

Thinking Thinking Thinking:
On God's Self-thinking in Aristotle's
Metaphysics $\Lambda.9$

Jonathan Beere

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Das Hauptmoment in der Aristotelischen Metaphysik ist, daß das Denken und das Gedachte eins ist.

— G.W.F. Hegel

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1 Introduction

In the triumphant sections of *Metaphysics* $\Lambda.7$, Aristotle characterizes the first unmoved cause of all change as an object of thought ($\nu\omicron\eta\tau\acute{o}\nu$), as a thinker ($\nu\omicron\tilde{\upsilon}\zeta$), and as (a) god. With stunning boldness, he suggests that we can know about what such a god’s way of spending time is like by considering our own case. Not every human being, but some human beings spend some of their time in that sort of thinking that is the exercise of theoretical knowledge ($\theta\epsilon\omega\rho\acute{\iota}\alpha$). What we do, in such cases, is like what god does all the time. It can be a basis for grasping what it is like to be god.

It turns out, however, that this inference from the best human activity to divine activity leads to problems. Aristotle raises and solves these problems in *Metaphysics* $\Lambda.9$ (having considered in $\Lambda.8$ how many divine thinkers there are, and made some remarks on their relationship to one another). This chapter is of great interest for a variety of reasons, including its vast influence on the subsequent history of philosophy. Aside from that influence, that chapter contains a complex and compressed argument, in which a remarkable theory of self-thinking comes to light. I see two reasons why this chapter is of immediate enduring interest. One is the way in which a certain ‘naturalistic’ view of thinking fails and an alternative view of thinking is developed. (I will say something more below about how to spell out the ‘naturalistic’ view of thinking.) The other is the development, however compressed, of the idea that an act of thinking can be its own object, without there being any additional object of act that is distinct from the act.

The interest of the chapter is obscured, unfortunately, by the way in which it is written. The various problems discussed in $\Lambda.9$ are liable to seem unconnected,¹ but I will argue that they all arise from the attempt to know god on the basis of the human case. In outline, the problem is that god’s thinking necessarily differs from human thinking. The divinity of god’s thought is incompatible with features of thought that are essential to the human case. The previous account of god’s thought in $\Lambda.7$ was seriously misleading, because it failed to take account of this.

¹See, e.g. Brunschwig [1]. He mentions this as the dominant view among commentators (who often have found the chapter “fairly disorderly,” and suppose that Aristotle does not distinguish among questions as he should, or state or answer them all explicitly). Then he says, “This assessment is perhaps a *little* less fair than is often thought” [1, p. 275; my emphasis]. I will concede that the chapter is not as clear and explicit as one would wish, but will argue firmly that it is coherent and unified.

In clearing up these difficulties, $\Lambda.9$ also shows us how radically different god's thought is from human thought, divine though it is. The resulting theory of god's thought is so strange that it seems rhetorically wise of Aristotle to have introduced the reader to it gradually, by way of the more familiar human case. In fact, the resulting theory of god's thought is so strange that one might start to wonder why god's activity counts as thought at all.

2 The Starting Point

The starting point of $\Lambda.9$ is the upshot of $\Lambda.7$: the claim that god is $\nu\omicron\upsilon\zeta$.² (Throughout, I will speak of “god,” using the singular noun *not* as a proper name but as a label that might be applied to a plurality of things.) The chapter raises problems to which this claim leads, given certain assumptions about god and about $\nu\omicron\upsilon\zeta$.

As a preliminary, we need to note how the translation ‘think’ for ‘ $\nu\omicron\epsilon\iota\nu$ ’ can mislead.³ The Greek verb ‘ $\nu\omicron\epsilon\iota\nu$ ’ originally covered certain cases of perception, namely recognition. But in Plato and Aristotle (and probably already in Parmenides), it had come to be contrasted with perception. Yet it remains a perception-like cognitive faculty. As we will see, the similarity and difference between $\nu\omicron\upsilon\zeta$ and perception is the dominant theme of $\Lambda.9$. To begin with, $\nu\omicron\upsilon\zeta$ is perception-like in that it is a faculty for cognition of objects (rather than propositions or states of affairs).⁴ However, for Aristotle (following Plato), the proper objects of $\nu\omicron\upsilon\zeta$ ($\nu\omicron\eta\tau\acute{\alpha}$) are not proper objects

²By calling this claim the “upshot” of $\Lambda.7$, I am skirting the question of whether there is an argument for it. Furthermore, there is a major problem of interpretation about how to relate the results of $\Lambda.9$ to the claim from $\Lambda.8$ that there is a multitude of unmoved movers (55 of them on the best astronomy of the time). First, some of the arguments of the $\Lambda.9$ speak of god as “the best.” It cannot be that all 55 unmoved movers are the best. Should we conclude that the results of $\Lambda.9$ apply only to the unmoved mover of the sphere of the fixed stars? Or should we read “the best” as meaning not “better than everything else” but “nothing else is better”? Second, if we do apply the results of $\Lambda.9$ to the other unmoved movers of heavenly spheres, then how are we to account for their being distinct? Given that each is an instance of self-thinking thought, there would appear to be no content of thought available to distinguish the various acts of thinking. I will offer some speculations about this in footnotes below.

³Because the translation is misleading, I often leave $\nu\omicron\upsilon\zeta$ and related words untranslated; I have appended a glossary of untranslated terms at the end of the paper.

