

Aristotle on God and the Unmoved Mover

1 Physics Θ: The mechanics of God

Aristotle begins to construct his influential account of the relationship between God and the world without actually mentioning God. He is trying to answer a practical question for a physical scientist which runs through the whole of his Physics: how do we explain the constant change that takes place in the world? Entities come into being and pass away, objects, celestial and terrestrial, move in space, plants grow, things change their appearance. He argues that the world is eternal and that all the change in it ultimately derives from the constant motion of the outer sphere of the universe, which contains the fixed stars. But how to explain that motion? He is no Newtonian, there is no concept of inertial motion. If something changes there must be a cause of that change. Does that mean there is an infinite chain of changeable changers? No says Aristotle.

258b10

Since there has to be a continuous change that never ceases, there must be something eternal which is the first source of change, whether this is one or many. And the first changer, cannot be subject to change. Whether all the things that are changeless changers need to be eternal is irrelevant to this argument. But it is clear to anyone who examines the case that there must be something that is itself changeless, beyond any form of transformation, whether simply or incidentally, but which is the source of change in something else...

[even if there are other changeless changers that come into being and pass away]

There is something that encompasses all of these, and is beyond each individual, and is the cause of the existence of some and the non-existence of others and of the continuous transformation. This individual is then the cause of the change in those others, and they in turn are the causes of change in the rest.

Then if in fact change is eternal, the first changer will be eternal, if it is one. If it is more than one, then there will be several eternal things. But we should consider that one is better than many, and finite rather than infinite. Provided we get the same outcomes, finite is always to be preferred. For in the things of nature, as far as possible, we should find what is determinate and better. And one changer is sufficient, which as the first of the changeless things and as eternal, will be the principle of change in everything else.

So it is clear from that that there must be something which is one and eternal, and is the first source of change. For we have shown that there must always be change, and if there is always change, that it must be continuous.

2 Mind (de Anima): the active and passive intellect. Non-material actualisation.

Crucial to Aristotle's eventual discussion of the divine is his discussion of the mind – Anaxagoras a hundred years before had suggested that 'mind' was the organising force behind the natural order and Aristotle takes the idea up. So his discussions of mind, active awareness, and contemplation, though often focusing on the human, also give us insight into his conception of the divine. Notice again that phrase, describing the soul (or the mind) as the 'space of forms'. That idea helps make sense of the concept we will encounter later of 'awareness being aware of itself'.

DA III.4 429a22

So what we call the mind (*nous*) of the soul isn't in actuality any of the things that exist until it is actively aware (*noei*) (and I mean by 'mind' that faculty by which the soul thinks things through and makes judgments). Accordingly it would be illogical to think of it as mingled with the body; for then it would turn out to be a sort of quality, like cold or hot, or it would be a bodily organ, like the sense-organs; but as it is, it is neither. And indeed it is well said by some that the soul is the 'space of forms' – except that it is not the whole soul, just the mental faculty and it is not the forms in actualisation, but in potential.

(DA III.4 429b5)

A sensory organ cannot exist without matter, but the mind is separable from matter. And the mind that is active, whenever it 'becomes' any one of those things [the forms], is called 'knowing' (this comes about when it is able to self-activate). It is also 'knowing' in a sense when it is still in rest-potential (not potential in the sense of the potential before it learned something or found it out). And in that state [of rest-potential] it can still think itself.

(DA III.1 429b31)

We have already explained how the mind could be affected in relation to something common: the mind is all of the objects of thought in potential but none of them in actuality until it begins thinking. It should be something like the writing tablet on which there is in actuality nothing yet written. This is just what happens in the case of the mind. But the mind itself is an object of thought alongside all the other objects of thought. For in the case of non-material entities what does the thinking and what is being thought are the same. For theoretical knowledge and the object of that knowledge are the same – though we do have to consider why the mind is not always thinking...

(DA III.1 430a10)

In the rest of nature, there is something which is the material for each kind of thing, ('matter' being what is *potentially* every one of those things) and there is something else which is the agent cause in that it *makes* all those things – the sort of relation we find between a craft and its raw materials. Something like these distinctions must be present in the soul: there must be a mind in the sense that it becomes all things, and a mind in the sense that it makes all things, like some sort of permanent state. Like light. For in a sense, light too makes things which are colours in potential into colours in actuality.

