) and the "physicist" (φυσικός) – both terms being used by Aristotle in a pejorative sense -- against one another: while the former studies the soul as an abstract form, the latter studies the soul as though it were nothing but its material manifestation. Each approach taken on its own, according to Aristotle, misses the real thing in question: the unity of the soul and body that constitutes the actual life of the soul. He makes this point plainly: "Who of the

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<sup>135</sup> *DA* 427a22ff; *Met.* 987a29ff.

<sup>136</sup> I have discussed this point in Chapter 2.

<sup>137</sup> *DA* 403a28ff.

two then is the physicist? The one who investigates the matter while ignoring its intelligibility (λόγος), or the one who investigates only the intelligibility? Probably the one who investigates both”.<sup>138</sup>

### 3.2.2: Aporia and the Good

But how exactly does Aristotle understand the dialectical investigation of inherited cultural attitudes to reveal their underlying truth? It is commonly acknowledged that Aristotle’s philosophical method is in some way ‘aporetic’ (that is to say, it deals with the ἀπορία, the difficulties in understanding), but explanations for what this means varies.<sup>139</sup> Recognition of the problems and conflicts in received opinion is an essential stage in the process, but not, I claim, its end. Let us examine more closely what Aristotle says about confronting the difficulties of inquiry. Aristotle says the search for the first principle of being must begin by going through the difficulties of

whatever has been held about these things, and apart from these whatever views have been overlooked. Now, whoever wishes to make safe passage through the difficulties (εὐπορήσαι) must go through them well (διαπορήσαι καλῶς). For the subsequent safe passage is a release (λύσις) from the earlier difficulties; and release (λύειν) is not possible for those who do not recognize the bond (δεσμός); the impasse (ἀπορία) in thought makes this clear about the thing (περὶ τοῦ πράγματος). For in its perplexity it is very much like those who are in bonds (δεδεμένοι); in both cases it is impossible to progress onward.<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> DA 403b8-9.

<sup>139</sup> Booth (1983) assumes that Aristotle’s *aporiai* are unsuccessful attempts to reconcile universal and particular knowledge. Booth is correct to identify the central problem with which the aporetic is concerned, yet he says nothing about what Aristotle believes the effect of going through *aporia* to be, and so decontextualizes the aporetic inquiries. Likewise Aubenque (1962), who takes as I do the ‘aporetic’ to be a stage in the larger process of ‘dialectic’, disregards Aristotle’s stated purposes, in order to supplant them with his own assumptions about the production of systems of meaning by language.

<sup>140</sup> *Met.* 995a24-33: ἐπελθεῖν ἡμᾶς πρῶτον περὶ ὧν ἀπορήσαι δεῖ πρῶτον: ταῦτα δ’ ἐστὶν ὅσα τε περὶ αὐτῶν ἄλλως ὑπειλήφασί τινες, κἂν εἴ τι χωρὶς τούτων τυγχάνει παρεωραμένον. ἔστι δὲ τοῖς εὐπορήσαι βουλομένοις προὔργου τὸ διαπορήσαι καλῶς: ἡ γὰρ ὕστερον εὐπορία λύσις τῶν πρότερον ἀπορουμένων ἐστὶ, λύειν δ’ οὐκ ἔστιν ἀγνοοῦντας τὸν δεσμόν, ἀλλ’ ἡ τῆς διανοίας ἀπορία δηλοῖ τοῦτο περὶ τοῦ πράγματος: ἢ γὰρ ἀπορεῖ, ταύτη παραπλήσιον πέπονθε τοῖς δεδεμένοις: ἀδύνατον γὰρ ἀμφοτέρως προελθεῖν εἰς τὸ πρόσθεν.

Aristotle borrows the imagery of bondage and release from Plato's description of dialectic via Socrates' allegory of the cave in *Republic*.<sup>141</sup> There, dialectic is presented as a mode of freedom from the bonds which have held us in cave since childhood, and which have prevented us from ascending and examining the source of the images to which we are accustomed, i.e. the puppeteers and flames casting shadows on the cave-wall, as well as preventing us from exposure to the sunlight and the sun outside. Aristotle, in interpreting the meaning of this allegory, takes these bonds to be the problems inherent in the traditional opinions about the matter of investigation. Furthermore, release from these bonds is nothing other than a recognition of the difficulties or limits that belong to certain ways of thinking. So far, dialectic's purpose is *negative*; it brings about a recognition of what is *not* absolutely true. Yet Aristotle says that we proceed from ἀπορία to εὐπορία, from impasse to clear sailing: we must ask, then, if dialectic's effect is negative, to where does this freedom take us?

Aristotle's answer to this question is in the second half of his introduction to aporetic thinking. He continues thus:

Therefore it is necessary to have first theorized all the difficulties, both for the above reasons and because those who inquire without first going through the difficulties do not know where they should be going, and, furthermore, they cannot recognize whenever they have found what they were seeking or not; for the goal (τέλος) is not clear to such a man; but it is clear to the man who has gone through the difficulties beforehand. Further, one is better at judging when, just as one who has heard both sides in a lawsuit, one has heard all the conflicting speeches (λόγοι).<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> For the same terminology of 'release' and 'bonds', see *Rep.* 515c; for a similar, thought more general use, see also *Pha.* 67d and 82d.

<sup>142</sup> *Met.* 995a33-b4: διὸ δεῖ τὰς δυσχερείας τεθεωρηκέναι πάσας πρότερον, τούτων τε χάριν καὶ διὰ τὸ τοὺς ζητοῦντας ἄνευ τοῦ διαπορῆσαι πρῶτον ὁμοίους εἶναι τοῖς ποῖ δεῖ βαδίζειν ἀγνοοῦσι, καὶ πρὸς τούτοις οὐδ' εἴ ποτε τὸ ζητούμενον εὔρηκεν ἢ μὴ γινώσκειν: τὸ γὰρ τέλος τούτῳ μὲν οὐ δῆλον τῷ δὲ προηπορηκότι δῆλον. ἔτι δὲ βέλτιον ἀνάγκη ἔχειν πρὸς τὸ κρίναι τὸν ὡσπερ ἀντιδίκων καὶ τῶν ἀμφισβητούντων λόγων ἀκηκόοτα πάντων. See also *DC* 279b6-12.

I will begin with the most straightforward allusion in this passage. Aristotle ends with the image of a judge adjudicating a lawsuit between two parties; Aristotle believes that both sides must be heard out, not because it is simply one or the other that is correct, but because the two sides are both themselves distortions of the truth, and the perspective that stands above both is the truer. Now, the image of adjudication does not entirely speak for itself. It must be taken with the statement preceding it. Here Aristotle describes the man who has not gone through the difficulties of the subject matter as not knowing where he is going. It must be emphasized that Aristotle uses the word “τέλος” to describe the goal. This word, of course, is the same that Aristotle uses to indicate the “final cause” or the “good” of something. As we have seen, for Aristotle, the final cause of knowing is νοῦς, and the good itself is the self-related activity of νοῦς. It is safe to say, then, that Aristotle has not abandoned the Platonic allegory of the cave. For Plato, the sun is an image of the good itself; Aristotle is here saying that to pass through the difficulties of dialectic, i.e. to be freed from our shackles, is to recognize the good.

There is another dimension of Platonic allusion in Aristotle’s description of aporetic inquiry that must be noted. Aristotle’s assertion, that those who do not know the τέλος of their investigation “cannot recognize whenever they have found what they were seeking or not”, should remind his audience of one of the central dilemmas of Plato’s *Meno*. In that dialogue, the possibility of the acquisition of knowledge, that is, of learning, is problematized. Socrates is concerned there, as Aristotle is here, with arriving at a higher kind of knowledge than that which is merely given in experience: he wants to proceed from knowledge *that* something is so, to knowledge *why* it is so, from “right

opinion” (ἡ ὀρθὴ δόξα) to “knowledge” (ἐπιστήμη) in the proper sense.<sup>143</sup> The failure of Socrates and his interlocutor to make this transition leads them to articulate the aforementioned dilemma: if the object of inquiry is already known, it need not be sought; whereas if it is not already known, it could not be recognized when found.<sup>144</sup> Aristotle’s more explicit treatment of this problematic in *Posterior Analytics* is formulated to the same effect: “one will learn either nothing or what one already knows”.<sup>145</sup>

Socrates’ solution to this problem – extrapolated from the teachings of the priests and priestesses of the mystery cults -- is what is typically called the “theory of recollection”.<sup>146</sup> According to this theory learning is nothing other than an awakening to knowledge that is already latent in the soul or, in Socrates’ terms, the soul recalling what it knew before its embodiment.<sup>147</sup> Aristotle pinpoints the philosophical core of the theory of recollection in the need to distinguish different senses of ‘knowing’:

Nothing (I believe) prevents it being possible that, in one sense, a man knows what he learns, and, in another sense, does not know it. The absurdity would be, not if in some sense he knew what he was learning, but if he were to know it in that precise sense and manner in which he was learning it.<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>143</sup> *Men.* 72c: ἔν γέ τι εἶδος ταῦτόν ἅπασαι ἔχουσιν δι’ ὃ εἰσὶν ἀρεταί; 97bff.

<sup>144</sup> *Men.* 80 D–E:

Meno: How are you going to search for this, Socrates, when you do not at all know what it is? For which of the things you do not know will you set up as the target for your search? And even if you do actually come across it, how will you know that it is that thing that you do not know?

Socrates: I understand what you mean, Meno. Do you see what an eristic argument you are bringing down on us—how it is impossible for a person to search either for what he knows or for what he does not know? He could not search for what he knows, for he knows it and no one in that condition needs to search; on the other hand he could not search for what he does not know, for he will not even know what to search for.

<sup>145</sup> *APo.* 71a30.

<sup>146</sup> *Men.* 81aff.

<sup>147</sup> This doctrine appears also in *Phaedo* and *Republic*.

<sup>148</sup> *APo.* 71b6-8: ἀλλ’ οὐδέν (οἶμαι) κωλύει, ὁ μανθάνει, ἔστιν ὡς ἐπίστασθαι, ἔστι δ’ ὡς ἀγνοεῖν· ἄτοπον γὰρ οὐκ εἰ οἶδέ πως ὁ μανθάνει, ἀλλ’ εἰ ὠδί οἶον ἢ μανθάνει καὶ ὧς.

Aristotle's distinction between the poetic and pathetic intellect, between active and potential knowing, should provide an answer to the dilemma under discussion. Indeed, Aristotle rejects the facile interpretation of Socrates' solution which would fail to distinguish the difference in potential and actual 'states' (ἔξεισις) of knowing.<sup>149</sup>

If Aristotle consciously situates his dialectical method within the dilemma of *Meno*, and considers that dilemma's solution to be the distinction between the poetic and pathetic intellect, it is very hard to deny that Aristotle would have subordinated dialectic to the poetic intellect. Herein lies the positive need for communal inquiry through language, as well as the redemption of error. If νοῦς is indeed the cause of the entire process of thinking, then even the imperfect forms of thinking must have some truth in them – they are all to some degree states of knowing. Aristotle says as much in the statements scattered around the criticisms of his predecessors in *Metaphysics*: they were, he says, “grasping murkily” at the causes; they were as children “lisping” towards clear articulation of the truth.<sup>150</sup> Aristotle's dialectic does not expose contradictions in opinions in order to shake thought indiscriminately out of misconceived opinion and into insight into the first principles of things; rather, no opinion is absolutely misconceived, and so each opinion allows for a unique perspective of the good which preexists and causes our knowledge of it. In this sense, theoretical truth is “both difficult and easy”, for whereas “no one person can obtain a worthy grasp of it”, truth is like the proverbially ample barn door which anyone could hit with a stone.<sup>151</sup> To learn is not simply to break free from error; it is to find exactly what is true within error. Thus, while the priority of νοῦς in the

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<sup>149</sup> *APo.* 99b25-32.

<sup>150</sup> *Met.* 988a23; 993a15-17. Here, one might be reminded of the image of the child at the start of *Physics*, discussed above.

<sup>151</sup> *Met.* 993a30-b12.



process of learning is causal, the temporal sense of “priority” is also partly applicable. Since the first principle is signified in any attempt to say anything, it can be found in any attempt in a partial way. Consider the underlying assumption of Aristotle’s refutation of the denier of the law of non-contradiction in *Metaphysics* Γ: it is impossible to speak without meaning *something*. This ‘something’ is a being, and as such is and is known in “relation to the one”, i.e. the first principle that is νοῦς.<sup>152</sup> It is through engagement with multiple imperfect visions of the good, that our mortal intellect, the “τῆς ἡμετέρας ψυχῆς νοῦς” adjusts its sight to the “clearest things of all”, as though “the eyes of bats” to “daylight”.<sup>153</sup>

As with Plato, Aristotle holds that νοῦς is beyond the divisions of discursive thinking and corruptible being, scientific knowledge and experience, and it is cause of them. Just as there is a substance beyond sensible substance, viz. νοῦς, there is thought and speech beyond the discursive and propositional. Aristotle presents νοῦς as a self-related being, an identity of actuality and potentiality, a being whose act is not other than its existence; such a substance is simple. Accordingly, it must be known by a simple knowing. How the first principle can be both simple and contain the difference of a self-relation is among the central problematics of Aristotelianism (not to mention the tradition of philosophy as a whole).<sup>154</sup> Here we see the epistemological implications of the problematic, as well as the significance to the central question of this chapter, how do we, as mortal, take part in the divine thinking. Just as νοῦς is two insofar as it is both subject

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<sup>152</sup> *Met.* 1075a19. At the end of Book Γ (1012b22-31), Aristotle connects the principle things signified to the unmoved mover.

<sup>153</sup> *Met.* 993b9-11.

<sup>154</sup> As I mentioned in Chapter 1, De Koninck shows through an interpretation of *De Anima* 3.6 that Aristotle engages with, if not answers to, this problematic. I have tried to develop a consistent picture of Aristotle’s view of a self-related and simple principle, but have not explicitly addressed this issue. I will treat it head-on in the concluding chapter of this thesis.

and object of its own activity, while at the same time being one insofar as both subject and object of its activity are identical, so also is knowledge of it (which, recall, is no other than it) a unity of difference. Aristotle is at pains to describe this knowing in its simplicity. In *De Anima* Aristotle resorts to the metaphor of ‘touching’ to describe the immediate participation in self-thinking.<sup>155</sup> νοῦς is the grasp, the ‘touching’, of the unity underlying the relation – between discursive knowledge and experience, between form and matter, between predicate and subject. This must be taken with Aristotle’s suggestion that we think only through sensible representation, i.e. imagination (φαντασία).<sup>156</sup> While language may present better and worse approximations to a direct grasp of νοῦς through discursive representation, the grasp itself cannot itself be demonstrated. The final union with the divine, then, requires a transcendence of mortal means.

### **3.3: A Map of *Metaphysics***

Thus, for Aristotle, the divine intellect is the limit of dialectic as well as its guiding principle. Since νοῦς contains the unity of knowledge and experience, it is only from the perspective of νοῦς that the received language and opinion, which would otherwise obscure the truth of thinking by presenting only part of it as the whole, can be reformulated so that it expresses each part of the whole in its true relation. Insofar, however, as this division is not reconciled, the intelligible principle of its unity, the good, remains only on the horizon of the inquiry. In the following I demonstrate concretely that this process of reconceptualization, is precisely the dialectical movement of theoretical

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<sup>155</sup> See also *Met.* 1051b24 (discussed below), concerning which Ross, *ad loc.*, says that the implications of “the metaphor of contact in the description of simple apprehension” are “the absence of any possibility of error” and “the apparent...absence of a medium in the case of touch”; in sum, it “means an apprehension which is infallible and direct”. On this topic, see Rosen (1961).

<sup>156</sup> *DA* 431b2.

wisdom in *Metaphysics*, and that by which Aristotle intends to lead human thinking towards divine wisdom. Here, I will not attempt a detailed interpretation of the movement of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, from its initial investigation of received opinion to the final conception of the συνόλον in which its principle of unity, νοῦς, is manifest. Such an investigation would take us beyond the purpose of this study; and, at any rate, it is undeniable that *Metaphysics* does not seamlessly portray this movement. Nonetheless, the overall movement from Book A and B, through Z, H and Θ, culminating in Book Λ, exhibits a drive towards a transformation of the opposed relation between form and matter into a self-relation, by the implicit recognition of the activity of the simple good underlying them.

A unified conception of sensible substance that reflects the structure of its first principle is the driving force behind the historical inquiry of Book A. It is a commonplace that Aristotle presents four causes of beings, form, matter, efficient and final, as the fruits of the labours of past philosophers, and as the starting-points for his own inquiry. However, Aristotle does not lay these distinctions out dogmatically, and he will not maintain them as they are presented here. Aristotle is more concerned with emphasizing the principle of their emergence. He shows not only that the idealists and materialists discover or neglect this-or-that aspect of their object of inquiry, but that these thinkers are *compelled* in certain directions because of the nature of their object. The early materialists, according to Aristotle, sought something within the world of change that persisted throughout its changes – the elements of water, earth fire and air.<sup>157</sup> Parmenides, who denied that such persistence belonged to the material elements, was compelled (ἐξ ἀνάγκης) to believe that being was one; yet he was simultaneously compelled to follow

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<sup>157</sup> *Met.* 983b7-19.

the phenomena (ἀναγκαζόμενος δ'ἀκολουθεῖν τοῖς φαινομένοις) in the other direction, to affirm that there must be a second cause to account for the non-being of things.<sup>158</sup> Plato's clearer separation of the formal from the material cause, and the assertion of the causality of the formal over the material, did not allow for an explanation of how a form could actually affect material.<sup>159</sup> For Aristotle, as long as the materialists and idealists fail to include the perspective of the other in their conception of the substance, they are pressed to acknowledge some external force bringing them together. The emergence of final and efficient causes, which Aristotle's dialectic will conflate with the formal cause, show the need to explain the *unity* of the formal and material causes. Aristotle speaks of the thinkers who discovered the efficient cause as though they were "compelled by the truth itself (ἀναγκαζόμενοι ὑπ'αὐτῆς τῆς ἀληθείας)".<sup>160</sup> Similarly, the "thing itself (αὐτὸ τὸ πρᾶγμα) made a way (ὠδοποίησεν) and compelled (συνηνάγκασε)" those who believed the only cause of a substance was its material to seek further; the reason, Aristotle says, is that when one recognizes "the fact that" (ὅτι) something happens the question of "the why follows (διὰ τί συμβαίνει)".<sup>161</sup>

In book B Aristotle furthers the investigation of the difficulties that have been received (αἱ ἐνδεχομένα ἀπορία) along with the partial views of the principle of substance, by stripping the received views of their historical context, and thereby articulating their conflicts with the utmost conceptual clarity. Aristotle identifies the center of the disagreement between the two camps and sets out its dimensions when in the opening section of Book B he says that, "most of all (μάλιστα) it must be investigated

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<sup>158</sup> *Met.* 986b32-987a1.

<sup>159</sup> *Met.* 992a25-992b2.

<sup>160</sup> *Met.* 984b9-10. Cf. *P.A.* 642a19-21.

<sup>161</sup> *Met.* 984a17-22.

whether there is any cause in-itself apart from matter, or whether there is something separable from it, or whether the primal cause is one or many, or whether there is anything apart from the concrete whole (παρὰ τὸ σύνολον).<sup>162</sup> Book B as a whole circles around the impasse that is “most difficult and most necessary of all to theorize”, namely the problem that “we know all things insofar as there is something one, identical and universal in them; but then there would have to be something beyond particulars (παρὰ τὰ καθ’ἑκάστα).<sup>163</sup> But, as Aristotle continually reminds us, there is nothing apart from a particular.<sup>164</sup> If “being and one are the substance of beings” then it is not clear how there can be “anything other than” these, that is, “more beings than one”.<sup>165</sup> The final difficulty of Book 3, whether substance is particular or universal, brings out most concisely the inadequacy of the opposition between the materialist physicists and the abstract idealists: on the one hand, “if [the principles] are universal (καθόλου), they will not be substances (οὐσίαι); for a ‘this here something’ (τόδε τι) indicates nothing common; ‘such a thing’ (τοιόνδε) does, but substance is a ‘this thing here’ (τόδε τι)”; yet on the other hand, “if the principles are not universal, they will not be knowable”.<sup>166</sup>

Book Z is primarily concerned with rearticulating the idealist insight, investigating in what sense it is true that a concrete substance is an intelligible form. This book, as Booth remarks, “contains the most detailed reflections of Aristotle on the relationship between the individual and universality.”<sup>167</sup> Here, Aristotle exhausts the received possibilities of there being an intelligible cause of substance that does not

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<sup>162</sup> *Met.* 995b32-5.

<sup>163</sup> *Met.* 999a24ff.

<sup>164</sup> *Met.* 999b18-24.

<sup>165</sup> *Met.* 1001a31-2.

<sup>166</sup> *Met.* 1003a6-18.

<sup>167</sup> Booth (1983) 10-11.

exclude relation with individuality. Eliminating one by one the concepts of essence, universal, genus, form, and by a sustained consideration of how generated substances come to be intelligible at all (Z.7-9), Aristotle is able, in the final chapter (Z.17), to present clearly the object of inquiry itself: the “why”, not the “that”. The substantiality of a generated substance appears in the thought that generates it: “the cause, that is, the form, by which matter is something – this is substance”.<sup>168</sup>

Aristotle explains this concluding insight in terms of house-building, and in this way the dialectic approaches a conception of form in which the Good is active. As we have discussed in the previous chapter, Aristotle holds house-building to be an imperfect instance of causal form. For this reason, Aristotle reminds his audience of the likely difference between the causal form of generated substance (which is still not completely the whole of the substance) and the form that is perfectly causal: “It is clear that for simples there is neither seeking nor teaching; but there is another manner of seeking such things (ἕτερος τρόπος τῆς ζητήσεως)”.<sup>169</sup> That said, it is undeniable that with Book Z Aristotle strongly shifts the intelligible aspect of substance closer to its first principle, from form conceived of as “universal” to “causal”; this fulfills Book E’s adumbration of the proper object of theology as that which is “universal because it is first”.<sup>170</sup>

If Book Z is concerned primarily with the sense in which substance is a formal entity, Book H pushes in the opposing direction: Aristotle proceeds to ask how, given the fact that Book Z concludes that form *qua* cause is substance, would substance still require

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<sup>168</sup> *Met.* 1041b7-9: ὥστε τὸ αἴτιον ζητεῖται τῆς ὕλης (τοῦτο δ’ ἐστὶ τὸ εἶδος) ᾧ τί ἐστίν: τοῦτο δ’ ἡ οὐσία.

<sup>169</sup> *Met.* 1041b9-11.

<sup>170</sup> *Met.* 1026a30-31: καθόλου οὕτως ὅτι πρώτη.

a passive material component.<sup>171</sup> His answer involves what Burnyeat calls the “conspicuous novelty” of an “emphasis on actuality and potentiality”.<sup>172</sup> Form may be a cause in nature, just as the idea of a house in an architect’s mind may cause a house, but there must nevertheless be some teleological aspect to matter as well: while, Aristotle points out, “different things can be generated by a cause of movement when the matter is one, e.g. both a chest and a bed [could come] from [the same] wood”, it is also true that “different things must have different matter, e.g. a saw could not come about from wood, and this is not because of the cause of the movement; for it cannot make a saw from wool or wood”.<sup>173</sup> Aristotle concludes Book H with an image of substance as a union of formal and material, solving the problem of the being of oneness (the ‘most difficult’ aporia): “the proximate matter and shape is one and the same (τὰυτό καὶ ἓν), the first potentially (δυνάμει) and the second actually (ἐνεργείᾳ)”.<sup>174</sup>

To this conclusion Aristotle adds an allusion to the simple principle which is the goal of the inquiry: he says that “whatever things do not have matter, simply are something one (ἀπλῶς ὅπερ ἓν τι)”. The text is undeniably difficult here, but the idea is clear enough. Notwithstanding the advances made, the first principle of substance, the being of beings, as yet appears separate from the concrete whole of concrete substance.

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<sup>171</sup> *Met.* 1042a26ff. Kosman (1999) also takes Z.17 to be aporetic: “It then becomes easy to imagine that when we have identified substance as form we are home. But then we need to know: what’s the issue that generates the aporia at the end of Book VII of the *Metaphysics*? And what indeed is going on in Books VIII and IX? What’s the problem that generates the further argument in these books and prevents our simply having a party at the end of Book VII? I think the answer is clear: if substance is form, then it appears to be distinct from its substratum; we need to understand why this is or is not the case” (p. 67).

<sup>172</sup> Burnyeat (2001) 69: “Aristotle’s reworking of the form-matter contrast, in terms of the more general notions of actuality and potentiality, continues all through H and comes to a climax in H6. On the one hand, this suggests that H, and hence ZH, expect Θ as their sequel. On the other hand, it means that new things are said in H, which could not be regarded as straightforward deductions from premises established in Z, where (outside Z.7-9) the notions of actuality and potentiality were seldom invoked”.

<sup>173</sup> *Met.* 1044a28-30.

<sup>174</sup> *Met.* 1045b18-20. Form is one, not because “one” is a universal term applying to everything, but because it is one actual individual (cf. 1044a9).