⁴Obviously, it is controversial nowadays whether one can perceive states of affairs or only individual objects, but Plato and Aristotle assumed that the objects of perception are particular items or instances of properties, not facts.

of perception. Moreover, νοῦς is not just any kind of minimal or hazy apprehension of the objects in question, but is full-fledged, robust understanding, a pinnacle of intellectual achievement. Thus ‘think’ is a misleading translation of ‘νοεῖν’ in at least two ways: first, it suggests that one might νοεῖν, for instance, that seven is prime or that whales are mammals, but this seems to be false; second, it suggests νοεῖν includes merely referential thinking, such as thinking of the number seven or thinking of whales, without any presumption of understanding. In fact, however, there is νοεῖν of objects, not of states of affairs, and νοεῖν, for Aristotle, always necessarily includes understanding, presumably a specially clear and perfect understanding. Myles Burnyeat puts it this way:

In sum, an Aristotelian form is not to be grasped on its own, as a solitary item of knowledge, but only as part and pinnacle of a whole explanatory system. Well may one wonder whether such a grasp is within ordinary human reach. Aristotle repeatedly reserves the name *nous*, *noein* for this achievement. When he says, for example, that *nous* is the disposition that grasps the first principles of a deductive science (*APo* II 19, 100b5–17; *EN* VI 6; cf. *Met.* A 2, 982a19–b10), he clearly means grasping them as the starting points of elaborate explanatory deductions. A single sentence, this hints, could never be an adequate expression of achieved *nous*. [2, pp. 27–26]

The problems about god as νοῦς derive from a view of νοῦς based on the human case, but it is not a view about specifically human νοῦς by contrast with any other kind. The peculiarities of human beings, such as how many senses we have, play no role. It is a general conception of what it is to think (νοεῖν, to exercise full understanding), based on our experience of thinking and on general assumptions about causation. These general assumptions about causation are particularly important. They do not derive from introspection, but from a view of change. This is what I meant when I said that a certain sort of naturalism plays a role in Λ.9. The impasses derive, I will argue, from treating god’s νόησις on a par with other natural events. For god’s thinking, this naturalistic understanding of cognition founders.

The naturalistic view of νόησις enters the discussion as the view of *our* thinking. At the outset, Aristotle signals that he is starting with our own, familiar case by referring to “manifest things [φαινόμενα],” among which νοῦς

“seems to be most divine” (1074b15–16).⁵ Aristotle is picking up on his own earlier remarks from Λ.7 about how similar our own thinking and contemplating are to god’s occupation. This similarity was the basis for Aristotle’s account, up to this point, of how god brings about motion (i.e., as a beloved νοητόν).

The problems that Aristotle discusses do not pertain to the divine character of human thought, but to the divine character of god’s thought in particular.⁶ These problems do not arise for human thought, because each problem derives from assumptions that do not apply to the human case.⁷ Similarly, one might have a general view about what sight in general is on the basis of the human case. The general view would have to be modified if one encountered instances of sight that it did not fit, but the view of human sight might well be untouched by this. This is precisely what happens, according to Aristotle, through the confrontation with a νοῦς that is god. Each problem arises due to a tension between assumptions about νοῦς and assumptions about god. Each solution accommodates the assumption about god by revising assumptions about νοῦς. There is no need to reconceive human νοῦς, only god-νοῦς. In the course of the argument, we progressively discern how god’s νοῦς is essentially unlike any human νοῦς.

All this flows from the naturalistic conception of νοῦς. For Aristotle, this is the conception of νοῦς as a capacity involved in action

⁵Brunschwig translates “the things in our experience,” but expresses some concern that “divine *nous* is not the sort of thing to which we have an *empirical* access” [1, p. 277, n. 10; my emphasis]. Certainly, our access to god’s νοῦς is not *perceptual*. In that sense, our access to it is not empirical. But surely Aristotle does think that the unmoved mover is one of the things in our experience—at least, in the experience of some of us. (Similarly, someone who believes that we have intellectual intuition of sets, will allow that we have experience, albeit not perception, of sets.) Brunschwig reports Burnyeat’s proposal that the φαινόμενα here are the things “a science sets out to explain” (*ibid.*). I do not see how to work this out. Is the phenomenon in question νοῦς? But Aristotle is not here presenting a general theory of νοῦς. He is solving some problems that arise for his view that the unmoved mover is a νοῦς and a god. Is the phenomenon in question the fact that νοῦς is most divine? This would be rather hard to squeeze out of the grammar. And Aristotle presents this not as a fact, but as something that seems to be the case.

⁶With this, I am in partial agreement with Kosman [5, p. 307–8].

⁷With this, I think I am disagreeing with Kosman. He is not terribly specific about how the problems in question arise, but he seems to think that the problems in question are problems about the divine character of any thought whatsoever, whether the thinker in question is a mortal man or an immortal god.

(ποίησις).⁸ This conception of νοῦς is captured by three assumptions. Initially, I state only two of them:

ASSUMPTION 1: νοῦς is a capacity to do something, namely to think (νοεῖν).

In general, when something thinks, it exercises its capacity to do so. This is an instance of a general metaphysical assumption about the exercise of capacities for action. The assumption is that in each case of action, two capacities are involved, one for bringing about the action in question, and one for undergoing it.⁹ In this case, the name of the exercise (ἐνέργεια) of the capacity to think (νοῦς) is ‘thinking’ (νόησις).¹⁰

ASSUMPTION 2: in each case of νόησις, there is a νοητόν, which ‘acts on’ the νοῦς.

I will spend some time elucidating the connection between these assumptions through a consideration of sight, which provides the model for νοῦς.¹¹ Like

⁸Throughout, I will use “action” as a translation for ποίησις; I will not have any occasion to speak of πράξις. An action in this sense does not require having intentions. When an ice cube cools some lemonade, it is acting on the lemonade in the relevant sense. It is a broad notion of something’s doing something to something (possibly to itself).

⁹It is compatible with this assumption that there be events that (1) do not involve correlative capacities for bringing about and undergoing change because (2) these events are not the action (ποίησις) of something on something.

¹⁰For νόησις as the ἐνέργεια of νοῦς, see also *Metaphysics* Θ.9 1051a30; *de Anima* I.3 407a19–22; *Protrepticus* 24 (Düring).