This mind is separable from matter and is affected by nothing and mingles with nothing, since it is active in its essence. For the agent is always superior to what is passive, and the principle is always superior to the matter. Now active knowledge is the same as the thing [it is knowledge of]; passive knowledge in an individual is prior in time, though overall it is not prior in time. Yet it is not the case that sometimes the mind thinks and sometimes it doesn't think. When it is isolated it is just this that is its true self, and this alone is immortal and eternal. (Though we cannot remember anything [from past lives] because this [active mind] is not affected by anything, while the passive mind [which can be affected and hold memories] is perishable). Without the active mind, nothing thinks.

3. Nicomachean Ethics X: Happiness, the life of the mind and being like a god

Aristotle has already decided that the goal of human activity is happiness and at the end of the Nicomachean Ethics he goes into more detail about what he thinks happiness is. In the process he once more makes a connection between the mind and the gods. The mind is the most godlike part of a human, and true, ultimate happiness for a human – what makes them godlike – consists in contemplation, revelling in the life of the mind.

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Now that we have discussed what concerns virtues and friendships and pleasures, we still have to give an outline of happiness, since we are proposing that this is the goal of human affairs. We can shorten our account here by reminding ourselves of what we stated earlier. We said there that happiness is not an acquired state. Otherwise, it could belong to someone who slept through their whole life, or someone living like a plant, or even to someone in the greatest misfortune.

So if that doesn't work for us, we should then rather consider it to be some sort of active state....

Things worth choosing for their own sake are those from which nothing more is sought than to be in that active state. Actions that are in accord with excellence seem to be of this kind. For doing things which are lovely and worthwhile belongs to the class of things that are worth choosing for their own sakes....

So these (pleasurable) things have the appearance of being sources of happiness because it is in these that monarchs spend their leisure. But such people are not perhaps the best guide. Being a monarch has nothing to do with excellence or intelligence, yet it is from just these that spring worthwhile activities. The fact that people like that, who have never tasted pure, noble pleasure, dive at physical pleasures is no reason to think that these are preferable. Children always think the things they value are genuinely the best. So it makes sense that just as different things seem valuable to children and men, so too in the case of disreputable and reasonable people.

As we've already said so often, the things which are really valuable and really pleasant, are those that the mature person finds so. For each person that activity is most preferable

which suits their individual acquired character. In the case of the mature person it is activity in the mode of excellence. Therefore happiness cannot consist in being at play...

Playing seems like taking a break, and it is those who cannot strive continuously who need a rest. Now a rest is not a goal. We have a rest for the sake of the activity.

And the happy life seems to be the life of excellence. That is a life lived seriously, not as a game. We say that serious things are better than things which are jokes or games, and whoever is the better councillor or human will be active in a more serious way. Anyone could sample the physical pleasures, a slave no less than someone high-born. But no one can give a slave happiness, unless they can also give them their freedom. Happiness cannot be found in such pastimes, but only in activities of excellence, as has already been said.

If happiness is activity in the mode of excellence, then it should be in the mode of the greatest excellence. And that would be the excellence of the entity which is the noblest of all. Whether we call this mind, or something else, that which of its nature seems to govern and guide and have a concept of things noble and divine – this may itself be divine, or it may be the most divine aspect of ourselves. When this becomes active with its own proper excellence, this would be perfect happiness.

We have already said that this is the excellence of contemplative thought. This would seem to accord with all that has gone before and with the truth. For this is the best of the active states, for the mind is the best of things within us, and those objects of knowledge are best with which the mind deals. It is also best able to be continuous; for we can contemplate continuously more easily than perform an action continuously. We believe that pleasure must be mingled in with happiness, and the sweetest of virtuous activities is, by common agreement, wisdom.

As a result, philosophy seems to provide pleasures that are of amazing purity and durability, and it makes sense that those who know have a sweeter lifestyle than those who are still seeking. And what we call 'self-sufficiency' is most readily found in the practice of contemplating truth.