With Book H's distinction between actuality and potentiality there is still a temptation to think an abstract actuality apart from its proper potentiality, and think of it as though it were a separate cause. Aristotle draws attention to the appearance of this aporia throughout the book. He states that "it is not at all clear whether the substance of perishable things is separable"; though it is clear in the case of "things that cannot exist apart from individual instances, e.g. a house or a tool".<sup>175</sup> Indeed, it might still appear that actualities in the proper sense, i.e. the form of beings which comes-to-be in a concrete individual from an intrinsic rather than extrinsic motion, can exist separately from their concrete instantiation. Aristotle only points to the question whether the soul, which is said to be the actuality of the body, can exist separate from the potentiality of the body, or is only thought so abstractly: "the soul and the essence of the soul are the same, but a human and the essence of a human are not".<sup>176</sup>

This ambiguity is virtually absent by Book Λ, where an account of sensible substance (chapters 1-5) allows for a direct grasp of separate substance (chapters 6, 7 and 9). This direct grasp is possible because the opposition between form and matter is altogether gone: form (as actuality) relates (through being desirable) what is other than it (as potentiality) to itself as its own fulfillment. In this manner of explaining substance we can locate most accurately the most perfect substance of all. As a complete identity of actuality and potentiality, as the thinker and the thought, νοῦς is, to use Aquinas' phrase, an *actus purus*, and the highest good to which everything is drawn.

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<sup>175</sup> *Met.* 1043b18; 1043b20-1.

<sup>176</sup> *Met.* 1043b1-5: ψυχὴ μὲν γὰρ καὶ ψυχῆ εἶναι ταῦτόν, ἄνθρωπον δὲ καὶ ἄνθρωπος οὐ ταῦτόν.



### 3.3.1: Actuality, Self-Thinking, and *Praxis*

The decisive step in Aristotle's dialectic that allows for his final understanding of substance is his discussion of actuality and potentiality in Book Θ, to which we must give special attention. While Book H introduced the distinction of potentiality and actuality as a means to show that the unity of form and matter describes one being in a non-accidental way (that is, that a body and its soul are one being rather than two beings, and that there is something about the body which makes it so), it left the distinction unexplained, and along with it the precise cause of its potentiality becoming actual. This cause will be pure actuality -- the complete integration of the formal cause and final cause (the Good). As Brague notes, Θ.6 is the only place in the *corpus Aristotelicum* where a demonstration of the nature of actuality is attempted.<sup>177</sup> A focused look at this demonstration will not only provide insight into the completion of Aristotle's pedagogical dialectic, but also reveal a suggestive link between our bigger question of the relation between the theoretical and practical good.

To this end, it is necessary to acknowledge Aristotle's particular use of examples. Speaking generally, as Aristotle's terminology approaches a more perfect conception of substance, so do the examples of substances that drive his inquiry become more and more perfect. While artificial processes such as house-building, or inessential compounds such

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<sup>177</sup> Brague (1988) 454. As for the preceding chapters of Θ, it is clear that they are oriented towards Θ.6, inasmuch as they explore the meaning of potentiality, with a view to understanding not only mobile substance but that which is somehow prior to motion. Potentiality, Aristotle shows, depends for its being and its intelligibility on actuality. He argues that potentiality is a capacity for one of two formal contraries, with one being the privation of the other. This produces the need for an account of actuality; for a privation can be understood only in view of the good of which it is a privation.

as snubnoses,<sup>178</sup> figure predominantly in Book Z, the key considerations of Book H and the first half of Θ of rely more on natural and animal substances.<sup>179</sup> Artificial processes, because they present the causes of a generation separately, provide an ideal object of comparison for the study of the causes in nature substances, whose causes can be considered distinctly only through intellectual abstraction.<sup>180</sup> Consider one of Aristotle’s tentative formulations of the opposition between the intelligible and particularity of a being: form (μορφή) and material (ύλη) – both taken from sculpting.<sup>181</sup> Now, in Aristotle’s attempt to demonstrate the nature of actuality, the dependence of his method of inquiry on the actual presence of the object of investigation is most explicit. Aristotle opens Θ.6 by advising that we must not “seek a definition” (ὄρον ζητεῖν), but instead “comprehend” (συνορᾶν) by “induction from particulars” (ἐπὶ τῶν καθ’ἕκαστα τῆ ἐπαγωγῆ).<sup>182</sup> Aristotle distinguishes between the actuality and potentiality in sensible substances by pointing to technical and biological instances; in respect to technical processes, actuality is to potentiality as what builds is to what can be building, what is worked on (τὸ ἀπειργασμένον) is to its raw material; in respect to biological processes, actuality is to potentiality as what is awake is to what is asleep, what is seeing is to what has its eyes closed, what is developed (τὸ ἀποκεκρυμένον) from matter is to the matter itself. However, the turning point of Θ (and indeed the whole of *Metaphysics*) is in Aristotle’s distinction between the kind of actuality that belongs to what is in motion that which is not.

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<sup>178</sup> For “τὸ σιμόν”, as a term expressing the concrete unity of the concave form with the material nose, see *Met.* 1025b33-1026a6; 1020b28-1031a1; 1035a26.

<sup>179</sup> Cf. the language of animal thinking and desire arising in Θ.5 for the first time in *Metaphysics*.

<sup>180</sup> 1078a21-3: ἄριστα δ’ ἂν οὕτω θεωρηθεῖ ἕκαστον, εἴ τις τὸ μὴ κεχωρισμένον θεῖν χωρίσας.

<sup>181</sup> For a treatment of Aristotle’s use of τέχνη in naturalistic explanations, see Solmsen (1963). Some relevant passages are: *Phys.* 193a31-b3, b6ff; *DA* 416b1f; *GA* 723b30.

<sup>182</sup> *Met.* 1048a36-9.

Significantly, this point turns on Aristotle's conception of theoretical thinking and of human action (πρᾶξις). Aristotle begins by considering the difference between artificial production and practical activity. The crucial passage reads:

Since no action which has a limit is a completion (τέλος), but a means to completion (τὰ περὶ τὸ τέλος), for instance the process of thinning, the parts of the body, when they are being thinned, are in motion (ἐν κινήσει), insofar as they are not [yet] that for the sake of which the motion [of thinning is taking place], these things are not an activity (πράξις); for they are not final (τελεία); it is the motion which contains the end that is the activity.<sup>183</sup>

In order to understand actuality, Aristotle is saying, we must look to motions more perfect than natural or technical ones. Hence he apprises his audience of the meaning of the above difference through examples of practical and cognitive activities:

For example, at the same time one sees and has seen, understands and has understood, thinks and has thought; but one does not learn at the same time as one has learned, or becomes healthy and is healthy. One lives well and has lived well; is happy and has been happy.<sup>184</sup>

Aristotle's terminological precision comes to its fullest in the separation of motions from actualities. Let us observe that, in this final of passage of Θ.6, the practical examples (happiness, living well) have been dropped, and Aristotle illustrates self-related actualities only through the theoretical cognitive states of seeing and thinking:

All motion is incomplete (ἀτελής) – thinning, learning, walking, house-building – these are motions, and are incomplete. For one does not walk at the same as one has walked, nor builds as one has built, nor becomes when one has become, or moves and has moved – that which moves and has moved are different. But it is the same thing that sees and has seen, that thinks and has thought. By 'actuality' I mean such a thing, while the latter I call 'motion'.<sup>185</sup>

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<sup>183</sup> *Met.* 1048b18-23: ἐπεὶ δὲ τῶν πράξεων ὧν ἔστι πέρας οὐδεμία τέλος ἀλλὰ τῶν περὶ τὸ τέλος, οἷον τὸ ἰσχυαίνειν ἢ ἰσχυασία αὐτό, αὐτὰ δὲ ὅταν ἰσχυαίνῃ οὕτως ἔστιν ἐν κινήσει, μὴ ὑπάρχοντα ὧν ἕνεκα ἢ κίνησις, οὐκ ἔστι ταῦτα πράξις ἢ οὐ τελεία γε (οὐ γὰρ τέλος): ἀλλ' ἐκείνη ἢ ἐνυπάρχει τὸ τέλος καὶ ἢ πράξις. For the final phrase, I closely follow Tredennick's Loeb translation.

<sup>184</sup> *Met.* 1048b23-6: οἷον ὁρᾷ ἅμα καὶ ἐώρακε, καὶ φρονεῖ καὶ πεφρόνηκε, καὶ νοεῖ καὶ νενόηκεν, ἀλλ' οὐ μανθάνει καὶ μεμάθηκεν οὐδ' ὑγιάζεται καὶ ὑγίασται: εὖ ζῆ καὶ εὖ ἔζηκεν ἅμα, καὶ εὐδαιμονεῖ καὶ εὐδαιμόνηκεν.

<sup>185</sup> *Met.* 1048b28-35: πᾶσα γὰρ κίνησις ἀτελής, ἰσχυασία μάθησις βάδισις οἰκοδόμησις: αὔται δὲ κινήσεις, καὶ ἀτελεῖς γε. οὐ γὰρ ἅμα βαδίζει καὶ βεβάδικεν, οὐδ' οἰκοδομεῖ καὶ ὠκοδόμηκεν, οὐδὲ γίγνεται καὶ

Before remarking on the anomalous appearance of *praxis* in *Metaphysics* here, let us pin down exactly why Aristotle's dialectic culminates in a meditation on thinking. Simply stated, Aristotle wants his audience to think about thinking because the object of the inquiry of *Metaphysics* is self-thinking thought. That Aristotle constantly compares his philosophical concepts, abstracted from nature and art, to the observation of actual of natural and technical processes has led some to believe that Aristotle is an empiricist or naturalist; and, perhaps, before this point of the dialectic, that is, when the inquiring subject was different than the inquired object, such a reading might have been plausible. I have been arguing against this view that Aristotle's solution to Meno's dilemma is the insight that the object of theoretical inquiry not only pre-exists its being known, but that it is already known in an imperfect way at each stage of the inquiry. But now the inquiry has advanced to the point where it can be understood that the good which is the principle of natural motion is not itself a natural motion. In the activity of seeing, but more so in the activity of thinking, we encounter a being whose existence is nothing other than its essence. Such a being is actually present insofar as it is the very activity to which dialectical thinking tends. Aristotle's method of exposition is not dogmatic; he has been leading his readers into a theoretical relation with νοῦς, into that self-contemplation which is the purpose of philosophy, from the start of his dialectic. The end has been in the means all along; men acquire "the power to theorize so that they may theorize", but they "do not theorize so that they may be able to theorize".<sup>186</sup> The hitherto unattainable pure idea is now recognized as something that exists, and we know it exists because it is before our eyes, as it were: the theoretical self-knowing that is the good has drawn mortal

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γέγονεν ἢ κινεῖται καὶ κεκίνηται, ἀλλ' ἕτερον, καὶ κινεῖ καὶ κεκίνηκεν: ἐώρακε δὲ καὶ ὄρᾳ ἅμα τὸ αὐτό, καὶ νοεῖ καὶ νενόηκεν. τὴν μὲν οὖν τοιαύτην ἐνέργειαν λέγω, ἐκείνην δὲ κίνησιν.

<sup>186</sup> *Met.* 1050a13-15.

thinking up into its very activity. Indeed, the dialectic of the *Metaphysics* finds its end in this self-thinking perspective. In the later parts of Book Θ, the distinction between form and matter now appears as a distinction between simple beings, and composite beings which imitate the structure of simplicity through being held together by their intelligible aspect. Returning from the perfect actuality of Θ.6 to considerations of composite, natural beings, Aristotle elaborates on this causal subordination of the latter to the former. In all natural beings, the actuality of an individual the cause of its motion: “matter is potential”, Aristotle explains, “because it moves towards its form; but when it is actual, then it is *in* its form”.<sup>187</sup> This follows his reformulation of particularity in Θ.7: concrete individuals are nothing without the aspect under which they are thought, the activity which they strive to be; hence there is no particular thing, i.e. no ‘this’ (τόδε), but rather a determinate material, i.e. a ‘that such’ (ἐκείνιν).<sup>188</sup> Aristotle cannot be an ‘empiricist’ who fishes out of experience new data to serve as first principles for reasoning: because of the fundamental priority and immanence of νοῦς in his dialectical method, the methodological return to experience is always mediated by the work of thinking. We see at the end of Book Θ the result: that sensible substance comes to exhibit the inner structure of the unity of thought itself, that is, the self-relating, self-determining, activity of form. The difference is that the one substance is grasped as a unity of parts, as true or false, whereas the other, the non-concrete (ἀσύνθετον), is always what it is thought to be; Aristotle ends Book Θ by invoking the mode of knowing proper to the non-concrete, which transcends language in its immediacy, and, therefore, is more properly described

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<sup>187</sup> *Met.* 1050a15-17.

<sup>188</sup> *Met.* 1149a19.

as “touching”.<sup>189</sup> At this point in *Metaphysics* it becomes equally a matter of the thing itself as of the mode by which it is thought.<sup>190</sup> It is no surprise that in Book Λ Aristotle suggests (albeit tentatively) that what he presents in Book Θ as a means for understanding simple actuality is no other than that actuality itself.

Notably, Aristotle gives practical activity a place – even a decisive place – in theoretical dialectic. The next two chapters of this thesis are devoted to understanding why this is so. Aristotle’s use of *praxis* in Θ.6 provides clues as to what the answer shall be. Aristotle’s pedagogy leads his audience to understanding the first principle, by engaging their thought with the imperfect manifestations of that principle’s self-related activity in imperfect substances. In the important passage discussed above, practical activity seems to serve such a role; for Aristotle, the divine self-thinking is somehow manifest to us in our practical lives. Furthermore, in practical activity it is manifest in a unique way. On the one hand, human action, as with artificial production, considers the various aspects of its object (e.g. the form, the matter, the end, the means) in abstraction from one another; yet, practice, unlike production, has the final cause within (rather than without), that is, it is a “process which contains its end”. For instance, the man who makes shoes is not necessarily the same as the man who wears them, yet the man who makes happiness is himself happy, precisely because the process of happiness and happiness itself are one and the same activity. Thus, the actuality of practical activity seems to exhibit, as natural motion, a complete, though composite, instance of the self-related activity of the divine. Implicit, then, in Aristotle’s employment of practical

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<sup>189</sup> *Met.* 1051b7-33.

<sup>190</sup> The metaphor for ‘touching’ recurs in Aristotle’s discussion at *Met.* 1072b21: “for thought comes about by touching and thinking, so that thinker and thought are the same” (νοητὸς γὰρ γίγνεται θιγγάνων καὶ νοῶν, ὥστε ταῦτὸν νοῦς καὶ νοητόν).

activity in  $\Theta.6$  is the following idea: man's practical activity, like nature, has the divine as its principle, and at the same time, it, like art, consciously possesses its principle of motion. In other words, practical activity ("to be happy" and "to live well") in some way thinks its own end, and, likewise, *is* that end. Let us now turn to an examination of what is only intimated in these statements.

## CHAPTER 4: THE PRACTICAL SELF

### 4.1: Between Good and Evil

In the first chapter of this thesis, I discussed what Aristotle believes to be the divine first principle of nature – a self-thinking thought that, in its self-thinking, thinks all natural substances as less perfect forms of itself. In the second chapter, I showed that Aristotle’s conception of learning entails that the human mind becomes theoretical in the opposite way: by incrementally investigating the privative forms of the divine thinking, mortal thinking proceeds to join in that divine self-thinking. Next, I will investigate what, for Aristotle, is human action, and show that it, like natural substances, imitates the inner structure of the divine. In other words, I will show that the practical good, the *τέλος* and regulating principle of human action, is itself determined by the divine, theoretical good.

Not only will we draw the consequence that human action is closer to the divine than is the activity of natural substances, but also, and more controversially, that man’s practical life is closer to the divine than is his share in theoretical contemplation itself. Let me elaborate in a preliminary manner. A natural substance imitates the divine thinking unconsciously; the forms of natural motions are privations of the divine self-thinking and, as such, are determined by it. Human action, on the other hand, imitates the divine in a way that is not only intelligible but intelligent. By partaking in theoretical thinking, man thinks himself in his biological aspect, in a way that he cannot control; he experiences his nature as necessity, either as force opposed or indifferent to -- what we will come to understand to be -- his volition. Here we may invoke the etymology of “theory”, tracing it to the idea of being a spectator at, as opposed to the participant in, the



games.<sup>191</sup> Alternatively, through practical wisdom, the highest good of human action, man is not only subject, but object, of his thinking; he is a thinking self-relation, and thus embodies the divine activity as a whole. How this is so will require some explanation. But, let me remind the reader of my intention in fleshing out Aristotle's vision of the nature of the human self. As set out earlier, I aim to show that the structure of practical wisdom is determined by theoretical wisdom; and that, in this sense, practical wisdom is an object of theory, and comes into being through its desire to become theoretical. Thus the 'autonomy', which is considered one of Aristotle's greatest contributions to philosophical thinking about ethics, does not entail an independence from the divine. On the contrary, an understanding of human practice is only possible in and through a theoretical insight into the highest good itself. It will be the task of the final chapter of this thesis to show how this understanding develops throughout *EN*.

The task at hand, then, is to pose the question to Aristotle, what is man, and what is the good that defines him? In *De Anima* Aristotle investigates what for him most clearly achieves self-related being in the sublunary world – living beings. Life, according to Aristotle, is characterized by the presence of soul (ψυχή). By this word Aristotle means the part of a living being which is the source of the movement and cognition in that being.<sup>192</sup> Near the end of the previous chapter, I showed how Aristotle thinks that the metabolic and reproductive functions of a living organism imperfectly imitate the divine activity. Man is an en-souled body, an animal, and lives not only as subject to the changes in the elements of which he is composed, but, more perfectly, according to the activity inherent in his biological functions, i.e. reproduction and nutrition. But man's

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<sup>191</sup> Liddell and Scott: θεωρία definition A.I and II.

<sup>192</sup> *DA* 415a9-416a9.

true self, Aristotle suggests, is more than his biological existence: for man's thinking part is realized only when it stands above physical necessity and becomes the divine self-thinking.

This vision of man is problematical, and, in considering why, we see the systematic need for, and purpose of, Aristotle's uniquely human conception of *πράξις*. Animal life imitates self-thinking thought, and thus participates indirectly in the divine; yet theoretical life participates directly in the divine life, and is divine. These two lives seem to be mutually exclusive: if we are animals, we must have bodies; if we are *νοῦς*, we do not have bodies. Certainly, Aristotle's dialectical method, we have seen, approaches the simple by way of the composite; yet Aristotle does not conflate the end and the means -- the theoretical life does not properly belong to man's nature as a whole, and insofar as we possess it we become more than man. As Gerson, emphasizing what is Platonic about Aristotle, puts it, "the life according to intellect is the life of a person who is transformed in identity".<sup>193</sup>

Indeed, taking Aristotle's overcoming of theoretical dualism alone, there remains the problem of ethical dualism, according to which man's ethical life consists in two opposing identities. Such opposition is perhaps most clearly at play in Plato's *Phaedo*, where the human life devoted to theory is explicitly put into question in the context of the separation of the soul from the body: that which is good is good by virtue of being "most similar to the divine, immortal, intelligible, uniform, insoluble, and to that which forever is according to the same things as itself", and is opposed to that which is bad: "the human, mortal, multiform, unintelligible, dissoluble and to that which is not ever

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<sup>193</sup> Gerson (2005) 259.

according to the same things as itself”.<sup>194</sup> The ethical implications are equally straightforward. For the philosophers of *Phaedo* it is proper that “the soul rules, while the body obeys”.<sup>195</sup> The practice of philosophy is a preparation for death, that is to say, the “purification” of the soul from all that is physical, the “gathering itself into itself” so that, when the soul is granted freedom from the body, “it goes away into that which is like it, the divine and immortal and wise, and when it arrives there it is happy (εὐδαίμων), released from error and stupidity and fears and lusts and other human evils”.<sup>196</sup>

In Aristotle’s view, this otherworldly temptation must not be rejected, but corrected. The intention behind his ethics, just as his metaphysics, is to unify the divine and the natural, the intelligible and the mutable, the universal and the particular, by eliminating their opposition. Man is a “political animal” in that he has, in addition to his animal nature, reason, or language (the word is ‘λόγος’), by which he “shows what is expedient and inexpedient, and therefore likewise what is just and the unjust”, and thereby “has any sense (αἴσθησις) of good and evil, of just and unjust, and the rest”.<sup>197</sup>

This life is constituted from both animal and divine, but is neither one: the man who lives outside of human political life is not a man at all, but “either a beast or a god”.<sup>198</sup> Having completed his investigation of virtue, and entering into his investigation of vice (κακία), Aristotle explicitly situates man’s moral life between these two forms of life:

If, as they say, the heroes turn from humans to gods through an excess of virtue (δι’ἀρετῆς ὑπερβολήν), the disposition opposed to bestiality would be clearly be such. For, just as a beast has neither virtue nor vice, so a god; but divine excess is

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<sup>194</sup> *Pha.* 80b.

<sup>195</sup> *Pha.* 80a.

<sup>196</sup> *Pha.* 81a.

<sup>197</sup> *Pol.* 1253a7-18.

<sup>198</sup> *Pol.* 1253a29.

more worthy of honour than virtue, and the state of bestiality is a type of thing other than vice.<sup>199</sup>

The gods, Aristotle says, agreeing with Xenophanes' criticism of the anthropomorphizing poets, cannot seriously be imagined as partaking in financial interactions, or the administration of affairs; their virtue is an *excess* of virtue – the one virtue which is free of the lack which would make virtue necessary in the first place, i.e. theoretical wisdom.<sup>200</sup> We shall see, however, that by developing of a concept of man as a political, virtuous agent, Aristotle shows how man, as a unified whole, may assimilate the divine self-relation, that is, in a proper sense, be a self *in his own right*.

Such is the context, the following chapter argues, in which we must understand Aristotle's much contested doctrine of 'practical wisdom', or 'prudence' (φρόνησις). Practical wisdom, I will demonstrate, is a self-thinking activity, and, as such, the constitutive good of practical life. Unsurprising as this assertion may seem after the previous two chapters, it goes against the grain of certain common misconceptions about Aristotle's *EN* (e.g. that practical wisdom is identical to deliberation, that it is about means and not ends, that the practical good always admits of being otherwise). Because these misconceptions emerge naturally as the result of interpreting select statements or passages without consideration of the systematic whole of which they are part, I shall reckon with them as they come up as I articulate the systematic core of Aristotle's ethics.

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<sup>199</sup> *EN* 1145a23-8: εἰ, καθάπερ φασίν, ἐξ ἀνθρώπων γίνονται θεοὶ δι' ἀρετῆς ὑπερβολήν, τοιαύτη τις ἂν εἴη δῆλον ὅτι ἢ τῆ θηριώδει ἀντιτιθεμένη ἕξις: καὶ γὰρ ὥσπερ οὐδὲ θηρίου ἐστὶ κακία οὐδ' ἀρετή, οὕτως οὐδὲ θεοῦ, ἀλλ' ἢ μὲν τιμιώτερον ἀρετῆς, ἢ δ' ἕτερόν τι γένος κακίας.

<sup>200</sup> *EN* 1178b7-23.

## 4.2: Ethical Education and Habituation

Let us begin with some general statements regarding the cultural background, as portrayed by Plato and Aristotle, of Aristotle's conception of human goodness and of knowledge of that goodness. In Chapter 2, I explained the way in which Aristotle's account of animal life more precisely articulates the first stage of Diotima's ladder of love in Plato's *Symposium*. According to Diotima, however, this first, corporeal imitation of eternity is surpassed by a more spiritual, ethical one. At the second stage of the ladder of love, the object of desire is not another body but another soul, and what is reproduced is not biological offspring but virtues. To this traditional picture of ethical life and education belongs a kind of procreation productive of:

Wisdom and the other virtues, which all the poets and innovative artists beget; but by far the greatest and most beautiful kind of wisdom is that which orders the city and the household, and its name is moderation and justice.<sup>201</sup>

Diotima goes on to explain that a spiritual begetter, in the presence of his beloved, “teem[s] with ideas and arguments about virtue – what sort the good man ought to be, and the customary activities in which he should engage; and so he tries to educate him”.<sup>202</sup> Since, for Diotima, the virtues endure through “immortal glory and memory (ἀθάνατον κλέος καὶ μνήμην)”,<sup>203</sup> the production of virtue in another soul is all the more perfect:

When he makes contact with someone beautiful and mixes with him, he conceives and gives birth to what has been there of old, and together or apart what is learned is remembered, for the offspring is nurtured in common with the begetter, so that such men have much more in common than those who produce children together,

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<sup>201</sup> *Symp.* 209a: φρόνησίν τε καὶ τὴν ἄλλην ἀρετὴν—ὧν δὴ εἰσι καὶ οἱ ποιηταὶ πάντες γεννήτορες καὶ τῶν δημιουργῶν ὅσοι λέγονται εὐρετικοὶ εἶναι: πολὺ δὲ μεγίστη, ἔφη, καὶ καλλίστη τῆς φρονήσεως ἢ περὶ τὰ τῶν πόλεων τε καὶ οἰκίσεων διακόσμησις, ἧ δὴ ὄνομά ἐστι σωφροσύνη τε καὶ δικαιοσύνη.

<sup>202</sup> *Symp.* 209b-c.

<sup>203</sup> *Symp.* 209d; cf. 208d.

and a much stronger friendship, since the children [i.e. the virtues] they share are much more beautiful and immortal.<sup>204</sup>

Thus, while the product of sexual reproduction is another mortal being, the products of a spiritual relationship are more immortal. But where does Aristotle stand in this story?

To start, Aristotle agrees with Diotima's account of political education in holding that the human good is a cyclical activity, and that it comes about, not by natural impulse, but by social habituation. In fact, Aristotle's treatment of habituation begins with the very question of how a natural substance differs from an ethical.<sup>205</sup> A natural being is that whose principle of motion is within it. Aristotle believes that, just as a stone left to its own devices will move downward, and an acorn will grow into a tree, so does a man by nature seek food and metabolize it spontaneously. Yet a man is not virtuous in this way. A man born and raised outside of civilization and human contact may grow and move and reproduce insofar as his biological functions move themselves, but he will not develop virtues. Aristotle and Diotima agree that there is no inherent potentiality for virtues in natural substances, and that they come about only through an external cause.