¹¹Actually, Aristotle explicitly compares νοῦς with perception in general, not sight in particular. The discussion in *de Anima* III.4 compares thought with perception precisely inasmuch as both are actions. It supports my reading of Λ.9 because it shows that Aristotle considered this the natural or default conception of νοῦς. See, especially, 429a10–18 and 429b22–430a9. However, these hard-to-interpret chapters may pose a problem for my reading of Λ.9. For Aristotle may be distancing his conception of human νοῦς from the very perceptual model that I am here describing, as Myles Burnyeat argues in his Aquinas lecture, “Aristotle’s Divine Intellect” [2]. He argues that these chapters specify a crucial difference between perception and νόησις. In the case of perception, the action of a perceptible object on the perceptive capacity brings about a transition from second potentiality to second actuality (that is, from actually possessing the capacity to perceive the object in question to actually exercising this capacity). By contrast, in the case of νόησις, the action of a νοητόν on νοῦς brings about a transition from first potentiality to first actuality (that is, from being able to acquire a capacity to actually possessing that capacity), and the transition from second potentiality (= first actuality) to second

νοῦς, sight (ὄψις) is a capacity. In each case of seeing (ὄρασις), there is a visible object (ὄρατον), which ‘acts on’ the sense of sight.

For seeing, as for thinking, scare quotes are appropriate for the words ‘acts on.’ This is because the ‘change’ brought about in the seeing thing, specifically in its organ of sight, is not an ordinary change. Indeed, it is a change only in a highly qualified sense, as Aristotle explains in *de Anima* II.5. These refinements, however, are not relevant to the discussion of god’s thinking in Λ.9. For they concern only the sense in which seeing (or perceiving in general) is a change, and not the question whether there are an agent and a patient involved. The agent and patient in seeing (or perception generally) simply inherit their special character from the special character of the ‘change’ in question. What is important for Λ.9 is that there are an agent and patient, and this is not an assumption that *de Anima* II.5 calls into question for perceiving (and all the less so for thinking). Now that I have registered this qualification about ‘acts on,’ I will dispense with the scare quotes.

The agent is the object of sight. The patient is the thing that sees. As in ordinary changes, the agent acts on the patient. In order that this be possible, the agent and the patient need appropriate correlative capacities, an active capacity in the agent and a passive capacity in the patient. In the case of seeing, the passive capacity is called ‘sight.’ The active capacity is a color.

Moreover, the visible thing (ὄρατον) is not only the agent that acts on the sense of sight, but is *for that reason* the object of the activity of seeing. This means not that its name is the grammatical object of the verb ‘to see,’ but that it is the thing that the seeing creature is aware of, by seeing. Aristotle also makes the natural correlative assumption about νοῦς and νοητόν:

ASSUMPTION 3: in each case of νόησις, the νοητόν that acts on

actuality is not the action of anything on νοῦς. Even if this view is correct, that would not undermine the core of the interpretation I espouse. Of course, the starting point of Λ.9 would then not be human νοῦς, but rather νοῦς conceived on the model of a perceptive capacity. But it would still be very plausible that Aristotle is showing, in Λ.9, how very different god’s νοῦς is from νοῦς so conceived. This is plausible because of the attractive interpretation of Λ.9 that emerges on this assumption, and also because *de Anima* III.4–5 do clearly show that Aristotle thought of this as a good starting point for thinking about (human) νοῦς (even if he did want to show how it is false for human νοῦς). But part of my interpretation would have to be rejected, namely that the guiding idea of Λ.9 is to articulate the difference between god’s νοῦς and human νοῦς.

the νοῦς is the thing that the νοῦς thinks (νοεῖ).

ASSUMPTION 3 connections ASSUMPTIONS 1 and 2. Νόησις, like seeing, is an activity with an object. It has, as contemporary philosophers say, a cognitive content. Thus it seems essential to such states that they are relational. The predicates in question are two-place. Something sees something; something thinks something. Throughout, when I speak of “subject” and “object” I will have in mind these causal roles, and not the phenomenology of intentional (self-)consciousness.

Aristotle has an elegant account of why it is that each instance of perceiving or thinking has the content that it does. The visible object is seen because it acts on the creature that sees. Likewise, the thinkable object is thought because it acts on the creature that thinks. The creature that sees can only be acted on in the relevant way if it has the necessary passive capacity, namely sight. The creature that thinks can only be acted on in the relevant way if it has the necessary passive capacity, namely νοῦς.

The earlier presentation, in Λ.7, of the first unmoved mover as νοῦς relied on this conception of νοῦς. The first unmoved mover is called a νοητόν (and ὀρεκτόν) precisely because νοητά (and ὀρεκτά) bring about motion (without themselves being in motion) (1072a26–27). Aristotle goes so far as to say that νοῦς is set in motion by the νοητόν (1072a30; νοῦς δὲ ὑπὸ τοῦ νοητοῦ κινεῖται). The remark refers to the way the first unmoved mover moves some *other* νοῦς. One might have thought that the remark applies only to this other νοῦς, but the text appears to be introducing a general claim about νοῦς, which applies to this case because it applies to all. This impression is confirmed when Aristotle goes on to say that the unmoved mover is not only a νοητόν but also a νοῦς, for he speaks again in terms of change. Νοῦς thinks by *becoming* (γίγνεται) in contact with the νοητόν (1072b20–21). Νοῦς is characterized in terms of a capacity: it is receptive (δεκτικόν) of the νοητόν (1072b22; also *DA* III.4 429a15). The entire passage rests on the three stated assumptions about the relation among the νοῦς, the νοητόν as active cause, and the νοητόν as cognitive content. These assumptions are the key to arguing that the νοῦς under consideration is active, not inert (ἔχων; 1072b23).

This conception of νοῦς will make it possible to discern the coherence of Λ.9, which has seemed to many commentators to be a chaotic jumble. But the jumbled impression does arise from intrinsic features of the text. Aristotle treats two pairs of problems, not always stating the problem explicitly. The problems of each pair are interrelated in such a way that they can-

not be independently solved. Thus the chapter does not have the structure “problem–solution; problem–solution; . . .” but rather shifts back and forth between two problems until it arrives at a solution to both together. The chapter treats first one and then another pair of problems this way, then makes a few remarks about a fifth problem, which stands apart from the rest.