Aristotle goes on to give a series of different arguments why the contemplative life is more conducive to happiness than the active life of political or social engagement where the practical virtues (justice, courage, self-control, generosity) come into their own. The first argument observes that the practical virtues can only be exercised when there are other people to practise on. Contemplation can be done alone. Again, when we are exercising practical virtues, we have to deal with the consequences and unexpected problems. No such difficulties for the contemplative. Practical virtues are also labour rather than rest, and we do not work in order to work (note the slight discrepancy with his earlier argument) but to be at leisure. Added to which the practical virtues are never an end in themselves. Contemplation on the other hand ticks both boxes. This is the reason it makes humans godlike – which says a great deal about Aristotle's gods. As it turns out, while they are well-disposed to philosophers, it is hard to imagine them getting too involved in human affairs:

The active mind stands out for its seriousness. It is contemplative. It aims at no goal beyond itself, and it has its own proper pleasure (this is a heightening of the active state). It is also self-sufficient, produces leisure and is as durable as anything can be for humans. In fact everything that can be attributed to a blessed god appears to be present in this state of activity...

If the mind is something divine with respect to the human, so too the life of the mind is divine with respect to ordinary human living. So we should not do as those who warn us that we should think as humans, since we're human, and as mortals, since we're mortal. Rather we should do all we can to become immortal and do all in our power to live according to that which is best within us. Small in bulk it may be, but in power and honour it outstrips all the rest by far. In fact this would appear to be what each person truly is, if indeed it is the truest and the best of them. So it would be strange indeed for someone to choose the life of another above that of their own true selves.

This is in accord with what we said before. What is most proper to the nature of each person is what is best and most pleasant for them. For a human this is the life of the mind, if this is in fact what is most properly human. This way of life is then the happiest.

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The life of the other virtues is most happy in a secondary sense. For the activities in this sphere of excellence are human. We perform acts of justice and courage and of the other virtues in relationship to one another. In contracts, according to the demands of circumstances, and in every sort of sphere of action, and preserving the appropriate emotional disposition in each case...

There is a debate about whether it is the will that is primary in excellence, or the [virtuous] actions themselves – since virtue belongs to both. Clearly perfection would consist in both; but when it comes to actions, many other things are needed besides, and the more significant the actions, and the nobler, the more of these extras are needed.

But for the one who is contemplating, there is no need of any such things in order to be in an active state. You could even say that they are a barrier to contemplation. Insofar as a person is a human and lives with many others, they will choose to perform virtuous action, so they will need all the things of this sort in order to live humanly.

But here too it would become apparent that perfect happiness is an activity of contemplation. For we all assume that the gods are above all blessed and happy. But what sort of virtuous actions would they need to undertake? Just actions? It would be absurd for them to be making contracts and restoring deposits, and all that kind of thing. Or courageous? Enduring terrors and taking risks for the sake of what is noble? Or generous? Who will they be giving things to? It is bizarre to suppose that they have coinage or anything like that. What would it mean for them to be balanced? Or is any approval meaningless, because they have no degraded desires? As you go through the list, you find that anything to do with actions appears petty and unworthy of gods. But still everyone assumes that they are alive and thus that they are active – they're no sleeping beauties. But

when you take away from a living being moral action, and still more action itself, what is left but contemplation? So that the active state of God, which is above all others in its blessedness, would be contemplative. And of all human activities the one most similar in kind to this would bring the most happiness...

1179a 13

The person who is active of mind, who nurtures their mind and keeps it in the best order also seems to be the most god-beloved. If there is indeed any concern for human affairs on the part of the gods, as is believed, then it would make sense for them to take delight in what was noblest and closest in kind to them (that would be the mind) and to reward those who showed most love and respect for that thing, thus taking care of their friends and those who act rightly and nobly. It is reasonably clear that this is above all the case with the wise person. So that person is the most god-beloved. It is plausible then to say the happiest. So following this line of argument too, the wise person would be the happiest.

4. Metaphysics Λ: Making the world go Round: God as mind

Aristotle's collection of lectures titled 'After the Physics' is a fiendish mish-mash of philosophical topics that continue to set the agenda today. In book Lambda he returns to the main theme of Physics 8 and tries to explain the source of ultimate source of being and change. This time, however, he goes into more detail about what sort of being would be a candidate for an unmoved mover. The answer is a mind - thought thinking itself. Notice that as with Plato desire plays a key role in making the world go round.