The human good, then, is at once a social, a political, and an educational process. It is *socialization* in the highest sense, and, as Aristotle fully recognizes, circular: virtues, he says, are habits by which we perform good activities; yet, in turn, "our habits come into being through like activities".<sup>206</sup> Aristotle poses this idea aporetically in order to bring out the individual's need for society:

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<sup>204</sup> *Symp.* 209c: ἀπτόμενος γὰρ οἶμαι τοῦ καλοῦ καὶ ὁμιλῶν αὐτῷ, ἃ πάλα ἐκεί τίκτει καὶ γεννᾷ, καὶ παρῶν καὶ ἀπῶν μεμνημένος, καὶ τὸ γεννηθὲν συνεκτρέφει κοινῇ μετ' ἐκείνου, ὥστε πολὺ μείζω κοινωνίαν τῆς τῶν παίδων πρὸς ἀλλήλους οἱ τοιοῦτοι ἴσχουσι καὶ φιλίαν βεβαιοτέραν, ἅτε καλλιόνων καὶ ἀθανατωτέρων παίδων κεκοινωνηκότες.

<sup>205</sup> *EN* 1103a14ff.

<sup>206</sup> *EN* 1103b21-2.

One might wonder what we mean when we say that it is necessary for men to act justly in order to become just, or act temperately in order to become temperate. For if they act justly or temperately, they are already just and temperate.<sup>207</sup>

An external force is necessary to initiate the cycle of acting justly and temperately: either “chance” (τύχη), but, primarily, “instruction”, just as the acquisition of the ability to “write or play music” depends on instruction.<sup>208</sup> Aristotle’s use of chance here will prove significant for our discussion of the ambiguities in Aristotle’s doctrine (in Chapter 5), but for now we must, as Aristotle does, pass over the problem and consider the nature of ethical instruction.

Ethical instruction, because it is regulated primarily by an instructor, that is, a virtuous agent other than the one in whom virtuous activity is to be exercised, sometimes appears to be a type of production (recall Aristotle’s definition of production as an activity for which the agent is other than the effect). An acorn will become a tree regardless of whether it is among men; yet it is unlikely that an acorn developing outside of civilization will become a bedstead. Indeed a tree does not become a bedstead unless a craftsman transforms it through his knowledge. Thus it belongs to the lawmaker to “make citizens good”.<sup>209</sup> The laws and customs set down by virtuous legislators serve to inculcate virtuous habits.<sup>210</sup> We must, however, appreciate how ethical education is not simply analogous to the work of a craftsman. Law, or custom (both meanings being united in 'νόμος'), has a dual role: not all citizens living under the same community receive an education as a result of the common laws and customs; the habits of “the many” for a large part develop independently of the laws, and, as a result, experience law

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<sup>207</sup> EN 1105a17-20: ἀπορήσειε δ’ ἂν τις πῶς λέγομεν ὅτι δεῖ τὰ μὲν δίκαια πράττοντας δικαίους γίνεσθαι, τὰ δὲ σώφρονα σώφρονας; εἰ γὰρ πράττουσι τὰ δίκαια καὶ σώφρονα, ἤδη εἰσὶ δίκαιοι καὶ σώφρονες.

<sup>208</sup> EN 1105a21.

<sup>209</sup> EN 1003b4.

<sup>210</sup> EN 1103b3-7.

(here the modern sense of 'law' is more fitting) as a force *contrary to* their bestial inclinations:

As it is, although [speeches, i.e. λόγοι] seem to be strong enough to convert and encourage liberal-spirited youths, and an inborn character and a genuine love of the beautiful to make them susceptible to virtue, they are incapable of converting the many to moral nobility. For it is not of the nature of the many to obey feelings of reverence, but of fear, nor to abstain from base things because of shame, but because of punishments.<sup>211</sup>

In the case of the many, the analogy of the craftsman holds. When, however, the laws and customs are properly inculcated – and according to Aristotle this only comes about in noble youths, capable of heeding the beauty of language, through the aristocratic institutions of personal apprenticeship – the analogy clearly fails. Aristotle says that, although the virtues do not come into being by nature, they are not “opposed to nature” (παρὰ φύσιν). Thus the craftsman’s imposition of the form of a bedstead upon his material differs from the lawmaker’s imposition of virtue upon a citizen. A tree is not habituated to being a bedstead, no matter how successfully the craftsman has destroyed its intrinsic impulse to grow.<sup>212</sup> Yet the product of ethical education does not destroy or oppress the natural inclinations of its material; instead, it “perfects” them.<sup>213</sup> Education transforms an individual’s desires, and turns them towards ethical perfection.

But what exactly is this perfection? Here we must recognize an ambiguity in Diotima’s presentation of ethical life. Aristotle does not diverge from Diotima’s overall picture: to use the familiar Aristotelian terminology, it is a matter of virtuous *activity* perpetuating itself through *potentially* virtuous individuals; ethical life is an eternal cycle

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<sup>211</sup> EN 1179b8-13: νῦν δὲ φαίνονται προτρέψασθαι μὲν καὶ παρορμηῆσαι τῶν νέων τοὺς ἐλευθερίουσιν ἰσχύειν, ἢ θός τ’ εὐγενὲς καὶ ὡς ἀληθῶς φιλόκαλον ποιῆσαι ἂν κατοκώχμιον ἐκ τῆς ἀρετῆς, τοὺς δὲ πολλοὺς ἀδυνατεῖν πρὸς καλοκαγαθίαν προτρέψασθαι: οὐ γὰρ πεφύκασιν αἰδοῖ πειθαρχεῖν ἀλλὰ φόβῳ, οὐδ’ ἀπέχεσθαι τῶν φαύλων διὰ τὸ αἰσχροὺς ἀλλὰ διὰ τὰς τιμωρίας.

<sup>212</sup> Phys. 193b8-12.

<sup>213</sup> EN 1103a26.



by partaking in which an individual man surpasses his bestial nature and becomes what he more truly is -- a “political animal”. However, Diotima ranks the political life at a higher stage of the ladder of love than biological life because its offspring, the virtues, are “more immortal”.<sup>214</sup> This latter expression should give us pause: how can there be *degrees* of immortality? Virtuous actions, on her account, live on through “immortal glory and memory”.<sup>215</sup> But is it thereby meant that there are particular actions – e.g. dying in battle, resisting overindulgence – which are universally valid, or do they only appear universally valid, as though artificially preserved in “immortal glory”? Here we run up against the limitations of the poetic mode of Plato’s otherwise Aristotelian expression of ethical immortality. And indeed, to this possible (mis-)reading corresponds what Aristotle considers to be one of the central faults of naïve idealism. For Aristotle, the idealists rightly sought a reality deeper than what appeared to the senses, but were too easily satisfied by the deceptive stability of language – thinking, for instance, that the cause of a particular man was a self-subsisting and universal “idea” of man. Aristotle saves idealism by discovering a truly self-subsistent idea, self-thinking thought, through and for which all natural beings are themselves good, and fit into a good order, e.g. the self-perpetuation of biological individuals through nutrition is itself good, and contributes to a more perfect good, the self-perpetuation of the species through reproduction. Consider now the realm of ethics: should individuals be habituated to *always* desire, in the name of courage, to rush fiercely into battle, or, in name of temperance, to abstain from wine? Such would be the case if indeed the virtues were immortal, through glory or

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<sup>214</sup> *Symp.* 209c

<sup>215</sup> *Symp.* 209d.

otherwise. Or are these actions good only when they are performed through and for a *truly* unchanging, universal, yet *practical*, good?

The chief claim of this chapter is that Aristotle answers the latter question affirmatively. Aristotle, seeking an explanation of the political good in a cause deeper than the perdurability of speech, finds it in practical wisdom. Let us recall his explicit criticism of Socratic ethics in 6.13, at the heart of which is this very problem:

[Socrates] erred in believing that all virtues are wisdoms (φρονήσεις), though he said beautifully that there is no virtue without wisdom (φρονήσις). The proof: everyone nowadays, having said that virtue is a state of the soul (ἕξις) and in respect to what things it is, propose that it is a state of the soul according to right reason (κατὰ τὸν ὀρθὸν λόγον), and right reason is reason according to wisdom (κατὰ τὴν φρόνησιν). Somehow everyone has the sense that such a state of the soul is virtue, viz. according to wisdom (κατὰ τὴν φρόνησιν). Yet a small modification is necessary. For virtue is not merely a state of the soul *according to* (κατὰ) right reason, but rather *with* (μετὰ) right reason. And right reason about the virtues is wisdom. And so while Socrates believed that the virtues are reasons (λόγοι) – since they are all sciences (ἐπιστήμαι) – I say that they are with reason (μετὰ λόγου).<sup>216</sup>

In general, then, the virtues are not intelligible ideas – they are not in themselves “λόγοι”. Aristotle does not seem to believe that the virtues are *universally* or *eternally* valid forms of human goodness. Nevertheless, virtue, on Aristotle’s account, is still somehow rational, at least to the extent that it is “with reason” (μετὰ λόγου). Any interpretation of this ‘μετὰ λόγου’ must be in light of the general thesis of the passage: namely, wisdom is the cause of the virtues.

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<sup>216</sup> EN 1144b20-30: ὅτι μὲν γὰρ φρονήσεις ᾗετο εἶναι πάσας τὰς ἀρετάς, ἡμάρτανεν, ὅτι δ’ οὐκ ἄνευ φρονήσεως, καλῶς ἔλεγεν. σημεῖον δέ: καὶ γὰρ νῦν πάντες, ὅταν ὀρίζωνται τὴν ἀρετὴν, προστιθέασιν, τὴν ἕξιν εἰπόντες καὶ πρὸς ἅ ἐστι, τὴν κατὰ τὸν ὀρθὸν λόγον: ὀρθὸς δ’ ὁ κατὰ τὴν φρόνησιν. εἰκόασιν διὸ μαντεύεσθαι πῶς ἅπαντες ὅτι ἡ τοιαύτη ἕξις ἀρετὴ ἐστίν, ἢ κατὰ τὴν φρόνησιν. δεῖ δὲ μικρὸν μεταβῆναι. ἐστὶ γὰρ οὐ μόνον ἢ κατὰ τὸν ὀρθὸν λόγον, ἀλλ’ ἢ μετὰ τοῦ ὀρθοῦ λόγου ἕξις ἀρετὴ ἐστίν: ὀρθὸς δὲ λόγος περὶ τῶν τοιούτων ἢ φρόνησις ἐστίν. Σωκράτης μὲν οὖν λόγους τὰς ἀρετάς ᾗετο εἶναι (ἐπιστήμας γὰρ εἶναι πάσας), ἡμεῖς δὲ μετὰ λόγου.

We may approach Aristotle's doctrine of practical wisdom by considering the difficulty already at the surface of the above passage, rooted deeply in Aristotle's idealist aspirations. Namely, if the regulating actuality of the virtues is practical wisdom, and the virtues are in some sense not objects of knowledge, i.e. they are not "λόγοι", what is practical knowledge knowledge *of*? Put another way, what is Aristotle's conception of the virtues such that they are not knowable enough to be "reasons" (λόγοι), yet are knowable enough to be "with reason" (μετὰ λόγου)?

#### **4.3: Is there a Practical Good that does not Admit of Being Otherwise?**

For Aristotle, the source of the irrationality of the virtues is their variability. Early on in *EN*, Aristotle warns that his investigation can only achieve a degree of clarity appropriate to its subject matter.<sup>217</sup> To specify this *caveat*, Aristotle points out that what is considered to be noble and just, has much "variation and divergence". It would follow that its truth can be demonstrated only in a "rough sketch" (παχυλῶς καὶ τύπῳ). Underlying these statements is the question of whether goodness can consistently belong to any particular good at all; a question which emerges from the simple observation that, while goods often result from goods, nevertheless "harms befall many people because of them". "Some people", Aristotle explains, "are destroyed through wealth, others though being courageous". Aristotle here invokes Socrates' formulation in *Meno* that things which are often considered to be beneficial "sometimes also cause harm".<sup>218</sup> This most important precedent to Aristotle's doctrine will be examined in more detail shortly, but first, let me confront the other major precedent involved in this problem.

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<sup>217</sup> *EN* 1094b13-28

<sup>218</sup> *Men.* 88a.

As a result of the variability of human good, Aristotle says, it is held by many that they are good “only by custom (νόμῳ), and not by nature (φύσει)”.<sup>219</sup> My claim that the practical good (and, what I will argue to be the same, practical wisdom) is the actuality that regulates its internal motion implies that the practical good is a constant. This claim is controversial, insofar as it seems to oppose Aristotle’s suggestion that the practical good “admits of being otherwise”.<sup>220</sup> Now, the meaning of Aristotle’s statement is exactly what is at issue when he raises the possibility that particular goods are only considered to be so by mutable customs. Therefore a consideration of Aristotle’s treatment of this issue will demonstrate the plausibility of the claim that, for Aristotle, there is a practical good that does not admit of being otherwise.

As we know from ancient testimony, Aristotle applied himself to investigating the laws of many political constitutions, and must have been familiar with the diversity of ways of life that led his contemporaries into ethical relativism.<sup>221</sup> In his investigation of justice, Aristotle again alludes to the apparent problem that the laws of nature are eternal, whereas the laws of man are variable. Interestingly, he affirms the transience of human customs, and, simultaneously, affirms an unchanging basis for their validity:

Some think that all kinds of justice are merely conventional, because, while that which is natural is immutable and has the same power everywhere, just as fire burns regardless of whether it is here or in Persia, that which is just seems to change. This is not absolutely true, but in a certain sense. Among, at least, the gods it is perhaps not true at all; but among us, there is something natural in justice, however much it all varies; [and so] nevertheless there is a natural and unnatural justice.<sup>222</sup>

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<sup>219</sup> *EN* 1094b14-17.

<sup>220</sup> *EN* 1139a8; cf. *DA* 433a30-31.

<sup>221</sup> Rhodes (1981) 1-2.

<sup>222</sup> *EN* 1134b24-31: δοκεῖ δ’ ἐνίοις εἶναι πάντα τοιαῦτα, ὅτι τὸ μὲν φύσει ἀκίνητον καὶ πανταχοῦ τὴν αὐτὴν ἔχει δύναμιν, ὥσπερ τὸ πῦρ καὶ ἐνθάδε καὶ ἐν Πέρσiais καίει, τὰ δὲ δίκαια κινούμενα ὀρῶσιν. τοῦτο δ’ οὐκ

Aristotle's conclusion here employs 'natural' in a peculiar sense, that is, not in the sense of that which will come to be independently of external factors. Although there is no innate and particular course of motion for the enactment of justice, as there is for the motion of a flame, the enactment of justice is an activity that "perfects" our nature. 'Nature' is being used here in the sense of that to which movement tends – which, I am suggesting, is an unchanging practical good.<sup>223</sup> But Aristotle has little to say here about the specific nature of this practical good; for this we must proceed further into *EN*.

In his third explicit encounter with this problem in *EN*, we are able to see how the problem, as well as his unique solution to it, is connected to his innovation in idealist ethics. Immediately before the passage, to which I refer often, in which he distinguishes his position from the idealists, Aristotle explains in what sense the virtues depend on practical wisdom:

Everyone believes that each of the virtues is somehow present by nature; for we are just and temperate and courageous and all the rest immediately (εὐθύς) from birth. But, on the other hand, we are seeking the true good (τὸ κυρίως ἀγαθόν) as something different, and the virtues in another way. For even children and wild beasts have natural dispositions (φυσικαὶ ἕξεις), but without intelligence (νοῦς) they are clearly harmful. It is likely the same spectacle, that, just as when a man with a strong body, yet without sight, moves around, he happens upon strong falls, because he cannot see, so also here: if he acquires intelligence (νοῦς), he excels in action, and his disposition, at that time only resembling virtue, now will be true virtue (κυρίως ἀρετή) ... Thus there are two forms of the Ethical: natural virtue (φυσικὴ ἀρετή), true virtue (κυρία ἀρετή), and true virtue does not come about without wisdom (φρόνησις).<sup>224</sup>

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ἔστιν οὕτως ἔχον, ἀλλ' ἔστιν ὥς: καίτοι παρά γε τοῖς θεοῖς ἴσως οὐδαμῶς, παρ' ἡμῖν δ' ἔστι μὲν τι καὶ φύσει, κινητὸν μέντοι πᾶν, ἀλλ' ὁμως ἐστὶ τὸ μὲν φύσει τὸ δ' οὐ φύσει.

<sup>223</sup> *Met.* 1015a8-12.

<sup>224</sup> *EN* 1144b4-17 : πᾶσι γὰρ δοκεῖ ἕκαστα τῶν ἠθῶν ὑπάρχειν φύσει πως: καὶ γὰρ δίκαιοι καὶ σωφρονικοὶ καὶ ἀνδρεῖοι καὶ τᾶλλα ἔχομεν εὐθύς ἐκ γενετῆς: ἀλλ' ὁμως ζητοῦμεν ἕτερόν τι τὸ κυρίως ἀγαθὸν καὶ τὰ τοιαῦτα ἄλλον τρόπον ὑπάρχειν. καὶ γὰρ παισὶ καὶ θηρίοις αἱ φυσικαὶ ὑπάρχουσιν ἕξεις, ἀλλ' ἄνευ νοῦ βλαβεραὶ φαίνονται οὐσαί. πλὴν τοσοῦτον ἔοικεν ὀραῖσθαι, ὅτι ὥσπερ σῶματι ἰσχυρῶ ἄνευ ὀψεως κινουμένῳ συμβαίνει σφάλεσθαι ἰσχυρῶς διὰ τὸ μὴ ἔχειν ὄψιν, οὕτω καὶ ἐνταῦθα: ἐὰν δὲ λάβῃ νοῦν, ἐν τῷ πράττειν διαφέρει: ἢ δ' ἕξις ὁμοία οὐσα τότε ἔσται κυρίως ἀρετή. ὥστε καθάπερ ἐπὶ τοῦ δοξαστικοῦ δύο

Interestingly, in this passage Aristotle inverts the subordination of custom to nature, to make the point that one's learned dispositions (or, disposition, in this case) are somehow *more* real than those which occur naturally. Here Aristotle uses 'natural' in his usual sense of that which develops from an inborn disposition, without any external human interference. Aristotle subordinates this kind of virtue to that which I have been translating as 'true', although the sense of 'κυρίως' is more proper to that which has dominance or mastery (we might call it "masterly"). According to his view, practical wisdom, an acquired knowledge, is the decisive factor in rendering what would otherwise be potentially dangerous dispositions into dispositions that would truly be in one's power. Just as there is, according to Aristotle, a real justice, so also are man's natural dispositions as mutable as the laws. With the right laws and instruction, these things being determined by practical wisdom, the one stable human good – which again seems to be some kind of practical wisdom – arises in the individual. My interpretation of this passage finds support, not only in Aristotle's statement that "the virtues do not come into being without wisdom", but also in the problematic underlying his passing allusion to Plato's *Meno*, noted above, namely that goods "sometimes also cause harm". In *Meno* the variability of the virtues is posed in epistemic terms. Socrates continuously points to the difference between the opinion that this or that virtue is in fact a virtue, and the knowledge *why* it is, between right opinion (ὀρθὴ δόξα) and knowledge (ἐπιστήμη). While a *right opinion* about goodness would be, say, believing (rightly) *that* to fight and die in battle would be courageous and good, *knowledge* of goodness would be to know *why* dying at such-and-such moment is a good thing at all. The problem, however, is that,

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ἐστὶν εἶδη, δεινότης καὶ φρόνησις, οὕτω καὶ ἐπὶ τοῦ ἠθικοῦ δύο ἐστί, τὸ μὲν ἀρετὴ φυσικὴ τὸ δ' ἢ κυρία, καὶ τούτων ἡ κυρία οὐ γίνεται ἄνευ φρονήσεως.

without the knowledge *why*, there will be no way to distinguish, given the variability of circumstances, whether one's opinion is right or not; *sometimes* it is not good, but bad, to fight and die in battle.<sup>225</sup>

From this perspective -- Aristotle's as well as Plato's -- knowledge of the good, knowledge *why* something is good or bad, is always good. Practical wisdom, then, would never err in choosing *itself*; in other words, practical wisdom would be the practical good. The logic of the circularity of practical wisdom is inescapable: the kind of knowledge in question would be *of* what is good for the soul; at the same time, it would itself *be* a good of the soul. It would be both the cause of the other virtues and the best virtue. It is not, then, as Moss claims, an "overstatement", when Aristotle says, in his criticism of Socrates in Book 6, that "right thinking" is "practical wisdom" itself, thus identifying the virtue with the act.<sup>226</sup> While the Socrates of Plato's *Meno* implicitly proposes the importance of the idea that knowledge of the good is a *self*-knowledge, it is only in Aristotle's *EN*, where an alternative to the idealistic dualism of the Platonic dialogues is elaborated, that we find this idea actually employed to solve the problem of the stability of human goods. We must now proceed to an elaboration of what this circularity looks like. Only after we have given a clear description of the actual activity of practical wisdom, will an account of Aristotle's subordination of what are traditionally considered to be virtues (courage, temperance, magnanimity etc.) to the activity of practical wisdom, be intelligible.

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<sup>225</sup> *Men.* 87b-89a.

<sup>226</sup> *EN* 1144b28-29: ὁρθὸς δὲ λόγος ... ἡ φρόνησις ἐστίν. Moss (2011) 245.

#### 4.4: The Structure of Practical Thinking

Aristotle presents (though not explicitly) the activity of practical thinking as constituted by what for convenience of exposition I divide into three distinct moments, which, I argue, together imitate the circularity of theoretical thinking.<sup>227</sup> First, βούλησις (which is commonly translated by ‘will’, ‘rational wish’, or ‘wish’) thinks and desires a good. Second, βουλή (consistently rendered ‘deliberation’) directs the βούλησις to a particular choice (προαίρεσις) that it is in the agent’s power. By so choosing, one becomes more habituated to making good choices or, in other words, one develops virtue; virtue then provides the object of βούλησις. Now, in considering this circular relation, we come closer to an understanding of the identity of practical wisdom with the practical good: by choosing the good, one thinks it, and, by thinking it, one chooses it. Tempting as it may be to jump into an investigation of the general significance of the circularity of this schema at this point, my summary of it, brusque in expression and provocative in content, requires some defense, to which we must now turn.

It is often believed that, for Aristotle, practical thinking is nothing other than deliberation, or deliberate choice. However, this assumption is difficult to reconcile with the fact that Aristotle’s explanations of practical thinking in Books 2 and 3 contain a treatment of, not only deliberation (βουλή), but also will (βούλησις); and, furthermore, that Aristotle, in Book 6, does not seem to limit practical *wisdom* to successful deliberation (εὐβουλία), but includes in it also good understanding (σύνεσις) and good

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<sup>227</sup> Aristotle himself presents the circle in various ways. First, there are instances where Aristotle says that “practical wisdom determines the means, and virtue determines the end”. Second, each movement is treated separately, on the one hand, in Aristotle’s explanation of virtue as habits determined by actions (which I discussed earlier in this chapter), and, on the other, the explanation of deliberation as derived from the will (which I am about to discuss).



judgment (γνώμη). But it is perhaps tempting to reduce practical wisdom to one of these kinds of thinking, if one assumes that the exercise of a virtue corresponds one-to-one with the exercise of a distinct faculty, understood as a capacity, or potentiality.<sup>228</sup> For, if practical wisdom were of only one faculty, then it would probably be of the one he elaborates in the most detail, i.e. deliberative choice. Yet Aristotle neither says that this is the case nor presupposes it. To speak generally, Aristotle believes that actualities, except the most basic, contain an internal structure of other, less perfect, and dependent actualities. The cosmos, for instance, is a totality of multiple and related substances, determined by a single divine actuality. Likewise, happiness is “one” actuality, yet, as the dominant/inclusive debate emphasizes, contains the exercise of many faculties and virtues.<sup>229</sup> But perhaps we need not go further than the most germane example, practical wisdom’s sister, theoretical wisdom, which in Book 6 Aristotle explicitly calls “both science”, which, to clarify, is discursive science, “and intellect”, which grasps first principles.<sup>230</sup> At the very least, one can conclude from this consideration that there is no reason to exclude the possibility that practical wisdom should in some sense encompass more than one intellectual faculty. Furthermore, seeing that in Book 6 Aristotle discusses the non-practical virtues largely in order to elucidate his conception of practical wisdom, it is highly plausible that Aristotle would be hereby suggesting to include both some kind of discursive knowledge and some kind of grasp of first principles in practical, as well as theoretical, wisdom. Therefore, as we might expect, Aristotle does not ever say that practical wisdom is limited to the exercise of one faculty. He says only that it is the virtue

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<sup>228</sup> This sense is imparted, for example, in Rackham’s translation of Aristotle’s open-ended ‘part’ of the soul by ‘faculty’ in 6.1.

<sup>229</sup> The dominant/inclusive debate is not about *whether* happiness contains multiple components, but *how*.

<sup>230</sup> EN 1141b3.

that belongs to the practical “part” of the rational “part” of the soul.<sup>231</sup> In light of these considerations, I propose that practical wisdom is the virtue of this practical “part” of the soul, and thus is the total actuality of practical thinking, which contains in its internal structure different, though dependent modes of thinking (viz. both βουλή and βούλησις).