3 First Pair of Problems: The Capacity to Think and the Object of Thinking (1074b17–35)

The first pair of problems concerns, on the one hand, whether the νοῦς in question is a capacity, and, on the other hand what the νοῦς thinks.

Aristotle starts slowly, asking simply whether the νοῦς in question thinks at all (1074b17). Naturally, this is not acceptable, for there would be nothing august (σεμνόν) about god in that case, who would then be like a sleeping human being (1074b17). Presumably, such a god-νοῦς would be *like* a sleeping human being, rather than asleep, because sleep is a certain incapacitation of the capacity to perceive,¹² and a νοῦς is not such a capacity.¹³ Certainly the unmoved movers described in Λ.7 and 8 can have no sense organs, since they have no matter (1074a35–36).

It is already clear that Aristotle is talking about god’s νοῦς, not human νοῦς. Whatever is divine and august about human νοῦς has to be compatible with the fact that human beings sleep.

Aristotle seems here to have forgotten his own argument that the first unmoved mover must be an *active* νοῦς (Λ.7 1072b18–24). This is the first instance in a pattern. Aristotle uses the upshot of Λ.7 that god is νοῦς; uses the same conception of νοῦς as Λ.7; but disregards many important points made there. Especially noteworthy is the fact that Aristotle makes repeated use of the term ἐνέργεια (activity, actuality) in Λ.7, but none at all in Λ.9. In sum, this evidence suggests that Λ.9 was originally written for some other context, which revolved around the claim that god is νοῦς, but perhaps did not involve the claims, central to Λ.7, that there is a first unmoved mover of the heaven, that its being is activity (i.e., that its activity is not the exercise of a capacity), and that this is god.

¹²See *de Somno* 2 455b3–13.

¹³Cf. Brunschwig’s unwarranted concern, p. 280.

Brunschwig worries that μηδὲν νοεῖ should possibly be understood as “thinks, but thinks nothing” [1, pp. 279–281]. But the comparison with sleep surely shows that this is not so. The sleeping person does not think at all. Brunschwig is troubled by the fact that Aristotle fails to consider the case of in which god thinks but does not think *something*. This is not a justified concern. Having concluded that the νοῦς thinks, Aristotle is entitled to assume that the νοῦς thinks something and to ask what. If god were a builder, Aristotle would not need to consider whether god builds, but builds nothing. On the conception of νοῦς as action, this is justified. The νοῦς has to think something if it is to think at all, because it is a passive capacity, which, to be exercised, needs the active capacity of a νοητόν. A sign that this is the way Aristotle is thinking about the matter is his saying in the next sentence that νοῦς is a capacity (δύναμις; 1074b20).

The point is not merely that ‘νοῦς,’ like ‘sight,’ is a word for a capacity. In that case, then Aristotle might simply have insisted that god is something that thinks but needs no capacity to do so—hard to accept, but perfectly conceivable. Aristotle could simply announce that, given the argument from Λ.7 that god is something whose being (οὐσία) is activity (ἐνέργεια) (1071b19–22), the designation ‘νοῦς’ was misleading albeit natural. If god were a fire whose being were activity, then it might be natural to call it flammable, since it burns, but it would be important to register that in this case there is no capacity to burn over and above the activity of burning.¹⁴ The serious problem derives not from the nature of νοῦς (the capacity) but from the nature of νόησις (an ἐνέργεια). The problem is that the νόησις somehow has to have a cognitive content. If Aristotle is going to relinquish the account of cognitive content in terms of the exercise of capacities, then how is he going to account for the content of the νόησις? The problem is how to reconceive the relationship between νοῦς and νοητόν, since their cognitive connection is normally understood in terms of the exercise of active and passive powers. This is why Aristotle, having raised a problem for the view of νοῦς as capacity, does not simply remind us that he has already shown god’s activity not to be the exercise of a capacity.

Yet there turns out to be a problem about the very idea that a νοῦς that is a god thinks something. For something else, the νοητόν, would then be in

¹⁴This general problem about whether an eternal activity is the exercise of a capacity is addressed in Θ.8 (1050b6–1051a2) and Λ.6 (1071b22–1072a4).

charge (κύριος) of the divine νοῦς (1074b19).¹⁵ There are several things to be explained here. What does it mean that for something to be in charge of a νοῦς? Why must there be something in charge, and why must it be something else? Why would that be a problem? I will consider these questions in order.

To approach the question of what it means for something to be in charge of νοῦς, I revisit the characterization of νοῦς as a capacity. This characterization should surprise someone who is reading the chapter as an immediate extension of the arguments of A.6 and 7 (and 8), since Aristotle had explicitly argued that the first unmoved mover's being (οὐσία) is activity (ἐνέργεια) (1071b12–22). This means that the first unmoved mover does not exercise a capacity to act in acting as it does. This conclusion is incompatible with the first unmoved mover's being νοῦς and νοῦς being a capacity. But here in A.9, Aristotle is working out the claim that god is νοῦς. So the question is not: should we think of god as an activity (ἐνέργεια) or as a capacity? The question is: given that we conceive god as a νοῦς, what consequences does that have for god's being (οὐσία)? The first consequence, Aristotle indicates, would seem to be that god's being is a capacity. It *follows* from this that there is something else in charge of the νοῦς. That this is the direction of entailment is shown by γάρ at 1074b19. One of the great advantages of the interpretation proposed here is the explanation it offers of this entailment.