A vital concept from the physics that is repeated throughout his argument is the concept of 'being in an active state'. Remember that things that change move from potential to actuality (existence), or from rest-potential to activity (existence in action). For an eternal mind to be a source of eternal motion, it must be in an eternal active state.

1071b 2

Since there were three realities, two natural ones and one beyond change, we need to talk about this and claim that necessarily there is some eternal reality which does not change. Realities (ousiai – substances) are primary beings and if all of them are perishable then everything is perishable. But change cannot come to be or pass a way, for it was always there, and nor can time, for there can be no 'before' and 'after' without the existence of time. And change is therefore as continuous as time - for time is either the same as change or is some effect of it. But the only continuous change is motion, and motion in a circle.

But even if it is a source of change or action, if it is not being active, there will be no change (for something which is in potential can always be inactive). So it will be no use our simply requiring there to be eternal realities, like the forms, unless there is some principle in it that can bring about transformations; but then even this isn't enough, nor any other reality apart from the forms: if it is not active, there will be no change. (Nor if it is active, but its nature is

a potential – for the change will not be continuous, for anything which exists in potential can not-exist).

So there must be some such principle [i.e. one which is eternal, and a source of change when active] whose nature is to be active. Further, these realities must be immaterial, for they have to be eternal, if anything else is to be eternal. Therefore their nature is an active state.

Aristotle constantly harks back to alternative points of view about the principles and structures that lie behind the universe. We can recognise in this passage of argument shades of an early phase of the argument from contingency. Notice the intriguing reference to theologians who say 'all things are generated from night'. Who are those people?

Here there is a difficulty, for something in [such] an active state would seem to be able to do everything, yet what is in a potential state is not active in every way, so that power [or potential] is prior. But if this is the case then none of the things will exist. For they are all capable of being but are not yet there. Yet, whether it is as the theologians claim who generate from the night, or as the nature-philosophers who say that 'all things were together', this very thing is impossible. For how will there be any change unless the cause is in an active state? For the wood will not change itself, but the skill of the carpenter, nor will the menstrual discharge or the earth, but seeds and sperm.

This is why some propose that there is always an activity – like Leucippus and Plato. For they say that there is always change. But they do not explain why or because of whom, nor why it is just this change rather than that. For nothing changes haphazardly, but there must always be something, as for instance, it happens by nature like *this* but by force or by mind (or something else) like *this*. Then, what sort of thing is this first principle? For it is a radically different thing. In fact not even Plato was able to explain what he sometimes supposes the principle to be, 'that which changes itself' – for soul is both prior to and simultaneous with the heavens, as he says.

In one perspective it makes sense to think of potential states as being prior to active states but in another it does not... And in fact Anaxagoras testifies that the active state is prior (for mind is an activity), as well as Empedocles (love and strife) and those who claim that change is eternal, like Leucippus. So that there was no boundless time of chaos or night, but these same things were always there either cyclically or in some other way, if in fact active states are prior to potential ones.

If it is always the same, in a cycle, then there has to be something that is constantly there throughout. And if there is going to be coming into being and passing away, there must always be something new becoming active now this way, now that. So these things must either become active like *this* of themselves, or like *that* through another. In the latter case, this will either be through something else or through the primary source. And it has to be through the latter, for that [primary source] is the cause of both. The first entity is therefore more properly the cause, for that was the cause of what is ever the same (the explanation for what is different at different times, or is always becoming different is already clear). So

changes take place in just the same way [as coming into being]. What further causes do we need to suppose?

Aristotle now begins to characterise his primary cause of the first motion. He picks up on three features of the mind that he also teases out in de anima: the mind is non material and is both active and passive. It is thus both self-identical and in an active relationship with itself. To this he adds the theme of desire as a source of motion in the world. It is not completely clear to this reader how he fits the different elements together to generate motion in the outermost heavens. The text – of lecture notes – feels quite disjointed as a discussion of mind in general, reminiscent of the discussion of the Ethics, blurs into a discussion of God. Hovering in the background, though not directly expressed, is the implication that the ultimate mind behind the first motion is in some sense a benign governing principle of the whole universe.