Now, it is undeniable that Aristotle’s explanation of practical thinking tends to focus on deliberative choice. And indeed his emphasis on the deliberative aspect of practical thinking (and occasional terminological equation of the two) is largely responsible for the interpretation of practical thinking as solely deliberation. Yet, it is more likely, judging from Aristotle’s attitude towards the ethical idealists, who, in his view, are satisfied with willing the good and so entirely neglect the role of deliberation in ethics, that this emphasis is for the sake of polemic.<sup>232</sup> Such polemic, moreover, does not exclude that which is ideal in ethics: “practical wisdom”. Aristotle takes for granted that practical thinking involves the universal, saying that it “is not *only* of universals, but it is also necessary to recognize the particulars”.<sup>233</sup> He even goes so far as to refer to deliberated choice as “the efficient, not the final cause” of action.<sup>234</sup> Thus, Aristotle develops a conception of deliberative choice not to replace the idealists’ concept of the rational will (βούλησις), but to show how the rational will can truly serve as a final cause of human action.

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<sup>231</sup> *EN* 1139a4-16. Of course, Aristotle uses the language of ‘parts’ of the soul only provisionally. As we frequently see, it is generally Aristotle’s aim to overcome this reifying type of thinking about what is essentially an active self-relation.

<sup>232</sup> *EN* 1105b12-18.

<sup>233</sup> *EN* 1141b14-15: οὐδ’ἔστιν ἡ φρόνησις τῶν καθόλου μόνον, ἀλλὰ δεῖ καὶ τὰ καθ’ἕκαστα γνωρίζειν

<sup>234</sup> *EN* 1139a32-4: “Now, the principle of action (not the final, but the efficient cause) is choice, and the principle of choice is desire and reasoning for the sake of an end; therefore there is no choice without intellect, thought or ethical habit.”

In what follows, I explore the precise nature of Aristotle’s concept of deliberative choice, distinguishing it first from animal motion and then from merely technical thinking. This will reveal its dependence on the concept of rational wish. This dependence, however, will turn out to be mutual: rational wish depends on particular deliberative choice. This mutual dependence reflects the circularity of true practical good, practical self-thinking, which, we shall see, solves the two-fold problem of his ethical thought, and of the whole of *EN*: how, on the one hand, can the universality of knowledge be brought to bear on the particular circumstances of human action, and, on the other hand, can an agent perform a particular action without losing the intelligibility of the action?

#### **4.4.1: Human and Animal Self-Motion**

Here, we may follow Aristotle himself in taking as a starting point for understanding the nature of practical thinking that which is common to both humans and animals. In Book 3 of *EN* Aristotle begins to develop a theory of voluntary motion (ἐκούσιον) in contrast to involuntary motion (ἀκούσιον). As in other works, specifically *De Motu Animalium* and *De Anima*, the soul is thus understood to be a “principle” (ἀρχή) of motion, or possessing movement “in-itself” (καθ'αυτή).<sup>235</sup> An animal, Aristotle says, has “self-motion” (αὐτοῦ κινητικόν) insofar as it has a “desiring part” (ὀρεκτικόν).<sup>236</sup> Let us dwell for a moment on the notion of the “desiring part”. I began this chapter with a consideration of man’s apparently divided ethical nature, according to which the thought and desire are opposed. The *locus classicus* of this opposition is the akratic and enkratic

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<sup>235</sup> *MA* 702a1; *DA* 405b32-406a12.

<sup>236</sup> *DA* 433b28-9

men, who *know* what is good, yet *desire* what is bad (the akratic follows his desire, while the enkratic follows his reason). It might seem, from the existence of such a man, that the soul is divided in two: a part that acts according to dispassionate reason and a part that acts according to irrational desire. Aristotle's objection to this division is appropriately twofold. First, thought, or form, does not cause motion, unless it is an object of desire.<sup>237</sup> Secondly, desire is always *for* something, and that something is desired as thought (for thought precedes desire).<sup>238</sup> Rather than separating the soul into a rational and an irrational part, Aristotle believes that each part of the soul is permeated with a relation between intelligibility and desire, understood as a relation between intelligible actuality and desiring potentially. Aristotle calls this unity of thought and desire by the name of the "desiring part" (ὀρεκτικόν), from "desire" (ὀρέξις),<sup>239</sup> and it is common both to man's rational (λογιστικόν) and irrational (ἄλόγον) parts.<sup>240</sup> On this basis, Aristotle can divide the soul according to the hierarchy of the living substances, the threptic, sentient, and rational, each with distinct, though interrelated motions. In Chapter 2 of this thesis, we saw that Aristotle considers animal self-motion to consist in nutrition, reproduction, and locomotion, all serving to perpetuate the unchanging form of the individual through what is other than it. We may put aside an account of the differences between the appetitive and threptic desires, as, for the purposes of ethics, Aristotle thinks it is sufficient to treat them as one. The threptic part does not take part in reason except insofar as it is integrated into the appetitive part of the soul, which is the part that can either obey or

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<sup>237</sup> *DA* 432b26-433a6.

<sup>238</sup> *Met.* 1072a26-30.

<sup>239</sup> This word is sometimes translated as 'appetite'. Such a translation, though perhaps sensible to readers of Latin (cf. '*appetito*'), is more proper to the nutritive faculties of the soul, than the cosmic desire that runs through all things. Cf. Lear (1988) 142n.

<sup>240</sup> *DA* 432b3-8.

oppose reason.<sup>241</sup> On this view, then, moral conflict emerges from two possible courses of motion which originate from within the animal, one moved by desire for the reason of the agent, and the other by the desire for the natural processes, which, though intelligible on the level of sense-perception, are not rational.<sup>242</sup>

This last point, that humans think about the good of their activity differently than do animals, suggests that it is on the basis of the nature of the cognitive element of the ὁρεκτικόν that the distinction between human and animal motion must be made.<sup>243</sup> It is sometimes suggested that Aristotle fails to limit practical wisdom to human beings.<sup>244</sup> The consequence of this suggestion is that human choice would be no different than any other voluntary motion. Indeed, Aristotle's account of practical motion often makes it difficult to see how this desire for the intelligible is not common also to non-human animals. In *De Motu Animalium* and *De Anima*, Aristotle does not treat the motion of sentient animals distinctly from the motion of ethical agents, and thus blurs the distinction between man and beast. The cognitive faculties of a sentient animal present to an animal an object, which, by virtue of the animal's natural potentiality, is for that animal an object of desire.<sup>245</sup> For instance, a carnivore, on perceiving another animal, may desire to hunt it; but an herbivore, who lacks the potential for meat-eating, would not experience a unity of cognition and desire in that perception; rather, the perception would

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<sup>241</sup> *EN* 1102a13-25; 1102b29-33.

<sup>242</sup> *EN* 1102b25-6.

<sup>243</sup> Aquinas very clearly sees this. Cf. *Summa Theologiae* 1.18.3.

<sup>244</sup> Richardson-Lear (2004) says that Aristotle, in distinguishing *phronesis* from *sophia*, "assimilates theoretical wisdom to divinity and practical wisdom to bestiality. In order to argue that the practically wise is variable while the theoretically wise is not, Aristotle claims there is a practical wisdom, at least in a loose sense, for animals as well as for human beings" (p. 144).

<sup>245</sup> How vegetative life moves itself is more difficult to explain. Aristotle sets himself this task in the final chapter of *De Anima*. The challenge is that the vegetation must in some sense cognize by way of touch, and, in such a case, cognition is hardly discernible from the movement that (more obviously in more developed animals and humans) follows from it.

be disinterested. Yet, as we know, Aristotle believes that human cognition can do better than sense-perception. Accordingly, the transition, which Aristotle describes at the start of *Metaphysics*, from sense-perception to scientific knowledge, applies not only to theoretical but also to practical thinking. Human action is not determined by the perceptions and accompanying desires given by our biological functions. While animal desires may correspond to the objects of sense-perception, a kind of cognition common to humans and some non-human animals, Aristotle seeks to ground ethical motion in a more “intelligent” mode of cognition, that is, the “λόγος”, which the biological desires of the soul, whose proper modes of cognition are perception and experience, would be trained to “obey”. This would be a fully self-moving motion, human freedom, constituted in thought; this would be to fulfill Socrates’ quest in *Meno*, that is, to bind true opinion of virtue with knowledge of the good.

#### **4.4.2: Human and Humean Deliberation**

In order to distinguish the practical thinking proper to ethical agents from the self-motion which is not grounded in knowledge in the fullest sense, Aristotle models his description of ethical deliberation in Book 3 of *EN* on a description of scientific or technical deliberation. Aristotle thinks of practical thinking, just as technical, as involving an active and a passive element, a doer and a deed. However, what distinguishes practical from technical activity is that, for practical activity, the doer and the deed are one and the same: the end of practical activity is not other than it.<sup>246</sup> Yet it is not the case for Aristotle’s philosophy of practice as for his philosophy of nature, where a consideration of the technical separation of universal and particular, form and matter, is necessary for

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<sup>246</sup> *EN* 1140b6-7.

what is actually inseparable in nature to be clearly isolated and understood; the practical agent *includes* the separation of universal and particular as intelligible moments *within* his conscious deliberation. Aristotle makes this very point at the beginning of *EN*, where he says that knowledge of the good:

would seem to be of the most masterly and architectonic sciences [of sciences or faculties]; and such appears to be political science. For this is what ordains which of the sciences are useful in cities, and what sort each citizen learns, and how far. And we see that even the most venerated of the faculties, such as strategy, economy, oratory, are subordinated to it.<sup>247</sup>

While Aristotle clearly intends to subordinate technical activity to political science – the science of human πράξις – many commentators believe that he fails to distinguish them at all.<sup>248</sup> We shall see that this common view is mistaken, precisely by showing that Aristotle considers deliberative choice to be only one, interdependent component of the practical thinking of human agents. With his theory of deliberative choice Aristotle does not simply shift the emphasis of morality from the question of the will (βούλησις) to the question of choosing the means of acting (thereby reducing practical wisdom to deliberation), but rather is concerned with showing how the particular means can fall *under* the rational will and express it.

As I have mentioned, Aristotle's explanation of deliberation is concerned largely with distinguishing deliberation from the will.<sup>249</sup> Deliberation is concerned with means (τὰ πρὸς τὰ τέλη), not, as the rational will, with ends (τὰ τέλη).<sup>250</sup> To employ Aristotle's own examples, a doctor deliberates not about *whether*, but about *how*, he will heal; an

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<sup>247</sup> *EN* 1094a27-b4 : δόξειε δ' ἂν τῆς κυριωτάτης καὶ μάλιστα ἀρχιτεκτονικῆς. τοιαύτη δ' ἡ πολιτικὴ φαίνεται: τίνας γὰρ εἶναι χρεῶν τῶν ἐπιστημῶν ἐν ταῖς πόλεσι, καὶ ποίας ἐκάστους μανθάνειν καὶ μέχρι τίνος, αὕτη διατάσσει: ὁρῶμεν δὲ καὶ τὰς ἐντιμοτάτας τῶν δυνάμεων ὑπὸ ταύτην οὔσας, οἷον στρατηγικὴν οἰκονομικὴν ῥητορικὴν.

<sup>248</sup> Gauthier and Jolif (2002) 2.6-7, 203-4; Aubenque (1963) 145.

<sup>249</sup> *EN* 1111b20ff; 1113a15ff.

<sup>250</sup> *EN* 112b12-13.

orator decides not *that* he will speak, but *what* to say. The result of deliberation is choice (προαίρεσις), a voluntary motion, which, as properly ethical, is distinguished from the kind of voluntary motion shared by “children and non-human animals”.<sup>251</sup> For Aristotle, choice is a “voluntary action which has been deliberated”,<sup>252</sup> or, as he puts it alternatively, “choice is with reason and thought”.<sup>253</sup> That is not say that desire is not involved in deliberation. As we have seen, in those of good moral character, the desires have been habituated to desire the conscious purposes of the practical agent. Deliberation, according to Aristotle’s conception of motion as a unity of thought and desire, is not simply the process of thinking out a plan which may or may not be followed; it is, in the good man at least, the process of relocating one’s *desire* from an otherwise indeterminate wish to a particular instantiation of that wish which is actually in our power (ἐφ’ ἡμῶν).<sup>254</sup> Hence, Aristotle will call choice “a deliberate desire for things in our power”,<sup>255</sup> and say, “when we have decided on the basis of deliberation, we desire according to the deliberation”.<sup>256</sup>

What does the ‘practical good’ mean in this context? Is it the object of one’s rational wish, or the particular instantiation of that object? At the very least, the latter: a deliberated choice, as a practical good, is, at least, ‘practicable’ (πρακτόν) because it is ‘in our power’ (ἐφ’ ἡμῶν). However, the object of wish is of foremost importance in this process. Consider the case of health. A doctor wishes to bring about health; without that wish, his desire to warm a particular patient, and therefore to wrap him in blankets, is

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<sup>251</sup> EN 1111b9-10.

<sup>252</sup> EN 1112a14-15.

<sup>253</sup> EN 1112a15-16: ἡ γὰρ προαίρεσις μετὰ λόγου καὶ διανοίας.

<sup>254</sup> For this reason Lear (1988) calls Aristotelian deliberation a “transmitter of desire”. My understanding of this point is quite indebted to Lear’s lucid exposition of deliberation (p. 145-9).

<sup>255</sup> EN 1113a10-11: βουλευτικὴ ὄρεξις τῶν ἐφ’ ἡμῶν

<sup>256</sup> EN 1113a12-13.



neither intelligible nor good, however much the wish may come about only through his deliberation. Supposing the blankets did not in fact bring about health, we would be wrong to say that the decision was a practical *good*. A patient's warmth is good primarily as a means to health, which is the idea whose intelligible structure is enacted by a doctor, or whatever agent desires to bring about health. Simply put, just as in Aristotle's theoretical philosophy, the means are determined by the end. That being said, it is not Aristotle's intention, by assuming the dependence of deliberation on willing, to reduce the importance of deliberation in attaining the practical good; rather, as we have seen, it is the opposite. Moss, who limits Aristotle's meaning of *phronesis* to deliberation, nonetheless argues rightly against desiccating Aristotle's concept of 'means' (τὰ πρὸς τὰ τέλη), so that its value – dependent, though real -- is altogether lacking:

*Phronesis* as characterized in *EE V/EN VI* is much more than Humean instrumental reasoning, and hence merits the ethical significance Aristotle attributes to it. *Phronesis* is crucial to virtue not because virtue requires mere means-end efficiency, but because without *phronesis* the intention to do what one should cannot reliably be made specific in an appropriate way, and hence cannot be reliably focused onto an appropriate course of action.<sup>257</sup>

Be that as it may, it is necessary to remember that, for the most part, Aristotle speaks of deliberation in its ideal manifestation, that is, as enacted by the man who has the virtue of deliberating well (εὐβουλία); in such deliberation, the end in relation to which the means are determined is good; yet Aristotle does make room for something like “Humean instrumental reasoning” for cases where the end itself of the deliberation is bad. Aristotle

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<sup>257</sup> Moss (2011) 247. Cf. also Fiasse (2001) 334: “A particular good can seem to us to be a means to becoming happy. It is then an object of προαίρεσις. Yet because this good is also, in another respect, an intermediate end, and object of βούλησις, it is going to inspire us to seek new means. Regarding the good in this respect gives us no grounds to oppose βούλησις and προαίρεσις since in this case βούλησις aims at a realizable end, causing the deliberate choice (προαίρεσις) of means thereto. The two are therefore causally linked.”

does not consider deliberation abstracted from its ground in good-willing to be practical wisdom, but the mere exercise of cleverness:

There is a certain power which they call ‘cleverness’ (δεινότης); this allows us to do and attain whatever purpose we have assumed and aimed at. If the purpose is noble, the power is praiseworthy, if base, knavery. Therefore we call both prudent men and knaves clever. Practical wisdom is not [merely] this power, though it does not come about without this power.<sup>258</sup>

This takes us to the question of just what the σκοπός at which deliberative choice aims is, and thereby to the next stage of practical thinking into which we must inquire. As we have seen, deliberative choice is the efficient cause of a purpose, or σκοπός, which is the proper object of the will (βούλησις). But this stage of practical self-thinking, whereby the unity of thought and desire in the will is expressed in a particular and contingent circumstance, is not the only stage. More significantly, Aristotle denies that an action can be good if it does not express an initial will for what is truly good. In fact, such an action is bad precisely insofar as it is not a self-relation of the will; but to explain this we must explain how Aristotle thinks that, after projecting itself into what is other than it, practical thought thereby reflects itself to itself; such is the motion through which practical thought is “for the sake of itself”. Appropriately, then, Aristotle’s exposition of deliberation concludes with the controversial line, which, taken as Aristotle’s final say on *praxis*, suggests that Aristotle does not succeed in distinguishing *poesis* from *praxis*, or, in other words, that he does not succeed in locating the end of *praxis* within itself: “It seems, according to what has been said, that man is the principle of his actions, and deliberation (βουλή) is about actions that one can perform oneself (αὐτῷ πράξαι), and actions are for

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<sup>258</sup> EN 1144a23-29: ἔστι δὴ δύναμις ἣν καλοῦσι δεινότητα: αὕτη δ’ ἐστὶ τοιαύτη ὥστε τὰ πρὸς τὸν ὑποτεθέντα σκοπὸν συντείνοντα δύνασθαι ταῦτα πράττειν καὶ τυγχάνειν αὐτοῦ. ἂν μὲν οὖν ὁ σκοπὸς ἢ καλός, ἐπαινετὴ ἐστίν, ἐὰν δὲ φαῦλος, πανουργία: διὸ καὶ τοὺς φρονίμους δεινοὺς καὶ πανούργους φημὲν εἶναι. ἔστι δ’ ἡ φρόνησις οὐχ ἡ δύναμις, ἀλλ’ οὐκ ἄνευ τῆς δυνάμεως ταύτης.

the sake of other things (ἄλλων ἔνεκα).”<sup>259</sup> Now, it must be noted that to take this statement as Aristotle’s final say on *praxis* is to take it out of its context. It is clear that Aristotle here poses the conclusion provisionally (and so signifies with “it seems, according to what has been said”). That it is posed aporetically also, is suggested by the fact that Aristotle goes on to examine the source of the goodness of deliberation – the good man and the good will.

#### 4.4.3: The Aporia of the Object of the Will

Aristotle’s treatment of the will, which consists of an aporia about the object of the will and the resolution of the aporia, reveals the properly self-related character of practical goodness. He begins thus:

It has been said that the will (βούλησις) deals with the end (τέλος); but, while some believe that the end is the good (ἀγαθόν), others believe that it is the apparent good (φαινομένον ἀγαθόν).<sup>260</sup>

Underlying each alternative is, respectively, the idealist project of grounding ethical life on knowledge of the absolute good, and the sophistic relativism which situates the ethical good, not in an unchanging truth, but in opinion (δόξα). Yet, for Aristotle, this kind of idealism fails in ethics just as in metaphysics: seeking an unchanging paradigm for particular actions in the stability of abstract thinking, it does not discover what kind of activity would be really ideal, but instead idealizes that which is not really separate from contingency. Hence Aristotle presents the conflation of the will and the act, the truth with the appearance, as the source of the contradiction faced by those wishing to say that the object of the will is an absolute good:

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<sup>259</sup> EN 1112b31-3.

<sup>260</sup> EN 1113a15-16.

However, for those who say that the object of will is the good, it follows that what the man who does not choose rightly wishes for is not really the object of will. For if it were the object of will, then it would have to be good; but in this case it turns out to have been bad.<sup>261</sup>

Aristotle presents this philosophical tendency alongside that which it originally aimed to overcome. The traditional Greek ethical view, preserved in its language, and obvious in everyday experience, is that one acts according to what ‘seems good’ (δοκεῖ). In the cultural decadence of the late 5<sup>th</sup> century, the worldly sophists realized the humanistic relativism implicit in the expression: the great variety of ‘what seems’ suggests that it is not opinion itself so much as the opining subject that determines what is good in particular circumstances. However, in Plato’s *Theaetetus* and *Protagoras*, Protagoras, taken as representative of this position, is portrayed as unable to defend it without abandoning his attachment to the contingency of individual perception (αἴσθησις). The very possibility of something being true or good, Socrates would show him, is a measure that transcends the disagreeing perspectives of individuals and circumstances. Here, as we have seen elsewhere, Aristotle is fundamentally idealist in this respect:

On the other hand, for those who say that the object of will is the apparent good, it follows that there is no natural object of will (φύσει βουλευτόν), only that which seems good (δοκοῦν) to each person. But different things appear to different people, and, in this case, contrary things.<sup>262</sup>

Yet Aristotle does not simply arrogate to one apparent good among many the title of cause; instead he locates the true good at work behind the appearances. He expresses the reconciliation of these two positions with a simplicity that conceals the systematic thinking that underlies it. He proceeds: “If, then, neither view is sufficient, it must be asserted that, while, absolutely and truly, the good is the object of will, to each individual

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<sup>261</sup> EN 1113a17-19: συμβαίνει δὲ τοῖς μὲν τὸ βουλευτόν ἀγαθὸν λέγουσι μὴ εἶναι βουλευτόν ὃ βούλεται ὁ μὴ ὀρθῶς αἰρούμενος (εἰ γὰρ ἔσται βουλευτόν, καὶ ἀγαθόν, ἦν δ’ εἰ οὕτως ἔτυχε, κακόν).

<sup>262</sup> EN 1113a20-22: τοῖς δ’ αὖ τὸ φαινόμενον ἀγαθὸν βουλευτόν λέγουσι μὴ εἶναι φύσει βουλευτόν, ἀλλ’ ἐκάστῳ τὸ δοκοῦν: ἄλλο δ’ ἄλλῳ φαίνεται, καὶ εἰ οὕτως ἔτυχε, τὰναντία.

it is the apparent good that is the object of will”.<sup>263</sup> Just as in Aristotle’s theoretical philosophy, according to which wisdom is neither universal nor particular, neither essence nor existence, but the moving, thinking unity of both, so here does Aristotle appropriate appearance to knowledge by unifying them in a self-relating activity:

To the good man the true good appears, and to the base man whatever chance thing; just as, in the case of bodies, truly healthy things appear healthy to the healthy man, but otherwise to the unhealthy man; similarly bitter, sweet, hot, solid, etc. For the good man judges rightly (κρίνει ὀρθῶς) about each situation, and in each situation the truth appears to him. For things are beautiful and pleasant correspondingly to each character (ἕξις), and the good man is perhaps most distinguished by seeing the truth in particular situations, as though he were the rule and measure of them.<sup>264</sup>

We must consider three central points of this passage. First, Aristotle says that the good man is good, not because that which is universally and eternally good is what appears to him in every situation as a measure of his actions, but because he is able to judge what is good in a particular situation; there is, Aristotle maintains against Platonism, no “right” opinion, but there is “right” reasoning about opinion. I will return to this point after elaborating on the next two.

Second, it is clear from this passage that the reasoning of the good man is right, i.e. that the good man is good, because the object of his will, that which appears good to him, is, or corresponds to, that which is truly good. This point is complicated by a third, which is that what appears to him is good precisely because of his moral habits, i.e. because he is good. I have already shown how, for Aristotle, good deliberation

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<sup>263</sup> EN 1113a23-24: εἰ δὲ δὴ ταῦτα μὴ ἀρέσκει, ἄρα φατέον ἀπλῶς μὲν καὶ κατ’ ἀλήθειαν βουλευτὸν εἶναι τὰγαθόν, ἐκάστῳ δὲ τὸ φαινόμενον.

<sup>264</sup> EN 1113a25-33: τῷ μὲν οὖν σπουδαίῳ τὸ κατ’ ἀλήθειαν εἶναι, τῷ δὲ φαύλῳ τὸ τυχόν, ὥσπερ καὶ ἐπὶ τῶν σωμάτων τοῖς μὲν εὖ διακειμένοις ὑγιεινὰ ἐστὶ τὰ κατ’ ἀλήθειαν τοιαῦτα ὄντα, τοῖς δ’ ἐπινόσοις ἕτερα, ὁμοίως δὲ καὶ πικρὰ καὶ γλυκέα καὶ θερμὰ καὶ βαρέα καὶ τῶν ἄλλων ἕκαστα: ὁ σπουδαῖος γὰρ ἕκαστα κρίνει ὀρθῶς, καὶ ἐν ἐκάστοις τάληθές αὐτῷ φαίνεται. καθ’ ἐκάστην γὰρ ἕξιν ἰδίᾳ ἐστὶ καλὰ καὶ ἡδέα, καὶ διαφέρει πλεῖστον ἴσως ὁ σπουδαῖος τῷ τάληθές ἐν ἐκάστοις ὀρᾶν, ὥσπερ κανὼν καὶ μέτρον αὐτῶν ὄν.

presupposes good willing; therefore the second point, on its own, should not be surprising. However that may be, Aristotle also seems to be asserting that that good willing depends on good deliberation. Such, at least, is implied in Aristotle's assertion that it is because of the virtue of the good man that the good man wills the good end; for good habits are formed by good actions, and, in order to act well, good deliberation must have occurred. Practical thought, having proceeded from the will through deliberation to action, returns to the will by way of moral character, thus reconstituting the object of the will. For instance, one might will courage, and, having deliberated and effected how the particular circumstances can be effected into a courageous action, one's character becomes more courageous, and wills courage all the more. The object of the rational will is "what is beautiful and what is pleasant", and, for the good man, what is truly good is desired by the good man because his habits are such that this appears morally beautiful and pleasant to him.

#### **4.4.4: The Apparent Good as Epistemic State**

There is, however, a difficulty in the employment of courage, or of any virtue other than practical wisdom, the true good, as an example of what I am arguing. Let us return to the first point which I drew from the above passage, namely, that the good man is not simply he whose will is right, but he who *judges* rightly. Now, I am arguing that the good man *wills to judge* rightly (and, to be precise, also judges rightly what will make him will this). However, is it the case that this self-related activity can be an object of the will? Certainly, Aristotle believes that the true good, i.e. practical wisdom, should *appear* to the practical agent as the object of his will. Are we to assume, then, that the apparent

good, when truly good, is identical to the true good? Or, rather, is the apparent good only that *by which* the true good appears?