Moreover, the capacity in question is a passive one. This is crucial for the inference that Aristotle draws. It is not in general the case that whenever something's being (οὐσία) is capacity, then something else is in charge of it. Consider, for instance, a house-builder. What it is to be a house-builder is to have a certain capacity.¹⁶ A house-builder's being is a certain capacity, namely one to build houses expertly. Yet it is not therefore the case that something else is in charge of the house-builder. Of course, the house-builder is dependent on external circumstances to exercise their art. In some circumstances, they cannot do so at all. For instance, the house-builder needs certain materials to build into a house. But those materials are not in charge of the house-builder or of the building. The house-builder is in charge. That is part of what it means for the house-builder to be the moving cause and the agent. He determines whether he builds, and of what he builds (a house

¹⁵I take τούτου to refer to the νοῦς rather than (as Brunschwig does [p. 278, n. 18]) the act of thinking. It seems to me rather difficult to take the antecedent of a pronoun to be a verb, when there is a readily available noun, four lines up, which yields good sense.

¹⁶See, e.g., Θ.2 1046b16–17.

or something else, what kind of house).¹⁷

So it is crucial not only that a νοῦς is a capacity, but that it is a passive capacity.¹⁸ The three assumptions explain why this should be so. They also strongly suggest answers to the other questions about how this argument works. First, the νοητόν is in charge of the νοῦς in two senses, corresponding to ASSUMPTION 2 and ASSUMPTION 3. The νοητόν is the agent that makes the νοῦς think. Moreover, it determines not only whether the νοῦς thinks, but also what it thinks—namely, the νοητόν in question.

I turn now to the second question: why must the thinkable object that is in charge be something other than the νοῦς? This follows from the conception of νόησις as the action of an agent on a patient. But it does not simply follow from the fact that two distinct powers, one active and one passive, are involved in action. Both powers can be lodged in a single thing (as when a sick doctor heals himself). However, there are additional considerations concerning cognitive capacities and their exercise. We can see this by considering the problem about perception raised by Aristotle at the beginning of *de Anima* II.5. If the sense organs consist of the same perceptible materials that perceptible things consist of, then why do the senses not perceive themselves, and in fact do not perceive at all without external things? (417a2–6)

The problem derives from the conception of perception as the action of an agent (αἰσθητόν) on a patient (αἰσθητικόν).¹⁹ The agent and the patient possess causal powers, active and passive, that are exercised in perception. If the agent itself already has both causal powers, then that would be enough for the agent to act on itself so as to perceive itself.²⁰ Hence it could perceive nothing else. So it is necessary that the perceiver (more precisely, the organ

¹⁷Cf. the use of the term κύριον in Θ.5. There, too, the thing in charge determines both whether a capacity is exercised and what it is exercised to produce. Moreover, one might think contradicts the claim that the house-builder is in charge, when he writes, “Therefore there is necessarily something other [than the capacity], which is in charge” (1048a10). But this is not saying that something else is in charge of the builder, but that the builder, i.e., the builder’s desiderative soul, is in charge of the capacity.

¹⁸This point is not seen by Brunschwig and Kosman.

¹⁹The opening lines of II.5, 416b32–417a2, make clear the importance of action.

²⁰There is a further nuance here. For one thing to act on another, it is necessary not only that they possess correlative active and passive powers, but also that they be appropriately related (e.g., some things have to be in contact with another thing in order to heat it, others do not). But I do not see how this might make possible a situation in which the sense organ could fail to act on itself, given the sorts of situations in which it clearly does have to be able to perceive certain objects.

of sense) not be such as to bring about perception in itself. The perceptible object is necessarily distinct from the sense.²¹

The same considerations apply to νόησις conceived as the action of an agent on a patient. If νοῦς as such is νοητόν, then it would always think itself. So it would seem necessary for νοῦς to have an object distinct from itself.

I now turn to the third question: what would be so bad about there being something else in charge of the νοῦς? Aristotle says that it would follow that it would not be the best substance (οὐσία). Obviously, this is a problem for god's νοῦς, not for a human being's νοῦς. Again, Aristotle draws on assumptions about god in particular, implicitly restricting the νοῦς under discussion.

But why should this consequence follow? Roughly, it follows because the value of a νοῦς derives from its activity (ἐνέργεια).²² In general, whether an activity is good or bad depends on whether the agent that brings it about is good or bad.²³ In the case of νόησις (conceived as an action), the agent is the object of thought. Thus we can clarify the issue about the value of νοῦς (and νόησις) by following Aristotle's lead (at 1074b21) and shifting our focus to the problem about the object of god's thinking. The candidates for the object of god's thought are as follows: it might think itself, or something else, and if something else, then either always one and the same thing or else different things at different times (1074b22–23).

Aristotle mentions the possibility that the god-νοῦς thinks any old thing (τὸ τύχον; 1074b24). But this is dismissed as clearly unsatisfactory. The value of thinking (νοεῖν) derives from the value of what is thought. At least in the case of seeing, Aristotle says that the badness of the object seen can be so great that the value of seeing is entirely outweighed by the badness of seeing certain things (1074b32–33). So the νοῦς should not think any old

²¹Note that this is not the solution to the problem Aristotle has raised in II.5, but rather a part of the problem. Cf. 417a3–4, “why don't the senses produce perception without external things?” The question presupposes that the senses require an external object. This is not merely a datum of experience, but a fact grounded on highly general assumptions about causation.

²²This is because, in general, the value of a capacity is derivative from the value of the ἐνέργεια that it is for the sake of. This is one of the assumptions relied on in Θ.9 1051a4–21.

²³I return below to the relevance of the distinction between being good of its kind and being *simpliciter*.

thing, but rather something beautiful (*καλόν*; 1074b24).²⁴ The plausibility of this claim should lead us to accept that if there are two things, one more beautiful than the other, then the νοῦς thinks the more beautiful one and not the less the beautiful one. From this, it follows that the νοῦς thinks something than which nothing is more beautiful.²⁵ If there is something most beautiful, and hence presumably most divine and honorable (1074b26), then νοῦς thinks that.

Notably, Aristotle does *not* say at this juncture that the νοῦς therefore thinks itself. He thus leaves open the problem about whether the νοητόν is the νοῦς or something else. This is striking, given that it is an obvious consequence of the argument just given, and that he himself has just mentioned the possibility. Thus neither of the first two problems has yet been solved.