1072a 19 *God as mind thinking itself*

Since this is a realistic possibility and without this, everything will exist out of ‘night’ and ‘everything together’ and from non-being, all these things can be resolved: there is something which is always changing with a never-ceasing motion, and this is motion in a circle. That is apparent not just from the arguments but from the evidence. So the first heaven would be eternal.

And there must be something that moves it. Since we have that which is purely changed, and that which causes change and what lies between... so there is something which causes change without being changed, it is eternal and it is a real existent and an active state. Now this sort of change is caused by the object of yearning and the object of thought. They cause change without themselves being changed. That which appears lovely is desirable, and the first thing we choose is that which is lovely. We reach for it because it seems so, rather than its seeming so because we reach for it.

For thought is a principle. And mind is moved by the object of thought. That correlate [of mind] is an object of thought of itself, and its reality is primary and simple and in an active state. Now what is lovely and what is worth choosing for its own sake belongs in this correlate. And what is primary is always noblest, (or at least proportionately nobler).

The ‘object of purpose’ belongs among the things that do not change. This is something we can show with a distinction. A goal can be the goal for an individual, or it can be the end point of an individual[’s development]. The one exists already, the other does not. [The first causes motion] by being an object of desire, [the second], once set in motion, moves all the others.

If something undergoes change, it can be otherwise. Thus the first motion [of the outer heavens] even if it is in an activated state insofar as it is undergoing change, still has the capacity to be otherwise, at least in its position, if not in its essence. But since there is something that causes it to change, while remaining unchanged, and in an active state, this cannot be otherwise in any respect.

Locomotion is the first of the transformations, and of all the motions, the first is motion in a circle. It is this motion that [the first changer] brings about. Therefore, it is what it is by necessity. Insofar as it is necessary, it is lovely, and thus it is a principle.

For 'what is necessary' can mean all of these: that which forces something else against its inclination; that which is necessary for some good end; that which cannot be otherwise than just so. It is on just such a principle that the heavens and the natural world depend.

Its quality of life is that of the best of our life, that we only experience in brief moments. For this being it is always so (impossible for us) since the actualisation of this being is a pleasure (and that's why for us the most enjoyable things are being conscious, perception and thought, because hopes and memories come with these).

Spontaneous, intelligent awareness is of what is intrinsically the best, and here, awareness par excellence is of what is best par excellence.

Mind has intelligent awareness of itself, by apprehending the object of thought. For it becomes the object of thought as it senses and becomes aware, so that mind and the object of thought are the same. What is open to the object of thought and its nature is mind, and when it possesses them, it is in an active state. So it is this active state, more than the other, that the mind seems to have as something godlike, and contemplation is what is sweetest and noblest.

If all that is correct, as is the case for us occasionally, in the case of God this is a perpetual wonder. If it goes beyond that, then it is still more marvellous.

Indeed it is so! And this being exists as a life. For the active state of a mind is life, and [that entity] is that active state; so the spontaneous activity of [that entity] is most noble and it is eternal. Indeed, we say that God is a living being, eternal and most noble, so that life and continuous, eternal existence belong to God. This is what a god is...

1073a 3

Therefore it is clear from everything discussed that there is a reality which is eternal and changeless and set apart from the things we can perceive. We have shown that this reality cannot have any magnitude but is without parts and indivisible.

(It causes movement for an infinite time, but nothing limited has an infinite power; but any magnitude is either infinite or limited, if we suppose limited magnitude then it cannot have magnitude, and if we suppose infinite magnitude, then overall there can be no infinite magnitude)

Moreover it cannot be affected by anything or undergo any change of quality, for all the other sorts of change are derivative from locomotion. The rest are obvious given that they are of this kind.

We tend to read Aristotle's argument through a Christian or Islamic lens, so it comes as a bit of a surprise to discover that in spite of his insistence in *Physics* 8 on a unique source of motion, he takes seriously the possibility that there may be multiple unmoved movers at

work in the universe, turning the other wheels within the frame of the outer heavens. These too are gods. Again, we can make a connection with his discussion in the *Ethics*.