I believe that Aristotle's view is the latter, and that this can be shown by a consideration of Aristotle's peculiar definition of the virtue of practical thinking itself as "true desire".<sup>265</sup> I have already explained how Aristotle distinguishes practical cognition from theoretical cognition: practical cognition is not mere, disinterested cognition, but cognition as *desired*. Let us recall our interpretation of Aristotle's doctrine of theoretical *truth*, and consider the implications for whatever practical *truth* may be. In the previous chapter, and in reference to the preface of *Physics*, we saw how Aristotle conceives of truth as the movement from sense-perception, by way of language, to its underlying reality. More precisely, thought receives sense-perception at first as linguistic "muddle", as "generalizations", or, to use Aristotle's terms from elsewhere, as "appearance" and "opinion"; these are broken down into their elements, and through dialectic, refigured so as to correspond to the "concrete whole", that which caused the movement in the first place. Applied now to practical thinking, this structure allows us to see the difference between practical opinion (the apparent good) and practical reality (the absolute good), and their relation. As we have said, ethical desire comes about through habituation. At the level of sensation, the pleasure and pain of physical or emotional punishment and reward is perceived and thus confirms, at the lowest epistemic state, that an activity is good or bad.<sup>266</sup> While pleasure is the cognition of sensation experienced as desired, and can thus motivate action, we know that Aristotle wishes to ground ethics in a higher

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<sup>265</sup> EN 1139a21-23; 1139a27-31.

<sup>266</sup> EN 1113a35-b2.

mode of cognition – this being the “apparent good” – corresponding to the linguistic, generalizing stage of theoretical thought.<sup>267</sup>

That the “apparent good” should *appear* in a linguistic mode is attested by the intimate association which Aristotle notices between actions that are morally beautiful and language of praise and blame, honour and disapproval (or as one contemporary interpreter has put it, appropriately in contemporary terms, “value language”).<sup>268</sup> Just as there is no pure sensation independent of the cultural matrix in which it is perceived, so is there no brute feeling without some articulated sentiment. Yet, furthermore, just as the generalizations abstracted from particular sensations fall short of the self-sufficiency of their real cause, so also do the value-generalizations taken from sensual experience.

Aristotle’s criticism of the life devoted to glorious deeds is grounded in his recognition of limited mode of knowledge associated with it:

[Honour] seems more superficial than what is sought after. For it seems to be in those who honour rather than in those who are honoured; but we divine that the good is more proper and inalienable [than that]. Further, they seem to seek honour so that they may believe (πιστεύωσιν) that they are good; wherefore they seek to be honoured by wise men (φρόνιμοι) and to be recognized by them on the grounds of virtue (ἀρετή).<sup>269</sup>

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<sup>267</sup> Here I am discussing only the kind of pleasure that corresponds to our biological functions, as Aristotle does in reference to distinguishing the kind of education proper to our bestial and ethical states. While an explanation of the nuances of Aristotle’s doctrine of pleasure would take us too far from the scope of this study, we can state the basic difference between pleasure and beauty belonging to ethical activity. Aristotle argues that pleasure is in fact an “epiphenomenon” (ἐπιτηγνόμενον) of a complete activity (1174b24-33); the more perfect the activity, the more pleasant. Thus, in the end, ethical activity, which is more complete than the activities relating only to our biological natures, is more pleasant than what are traditionally considered to be pleasures (food, sex, drink, etc.). This accounts for Aristotle’s peculiar claims that the good man will not take pleasure in what is outside himself, but the pleasure which is “according to himself” (καθ’αυτόν) (cf. 1099a7-21).

<sup>268</sup> Moran (1968) 96.

<sup>269</sup> EN 1095b24-29: φαίνεται δ’ ἐπιτολαιότερον εἶναι τοῦ ζητουμένου: δοκεῖ γὰρ ἐν τοῖς τιμῶσι μᾶλλον εἶναι ἢ ἐν τῷ τιμωμένῳ, τὰγαθὸν δὲ οἰκεῖόν τι καὶ δυσσφαίρετον εἶναι μαντευόμεθα. ἔτι δ’ εὐόκασι τὴν τιμὴν διώκειν ἵνα πιστεύωσιν ἑαυτοὺς ἀγαθοὺς εἶναι: ζητοῦσι γοῦν ὑπὸ τῶν φρονίμων τιμᾶσθαι, καὶ παρ’ οἷς γινώσκονται, καὶ ἐπ’ ἀρετῆ.



Here, Aristotle argues that honour is not desired for its own sake; rather, he claims, it is desired as a means of knowing one's own goodness. This argument is interesting because it reveals what Aristotle believes to be the inherent limitations of the political life, and that in which it is perfected. First, it is not enough to *do* good; there is an inherent desire to *know oneself* as good. Second, this desire cannot be satisfied without an extrinsic factor: honour is not a self-sufficient mode of thought; validation is sought from others, from the *wise*. But the mode of knowing which belongs to the lover-of-honour itself falls short of wisdom, and of knowledge, properly speaking; it is by trust ('πίστις', i.e. 'opinion', being the root of 'πιστεύωσιν'), which, because it is not knowledge *why*, can amount, at best, to knowledge *that* one is good, or, in Platonic terms, to *true belief*. This fundamental limitation to self-knowledge through the apparent goods Aristotle traces to the divided nature of political action, as we see in his comments on the nature of praise:

Everything praised seems to be praised for being a certain way or being in relation to something. For we praise a just man or a courageous man, and generally a good man and virtue, because of the actions and deeds they produce; and we praise the strong and the swift and the rest, because they possess a certain quality, or somehow being in relation to something good and important.<sup>270</sup>

In other words, a man is praised for what he does, not what he is. Aristotle's comparison of virtue to sport is meant to convey this insight: one does not win praise at an athletic competition for being strong or swift, but for externalizing these qualities in a competition.<sup>271</sup>

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<sup>270</sup> EN 1101b13-18: φαίνεται δὴ πᾶν τὸ ἐπαινετὸν τῷ ποιόν τι εἶναι καὶ πρὸς τι πῶς ἔχειν ἐπαινεῖσθαι: τὸν γὰρ δίκαιον καὶ τὸν ἀνδρείον καὶ ὅλως τὸν ἀγαθόν τε καὶ τὴν ἀρετὴν ἐπαινοῦμεν διὰ τὰς πράξεις καὶ τὰ ἔργα, καὶ τὸν ἰσχυρὸν δὲ καὶ τὸν δρομικὸν καὶ τῶν ἄλλων ἕκαστον τῷ ποιόν τινα πεφυκέναι καὶ ἔχειν πῶς πρὸς ἀγαθόν τι καὶ σπουδαῖον.

<sup>271</sup> Aristotle's reference to athletic competition at EN 1099a3-5 makes the opposite (though not contradictory) point, that we cannot know what a man is apart from his activity.

Thus the apparent good and situation from which it emerges, and which it idealizes, correspond to the duality between universal and particular in Aristotelian metaphysics. In the true good, the self-related activity of practical wisdom, the division between external and internal is not effaced, but embraced. The logic of Aristotle's ethical idealism is the same as of his theoretical: the subordination of opinion, not to thoughts, but to *thinking activity*. The meaning of Aristotle's opaque formula, that the virtues are not "according to thought" but are "with thought", is now clear. *Virtuous activity* is the activity of practical thinking in a particular circumstance. A *virtue* on the other hand is a state of the soul, and desiring disposition, corresponding to the experience of an activity, and can be considered in-itself only abstracted from experience; that is to say, it is an apparent good, an opinion which, through its association with a habitually performed action, has become an object of the will.

Let us illustrate this idea by observing Aristotle's criticism of the self-sufficiency of the traditional Hellenic virtue *par excellence*: courage. Suppose, for example, that an educator believes that courage, conceived of as rushing fiercely into battle when experiencing the fear of death, is the highest good. He shall inculcate in his students the desire to act courageously by way of praise and blame, with the result that what appears beautiful to them (the apparent good) will be actions embodying praiseworthy courage, and the opposite will appear shameful to them. A man so educated will seek out battle in which he can die, and he shall do this regardless of whether his action contributes to peace or total destruction of the political community. But without the political community, the honour which dying nobly seeks cannot exist. This is precisely

Aristotle's criticism of the Spartan constitution, which treats courage as the ultimate end: they do not know the proper use of the consequence of war, namely, peace.<sup>272</sup>

Aristotle recommends, instead, that the natural passions that occur in the face of battle be trained, not to desire a general image of courageous actions, but to desire *to exercise practical reason*. In other words, the real good inherent in courage is not simply the outcome of the act (e.g. the death or the glory), but rather the activity itself of relating the particular circumstances to the will: that is to say, the practical good is nothing other than the exercise, in a particular circumstance, of practical wisdom. This of course is true *mutatis mutandis* of all the ethical virtues, and the corresponding conditions of their emergence.<sup>273</sup> The particular beautiful act will be the one which promotes practical wisdom (e.g. peace, in the case of war), and it will *appear* good to the degree that practical wisdom *knows* it to be good. Hence I agree with Kosman, who, invoking Plotinus, writes that, for Plato and Aristotle, “the *kalon* is to the good as ‘appearance’ is to ‘being’”.<sup>274</sup>

While we have explained the development of ethical opinion from sensation, it still remains for us to explain how the apparent good is actually made to serve as an appearance of the true good, that is, how practical thinking dialectically overcomes the

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<sup>272</sup> *Pol.* 1334a40-b4

<sup>273</sup> For instance, temperance is the exercise of practical thinking in the context of the otherwise natural desires for food, sex and drink (cf. 1140b11-13). Some virtues are especially noteworthy: for instance, magnanimity, which of all the ethical virtues, most approaches the self-related rational activity of wisdom, because of the particular circumstances in which it can occur. Magnanimity is the virtue corresponding to the reception of honour (1123b20-21), which, as we have seen, Aristotle considers to be a kind of knowledge, namely, an opinion *qua* desirable. the magnanimous man both “deems himself worthy of great things” and “*is* worthy” of them (1123b2). Further, the magnanimous man does not, in the last analysis, value honour for its own sake, but so that he may *know* his own superiority (1123a16-20). The inherent shortcoming of magnanimity, however, is that it is not (in itself) a self-sufficient mode of knowing. Of course this is not to deny that someone with such knowledge cannot be magnanimous.

<sup>274</sup> Kosman (2010) 354.

duality between universal and particular, grounding both in a higher, unified activity. Such an explanation is not straightforward, and the next chapter is devoted entirely to it.

For now, let us summarize one of the basic points of this chapter: Aristotle is implicitly arguing that the will is the object of its own deliberation because moral decisions are (and should be) made for the sake of self-habitation. In plainer terms, when an agent recognizes his ethical life as a self-regulating whole, and his present (and past) actions as formative of his future, and total, self, he will direct his actions, not simply to the immediate, external outcomes of his choices, but to the end of improving and stabilizing his own character – this being his desiring disposition for the exercise of practical wisdom. Consider Aristotle’s assertion that “a habit is not chosen in the same way as an action; action is conscious from beginning to end, whereas dispositions develop imperceptibly, as an illness does”.<sup>275</sup> This is not to say that we cannot be conscious that we are going to develop a certain bad habit if we choose consistently to commit a correspondingly bad action. Aristotle’s above statement comes after the conclusion of his treatment of the components of moral thinking, wherein he argues that the agent is “responsible” for his habits, and therefore deserves punishment when he commits a crime. Indeed, insofar as an agent consciously chooses his actions, and knows that his particular actions determine what he perceives as good or bad, he can deliberate about ends. This is the elusive meaning of Aristotle’s assertion that the object of praxis is not outside but is within: practical thinking does not aim to improve something outside the agent; rather it aims to choose for the sake of choosing well, that is to say, for the sake of becoming *all the more* self-determining.

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<sup>275</sup> EN 1115a1-2.

#### 4.5: Choosing Freedom

The obvious objection to this conclusion, but one that emerges from a misunderstanding of the self-constituting nature of the human good, is that Aristotle does not think that the absolute end of action can be chosen. That is to say, the goal of *praxis*, in Aristotle's view, is "happiness", or even "the practical good"; yet, it might seem, no one *chooses* to have this end – happiness *necessarily* is the human good. Such an objection even finds support from Aristotle's text: "we wish", he writes, "to be happy and say we do, but it would not be appropriate to say that we choose to be".<sup>276</sup>

This view is profoundly opposed to the spirit of Aristotle's conception of freedom, though it is tempting from the contemporary, post-modern perspective, which finds straightforward expression in Sartre's 1945 portrayal of existentialism as a form of humanism:

If indeed existence precedes essence, one will never be able to explain oneself by reference to a given and fixed human nature; in other words, there is no determinism – man is free, man is freedom. If, on the other hand, God does not exist, we do not find ourselves faced with any values or commands which would legitimize our conduct. Thus, we have neither behind us, nor before us, in the luminous realm of values, any justifications or excuses.<sup>277</sup>

Sartre's view here seems to agree with Aristotle in that, for both thinkers, "we will freedom for freedom's sake, in and through each particular circumstance", and even in that "the content is always concrete, and, consequently, unpredictable; there is always invention. The one thing that counts, is to know whether the invention which is made, is made in the name of freedom."<sup>278</sup> But on what grounds, Aristotle would ask Sartre, can we say that this kind of activity, i.e. freedom, is good in the first place? Aristotle does not

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<sup>276</sup> EN 1111b28-9; See also EE 1226b10.

<sup>277</sup> Sartre (1970) 37.

<sup>278</sup> Sartre (1970) 83; 86.

think that freedom is the construction of an end in the face of an otherwise purposeless existence; rather, the individual agent realizes freedom by recognizing and embodying that which is truly good. For Aristotle, a “luminous” value is needed. It is a matter of turning the unity of thought and desire (which Aristotle calls the “apparent good”) towards the principle for which, despite our misconceptions, we act at all. Thus, the necessity, according to which we wish the human good, is not *compulsion*. That is to say -- recalling Aristotle’s definition of necessity -- it is not the experience of an extrinsic force opposed to our own self-motion.<sup>279</sup> Rather, it is the discovery of, and desiring for, the self-relation of the divine from within the practical self; freedom is *inner* necessity. Sartre’s radically atheistic doctrine must be contrasted with Aristotle’s description of the freedom of the divine self-thinking, which, recognizing its own supreme goodness, necessarily thinks itself only because it *would not wish* to think anything else.<sup>280</sup> For Aristotle, practical wisdom aims to embody this state in the total activity of a human life; he follows his description of the divine self-thinking with the observation, elliptical in form but unambiguous in content, that “just as human thinking, or, at least, what thinks composite things and in time (for it not does not possess the good at this time and that, but in a certain whole which is other than it), thus is the [divine] self-thinking for all eternity”.<sup>281</sup>

To someone seeking from *EN* instruction in how to live well, Aristotle’s circular reasoning about virtue must appear vicious. On the other hand, the circularity is embraced by those looking for an alternative to *a priori* rationalist ethics. Aubenque, for

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<sup>279</sup> *Met.* 1015a27-34.

<sup>280</sup> *Met.* 1074b15-1075a11.

<sup>281</sup> *Met.* 1075a8-10: ὡςπερ ὁ ἀνθρώπινος νοῦς ἢ ὁ γε τῶν συνθέτων ἔχει ἐν τινι χρόνῳ (οὐ γὰρ ἔχει τὸ εἶ ἐν τῷδι ἢ ἐν τῷδί, ἀλλ’ ἐν ὅλῳ τινὶ τὸ ἄριστον, ὃν ἄλλο τι) οὕτως δ’ ἔχει αὐτὴ αὐτῆς ἢ νόησις τὸν ἅπαντα αἰῶνα.

instance, traces Aristotle's doctrine of practical wisdom back not only to Plato, but to the pre-Platonic, religion of the Greeks, which, for Aubenque (following Nietzsche), finds its clearest expression in the wisdom of the tragic chorus.<sup>282</sup> Aristotle's doctrine of the *phronimos* steers safely between the "humanistic relativism of Protagoras" and the "Platonic absolutism of the Good" by way of the "social superiority of the 'free' man"; it is "an intellectualism of *judgment* more than of science, intellectualism of *limits* and not a triumphant rationalism".<sup>283</sup> Practical wisdom, on this view, is the ability to recognize the ultimate groundlessness of our ethical principles; thus the good man, who serves, by virtue of his socialization, as an ersatz standard of action, must always be reforming, in view of the contingency of circumstances, whatever precedent he might set (if he does not meet a tragic end first by that precedent). But what, Aristotle would ask, is the basis for his original precedent? It is in Aubenque's dependence -- typical to contemporary interpretations -- on the alleged "social superiority of the free man" where Aubenque's Nietzscheism is still too relativistic:

The *phronimos* is then, for Aristotle, the inheritance of an aristocratic tradition, which attributes to the "well-born" soul a privilege incommunicable to the vulgar. But this privilege remains that of intellectuality, even though it is neither intellectually definable nor transmittable by rational discourse.<sup>284</sup>

Given the undeniably circular reasoning at the heart of Aristotle's conception of the practically wise man, it is tempting to posit a fundamentally irrational basis of determining *who* is such a good man (and consequently what kind of actions are good,

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<sup>282</sup> Aubenque (1963) 162: "The chorus, instructed by experience, knows that human truths are difficult, not only for us, but in themselves: that which ruined Creon was his assurance, his presumption, his pretension of knowing that which is good in itself and of leaguings with the absolute, his contempt for human contingencies and circumstances. 164: "Phronesis is not yet the Socratic knowledge of not-knowing (which is, however, undoubtedly an unconscious heir); but it is a knowledge which is suspicious of its own transgressions and reminds itself constantly of the consciousness of its necessary limits".

<sup>283</sup> Aubenque (1963) 46-47, 162.

<sup>284</sup> Aubenque (1963) 63.

even contingently): in this case, the Athenian institution of aristocracy.<sup>285</sup> The actual practice of that institution, in Aubenque's view, would be wholly constitutive of the knowledge ('knowledge' being meant in a qualified sense) of that activity; to employ Sartre's terms, as Aubenque himself does, existence would precede essence.

But would it be correct to read a post-modern relativism, which abandons a universal, rational basis for morality, into Aristotle's teaching? Consider Jonathan Lear's otherwise perfect explanation of Aristotelian ethics. Lear interprets *EN*, in my view correctly, as "an instance of the transition from the mere possession to the reflective understanding and legitimation of the virtues" and as "the highest state of the ethical virtues" whereby the person possessing the other virtues "understands and endorses them".<sup>286</sup> Yet, Lear later says about this "endorsement" that:

There is no absolute standpoint from which one can judge that one endorsement is true and constitutes a genuine legitimation and that another is false and constitutes a sham legitimation. The virtuous person's endorsement of his own character is carried out from within the perspective of a virtuous person. The endorsement counts as a legitimation only if it is true, but there is no detached perspective from which to judge its truth.<sup>287</sup>

Now, if, as I suspect Lear really believes, the standpoint from which the virtues of Aristotle's virtuous person is endorsed is the same standpoint from which any set of virtues can be "endorsed", then the "transition" from mere possession to reflection, should itself be grounded in a universally accessible, intellectual virtue. Only on this

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<sup>285</sup> Cf. also Nussbaum (1986), who claims that Aristotle believes that there is a need for "experts" to determine the ultimate, though ultimately contingent, principles of ethics (p. 248-249, 479).

<sup>286</sup> Lear (1988) 187.

<sup>287</sup> Lear (1988) 191.



condition could Aristotle, for instance, learn from studying various constitutions, and, moreover, could anyone, if they themselves are virtuous, learn from Aristotle's *EN*.<sup>288</sup>

And indeed, on the basis of my treatment of Aristotle's conception of the first principle, it is reasonable to believe that the "intellectuality" of the *phronimos* is rationally grounded, and can be known by an "absolute standpoint", recognizable not only to the noblemen of one and the same community, but of the members of any community who are able to recognize it. The circularity and reflexivity inherent in practical wisdom cannot be taken as indicative of the ultimate groundlessness of ethics; rather, the very opposite is true: Aristotle attributes circularity to the judgment of the *phronimos* because he believes that the causal ground of the *phronimos* is the self-related intellectual activity of the divine first principle. In other words, Aristotle understands the "human good" (i.e. the "good man") to embody through human activity the activity of the Good itself.

While Aristotle presupposes the audience of *EN* to have many opinions already formed, he does not presuppose them to recognize divine reason as the ground of virtue; indeed, it is the very purpose of *EN* to *effect* this recognition. In the subsequent chapter I will show how *EN* overcomes the internal/external division in both political life and political thinking, by actually making apparent the underlying rational ground of virtuous actions, in and through the visible phenomena of ethical reality. In order to accomplish this, as we shall see, Aristotle will have to take his audience, and practical wisdom,

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<sup>288</sup> Cf. Strauss (1964) 30: "Our provisional contention according to which Aristotle's political science is the fully conscious form of the common sense understanding of political things is open to the objection that the matrix of that science is not common sense simply but the common sense of the Greeks, not to say the common sense of the Greek upper class".

beyond the political, to a place where the theoretical manifests itself in the totality of man's ethical life. Thus we shall make sense of Lear's suggestion that *EN* not only provides, but, "embodies a transition from the mere possession to reflective understanding and legitimation of the virtues" (187). This "embodiment", we shall see, is the embodiment of theoretical wisdom itself – it is a practical act that pushes the boundaries of practice into the theoretical. Thus we will arrive at the root of the tension motivating *EN*, and its resolution: that, though the practical self is not the theoretical self, it is nevertheless derived from it, known through it, and is fulfilled in it.

## CHAPTER 5: THE DIALECTIC OF *NICOMACHEAN ETHICS*

### 5.1: Preliminary Remarks

It remains for us to interpret the structure of *EN* as a pedagogical text, in view of what has been argued in the preceding studies. This will clarify exactly in what sense theoretical wisdom ‘knows’ practical wisdom and is presupposed in practical enquiry. I support my overall claims through a concrete investigation of exemplary moments of the pedagogical dialectic of *EN*.

In the introductory chapter of this thesis I called attention to two ambiguities in Aristotle’s *EN*, one relating to its *content*, that is, its doctrine of autonomous human action, and the other to the *form* in which this doctrine is presented. As for the first, Aristotle writes of the practical good that it is variable, erratic, and, in short, dependent on the fundamentally indeterminate circumstances of human life; yet in virtually the same stroke he affirms the absolute, universal, intellectual character of praxis, not least in assuming that the life of divine theoretical contemplation is the defining purpose of practical activity. A related problem is the mode of knowledge appropriate to such a good, and the proper perfection of that knowledge, namely practical thinking and practical wisdom, respectively, to which Aristotle seems to arrogate, in accordance with the ambiguity of their proper object, both the universality of a theoretical knowledge and the protean contingency of particular experience. This epistemological problem bears upon the question of the formal purpose of the text of *EN* itself, specifically in the controversy over whether the text aims to present its audience with a theoretical investigation of the practical good, or a practical investigation of it; whether it aims to

teach its audience to *know* the good, or to *be* good. In the preceding chapters I have sought to resolve the problem of content, and to set the stage for a resolution of the problem of form.

In Chapter 3 we saw how Aristotle believes that, for theoretical inquiry, the difference between form and content, between the object of the science and the subject who thinks it, is overcome in its fulfillment, which, I showed, directs the process of learning from start to finish. The source of the possibility of this union of thinker and thought is the nature of the theoretical good itself, which I have sketched in Chapter 2: a pure activity, a thought thinking itself. Thus, for Aristotle, learning is not an acquisition of something outside of the one who acquires it; it is a matter of the thinker actualizing the thing in question, and, actually becoming that which it thinks, the activity of the self-thinking Good. Finally, in Chapter 4 I argued that Aristotle's intention in separating practical thinking from theoretical is to locate the divine subsistence that is really present in practical thinking. Thus Aristotle does not depart from the Platonic project of grounding human ethical life by finding the *telos* of that life in its aspiration for deiformity. Specifically, he shows how practical wisdom, just as theoretical wisdom, is, in a qualified sense, identical to its object; in other words, the practical good is a self-thinking activity, whose perfection is limited by its composite nature (i.e. by the division between virtue and act, thought and desire, self and external condition). Aristotle's act of distinguishing practical thinking from theoretical thinking allows for a doctrine of deiformity, according to which the practically good man, by becoming a self-related activity, imitates the divine good within his composite life; thereby Aristotle avoids the pitfall of the idealism according to which human life is forced into the procrustean bed of

the absolute. But the deformity of human activity is not that of nature: while natural substance shares with ethical life a composite structure, and equally finds its good in an active unity between its inherent divisions, ethical life is unique in that its active unity is effected by the *thinking activity itself* of the ethical self. That is simply to say, the self-thinking of practical wisdom is the practical good itself. It seems plausible, then, that there would be a similar coalescence of form and content in the highest attainment of the goal of the ‘practical’ inquiry of *EN*.