The assumption that the νοητόν (being good of its kind) makes the νόησις be good of its kind is a natural one. It, too, is closely tied to the conception of νόησις as action, on which the νοητόν is in charge of the νοῦς (and of the νόησις). For house-building, the housebuilder is in charge, because the housebuilder is the agent, and the housebuilder is what makes the house-building go well. Of course, something might do something to the house-builder, to prevent her building well. And something might damage the house-to-be itself. But if the house-building goes well, then the house built is a good one unless there is interference from some kind of cause that falls outside the purview of house-building.²⁶ In fact, I would suggest that this is another part of what it means for the νοητόν to be in charge (*κύριος*): the νοητόν makes episodes of νόησις be good ones.

But Aristotle seems to be assuming not only that the νοητόν in question is a good νοητόν, but that it is good *simpliciter*. This is the most natural way of

²⁴It is interesting, and surely significant, that the term used is *καλόν*, rather than, say, *ἀγαθόν*. But I am not sure what to make of this. Perhaps part of the idea is that a god leads a blessed life, *μακάριος βίος*, and that for this not mere goodness but beauty is important.

²⁵On this view, each of the many divine unmoved movers might be most beautiful and think itself in just the way the first unmoved mover does.

²⁶There is also the possibility that a bad house-builder manages to produce a good house by chance. One might think that this is a counter-example to the claim that the house-builder is what makes the house-building go well. But a case of chance is one in which nothing made the house-building go well (in the relevant sense of ‘make’). The claim is that when the house-building goes well, not by chance, it is the house-builder who made it go well, because the house-builder did it. Obviously, these issues deserve further discussion and clarification.

taking all the words for goodness in the passage (particularly “beautiful” and “honorable,” which, unlike “good,” cannot naturally be restricted to some kind). Here the analogy between νόησις and action is less straightforward. One might well think that a bad house-builder could produce something that was good *simpliciter* (e.g., a drafty residence for an evil dictator, who catches a cold and is thus prevented from carrying out dastardly intentions). Or that a good house-builder could produce something that was bad *simpliciter* (e.g., a splendid palace for an evil dictator, which enhances his authority).

But these cases are problematic only on the assumption that the analogous assumption about house-building is this: the good-of-her-kind house-builder produces houses that are good *simpliciter*. This would be rather implausible. However, this is the wrong way to formulate the assumption. “Good” should be used in the same sense throughout. Thus the analogous assumption about house-building would be that the house-builder’s being good *simpliciter* makes her house-building be (non-accidentally) good *simpliciter*. This assumption is plausible. The house builder who is good *simpliciter* is a good, i.e., virtuous human being, who has practical wisdom. Surely such a person only chooses to exercise the art of house-building if that is good *simpliciter*, and only does so in a way that is good *simpliciter*. A bad result could come about, but only incidentally, i.e., not in a way for which the virtuous person would be blameworthy.

It may well be that this is Aristotle’s view. We would then require two assumptions about goodness for the argument here. One is the assumption that god’s νόησις is good νόησις only if god’s νοητόν is a good νοητόν. This assumption is clearly motivated by the conception of νόησις as action (together with Aristotle’s robust teleological assumptions about action). The other is the assumption that god’s νόησις is good *simpliciter* only if god’s νοητόν is good *simpliciter*. On the reasonable assumptions that god’s νόησις is good νόησις and good *simpliciter*, it validly follows that god’s νοητόν is a good νοητόν and is good *simpliciter*.

Notably, the assumption about goodness *simpliciter* is not motivated by the conception of νόησις as action. The need for both assumptions can be made vivid by considering the analogy with human actions. A fully virtuous agent might be in a situation in which it would be good *simpliciter* is to build a house, but not be able to do so just because she is not a house-builder. The agent has to be both good *simpliciter* and a good house-builder to do what is good *simpliciter*. Likewise, god’s νοητόν has to be both good *simpliciter* and a good νοητόν to bring about some νόησις that is good *simpliciter*.

There is another way of reconstructing Aristotle's argument here, without relying on a general assumption that what is good *simpliciter* is (non-accidentally) brought about only by agents that are good *simpliciter*. Perhaps Aristotle is, instead, assuming a general connection between goodness and intelligibility. The assumption is that any good νοητόν is good *simpliciter*. Conversely, whatever is less intelligible is less good *simpliciter*. It may well be that Aristotle was saying precisely this in Λ.7: paradigmatic νόησις is of what is paradigmatically good (1072b18–19; ἡ δὲ νόησις καθ' αὐτήν τοῦ καθ' αὐτὸ ἀρίστου, καὶ ἡ μάλιστα τοῦ μάλιστα).²⁷ This is the reason why the first unmoved mover is divine at all: because when it is engaged in its paradigmatic νόησις, it is in possession of (ἔχων) what it is paradigmatically good (1072b22–24; note especially ὅσπερ). I incline to this construal of Λ.9. My reason is that Aristotle emphasizes god's simplicity, both in Λ.9 and elsewhere. It would seem contrary to the spirit, and perhaps the letter, of this view, for god to have two kinds of goodness.²⁸

However, one might think that the assumed connection between intelligibility and goodness is so dubious as to count against this interpretation. One might think that goodness and intelligibility have no special connection with one another; some good things are utterly unintelligible, while some bad things are perfectly intelligible. But the intuition behind the connection between intelligibility and goodness, while questionable, is reasonable. The intuition is something like this: both intelligibility and goodness consist in order or unity. Whatever is unintelligible, is somehow arbitrary and disorderly, thus bad. Conversely, whatever is bad is disunified and disordered, thus unintelligible. (One should, of course, allow for degrees of both properties.) For better or for worse, I do think that Aristotle accepted something like this. His teleology seems to express such a view. If that is right, that makes it easier to interpret Λ.9 in this way.

It might be helpful to distinguish my construal of the argument here from Kosman's. Kosman thinks that the argument rests on the assumption that what is good about god is god's thinking, such that god's goodness cannot derive from anything except god's thinking. In particular, god's goodness cannot derive from the νοητόν thought, even if the νοητόν is god. Kosman

²⁷I do not have a clear understanding of the significance of καθ' αὐτό and μάλιστα here. "Paradigmatic" is my best approximation for now.