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We shouldn't neglect the question whether we are to suppose such a reality is one or many, and we should note that what other people have said about quantity offers nothing that can be presented clearly...

We will speak on the basis of what has been established and defined. The origin and the first of beings is without change, whether change in itself or incidental change. It causes the first single and eternal motion. We have seen that that which changes must be changed by something, and the first changer must be intrinsically changeless, and that the eternal movement is caused by something eternal, and that one movement is caused by a single mover. But we also see that apart from the simple motion of the whole universe, there are other eternal motions of the planets. (The body that [moves] in a circle is eternal and fixed in its position – we explained that in the *Physics*). So necessarily each of these movements must be caused by a reality that is intrinsically changeless and eternal. For the nature of the stars is an eternal reality, and that which causes change must be logically prior to what is changed, and what is logically prior to a reality must be a reality. Therefore it is clear that there must be as many realities, eternal by nature and changeless in themselves, and without magnitude for the reason already given.

So that there are realities and there is a first and a second etc, corresponding to the ranking of the motions of the stars, is clear. But then to investigate the number of these motions, we need astronomy, the mathematical science closest to philosophy...

1073a35

The primary type of thing does not have matter, because it is [already] fully realised. So the primary changeless changer is unique in its [intelligible structure] and one numerically. And what is moved therefore is eternal and continuous. There is one outer heaven only.

Aristotle draws to a conclusion with a further discussion on problems in conceptualising the mind as thought thinking itself – decide for yourself if this discussion makes it significantly clearer. He also has a long section enquiring into the source of order in the universe. I have only given the first few lines of that here, because he very quickly goes into unhelpful digressions, and the threads of argument become rather more knotted.

1074b15

There are some uncertainties regarding the mind. For it seems to be the most godlike of phenomena, but how exactly it is such is difficult to disentangle. For if it was not actively aware of anything, what would be so special about it? It would be the same as someone asleep. Then if it is actively aware, but something else controls this (for the thing in which its reality consists is not the active awareness, but a potential [for it]), then it would not be the noblest reality. It is through its being actively aware that it acquires its value. Then again, irrespective of whether its reality is mind or active awareness, what is it actively aware of? For either it is aware of itself or of something else. And if it is aware of something else, then either always the same something, or something else besides. Does it make a difference whether one is being actively aware of what is noble or of whatever turns up? Or is it just ridiculous to be asking some of these questions?

It is clear then that what is most godlike and most valuable has active awareness, and does not undergo transformation. For transformation would be to something lesser, plus something like this would already be a movement.

So firstly if [the mind] is not active awareness but a potential, then it is likely that its continual active awareness will be an effort for it. What's more there would clearly be something else of more value than the mind, namely the object of awareness. For the act of being aware and the active awareness will be there even when someone is being actively aware of the vilest thing, so if this is something to be avoided (and there are some things it is better not to see than to see) the active awareness would not be the noblest thing.

Therefore it is actively aware of itself, if in fact it is the best of entities. And active awareness is awareness of awareness. Though knowledge and perception and belief and thought always appear to be about something else, and about themselves in passing.

Again if being actively aware is different from being an object of awareness, in respect of which one does [the mind] achieve its good? For neither is the nature of active awareness and of an object of awareness the same. Or is it that for some knowledge is the key, in the case of those who make things without material, essence and what it means to be, and in the case of contemplatives, the intelligible structure is what matters and the active awareness?

Then since the object of awareness and the mind are not different with respect to everything non-material, they will actually be the same, and the active awareness will be one with the object of awareness.

There is one difficulty left, whether the object of awareness is composite; for if it were, there would be transformations in the parts of the whole. Or is it the case that anything non-material is indivisible? Like the human mind, or the aspect of composites that lasts some time (for its being in a good condition isn't to do with this bit or that bit of it, but peak condition is found in a whole, which is something different). Is this the case for the active awareness of active awareness for all of time?

We also have to look at how the nature of the whole possesses the good and the best condition. Whether this is something separate and independent, or whether it is a matter of organisation. Or is it both – like an army? Its wellbeing depends both on its organisation and its commander. Though more the latter. He doesn't exist because of the organisation, but the organisation exists because of him...