## **5.2: The Audience of *Nicomachean Ethics* and the ‘Appearances’**

That last observation, that the unification of form and content in the culmination of the theoretical inquiry, which I attempted to outline in Chapter 3, might be at play in Aristotle’s ethical inquiry too, is, I propose, the cardinal point on which interpretation of the method and structure of *EN* should turn. For this interpretation the essential insight of the phenomenological approach to Aristotle’s general method is crucial: inquiry must begin from what our habituated way of life causes to appear to us. I have shown that, at least for Aristotle’s theoretical philosophy, such a view must be complemented with the notion that Aristotle manifestly believes such inquiry to presuppose (though not necessarily explicitly) the good as the determinative end of the inquiry. To demonstrate that Aristotle envisioned a similar project for his ethical lectures little more is needed than to avail ourselves of Aristotle’s own testimony. Consider a programmatic excerpt from *Metaphysics*, where Aristotle wishes to make the point that learning always proceeds through the less inherently knowable, though more familiar, being to the opposite:

Just as in practical activities, the task is, [proceeding] from the individual goods, to make the absolute goods goods for the individual, so also [in *Metaphysics*] we must, [proceeding] from what is known to the individual, make what is knowable by nature known to him.<sup>289</sup>

It is important for our purposes to remark that Aristotle assumes that this process of learning is not solely theoretical, but belongs also to practical action. The above passage states that the “task” of a moral education is to make the absolutely good good for the individual. In Chapter 4 we saw how Aristotle envisions the good man to be he for whom the good for him as an individual is the absolute good, and that the distinction between the two corresponds to the (ontological end epistemological) distinctions between the particular and universal, and experience and knowledge, respectively. Here, Aristotle quite explicitly states that the correspondence between the two is not simply immediate in the good man, but comes as the result of moral training – a process of making the real good manifest through the dialectical conflict of apparent goods. In *EN* itself, Aristotle, employing the language of his response (found in *Posterior Analytics*) to Plato’s *Meno*, explicitly makes knowledge *that* something is good, i.e. true belief, the starting-point of inquiry:

Let us not forget that speeches from (ἀπό) principles differ from speeches to (ἐπί) principles. For Plato rightly made this a problem, and sought whether the path is from the principles or to the principles, just as in a race-course one can proceed from the judges to the turning-post, or back again. So, then, one must proceed from what is known. But ‘what is known’ is meant in two ways: what is known *to us*, and what is known *absolutely*. Perhaps, then, for us, at least, one must begin from what is known to us. Therefore it is necessary for the adequate student of beautiful, just and, generally, political things, to have been well-trained in his habits. For the starting-point is the *that* (τὸ ὅτι); and, if this sufficiently appear, there is no additional need for the *why* (τὸ διότι) [sc. to make it appear].<sup>290</sup>

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<sup>289</sup> *Met.* 1029b5-9: καὶ τοῦτο ἔργον ἐστίν, ὥσπερ ἐν ταῖς πράξεσι τὸ ποιῆσαι ἐκ τῶν ἐκάστῳ ἀγαθῶν τὰ ὅλως ἀγαθὰ ἐκάστῳ ἀγαθῷ, οὕτως ἐκ τῶν αὐτῶν γνωριμωτέρων τὰ τῇ φύσει γνώριμα αὐτῶν γνώριμα.

<sup>290</sup> *EN* 1095a31-1095b8: μὴ λανθανέτω δ’ ἡμᾶς ὅτι διαφέρουσιν οἱ ἀπὸ τῶν ἀρχῶν λόγοι καὶ οἱ ἐπὶ τὰς ἀρχάς. εὖ γὰρ καὶ ὁ Πλάτων ἠπόρει τοῦτο καὶ ἐζήτει, πότερον ἀπὸ τῶν ἀρχῶν ἢ ἐπὶ τὰς ἀρχάς ἐστιν ἡ ὁδός, ὥσπερ ἐν τῷ σταδίῳ ἀπὸ τῶν ἀθλοθετῶν ἐπὶ τὸ πέρασ ἢ ἀνάπαλιν. ἀρκτέον μὲν γὰρ ἀπὸ τῶν γνωρίμων,

In addition to corroborating my point that Aristotle's pedagogic aim is to proceed from what appears good to his audience to what is truly good, this passage contains a decisive inference: namely, the *that*, i.e. the belief that something is good, which provides the starting-point of ethical-dialectical inquiry, is present for inquiry only insofar as the audience itself is good. This notion should not surprise us, given our familiarity with Aristotle's doctrine of the apparent good. As we have seen, for Aristotle, the particular activities of a moral agent determine what does or does not appear good to him; a man believes that resisting his natural impulse to flee in terror, or to eat in excess, is beautiful (which is to say, desirable), because he has been habituated to think it so. This fact must inform our interpretation of Aristotle's initial explanation, which might otherwise seem merely common-sense, of why his audience must already be well-trained in its moral habits, namely that the young cannot judge well about that in which he has no experience:

Each man judges beautifully what he knows, and is a good judge of such things. Therefore, in each subject, he is a good judge if he has been educated; and he is a good judge simply, if he has been educated about all (περὶ πάντων). Thus the young are not the proper audience for political science. For they are inexperienced in the actions of life, and the speeches (λόγοι) [of these lectures] are from these and about these.<sup>291</sup>

The truth of the modern insight that Aristotle's ethical teachings are available only to those who already participate in the contingent culture of the Athenian aristocratic educational institutions lies in this. Here, the difference between Aristotle's natural and ethical investigations is more illuminating than the similarities. The dialectic of natural

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ταῦτα δὲ διττῶς: τὰ μὲν γὰρ ἡμῖν τὰ δ' ἀπλῶς. ἴσως οὖν ἡμῖν γε ἀρκτέον ἀπὸ τῶν ἡμῖν γνωρίμων. διὸ δεῖ τοῖς ἔθεσιν ἡχθῆναι καλῶς τὸν περὶ καλῶν καὶ δικαίων καὶ ὅλων τῶν πολιτικῶν ἀκουσόμενον ἰκανῶς. ἀρχὴ γὰρ τὸ ὅτι, καὶ εἰ τοῦτο φαίνοιτο ἀρκούντως, οὐδὲν προσδεήσει τοῦ διότι: ὁ δὲ τοιοῦτος ἔχει ἢ λάβοι ἂν ἀρχὰς ῥαδίως. Cf. also 1098a35-b8.

<sup>291</sup> EN 1094b29-1095a4: ἕκαστος δὲ κρίνει καλῶς ἃ γινώσκει, καὶ τούτων ἐστὶν ἀγαθὸς κριτής. καθ' ἕκαστον μὲν ἄρα ὁ πεπαιδευμένος, ἀπλῶς δ' ὁ περὶ πάντων πεπαιδευμένος. διὸ τῆς πολιτικῆς οὐκ ἔστιν οἰκειὸς ἀκροατὴς ὁ νέος: ἄπειρος γὰρ τῶν κατὰ τὸν βίον πράξεων, οἱ λόγοι δ' ἐκ τούτων καὶ περὶ τούτων.

science proceeds between the abstract opinions that stick too closely to sense-perception and those that soar too zealously above it, in order to grasp the active self-relation of the intelligible nature of a thing with its particularity; mortal thought thereby enters into the divine thinking that sustains nature, and ascends to a grasp of the principle of that thinking. The prerequisites for the dialectic of political science are not so simple. The ethical good does not preexist in nature; it is not a matter of merely opening one's eyes, that is, employing one's natural cognitive faculties upon that which is always and everywhere present. The goods which are the subject matter of the practical thinking of *EN*, that is, of the deliberation on the actual ends of human activity, appear only to those who possess the habituated states of desiring and thinking (and by this hendiadys I mean to signify the unity of desire and thought which Aristotle calls 'ὁρέξις' discussed in the last chapter) which cause and are caused by those activities.

However, we know that Aristotle thinks that this contingency must, and can, be overcome: 'natural' virtue will become 'masterly' virtue, through an absolute knowledge of what is absolutely good. How this is so will become clear through considering the other methodological statement by which Aristotle distinguishes ethical inquiry from natural, which, as we have noted, seems to contradict the first. Let us consider the third remaining passage in *EN* in which Aristotle justifies his demand that his audience be already well-trained in their habits, not only for completeness, but also because it will allow us to pinpoint an illuminating paradox in our argument:

Further, since the young follow their passions they will hear [sc. the λόγοι] to no purpose or benefit, since the end (τέλος) is not knowledge (γνώσις) but action (πρᾶξις). And youth in respect to age is no different than an immature character: for the defect is not a matter of time; it is because of living, and chasing after each thing, according to passion. For to such men, as to those without self-restraint,



knowledge is useless; whereas to know about these things would be of manifold benefit to those who act and make their passions in accordance with reason.<sup>292</sup>

In this passage, Aristotle's central claim is that the content of *EN* cannot but be learned superficially by those whose inmost passions are not disposed to being transformed by speech (and we have seen in the previous chapter that this can be the result of bad habits or, as in the case of the many, of a natural inability). This is important, as Aristotle makes plain, because the aim of the inquiry of *EN* is not a disinterested, theoretical knowledge, but "action". Aristotle takes pains to remind his audience that his lectures are for the sake of actually becoming better:

Therefore will knowledge of this [sc. the highest good] not be of great importance in respect to living also, and, as archers aiming at their target, would we not better attain what is fitting?<sup>293</sup>

And so, since the present study is not for the sake of theory as the others (for we do not seek what virtue is so that we may know, but so that we may become good, since otherwise there would be no benefit), it is necessary to examine the things concerning actions, how one should act in respect to them; for actions, as we have said, even determine what sort of ethical characters come into being.<sup>294</sup>

As has been said, is the end in practical things not to theorize and understand each thing, but rather to do them? Indeed, it is neither sufficient to know about virtue, rather one must also strive to employ it, or, if perhaps we become good some other way.<sup>295</sup>

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<sup>292</sup> *EN* 1095a7-12: ἔτι δὲ τοῖς πάθεσιν ἀκολουθητικὸς ὢν ματαίως ἀκούσεται καὶ ἀνωφελῶς, ἐπειδὴ τὸ τέλος ἐστὶν οὐ γνῶσις ἀλλὰ πράξις. διαφέρει δ' οὐδὲν νέος τὴν ἡλικίαν ἢ τὸ ἦθος νεαρός: οὐ γὰρ παρὰ τὸν χρόνον ἢ ἔλλειψις, ἀλλὰ διὰ τὸ κατὰ πάθος ζῆν καὶ διώκειν ἕκαστα. τοῖς γὰρ τοιοῦτοις ἀνόνητος ἢ γνῶσις γίνεται, καθάπερ τοῖς ἀκρατέσιν: τοῖς δὲ κατὰ λόγον τὰς ὀρέξεις ποιουμένοις καὶ πράττουσι πολυωφελῆς ἂν εἴη τὸ περὶ τούτων εἰδέναι.

<sup>293</sup> *EN* 1094a23-25: ἄρ' οὖν καὶ πρὸς τὸν βίον ἢ γνῶσις αὐτοῦ μεγάλην ἔχει ροπήν, καὶ καθάπερ τοξόται σκοπὸν ἔχοντες μᾶλλον ἂν τυγχάνοιμεν τοῦ δέοντος;

<sup>294</sup> *EN* 1103b26-31: ἐπεὶ οὖν ἡ παροῦσα πραγματεία οὐ θεωρίας ἐνεκά ἐστιν ὥσπερ αἱ ἄλλαι (οὐ γὰρ ἵνα εἰδῶμεν τί ἐστὶν ἢ ἀρετὴ σκεπτόμεθα, ἀλλ' ἵν' ἀγαθοὶ γενώμεθα, ἐπεὶ οὐδὲν ἂν ἦν ὄφελος αὐτῆς) , ἀναγκαῖον ἐπισκέψασθαι τὰ περὶ τὰς πράξεις, πῶς πρακτέον αὐτάς: αὗται γὰρ εἰσι κύρια καὶ τοῦ ποιᾶς γενέσθαι τὰς ἕξεις, καθάπερ εἰρήκαμεν.

<sup>295</sup> *EN* 1179a33-b4: ἢ καθάπερ λέγεται, οὐκ ἔστιν ἐν τοῖς πρακτοῖς τέλος τὸ θεωρῆσαι ἕκαστα καὶ γνῶναι, ἀλλὰ μᾶλλον τὸ πράττειν αὐτά: οὐδὲ δὴ περὶ ἀρετῆς ἰκανὸν τὸ εἰδέναι, ἀλλ' ἔχειν καὶ χρῆσθαι πειρατέον, ἢ εἴ πως ἄλλως ἀγαθοὶ γινόμεθα;

Those who wish to argue that *EN* aims to provide advice for good conduct, would find support for their interpretation in these statements. The intended, constitutive science of *EN* -- what Aristotle calls ‘political science’ – would, on this view, be a sort of practical deliberation. However, the fact that Aristotle explicitly treats the *ends* of action – asking, for instance, what is the best life – seems to force the conclusion that Aristotle does not consistently limit *EN* to this task.<sup>296</sup> Others have rejected this approach to *EN* altogether.<sup>297</sup> For our part, keeping in mind the interpretation of Aristotle’s doctrine of practical wisdom outlined in the previous chapter, this fact should not cause us distress. For we have seen that practical wisdom is knowledge of ends, as well as means. Further, it is the sole virtue which is chosen as its own end – it *is* its self-thinking and self-willing, both means and end. Since Aristotle wishes to improve his audience by making them, not more courageous or temperate (for these virtues, developed through a life of experience, are presupposed), but more wise, to engage in the activity will be precisely to embody that activity, or, in Aristotle words, to *become* good. Hence it is no accident that Aristotle should suggest that practical wisdom is realized (i.e. that “we become good”) by way of a dialectical reflection on, and clarification and correction of, our own (shared) beliefs, causally linked to our own character (through habituation from within a common

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<sup>296</sup> E.g. Armstrong (1947) 105: “Aristotle, however, rather unnecessarily narrows the scope of his conception of choice by saying that it is only concerned with means not ends. Ends are rather the object of wish, and, Aristotle seems to think at least while he is discussing choice, are immediately obvious, so that we do not have to deliberate about them (though of course he himself elsewhere in the *Ethics*, when he is discussing the proper end of human life, is engaged in this very process of deliberating about ends)”.

<sup>297</sup> Bodéüs (1993) has most forcefully argued against this type of interpretation. Specifically, Bodéüs rejects the view that “*Nicomachean Ethics*, as the expression of a strictly independent science, designed to teach each individual the ends of his moral action and, therefore, as the first historical expression of the individualistic spirit which asserts itself against politics (p. 3)”. According to Bodéüs, *EN* does aim to present generalized ideas about practical goods, in order to make the audience of potential lawmakers better understand what laws will or will not be conducive to the good of the *polis*. However, Bodéüs’ view must be supplemented with an account of the pedagogy of *EN*. For political legislators are individuals. How could they be convinced that their politics should serve philosophy, if they are not made to actually understand that politics is not the highest end for man?

culture), of what is good. For such reflection is the human embodiment of self-related thinking, the good itself, on which Aristotle intends to demonstrate all apparent goods causally depend. The content of *EN*, in its realization, merges with its form.

But this solution raises a more important dilemma, intrinsic to the very nature of ethical inquiry. On the one hand, Aristotle says that human activity is an object of will for an individual only insofar as that activity has been practiced by that individual, and thus presents itself to him as an ‘apparent good’. On the other hand, Aristotle intends to teach his audience what has not been practiced by that individual, and thus does not (at least initially) present itself as an apparent good, the self-reflection which constitutes the highest form of practical thinking: practical self-reflection. While Aristotle’s dialectic of natural philosophy can proceed by virtue of the activity of its divine principle, which pre-exists (at least) as cause, the practical good, which thinks itself *only* through its imperfect, embodied manifestations, does not seem to have any such prior cause determining its realization in an individual agent. Or, I should say, it does not seem to have such a principle if we deny that the theoretical good is the principle of the practical good. But the preceding chapters have shown that interpretation of *EN* can no longer maintain such a denial. As I have argued, theory is the cause, and perfection, of practice. That being said, our dilemma is not removed, but instead becomes constitutive of the motivating tension of *EN* as a whole. Since practical wisdom is an embodiment of theoretical wisdom in the particular circumstances of human life, it cannot be its own object of thought (that is, to be the self-reflection that it is) until it is thus embodied. Therefore, insofar as this wisdom is not embodied, that is, insofar as the conditions for self-reflection are not present, practical wisdom remains (for human thought) an abstract

ideal, beyond human activity. This dilemma demands a radical rethinking of the structure of *EN* as a whole, implying no less than that the theoretical good directs, as well as transcends, the investigation of *EN*. The implication is that, for Aristotle, the human good and the process by which it is thought, just as natural substance and the process by which it is thought, have the theoretical good as transcendent cause.<sup>298</sup> Knowledge of the practical good (which, again, is the practical good itself) is arrived at by Aristotle, through his insight into the activity of the theoretical good (which, again, is identical to that activity), working itself out in a dialectic of human life, and at last finding its completion in the closest approximation to itself possible in the potentiality of human life to do so. We shall see, however, that Aristotle does not find a complete approximation within practical life. Thus the simple self-related thinking of the absolute good, while serving as the measure and aspiration for human life, will, even at the end of *EN*, transcend that life. The result is nothing short of Aristotle's unique conception of the practical good, a self-willing and self-choosing, which, due to the perpetual contingency of the circumstances of human action, must constantly redirect itself to itself, thus always in a state of becoming what man, in his inmost theoretical life, might actually be.

To fully demonstrate this claim about the text of *EN* would require the labour of a comprehensive commentary, of which the present essay has provided only the bare foundations. For now, however, I will make some preliminary observations towards an understanding of how our interpretation of Aristotle's doctrine of the dependence of the

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<sup>298</sup> Yet, differently from man's inquiry into nature, the thinking of the human good engages man's whole self, and so approaches the divine more directly than through natural inquiry. This, by the way, would explain Aristotle's use of *praxis* at decisive moments in *Metaphysics* for elucidating, not only the first principle, pure actuality, but also the actualities within nature itself.

practical good on the theoretical good makes intelligible Aristotle's ambiguous treatment of the theoretical good within the practical inquiry of *EN*, and the precise way that that these ambiguities serve as essential junctures in the general course of *EN*.

### 5.3: Being and Nothing

Let us return to the very opening lines of *EN* (cited in the introduction of this essay), where we shall find, not surprisingly, that Aristotle begins his work by setting out in the starkest possible way the what I am calling the intrinsic tension of the inquiry of *EN*:

Every art and every investigation, similarly every act and choice, seems to aim at some good (ἀγαθοῦ τινός); therefore it has been well said that the good (τάγαθόν) is that at which everything aims.<sup>299</sup>

Aristotle's *EN* begins with the assertion that the technical, scientific and practical activities of human life, all aim at some good; this assertion is followed by the inference that the Good *tout court* is that which all things aim. As I remarked at the beginning of this essay, the challenge in these lines resides in the transition from the initial observation, which is clearly concerned with the aim, or aims, of human life, to the general conclusion about what is good absolutely and for even non-human nature. Now, with the investigations of the previous chapter behind us, we are in a position to see how the riddling character of the connection between these two statements is not accidental, but reflects the dual nature of Aristotle's project: first, Aristotle's aim is to reveal the divine, theoretical ground of human goods; second, he reveals this ground by way of a dialectical inquiry into the various opinions about the human good held by his audience,

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<sup>299</sup> *EN* 1094a1-3: πᾶσα τέχνη καὶ πᾶσα μέθοδος, ὁμοίως δὲ πράξις τε καὶ προαίρεσις, ἀγαθοῦ τινὸς ἐφίεσθαι δοκεῖ: διὸ καλῶς ἀπεφήναντο τάγαθόν, οὗ πάντ' ἐφίεται.

that is, by way of preserving the apparent good, the *doxa*, and the particular, through demonstrating that it is an expression of, and is dependent on, the activity of the real good, *logos*, and the universal.

What is condensed in the opening lines of *EN* becomes more explicit in the rest of the proem of which they are part.<sup>300</sup> Aristotle's initial approach to unifying the good itself with the good as it appears to Aristotle's audience of well-bred, though not (yet) philosophic audience produces an unknown quantity at the peak of a hierarchy of ends. First observing that the various human activities have "many ends", e.g. bridle-making is for the sake of bridles, and strategy is for the sake of victory, Aristotle points out that ends are in fact subordinated to one another, such as when a bridle-maker makes a bridle for a soldier to be used in battle.<sup>301</sup> Thus, he continues, "in all these pursuits the ends of the architectonic sciences are more choiceworthy than those below them".<sup>302</sup> From this consideration of familiar activities, the good still appears only negatively, as that which is desired, though absent. In Aristotle's first determination of the good in *EN* we find the familiar tactic of naïve idealism, which, unsatisfied with experience, seeks an experience immediately "for-itself", but cannot thereby explain the precise meaning of that "for-itself". Note Aristotle's emphasis on the desire for the goal rather than the goal itself in his conclusion:

If there is some end of our actions which we will for itself (*δι'αυτό*), and we choose everything for this end, rather than for something else (for if it were for something else then our choices would proceed indefinitely, with the result that

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<sup>300</sup> It has been traditionally inferred from Aristotle's statement at *EN* 1095a12-13 that lines 1094a1-1094b12 constitutes a proem, laying out for the rest of *EN* the subject matter (*τί προτιθέμεθα*), the manner of demonstration (*πῶς ἀποδεκτέον*) and the appropriate audience for the demonstration (*περὶ ἀκροατοῦ*). E.g. Aquinas *ad loc.*

<sup>301</sup> *EN* 1094a7-14.

<sup>302</sup> *EN* 1094a14-15.

desire would be empty and vain) it is clear that this would be the highest good (τάγαθὸν καὶ τὸ ἄριστον).<sup>303</sup>

Seeing that what at the beginning of his inquiry Aristotle refers to as ‘the good’, is now called ‘the best and the good’, or, as the hendiadys signifies, ‘the highest good’, we must conclude that the practical good has begun to take form. The good is not simply an absolute object of desire at which “everything” indiscriminately aims, as it first seems to be presented in the opening lines of *EN*, but an object of desire among other objects of desire, through which other things are desired, and that which is desired for nothing other than itself.

This happy outcome is counterpoised by the ambiguous consequence of Aristotle’s subsequent reflection on the kind of science that is proper to the highest good. The science that would be most authoritative and architectonic, Aristotle says, “seems to be political science”.<sup>304</sup> For political science lays down the laws about “what it is necessary to do and from what it is necessary to abstain”, all for the sake of the end of all the other human pursuits; the ultimate end of human activity, in this light, seems to be a science of human things, of, as Aristotle now calls it, the “human good” (τάνθρώπινον ἄγαθόν).<sup>305</sup> But Aristotle’s assimilation of the Good to the domain of human affairs within this proem is not without the sacrifice of its absolute character. Aristotle’s concluding tone is not straightforward:

And if this [sc. the human good] is the same for an individual and for a city-state (πόλις), that of the city-state seems probably to be better and more perfect, both to attain and preserve. For, while it is desirable in an individual, it is more beautiful

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<sup>303</sup> *EN* 1094a19-23: εἰ δὴ τι τέλος ἐστὶ τῶν πρακτῶν ὃ δι’ αὐτὸ βουλόμεθα, τᾶλλα δὲ διὰ τοῦτο, καὶ μὴ πάντα δι’ ἕτερον αἰρούμεθα (πρόεισι γὰρ οὕτω γ’ εἰς ἄπειρον, ὥστ’ εἶναι κενὴν καὶ ματαίαν τὴν ὄρεξιν), δῆλον ὡς τοῦτ’ ἂν εἴη τάγαθὸν καὶ τὸ ἄριστον.

<sup>304</sup> *EN* 1094a27-8.

<sup>305</sup> *EN* 1094a28-1094b8.

and more divine in peoples and city-states. And so our method aims at these things, being a certain political science (πολιτική τις).<sup>306</sup>

While Aristotle has up to this point said little about the absolute good, as pure contemplation, prior to its assimilation into the human domain, there is nonetheless room within that domain for an appearance of the incompleteness of ethical life in view of what is beyond it. Aristotle asserts that the good for an individual is the same as the good for the political community of which he is part, only to suggest immediately afterwards that the good of the political community is more beautiful and divine than that of the individual. Thus, at this early stage of *EN*, Aristotle subtly reasserts, in terms most intelligible to his audience of politically trained citizens, the disparity between the individual and the universal.

#### **5.4: The Aporia of Happiness**

Sections 4 to 7 of Book 1 pushes this aporia towards a resolution, a more concrete union of the real with the apparent goods: the rational soul as the cause of goodness. Attempting to further his initial determination of the good as the object of political science and thus the “highest of all practicable goods”, Aristotle introduces the name ‘happiness’ (εὐδαιμονία), which “is agreed upon by most people” to be the name of such a good.<sup>307</sup> This designation serves as the middle term between the absolute end and a variety of opinions about what happiness really is, pleasure, wealth or honour. However that may be, Aristotle notes that “what it [sc. happiness] is, is disputed”; that is to say, “happiness” is still too abstract a conception, and, in the movement of the text at this

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<sup>306</sup> *EN* 1094b7-11: εἰ γὰρ καὶ ταῦτόν ἐστιν ἐνὶ καὶ πόλει, μείζον γε καὶ τελειότερον τὸ τῆς πόλεως φαίνεται καὶ λαβεῖν καὶ σφῆξιν: ἀγαπητὸν μὲν γὰρ καὶ ἐνὶ μόνῳ, κάλλιον δὲ καὶ θεϊότερον ἔθνη καὶ πόλεις. ἢ μὲν οὖν μέθοδος τούτων ἐφίεται, πολιτική τις οὔσα.

<sup>307</sup> *EN* 1095a14-30.



point, it is not clear how happiness relates to the variety of opinions about it. Aristotle's disagreement with the Delian epigram, which, on his reading, suggests that the various goods of human life cannot be held simultaneously, suggests that he will find a place for these apparent goods within the structure of his completed vision of the practical good.<sup>308</sup> Yet, independent from a consideration of their proper relations to that good, as they are here presented, they are mere abstractions from experience. Hence Aristotle takes the first steps towards understanding their place in human ethical life by attacking abstract conceptions of the good, generally, as it were, or, in their most explicit expression -- the Idea of the Good.