²⁸It is highly speculative, but I would also venture to suggest that the connection among ἐνέργεια, goodness, and νόησις in various passages (including Θ.9, Λ.7, 9, and 10, and *de Anima* III.4–5) supports this view.

writes, “what is required is not that divine thinking think of the best, but that it be the best independent of what it thinks of” (p. 317). I agree that the fundamental requirement is that god be the best, not that it think the best. But I see no reason to think Aristotle accepts the further requirement that god’s νόησις be the best *independent of* what it thinks.²⁹ On the contrary, the argument of Λ.9 is precisely that because god’s νόησις must be the best, it must think the best. The one entails the other on the assumption that the value of νόησις derives from the νοητόν.

It also follows that the νοῦς does not change to thinking something else, because then it would be thinking something less divine. Of course, Aristotle has already argued that the first unmoved mover is unmoved (both *per se* and incidentally). His earlier arguments derived from the role of the unmoved mover in causing there to be change at all. Here in Λ.9, the argument is entirely independent of this, and is based rather on quite general assumptions about god. The problem is simply that “any change would be for the worse” (εἰς χεῖρον γὰρ ἢ μεταβολή; 1074b26–27). It thus constitutes an important new result about god’s changelessness, independent of the arguments in Λ.6 from the first unmoved mover’s *causal* role.³⁰

But he also seems to have in mind a further argument, which does presuppose that god does not change. Why else would he go on to note, “and

²⁹One might think that there is a good reason for this view in the following sentence: “For both thinking [τὸ νοεῖν] and thinking [ἡ νόησις] are there even in what is thinking the very worst thing, so that, if this is to be avoided (since there are also some things it is better not to see than to see) thinking [ἡ νόησις] would not be the best thing” (1074b31–33). Kosman seems to me to think that the consequence (that thinking is not the best) is unacceptable. What is to be avoided is any assumption from which that follows. That would be his reason for saying, “If thought is to be considered as divine, this must be by virtue of the nature of thinking itself, not by virtue of anything that is thought of” (p. 316). But the force of the sentence is precisely the opposite of this. The sentence gives a good reason, accepted by Aristotle, for the conclusion that νόησις, i.e., the exercise of a capacity to think any νοητόν, is not, just as such, the best thing. That is because even someone who is thinking the very worst has νόησις. But, Aristotle silently assumes, such a person is not well off in virtue of that νόησις. They would be better off without it. The νόησις that Aristotle takes for the best thing is not the exercise of a capacity to think any νοητόν. Also, διὰ with the genitive in διὰ τοῦ νοεῖν (1074b20–21) means not that the value of the νοῦς is explained by thinking (as the accusative would have meant), but that the value of the νοητόν is conveyed to it by thinking.

³⁰At *Republic* II 381b10–c10, there is a similar argument. Socrates says that no god would be willing to undergo change, because gods are already perfectly well off, so that any change would be for the worse. This supports the independence of this idea from the specific context of *Metaphysics* Λ.

such like [i.e., switching from thinking one thing to thinking another] would already be a sort of change” (καὶ κίνησις τις ἤδη τὸ τοιοῦτον; 1074b27). This assumption can naturally be drawn from the argument of Λ.6.

Aristotle has now partially resolved the second problem, about what the νοῦς thinks. He has said that it thinks what is most divine and honorable, without saying whether it thinks itself. He now returns (in line 28) to the still unanswered question whether the god-νοῦς might be a capacity to think. A few lines below (34–35), he will announce the completion to the solution of the first problem: god thinks himself. So we expect that he answers the question about whether νοῦς is a capacity in a way that completes the solution of the problem about what god thinks.

But where does Aristotle answer the question at all? The only place in the text where Aristotle might be answering the question is in the phrase, ἡ νόησις νοήσεως νόησις, “its thinking is thinking of thinking” (1074b34–35). The Greek word νοήσεως, a genitive, has the same ambiguity as the English phrase, “of thinking.” That is, “thinking of x ” can mean “thinking x ” (where x is the object thought) or it can mean “ x ’s thinking” (where x is doing the thinking). The phrase has usually been taken to mean that the object of god’s thinking is the activity of thinking. I advocate taking the phrase the other way.³¹ Aristotle is here answering the question whether the νοῦς is a capacity. The answer is no. The subject of the νόησις in question is not a νοῦς, i.e., not a capacity, but is rather the νόησις itself.

This reading of phrase makes the sentence at 1074b33–35 a highly satisfying culmination to the whole passage from the beginning of the chapter. The sentence says, “Therefore, it thinks itself, since it is the best, and its thinking is thinking’s thinking” (αὐτὸν γὰρ νοεῖ, εἴπερ ἐστὶ τὸ κράτιστον, καὶ ἡ νόησις νοήσεως νόησις). The first part of the sentence answers the question what the god-νοῦς thinks, whereas the second part of the sentence answers the question whether it is a capacity. On the other hand, if we take νοήσεως

³¹The only other person who defends this view, to my knowledge, is Joseph de Filippo [3, p. 559]. While we agree about the grammatical role of νοήσεως, we disagree about how this conclusion is supposed to arise from the previous argument. De Filippo does not see how the text interweaves the two impasses and links their solutions. Thus he thinks that the problem of what the divine νοῦς thinks is quite independent of the problem of whether the divine νοῦς is a capacity. That motivation to deny this comes from entirely outside the chapter. Thus de Filippo writes, “this alone [viz. self-thinking] would not guarantee it being the complete and essential actuality demanded by the physical argument of chapters 6 and 7” [3]. Also, I once heard Michael Frede point out the ambiguity in νοήσεως to a reading group. He gave no reasons for the one or the other construal.

to refer to the object of god's νόησις, then the sentence simply repeats itself, for no apparent reason, and there is no explicit answer in the text to the crucially important question whether the νοῦς is a capacity.