Aristotle's notorious critique of Platonism in 1.6 does not, as it might appear when isolated from its dialectical context, aim to prove that there is no good in itself, but only that a universal *idea* of the good cannot be the good in itself. Aristotle's terminology, familiar to us from his treatment of idealism in *Metaphysics* A, B and Z especially, is clearly limited to the idea as a 'universal', 'common' and 'one', that could be predicated -- so the idealists are assumed to suppose -- of all other goods.<sup>309</sup> Aristotle makes this point in reference to his doctrine of categories, and thereby additionally suggests a way of thinking by which there can be a plurality of predications of the good.<sup>310</sup> Thus his critique of idea-ology by way of returning to multiplicity of particulars, here, as in *Metaphysics*, debunks idealism not totally, but only its totalizing pretension. As Kosman puts it, "the multivocity of "good" is exhibited not only in the fact that many sorts of things may be said to be good, but more in the fact that predicates of radically

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<sup>308</sup> EN 1099a22-31

<sup>309</sup> E.g. τὸ δὲ καθόλου βέλτιον (1096a11); κοινόν τι καθόλου καὶ ἓν (1096a28); τὸ ἀγαθὸν κοινόν τι κατὰ μίαν ἰδέαν (1096b25); κοινή τις ἐπὶ τούτοις ἰδέα (1096a23).

<sup>310</sup> EN 1096a19-28.

different type are in fact disguised as means of predicating the good in radically different senses”.<sup>311</sup> Aristotle concludes his critique by suggesting that the unity of the term ‘good’ is probably not accidental: he remarks that “all things” are good by virtue of being “from one good” (ἀφ'ένος εἶναι) and “contributes to one good” (πρὸς ἓν ... συντελεῖν).<sup>312</sup> Punning on “συντελεῖν”, which, although primarily meaning “to contribute”, etymologically contains “τελεῖν”, Aristotle alludes to the *tele*-ology, the conception of being as intrinsically determined by its purpose, that is revealed at the end of his consideration of the *aporia*.

The *aporia* receives a more complete expression with the return to experience, which concludes 1.6. Aristotle argues in 1096b30-1097a14 that even if the idea of the good existed, it is not what human beings use in their real life to bring about goodness; a doctor, in order to heal his patient, does not look to a universal good, but to “the good of man, or rather perhaps of a particular man”.<sup>313</sup> The considerations of 1.7 pose the fact that to simply call the human good “happiness” is not to overcome its excessively universal designation,<sup>314</sup> against the demand that the human good be something “πρακτόν”, or “practicable”, in particular circumstances.<sup>315</sup> Thus Aristotle is led to pose the question, what is the activity (ἔργον) that is proper to man, and by doing which he is said to be doing something good?<sup>316</sup> Through this consideration Aristotle approaches his target, drawing from his conception of the practical soul from *De Anima*, according to which man’s activity consists in the relation of a “rational part” (διανοούμενον) to an irrational

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<sup>311</sup> Kosman (1968) 174.

<sup>312</sup> *EN* 1096b27-28.

<sup>313</sup> *EN* 1097a12-13.

<sup>314</sup> *EN* 1097a24-5; 1098a22-4.

<sup>315</sup> *EN* 1096a5; 1097a23-24.

<sup>316</sup> *EN* 1097b24-5.

part which is nonetheless “obedient to reason” (ἐπιπειθές λόγῳ).<sup>317</sup> In this way, the difference between the intelligible, universal good of human life, and the particular, desiring movement of it, is reformulated in such a way that the rational, *human* self becomes the center of goodness, while what is not of that self, the otherwise irrational part of a human, becomes good through being related to it, and by it. “The human good”, Aristotle concludes, “is activity of the soul according to *virtue*”, which, let us recall parenthetically, is a rational disposition of the self, “and, if there are many virtues, according to the best and most complete”.<sup>318</sup>

### **5.5: Chance, Death and Wholeness**

The remainder of Book 1 is devoted to developing this self-related concept of the human good by pushing it to its limits, with the help of traditional Greek views of happiness, which Aristotle is at pains to fully integrate into that concept. Thus Aristotle picks up on a problem which he wastes no time in exposing alongside the emergence of the notion that happiness is an activity according to virtue. Specifically, he immediately points out that the human good is found only “in a complete life; for one swallow does not make spring, nor does one day; thus neither one day nor a short time makes a man happy and blessed (μακάριος)”.<sup>319</sup> As I have argued, practical activity converts its external conditions such that they become motions intrinsic to its actuality (as, for instance, when a practical mind habituates any natural passion to become a desire for the activity of the practical mind, or a motion which is instrumental to that activity). However, it becomes very difficult to maintain that the origin of this activity can be

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<sup>317</sup> EN 1098a5.

<sup>318</sup> EN 1098a16-17.

<sup>319</sup> EN 1098a18-20.

altogether traced back to the human, rather than divine, self, in view of the traditional opinions concerning chance, death, and generally all of the extrinsic factors that seem to contribute to happiness. The underlying problem, I am claiming, of Aristotle's suggestion that it is not enough to be "happy", but also "blessed", is the incompleteness of the particularity of the soul against the totality of which it is part, which depends on the external conditions provided within the totality (and more perfect self-relation) of which it is part: either the contemplative activity of the cosmos (which has yet to become explicitly manifest), or the political community (which emerged at the end of the proem), and the whole of the lifetime itself (which is most explicitly at issue in these later sections of *EN* 1).

Aristotle explicitly takes up this tension at the start of 1.8, investigating the goods that are commonly considered to be "concerning the soul" (τὰ περὶ ψυχῆν) and those that are "extrinsic" (τὰ ἐκτός), claiming that the latter goods, namely virtuous actions and pleasures, are derived from the former.<sup>320</sup> Indeed, this is when Aristotle draws the perhaps surprising consequence, which I noted in the previous chapter, that the source even of pleasure is oneself.<sup>321</sup> Yet Aristotle makes sure to remind his audience that there is a difference between "supposing that the highest good is something merely possessed (κτήσις) or something used (χρήσις), an acquired state (ἔξις) or an activity (ἐνεργεία)".<sup>322</sup> He now deepens this problem by pointing out that, while many goods associated with happiness (friends, wealth, political power) may be easily reconciled to the agency of the virtuous man as the "organs" or "supplies" of his activity, there are things wholly outside

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<sup>320</sup> *EN* 1098b8-1099b31.

<sup>321</sup> *EN* 1099a10-31.

<sup>322</sup> *EN* 1098b32-4.

of a virtuous man's agency – good birth, good children, beauty -- without which he could not have acquired the potential to be virtuous in the first place.<sup>323</sup> “Hence”, Aristotle writes, “some think that happiness is good fortune” (εὐτυχία), and hence, he implies, the inquiry is led to the question of fortune (τυχή).<sup>324</sup>

In respect to the logic by which Aristotle reformulates the difference between the practical self and what is other than it, so that the divine can be properly understood as separate and perfect vis-à-vis the human good, Aristotle's initial formulation of the cause of education is particularly revealing:

Hence it is also an aporia whether [the human good] is something learned or habituated or in some other way practiced, or whether it comes about according to some divine gift (θεία μοῖρα) or through fortune (τυχή). Indeed if men have anything that is a gift (δῶρημα) of the gods, it is reasonable that happiness is divinely given (θεόσδοτον), and most of all of human goods insofar as it is the highest. But even if this might be more germane to another study, it seems that happiness, if not sent by the gods but instead coming about through virtue and a certain learning and practice, is among the most divine things. For the prize and best target of virtue seems to be something divine and blessed.<sup>325</sup>

Here, Aristotle invokes not only the beginning of Plato's *Meno*, but also its end. In asking how the human good is acquired (the initial question of that dialogue), Aristotle includes, as a possible answer, *Meno*'s tentative conclusion, namely that the source of human virtue is a “divine gift” (θεία μοῖρα).<sup>326</sup> Aristotle's final doctrine of practical wisdom, as we saw in Book 3, is of a self-regulating principle that, as such, masters its external conditions and thus takes control of chance. Thus, according to this view, the practical

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<sup>323</sup> EN 1099a31-b8.

<sup>324</sup> EN 1099b7-8.

<sup>325</sup> EN 1099b9-18: ὅθεν καὶ ἀπορεῖται πότερόν ἐστι μαθητὸν ἢ ἐθιστὸν ἢ καὶ ἄλλως πως ἀσκητόν, ἢ κατὰ τινα θεῖαν μοῖραν ἢ καὶ διὰ τύχην παραγίνεται. εἰ μὲν οὖν καὶ ἄλλο τί ἐστι θεῶν δῶρημα ἀνθρώποις, εὐλογον καὶ τὴν εὐδαιμονίαν θεόσδοτον εἶναι, καὶ μάλιστα τῶν ἀνθρωπίνων ὅσῳ βέλτιστον. ἀλλὰ τοῦτο μὲν ἴσως ἄλλης ἢ εἴη σκέψεως οἰκειότερον, φαίνεται δὲ κἂν εἰ μὴ θεόπεμπτός ἐστιν ἀλλὰ δι' ἀρετὴν καὶ τινα μάθησιν ἢ ἄσκησιν παραγίνεται, τῶν θειοτάτων εἶναι: τὸ γὰρ τῆς ἀρετῆς ἄθλον καὶ τέλος ἀριστον εἶναι φαίνεται καὶ θεῖόν τι καὶ μακάριον.

<sup>326</sup> See my discussion of Plato's *Meno* in the previous chapter.

good -- and thereby the virtues derived from it -- perpetuates itself through time and individuals by way of the educational institutions of lawmaking and *a fortiori* personal apprenticeship. This bigger picture of the human good suggests the incompleteness of an individual's happiness and its dependency on a source outside himself, thus leading Aristotle to conclude his treatment of the question of education with description of just this process as "political science".<sup>327</sup> But there is nonetheless room within this picture for the autonomy of human individuals, at least, in the case of lawmakers and educators for whom the individual good and communal good are in harmony.

However, if a "cause" of virtue were needed only to explain the *efficacy* of practical self-constitution, we might be justified in taking, as Gauthier and Jolif do, Aristotle's postponement of the question of the divine gift as a tongue-in-cheek dismissal of the question.<sup>328</sup> But, in fact, we see from the above passage that Aristotle is more concerned with the *final* causality of practical virtue: if the gods are better than humans, then the human good must depend on the divine good. Thus, Aristotle's response to *Meno* takes shape; Aristotle, in effect, separates μοῖρα from τυχή so that, without deposing the divine as the absolute condition of virtue, he can allow the practical agent to preside over his own (or another's) particular conditions, i.e. imitate the divine self-relation itself.<sup>329</sup>

Aristotle pushes the integration of the external conditions of the human good into the rational soul to its most extreme point: death. The locus of Aristotle's consideration of death is Solon's proverb that a man cannot be judged to be happy until his end (τέλος) has been seen, which Aristotle takes to mean that a person's happiness cannot be judged

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<sup>327</sup> EN 1099b28-32.

<sup>328</sup> Gauthier and Jolif (2002) *ad loc.*

<sup>329</sup> Aristotle makes a similar point in *EE* 8.2.

until he is out of the reach of misfortune.<sup>330</sup> This interpretation presupposes that death is a separation of the soul (in which virtue, εὐδαιμονία and the good reside) from the body, and its particular circumstances. Here, it is clear where the kind of Idealism of *Phaedo* (discussed at the start of Chapter 4), which seeks causality in what is intelligible in experience, fails to overcome the materialism of the traditional Greek religion. The inquiry of *EN* has been moving toward an identity of the rational self with the good: both naïve Platonism and Solon’s proverb proceed too hastily. The ethical idealism of *Phaedo*, in addition to supposing that the agent’s soul persists in its individuality after death (just as in Homer’s depiction of the shades in the underworld), holds that the soul of a virtuous man is separate from the body already in life, in that the soul determines the life of the body and remains unaffected by its changes from without. For Aristotle, on the other hand, the soul is fully what it is (and is fully knowable) only in its activity, and so in its particular embodiment. Aristotle first answers the question whether a man can be happy if he has been deprived of the means for good action. Again, Aristotle distinguishes a domain of human self-relation from, and measured against, the divine; yet he cannot but reassert by the way the incompleteness of the practical life, and its need for the divine “blessedness” for completion. The good man, he writes, will

always act nobly with whatever is at hand to him -- just as a good strategist uses in the most effective way the forces he has, and the shoemaker makes the most beautiful shoe out of the leather provided to him. And, if this is so, the happy man would never become miserable; however, it is true that he would not be blessed if the kind of misfortunes of Priam should befall him.<sup>331</sup>

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<sup>330</sup> *EN* 1100a11-17.

<sup>331</sup> *EN* 1101a2-8: τὸν γὰρ ὡς ἀληθῶς ἀγαθὸν καὶ ἔμφορον πάσας οἰόμεθα τὰς τύχας εὐσημιόμως φέρειν καὶ ἐκ τῶν ὑπαρχόντων αἰεὶ τὰ κάλλιστα πράττειν, καθάπερ καὶ στρατηγὸν ἀγαθὸν τῷ παρόντι στρατοπέδῳ χρῆσθαι πολεμικώτατα καὶ σκυτοτόμον ἐκ τῶν δοθέντων σκυτῶν κάλλιστον ὑπόδημα ποιεῖν: τὸν αὐτὸν δὲ τρόπον καὶ τοὺς ἄλλους τεχνίτας ἅπαντας. εἰ δ’ οὕτως, ἄθλιος μὲν οὐδέποτε γένοιτ’ ἂν ὁ εὐδαιμόνων, οὐ μὴν μακάριός γε, ἂν Πριαμικαῖς τύχαις περιπέσῃ.

In respect to both blessedness and mere happiness, Aristotle recovers the wisdom of Solon from the formalizing temptation of Idealism, by implicitly reinterpreting his Solon's "end" of life as a teleological, rather than temporal, end.

Even Aristotle's consequent treatment of the question whether the happiness of the dead can be affected by the fortunes of one's surviving intimates, which has traditionally been taken to be one Aristotle's more blatant concessions to popular opinion, is compatible with the logic to which I have been pointing.<sup>332</sup> Indeed, Aristotle can affirm, on the basis of his preceding conclusion that external circumstances do not determine the ability of the good man to make the best of those circumstances, that though "the prosperity of friends seems to affect the dead, yet such things and of such a degree so that it makes the happy unhappy or vice versa".<sup>333</sup> Obviously, that a composite agent could continue to determine its activity in an afterlife (where there is no composite activity) opposes Aristotle's general attitude. And indeed, in his reflections on the epistemic limitation of the subject matter he shows himself decidedly aware that the inquiry into the practical self has reached a limit at this point. He notes that, "*it is because* the afterlife is unknown (ἀφανές) to us, we hold εὐδαιμονία to be the absolute end and

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<sup>332</sup> Gauthier & Jolif (2002), *ad loc.*, on the grounds that Aristotle would deny any knowledge of the afterlife, interpret Aristotle's treatment of the question as disingenuous and condescending. See Pritzl (1983) for a survey of interpretations of this point. Pritzl's paper supports the possibility that Aristotle is not awkwardly and haphazardly holding together his own notion of happiness with the that of traditional Greek religion, by drastically reinterpreting a decisive phrase in Aristotle's explanation, which has traditionally been taken as an attempt to spare popular sentiments and reach a compromise of opinions of interest only to the audience of his particular time and place. Pritzl argues that Aristotle's assertion that the denial of an influence of the fortunes of descendants and friends on the dead seems "too unfriendly" (λίαν ἄφιλον) must be taken in a literal sense. It would be contrary to the very notion of φιλότις that one's own fortune be unaffected by that of loved ones. As an example of the kind of interpretation that Pritzl is arguing against, Rackham translates 'λίαν ἄφιλον' as "too heartless a doctrine". Pritzl points out that it would be strange indeed if Aristotle were softening his teachings while at the same time telling those whose feelings he trying to protect that he is softening his teachings.

<sup>333</sup> EN 1101b6-9.



perfection of life”.<sup>334</sup> At another point he reminds us that we, the living, do not really know whether the dead really do “share in some good or its opposites”.<sup>335</sup> In neither of these statements is Aristotle claiming that there is no immortal soul; he is suggesting only that such a thing would not take part in εὐδαιμονία. The second statement implies that the afterlife might be neither better nor worse than life, while the first alludes to the possibility of there being something more complete than εὐδαιμονία.<sup>336</sup> That being said, let us not allow Aristotle’s aporetic rhetoric to cause us to forget that his implicit project is the systematic re-ordering of the opinions common to his culture, from the transcendent perspective of νοῦς -- that alone which he believes to be immortal, and that alone by which the human is immortal. However, this immortal being is not directly intelligible from a practical perspective, that is, of a composite being who, as composite, must think the “real” good through the “apparent” good.

Such is the underlying context of the problem, “whether happiness is something that is praised or honoured”, to which the next section of Book 1 attends.<sup>337</sup> In Chapter 4 I argued that, for Aristotle, praise is that medium by which an action comes to “appear” good to an agent through habituation; it is the positive reinforcement, as it were, by which one comes to *believe that* (though not *know why*) something relative to oneself is good. It is reasonable, then, that the mechanism of praise breaks down when applied to that which is beyond the division of human practical life, between the will and the execution, the knower and known: this is why Aristotle thinks that “those who refer the

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<sup>334</sup> EN 1101a17-20.

<sup>335</sup> EN 1101a35-1101b1.

<sup>336</sup> Interestingly, these are the two hypotheses about the afterlife which Socrates presents to the jury in Plato’s *Apology*.

<sup>337</sup> EN 1101b10-11.

gods to our standards seem ridiculous”.<sup>338</sup> Yet, Aristotle does not preclude referring preeminent men to the standards of the gods, indicating the incompleteness of the goodness of virtue in comparison to the totality of happiness (or even what is better than happiness), when he adds that “no one praises happiness as they praise justice”, but rather, deeming it “something better and divine, they call it ‘blessed’ (μακαρίζει)”.<sup>339</sup> Indeed, what Aristotle calls “honours” (τὰ τιμῖα) seems to serve as a recognition, from the perspective of practical life, that is, in the epistemic mode of opinion, of what is above practical life -- the “principle and cause (ἡ ἀρχὴ καὶ τὸ αἴτιον) of good things”.<sup>340</sup>

## 5.6: The Dolorous Path

There is no substantial conclusion to Book 1, but instead a transition to the lengthy investigation of the structure of virtue, and the particular virtues, which constitute Books 2-4, and whose essence it was the task of the preceding Chapter to interpret. For our present purpose two points should be stated about this transition. First, in it, Aristotle returns to the account of the soul initially introduced in 1.7, but deepened by the inquiry of 1.8-12, which brought out the fact that reason, for human life, exists only within the particular, corporeal, contingent potentiality of that life. Specifically, he ends with an articulation of the division between the two parts of the soul, which is no longer between a rational part and an irrational, though obedient, part. Rather, both parts are characterized as both rational and desiring: the first “masterfully and in itself” (κυρίως

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<sup>338</sup> EN 1101b19-20.

<sup>339</sup> EN 1101b25-7.

<sup>340</sup> EN 1102a2-4.

καὶ ἐν αὐτῷ), and the other “obedient as a child to its father”.<sup>341</sup> Thus the crucial “ὀρεκτικόν” comes to light as a corrective to the residual dualism of 1.7.<sup>342</sup>

Second, for now and some time yet, that which transcends the individual human agent has receded from the viewpoint of *EN*.<sup>343</sup> And not accidentally: with the account of the soul which Aristotle initially introduced in 1.7, and re-articulated in view of its preceding trials vis-à-vis extreme misfortune and death, Aristotle has sufficiently separated the rational, acting self from the divine enough to the point where he can investigate virtuous activity in a seemingly isolated manner. Aristotle justifies the transition here on the basis of the emergence of the view that “happiness is a certain activity of the soul according to complete (τελεία) virtue”.<sup>344</sup> However, it follows that whatever Aristotle discusses between this point and the resurgence of “complete virtue” and “happiness” in his inquiry must be for the sake of that resurgence.<sup>345</sup> And indeed, there is such a resurgence. The distinction between the two types of virtues, which Aristotle draws from the two parts of the soul, the “ethical” corresponding to the “obedient” and the “intellectual” corresponding to the “masterly”, is speciously tidy. As we saw in Chapter 4, Aristotle’s treatment of the ethical virtues will show them to depend, through their essentially ratiocinative structure, on the intellectual virtues. Likewise, “intellectual virtue” will prove itself dependent on the divine intellect, which, as Aristotle suggests most explicitly in *EN* 10, exceeds (to use the expression at the start

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<sup>341</sup> *EN* 1103a2-4.

<sup>342</sup> *EN* 1102b31.

<sup>343</sup> Cf. Sparshott (1994) 75.

<sup>344</sup> *EN* 1102a5-6.

<sup>345</sup> Gauthier and Jolif (2002), *ad loc.*, contrast this transition from happiness to virtue with Aquinas’: “In passing from happiness to virtue, one passes in the *Ethics* from the confused to the clear, from whole to parts; one falls in the *Summa* from heaven to earth, from the blessed Fatherland to the dolorous path.” Clearly, however, Aristotle’s inquiry into virtue must be a dolorous path too, inasmuch as it is for the sake of the later part of *EN*.

of *EN 7*) virtue.<sup>346</sup> This general ascent, from the ethical virtues, to the intellectual virtues, to the theoretical first principle, takes place within an examination of the living reality, or, to speak all but the concluding treatment of friendship, the opinions connected to that reality, in which they actually exist as activities. For instance, practical wisdom (Book 6) is brought to light as the cause and purpose of the ethical virtues (Book 2-4) and of the most perfect of the ethical virtues, justice (Book 5). Likewise, divine wisdom emerges as the principle of practical wisdom, when it is shown that justice, in which practical wisdom qua practical is most complete, depends on friendship, in which practical wisdom qua theoretical is most complete (Book 8-9).

Indeed, Aristotle does not explicitly state that any particular practical activity results, or is perfected, in self-contemplation until late in his discussion of friendship, where he says that “to *be* is choiceworthy through consciousness of oneself as good, and such consciousness is pleasant in-itself”.<sup>347</sup> Similarly, and in that same context, he reasons that a friend “relates to the other as to himself; and it is consciousness of oneself that is choiceworthy, and therefore of the friend also”.<sup>348</sup> That Aristotle believes that the activity of friendship imitates the divine self-thinking activity is not in itself a novel claim.<sup>349</sup> My purpose in treating the point will be to show, first, that in friendship, practical activity is most complete exactly where theoretical contemplation is most embodied, and, second, that it is for this very reason that Aristotle can, and does, reveal to his audience shortly thereafter that the divine self-thinking is the highest good for *man*.

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<sup>346</sup> *EN* 1178b7-24.

<sup>347</sup> *EN* 1170b8-10: τὸ δ' εἶναι ἦν αἰρετὸν διὰ τὸ αἰσθάνεσθαι αὐτοῦ ἀγαθοῦ ὄντος, ἢ δὲ τοιαύτη αἴσθησις ἡδεῖα καθ' ἑαυτήν.

<sup>348</sup> *EN* 1171b33-5: ὡς πρὸς ἑαυτὸν ἔχει, οὕτω καὶ πρὸς τὸν φίλον: περὶ αὐτὸν δ' ἡ αἴσθησις ὅτι ἔστιν αἰρετή, καὶ περὶ τὸν φίλον δὴ.

<sup>349</sup> E.g. Aubenque (1963) 183; Kosman (2004).

## 5.7: Me-Ontology and the Common Good

At the apex of his second book on friendship, Aristotle asks, why is friendship necessary for happiness at all?<sup>350</sup> As I am claiming, Aristotle’s ultimate answer is that it is necessary for the human embodiment of divine freedom. But why, one might wonder, could this freedom not emerge in the self-contemplation of a virtuous individual? A brief detour through justice, which, as will soon be clear, is a necessary stage in the development of friendship, provides the answer. Aristotle’s investigation of justice is detailed and complex, but it is sufficient for our purposes to remark on the need of it within the movement of *EN*, and why it is only imperfectly meets that need; thus we shall understand why it is subsequently displaced by the investigation of friendship.

In Book 5, Aristotle’s inquiry arrives at the kind of “complete” or “perfect” (τελεία) virtue promised at the end of Book 1: justice. This completion, however, is qualified: “justice is complete virtue, not absolutely, but in respect to another (πρὸς ἕτερον)”.<sup>351</sup> Nonetheless, Aristotle thinks that it is in this particular qualification that justice is complete at all, claiming that justice “is complete, because the one who has it is able to use it in respect to another (πρὸς ἕτερον), and not only in himself (καθ’ αὐτόν)”.<sup>352</sup> That virtue is more perfect when deployed towards another, is a natural consequence of Aristotle’s general doctrine of virtuous action. Indeed, all virtuous activity is in relation to another, since virtuous activity relies on external conditions, and external conditions are social. Without war, there is no opportunity for courage; without the luxuries that result from the division of labour, there is no opportunity for temperance. Yet insofar as a

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<sup>350</sup> *EN* 1169b3-4.

<sup>351</sup> *EN* 1129b25-27.

<sup>352</sup> *EN* 1129b31-33.

man is not the cause of those external conditions, the activity is not completely his own. Justice, then, is the mastery of those conditions, and the statesman – the knower of “political science” – is the just man *par excellence*.

To put it in such a way, however, is perhaps misleading. The common good, as that which provides the conditions for the individual good, is -- or at least seems to be in Aristotle’s presentation of it -- an actuality in its own right, not merely a means to the actuality of the individual. Indeed, in Aristotle’s world, one can speak of justice as the promotion of the “happiness of the political community”.<sup>353</sup> Aristotle subordinates the individual good to the common good in his argument that political and legislative science are included within practical wisdom, where he must confront the common opinion that ‘φρόνησις’ seems to denote primarily the practical wisdom of individuals. Importantly, he does not deny that “one type of practical wisdom would be to know one’s own interest (τὸ αὐτῷ)”.<sup>354</sup> Rather, he contextualizes it within the actuality of which it is part: “yet perhaps”, he concludes, “there is no self-interest (τὸ αὐτοῦ εἶ) without the governance of the household or of the city-state”.<sup>355</sup> The reticence in Aristotle’s affirmation is telling. For with the distinction between the individual good and the good of the political community comes the admission that the two might conflict. This conflict is the point at which the need for justice arises, and the just *man* becomes possible. Where the good for the community is not the same as the good for an individual, there must be some way of reconciling, or at least mollifying, the discord between them. Aristotle addresses the issue as it appears to the common-sense of his audience: the accordance of the individual good

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<sup>353</sup> EN 1129b17-19.

<sup>354</sup> EN 1141b33-34.

<sup>355</sup> EN 1142a9-10.

and universal good comes about through the laws;<sup>356</sup> while a man may appear just through obedience to the laws,<sup>357</sup> he is truly just only insofar as his desires accord with the laws, through education by the laws.<sup>358</sup> However we must remember the manner in which Aristotle criticizes the absolutism implicit in the common-sense view of political education: the virtues, according to Aristotle, are not universally valid, and, accordingly, neither are the laws. As we have shown, Aristotle believes that the good man is not he who imposes form on his life merely, but rather he who embodies the active unity of form and life. If the lawmaker wishes to avoid, or even just mitigate, the conflict between the individual and universal good, there must be an activity of the thoughtful application (as well as creation) of the laws on an individual basis:

Some suppose that it requires no special wisdom to know what is just and unjust, on the basis that it is not hard to understand what the laws talk about. But these things are not just, except incidentally. Rather, *how* they are done and *how* they are distributed is what makes them just. Indeed, this is a greater task than knowing what is salubrious. But even in that case it is easy to understand honey and wine and hellebore and burning and cutting, but how and to whom and when to apply them with a view to health – so great a task is that of a doctor.<sup>359</sup>

Thus, for the activity of the just man, Aristotle gives pride of place, not to the lawmaker (as does Plato), but to “equity” (ἐπεικεία), the ability to “correct the law”, which is otherwise “defective because of its generality”, and make it properly apply to the

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<sup>356</sup> EN 1129b14-17: “The laws make pronouncements concerning all things, aiming at the common benefit of everyone, or the nobles, or those who are masterly according to virtue, or to any other such way”.

<sup>357</sup> EN 1130b22-24: “For the most part, the actions that generally come out of virtue are the same as much of what is according to law; for the law enjoins living according to particular virtues and forbids living according to particular vices”.

<sup>358</sup> EN 1134a25-31.

<sup>359</sup> EN 1137a9-17: ὁμοίως δὲ καὶ τὸ γινῶναι τὰ δίκαια καὶ τὰ ἄδικοα οὐδὲν οἴονται σοφὸν εἶναι, ὅτι περὶ ὧν οἱ νόμοι λέγουσιν οὐ χαλεπὸν συνιέναι (ἀλλ’ οὐ ταῦτ’ ἐστὶ τὰ δίκαια ἀλλ’ ἢ κατὰ συμβεβηκός): ἀλλὰ πῶς πραττόμενα καὶ πῶς νεμόμενα δίκαια, τοῦτο δὴ πλέον ἔργον ἢ τὰ ὑγιεινὰ εἰδέναι: ἐπεὶ κάκεῖ μέλι καὶ οἶνον καὶ ἐλλέβορον καὶ καῦσιν καὶ τομῆν εἰδέναι ῥάδιον, ἀλλὰ πῶς δεῖ νεῖμαι πρὸς ὑγίειαν καὶ τίνη καὶ πότε, τοσοῦτον ἔργον ὅσον ἰατρὸν εἶναι.

indefinite conditions of particular life.<sup>360</sup> Thus equity, and justice, is practical thinking, with the qualification that it is exercised in respect to the common interest.

With the discovery of equity, however, the problem of justice is only imperfectly solved. This imperfection is inherent to the subject matter to which Aristotle limits his discussion of justice, namely, external goods: offices, money, slaves, bodily damage.<sup>361</sup> The problem is this. External goods are good, because deployed by the agent for the realization of self-determination; yet the alienation, the activity “in respect to another” seems to compromise, rather than complete, such determination, insofar as the good of the other differs from the one to whom he is related. To emphasize this point, we may note a special negativity in Aristotle’s phenomenology of justice. Aristotle’s dialectical method, proceeding from the more familiar (though less substantial) to the less familiar (and more substantial), takes its beginnings in observations about injustice.<sup>362</sup> It is in the *dissonance* between the individual and the common good that injustice is manifest, and so, Aristotle infers, it is the *reconciliation* of those interests that constitutes justice. Furthermore, even when Aristotle defines equity as a means of reconciliation, he provides no explanation of how one might learn it. Seeing that it could not be developed by the adherence to general laws concerning the distribution of honours or settling of disputes about private property, some other habituation would be necessary. After claiming that equity is “just” although “superior” to what is just, Aristotle raises the dilemma that “the equitable is just not according to law but as a corrective to what is just by law”.<sup>363</sup> This substantiates Aristotle’s suggestion that there might be an education more appropriate for

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<sup>360</sup> EN 1137a31-1138ab2.

<sup>361</sup> EN 1131a3-9.

<sup>362</sup> EN 1129a18-24.

<sup>363</sup> EN 1137b5-13.



the individual than the one according to the laws, on the basis that “to be a good man is perhaps not the same as to be a good citizen”.<sup>364</sup> All this is to say that 1) in the political realm, goods are external, and there can be conflict between the claims of the individual and the community of which he is part, and 2) the educative role of justice does not seem possible within the means of justice itself. Despite these problems, man acts only *within* external conditions, and claims of justice cannot be abandoned, but must be perfected, through an activity that surpasses the realm of possibility for political life.

### **5.6: Summus Amicus Summa Justitia**

In this way, the tensions in Aristotle’s treatment of justice, taken as the culmination of his treatment of the virtues, necessitate his treatment of friendship in Book 8 and 9. Book 6 of *EN* articulates what has come to light throughout the preceding investigation of virtues, the underlying, natural virtue that is the universal basis of all ethical life – practical wisdom. Yet, Aristotle provides little more than a few allusive statements about the cause of practical wisdom itself, theoretical wisdom; and rightly so, given that no activity has come to light at that point in *EN* in which the self-related thinking of theoretical wisdom may be properly embodied. Hence arises friendship.<sup>365</sup> Agreeing with both experience and tradition, Aristotle says from the outset of his treatment of friendship that justice is perfected in friendship, and, what is more, that

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<sup>364</sup> *EN* 1130b27-9.

<sup>365</sup> A word must be said about what I am excluding from my exposition of *EN*. It seems to be the case that Aristotle’s exposition of the nature of pleasure in Book 10 takes up the discussion in Book 7 with a deeper understanding of the highest good via the intervening book on friendship. Likewise, the investigation of self-control and lack of self-control in Book 7 follows and depends upon the conception of practical agency developed throughout Books 2-6. While I believe that Aristotle’s treatment of these subjects take part in the dialectical course of *EN*, they are not as crucial to its development as the sections I treat here.

friendship subsists independently of the political community.<sup>366</sup> But what is his underlying reasoning? As I have been saying, in the case of justice, the good is partly external, and therefore subject to the competing good of the community; all the same, human action requires external goods to take place at all. What is needed is a human activity that remains itself while going outside of itself.

Aristotle finds the possibility for a concrete self-relation through otherness in friendship. While justice is an accommodation of different individual goods in view of a common good, the good for the individual, in the case of friendship, *is* the good of the other. Thus Aristotle invigorates the inherited wisdom which testified that the source of friendship was similarity. “The friend”, says Aristotle, “is an other self (ἄλλος αὐτός)”.<sup>367</sup> The cause is that “the friend relates to his friend as he relates to himself”.<sup>368</sup> True friendship returns to the self from the other and is thus “in-itself” (καθ'αυτήν), without being inactive.<sup>369</sup> Further, the relation is reciprocal: “all things pertaining to friendship extend from the self to others”.<sup>370</sup> Justice is virtuous activity in respect to an other, one might add, *qua other*; friendship is virtuous activity in respect to an other *qua self*. This logic, expressed thus epigrammatically, is perhaps beautiful, but not immediately intelligible. To clarify, Aristotle is able to effect an identity in otherness, because he presupposes an identity between being and goodness. The friend is another self, precisely because the good of the friend is the good of the self:

Through loving their friends, they love their own good; for the good man, by becoming a friend, becomes good to whom he becomes a friend. And so each man loves his own good and makes an equal return in will and pleasure; for, it is said,

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<sup>366</sup> EN 1155a21-28.

<sup>367</sup> EN 1166a31-32.

<sup>368</sup> EN 1166a30-31: πρὸς δὲ τὸν φίλον ἔχειν ὡσπερ πρὸς αὐτόν.

<sup>369</sup> EN 1164a12.

<sup>370</sup> EN 1168b5-6: ἀπ' αὐτοῦ πάντα τὰ φιλικὰ καὶ πρὸς τοὺς ἄλλους διήκει.

“friendship is equality”, and this belongs most to the friendship between good men.<sup>371</sup>

In the friendship between good men, the universal and particular, the real and the apparent, are one and the same, not only to each as individuals but in their actions towards one another:

Friendship between good men is best, as has been said often. For the absolutely good and pleasant is lovable and choiceworthy; so is that which appears good to each individual. But the good man is lovable and choiceworthy to the good man for both these reasons.<sup>372</sup>

Thus, for Aristotle, the question of what constitutes a good friendship leads to the question what is universally good for man – or rather it is the same question. Thus it is not only being and goodness that are joined by Aristotle in identity at this point, but thought. That which is good universally, the self-thinking of intellect, is the good which, when recognized as good by different individuals, *cannot* conflict. Hence, to explain the desirability of friends, Aristotle adduces the activity of self-thinking: “life in the fullest sense is perception or thought”,<sup>373</sup> and “to be conscious that we perceive or think is to be conscious that we *are*”,<sup>374</sup> yet “we are better able to contemplate (θεωρεῖν) our neighbours than ourselves”.<sup>375</sup> Hence we arrive at the notion that “the blessed man will need good friends, if he will choose to contemplate actions that are good and his own”.<sup>376</sup>

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<sup>371</sup> EN 1157b33-1158a1: καὶ φιλοῦντες τὸν φίλον τὸ αὐτοῖς ἀγαθὸν φιλοῦσιν: ὁ γὰρ ἀγαθὸς φίλος γινόμενος ἀγαθὸν γίνεται ὡς φίλος. ἐκάτερος οὖν φιλεῖ τε τὸ αὐτῷ ἀγαθόν, καὶ τὸ ἴσον ἀνταποδίδωσι τῇ βουλήσει καὶ τῷ ἡδέϊ: λέγεται γὰρ φιλότις ἰσότης, μάλιστα δὲ τῇ τῶν ἀγαθῶν ταῦθ' ὑπάρχει.

<sup>372</sup> EN 1157b25-29: μάλιστα μὲν οὖν ἐστὶ φιλία ἢ τῶν ἀγαθῶν, καθάπερ πολλάκις εἴρηται: δοκεῖ γὰρ φιλητὸν μὲν καὶ αἰρετὸν τὸ ἀπλῶς ἀγαθὸν ἢ ἡδύ, ἐκάστῳ δὲ τὸ αὐτῷ τοιοῦτον: ὁ δ' ἀγαθὸς τῷ ἀγαθῷ δι' ἄμφω ταῦτα.

<sup>373</sup> EN 1170a19-20: ἔοικε δὴ τὸ ζῆν εἶναι κυρίως τὸ αἰσθάνεσθαι ἢ νοεῖν.

<sup>374</sup> EN 1170a32-33. On ‘αἰσθάνεσθαι’ as ‘to be conscious’, see below.

<sup>375</sup> EN 1169b33-34.

<sup>376</sup> EN 1170a2-3.

The preceding statements make explicit what Aristotle begins to suggest throughout his investigation of friendship (notably, *before* Book 10's discussion of the divine): that man's true self is intellect.<sup>377</sup> But the story is not as straightforward as it might immediately seem; let us linger on this point a moment. It is not controversial to say that, for Aristotle, the need to know this self through the other, to understand our inner divinity through "sharing consciousness" (συναισθάνεσθαι), betokens the inherent incapacity of our composite human nature. While 'αἴσθησις', in Aristotle's descriptions of the mediation of self-contemplation through friendship, is commonly, and reasonably, translated as 'consciousness' (e.g. Ross, Rackham), in order to convey the rather open connotation of Aristotle's use of the word,<sup>378</sup> it is also the case that 'αἴσθησις' is Aristotle's term for the perception arising from the sensory faculties. It should be plain enough that both senses are being used here. According to Aristotle, not only does the mortal intellect experience more perfect forms of thinking by proceeding through sense-perception, but it is only as objects of sense-perception, as *appearance*, that cognition can motivate practical desire.<sup>379</sup>

### **5.7: Philosophy, Friendship, and *Nicomachean Ethics* as Self-Thinking**

That being said, there is a subtler, more characteristically Aristotelian, or, so to speak, more *praktikos* sense in which Aristotle thinks that friendship embodies the divine.

In studies on this topic, scholars often draw attention to parallel passages in *Eudemian*

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<sup>377</sup> EN 1166a14-23; 1168b34-1169a1.

<sup>378</sup> Aristotle strangely employs the preposition 'περι' ('about') to relate the word to its (accusative!) object. Kahn (1966) points out that "in normal usage" the word 'αἴσθησις' refers to the "general range of thought" (p. 72).

<sup>379</sup> Each of these points receives further elaboration in Chapter 3 and Chapter 4, respectively. Cf. Kahn: "The only absolute restriction [to 'αἴσθησις'] lies in the Aristotelian (and Platonic) antithesis between the two faculties of discernment: sense and intellect. But since, in its concrete operations, the human intellect for Aristotle requires at every step an internal image or phantasm provided by the faculty of sense, this restriction is not as sweeping in fact as it might appear in principle" (p. 72).

*Ethics* and in *Magna Moralia*, which more explicitly than *EN* take up the logic of Plato's *Alcibiades I*.<sup>380</sup> In *Alcibiades I*, Socrates is portrayed persuading Alcibiades that the true self is the soul, or even the divine intellect within the soul, and, importantly, that it is known by us only as reflected in the soul of another.<sup>381</sup> In this Platonic argument, as P  pin observes, self-knowledge "not only leads to knowledge of god, but is confounded with it".<sup>382</sup> P  pin argues that *EN* takes up the anthropology of *Alcibiades I*, at the same time as "softening its rigor".<sup>383</sup> For, he notes, the notion that the true self is bodiless is incompatible with Aristotle's hylomorphic conception of man.<sup>384</sup> This should raise a question for us: put bluntly, when Aristotelian friends contemplate one another, do they think pure, separate intellect?

Aristotle seems to have two answers. First, there is the answer of *Alcibiades I*, which, in Book 10, Aristotle famously offers as an aspiration, if not a possibility, for human self-realization. Second, there is precisely that to which my argument has been leading: namely, that in the practical activity of friendship, self-contemplation is embodied in man as a whole, not only in his "best part". In effect, Aristotle's *EN* concludes, as did the dialectic of *Metaphysics*, with the separation of the divine and the natural substance rethought, so that the natural substance embodies the divine to the extent that it can. Man's practical activity now stands side by side with the divine, as a self-related thinking activity in its own right. While, for  $\nu\omicron\upsilon\varsigma$ , the universal and particular are one *tout court*, man's particularity "admits of being otherwise", and therefore seeks

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<sup>380</sup> Aubenque (1963) 182 and note. *MM* 1213a16-24; *EE* 1245b14-19.

<sup>381</sup> *Alc. I* 130c-133b.

<sup>382</sup> P  pin (1971) 73.

<sup>383</sup> P  pin (1971) 80.

<sup>384</sup> P  pin (1971) 84.

“the actuality of friendship” which comes about only “in living together (συζῆν)”.<sup>385</sup>

Aristotle’s elaboration of the meaning of ‘living together’ makes this very point:

Whatever, for each friend, it is to *be* (τὸ εἶναι), or that for the sake of which they choose to live, they wish (βούλονται) to spend time in it with their friends. Wherefore some drink, others dice, together; still others work out together, or hunt together, or practice philosophy together, each passing the day together in whatever they love most in life. For they wish (βούλονται) to live together (συζῆν) with their friends, and they do these things and commune with them as much as they live together.<sup>386</sup>

Note that Aristotle continues to maintain, albeit minimally, the separation of the particular and universal, in his description of what it means to live together with friends.

To emphasize the intention behind Aristotle’s word-choice, friends *wish* (βούλονται) to be together, the implication being that their wish may not take substantial form.

Friendship, Aristotle is saying, must be cultivated; that is to say, it must be *chosen*.<sup>387</sup>

And, we must add, insofar as the friends are drawn together by what is truly good, it will be chosen. This is manifestly the most perfect instance of the self-constituting nature of the practical good: in willing one’s good, one chooses it, and, in turn, wills it all the more. In the case of friendship, the will for the good of the other (which is identical to the good of the self), is strengthened by acting for that good; we wish to improve our friends, and *vice versa*, and thereby we both improve:

The friendship of good men is good, and grows together with association. In fact the friends themselves seem to become better, by actualizing and correcting one

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<sup>385</sup> EN 1171b35-1172a2.

<sup>386</sup> EN 1172a2-8: καὶ ὁ ποτ’ ἐστὶν ἐκάστοις τὸ εἶναι ἢ οὗ χάριν αἰροῦνται τὸ ζῆν, ἐν τούτῳ μετὰ τῶν φίλων βούλονται διάγειν: διόπερ οἱ μὲν συμπίνουσιν, οἱ δὲ συγκυβεύουσιν, ἄλλοι δὲ συγγυμνάζονται καὶ συγκυνηγοῦσιν ἢ συμφιλοσοφοῦσιν, ἕκαστοι ἐν τούτῳ συνημεροῦντες ὅ τι περ μάλιστα ἀγαπῶσι τῶν ἐν τῷ βίῳ: συζῆν γὰρ βουλόμενοι μετὰ τῶν φίλων, ταῦτα ποιοῦσι καὶ τούτων κοινωνοῦσιν οἷς οἴονται συζῆν.

<sup>387</sup> Aristotle employs the logic of his argument for the insufficiency of the will and for its dependence on choice, in his examination of “good-will” (εὐνοία), which, while “the starting-point of friendship”, requires real “fellowship” (συνηθεία) in order to become actual friendship (EN 1106b30-1107a22).

another. For they absorb from one another that which is agreeable to them. Hence it is said: great things from great men.<sup>388</sup>

On this basis, we might wish to modify Pépin's judgment: it is not the anthropology of *Alcibiades I* that *EN* softens in rigour, but its theology; or, rather, we might prefer to say that its anthropology has been deified. The human, as a whole, resembles the divine.

To conclude, let us notice that, in the above-cited description of 'living together', Aristotle's examples, proceeding from the least good (drinking and dicing) to the greater (working out and hunting), culminates in the activity that can be motivated only by a love for what is absolutely and in every case good, namely, the practice of philosophy.<sup>389</sup> For, with this last reflection, we return to the original question of this chapter. There, I pointed out that the aim of *EN* is multi-dimensional: Aristotle wants, on the one hand, to demonstrate to the future lawmakers and politicians of the noble class that the purpose and structure of political life is rooted in theoretical self-contemplation, and, on the other hand, to effect this demonstration by making them experience this contemplation, that is, to make them concretely realize the highest good, rather than accept it dogmatically. For, that which appears good to the practical agent, must actually have been practiced: habits are formed by activity, and what appears good is that to which we are habituated. I have shown how Aristotle achieves this through a reconfiguration of the practical life according to a presupposed theoretical insight of the divine. Thus he brings his audience into a reflective relation with their own (shared) goodness. At last, in the recognition of friendship as the highest practical good, the audience becomes reflectively aware of the

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<sup>388</sup> *EN* 1172a11-14: ἡ δὲ τῶν ἐπιεικῶν ἐπιεικῆς, συναυξανομένη ταῖς ὁμιλίαις: δοκοῦσι δὲ καὶ βελτίους γίνεσθαι ἐνεργοῦντες καὶ διορθοῦντες ἀλλήλους: ἀπομάττονται γὰρ παρ' ἀλλήλων οἷς ἀρέσκονται, ὅθεν ἐσθλῶν μὲν γὰρ ἅπ' ἐσθλά.

<sup>389</sup> Cf. *EN* 1164b2-6; 1165a26.

activity in which they are engaged. Through consciously, to use Aristotle's words, "actualizing and correcting" one another, Aristotle and his audience effectively unify being, goodness, and knowing; and, in this way, they embody the original self-identity of the divine. That is not to say that the audience leaves behind their bodies and enters into pure contemplation; by the end of *EN*, the audience not only logically understands that theory is the highest good, but *desires* it. In enacting self-reflection Aristotle gives his audience a taste of *willing* and *choosing* self-reflection.

It is in this sense, then, that what was intimated in the introduction to this essay, that the theoretical good *knows* the practical, is a sound statement. To put it anachronistically, the autonomy of the secular world originates in a divine insight, and is intelligible only in view of that insight. But, for this idea, we need search no further than the works of Aristotle's great teacher, for whom the philosopher-lawgiver had to pay a visit to the gods before setting the laws, and the conversion of a prisoner of the cave of ignorance had to be effected by a teacher who had already been outside and seen the light of the sun. Aristotle's aim has been to harmonize the theoretical and practical life, without eradicating their difference, and without subordinating theory to practice. While the theoretical activity through which the practical good takes shape shows itself in the practical good, it itself transcends the practical good. And, indeed, insofar as friendship is of the highest sort, it aspires to that transcendence also. Book 10's exhortations to "become immortal", and to "live according to the best part in oneself", are tempered with the qualification, "as much as possible".<sup>390</sup> The truth of the claim that the *EN* speaks both to potential philosophers and to non-philosophical lawgivers lies herein. As initiating

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<sup>390</sup> *EN* 1177b31-4.



both into a practical inquiry that ultimately reveals its dependency on theoretical activity, the potential philosophers are made to recognize what the true self “might seem to be, if indeed it is the ruling and best part”,<sup>391</sup> and the non-philosophers are made to partake in, if only for a brief time, that which is beyond the political, and on which the political depends. Philosophical friendship is where theory and practice meet.

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<sup>391</sup> *EN 1178a2-3.*

## CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

This thesis has argued that the ambiguous identification of the practical good with the theoretical good in Aristotle's *EN* is not merely a normative problem; it comes down to Aristotle's attempt to understand how man can be normative at all. The question, for Aristotle, is not whether I should contemplate or get involved in politics, rather, it is this: if I am not God, how can I be divine? Aristotle's answer, that man's goodness consists of his practical wisdom, is ambiguous insofar as it presupposes the wisdom that exceeds man's nature. That said, he permits – even affirms -- this ambiguity in the concrete reality of the most perfect human activity: philosophical friendship, a society devoted to, and ever aspiring to become, what is both beyond itself and is its best self. In this, we claim to have found a principle for systematic interpretation of *EN*. However, even at the liminal point of philosophical friendship, the necessary condition for the realization of the human good, i.e. the theoretical good, remains beyond. Aristotle resolves the tension inherent in his separation of the human good from the divine, but not absolutely; man's causal dependence on a more-than-human insight is never done away with. Aristotle's recognition of this dependence perhaps motivates him to assert, against conventional wisdom, that the divine does not begrudge us its own possessions.<sup>392</sup> He augments this supposition of divine benevolence at the end of *EN*, where, reaching back to the Homeric understanding of the conditions for the deification of mortals, and uniting it to his philosophical ethics, he concludes that the “wise man” (σοφός) is “most beloved of the gods (θεοφιλέστατος)”<sup>393</sup>

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<sup>392</sup> *Met.* 982b29-983a9.

<sup>393</sup> *EN* 1179a30-32.

Hence, this study takes on its full significance precisely where it goes against the grain of contemporary interpretations of Aristotle's philosophy. There has long been a tendency to downplay, either by omission, misrepresentation or misunderstanding, the philosophical importance of Aristotle's theology for, among other things, his ethics. Generally speaking, where this aspect of Aristotle's thought is recognized it is given a secondary role -- this despite Aristotle's (from the contemporary point of view) paradoxical assertion of the divine as the highest ethical reality. This thesis inverts the contemporary perspective insofar as it, following Aristotle, derives ethics from metaphysics, practice from theory, man from God. For Aristotle, man need not submit to divinely revealed law *because* there is something divine to obey in man himself; and, further, Aristotle's insight that there is such a thing in man is given from the perspective of the divine itself. The idea of a free, autonomous, human civilization, which perhaps for the first time finds conceptual expression in Aristotle, is now, after thousands of years of historical mediation, rejected or taken for granted, or both. In short, theoretical justification for its existence is lacking. It seems, therefore, to be of the highest practical value to recover the original, theoretical inception of human freedom -- if not for the vindication of the institutions promoting that freedom which remain, then, perhaps, for the recognition of the kind of thinking within which such institutions could emerge, phoenix-like, from the apparent confusion of the modern world. At the very least, we may take consolation, if Aristotle is right, in the idea that the Good is independent of the fate of the present times anyway. And indeed, if Aristotle is right, then what is most necessary, today and always, is what is least necessary, namely, to use the philosopher's words, that science than which "every science is more necessary, but none better".<sup>394</sup>

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<sup>394</sup> *Met.* 983a10.

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