Aristotle gives two reasons here why we should accept that the god-νοῦς is not a capacity.

First, the νοῦς cannot be a capacity to think because then the continuity of its activity would be a strain (1074b28–29). Aristotle does not spell out what would be unacceptable about this consequence. A clue comes from Theta 8 (1050b26–27), to which Λ.9 is referring. The wording of the passages is strikingly similar. In the context within Θ.8, Aristotle gives highly general arguments why no eternal activity (ἐνέργεια), even a change, can be the exercise of a capacity. One argument is that eternal activities cannot be the exercise of a capacity because if they were, they would have to stop; and they would have to stop, because the exercising of a capacity is a strain that wears it out (so that the capacity is eventually lost). Here in Λ.9, the problem would seem to be that if the νόησις in question is a strain, then it would have to stop, because the capacity in question, i.e., the νοῦς, would eventually wear out. This could not be true of an eternal νόησις, such as god's νόησις. Thus we see here, again, how Aristotle is drawing simultaneously on assumptions about god and assumptions about νοῦς drawn from the human case. These two sets of assumptions conflict.

The second reason why the νοῦς cannot be a capacity is more firmly rooted in the immediate context. The reason is that there would then be something more divine and more honorable than the νοῦς, namely the thing thought (τὸ νοούμενον; 1074b30). This argument shows how the first two problems—about whether the νοῦς is a capacity to think, and about what it thinks—are intimately connected. If the νοῦς were a capacity to think, then its thinking would be the action of the νοούμενον on it. The problem is that there would then be something else more honorable than the νοῦς, namely the νοούμενον. But the νοῦς in question is god, hence it is best (κράτιστον; 1074b34). Hence its thinking cannot be the action of something else on it. Hence it cannot be a capacity.

This argument presupposes that the νοῦς and the νοητόν are distinct, as was already said above (1074b18–20). The discussion of νοῦς in Λ.7 harmonizes with this. There, Aristotle argues that νοῦς thinks itself to the extent that it comes in contact with and thinks a νοητόν (1072b19–21). Surely he means a νοητόν *distinct from* the νοῦς. Otherwise one can explain much more easily how the νοῦς thinks itself, without making a detour via the νοητόν.

In this spirit, I sketched an argument above that the νοῦς and the νοητόν must be distinct in normal cases of νόησις (where ‘normal’ means that the νόησις is an action, as in the human case).³² The argument presupposes that the νοῦς in question does sometimes think objects distinct from itself. For in that case, the νοῦς has to be structured in such a way that it can take on the determinate character of the various objects that it thinks. If such a νοῦς were itself to have the properties in virtue of which the other thinkable things are thinkable, then it would always inevitably act on itself so as to think itself. So such a νοῦς can only ever think itself by way of its thinking of other things. It is precisely because Aristotle thinks it blazingly obviously how problematic this is—that a νοῦς (a capacity) should think itself in any way except by thinking something else—that he refrained, a few lines earlier, from drawing the obvious conclusion about what god thinks—the conclusion that god thinks himself.³³

Aristotle now draws this conclusion because he is now free to deny that the god-νοῦς is a capacity. And he is free to deny that because he is free to deny that it ever thinks anything other than itself. The god-νοῦς can think itself. The consequence—intolerable in the human case—that it never thinks anything else is not only tolerable but welcome in the case of the god-νοῦς, for we have just seen reasons why the god-νοῦς thinks only what is most beautiful and honorable and good. Conversely, the consequence of accepting that the god-νοῦς is a capacity is that it necessarily thinks things other than itself. And they would therefore be better than it.³⁴

³²See p. 12.

³³This construal also explains why no consideration is given to the possibility that the god-νοῦς thinks itself sometimes and thinks other things sometimes. This is easy to explain if Aristotle is assuming that νοῦς can only think itself if it can think only itself and nothing else. And this follows, as explained, from the agent-patient conception of νόησις.

³⁴Note that the conclusion is that god thinks nothing other than himself. This does not, yet, amount to a Narcissus-like god. For it may be that god is to be identified with a unified system of all essences. (Jonathan Lear espouses this view: “Suppose that God is actively thinking the primary substances to be found in the world” [6, p. 295].) In that case, it might in some sense be true that god thinks everything that is (given that anything that is has some essence or other). I myself would not attribute such a view to Aristotle. There is no direct positive evidence in favor of it. For further discussion, see n. 47, p. 28 and n. 44, p. 27.

4 Second Pair of Problems: The Content and Goodness of Thinking's Thinking (1074b25–1075a5)

The resolution of the opening pair of problems leads to a new pair of problems. It is hard to see that there are two problems, and what they are, because one problem is not stated, and the other is stated tersely. It is thus even harder than for the first pair to see that these two problems are closely linked. The explicit problem is whether god's goodness is due to thinking or being thought. I will return to this problem in a moment.

The implicit problem concerns the content of thinking's thinking. This is the problem that is hinted at by Aristotle's remark, not linked with the context in a logically determinate way, that "knowledge, perception, opinion and reflecting appear to be always of something else, and of themselves merely by the way" (φαίνεται δ' αἰεὶ ἄλλου ἢ ἐπιστήμη καὶ ἡ αἴσθησις καὶ ἡ δόξα καὶ ἡ διάνοια, αὐτῆς δ' ἐν παρέργῳ; 1074b35–36). The precise force of "by the way" is hard to determine, but it is clear that it refers to the sort of self-thinking that was described in A.7: a νοῦς thinks itself in virtue of thinking something else, and itself becomes a νοητόν because its thinking just is its becoming what it thinks. Aristotle is pointing out a striking difference between the god-νοῦς and its νόησις, as he has just described it, and familiar cognitive states.

It is understandable that commentators have thought that the problem here is how it is possible for there to be a cognitive state that has itself as its object. Aristotle has just said that god thinks himself and nothing else. Thus it cannot be that god thinks himself "by the way," if that means "by thinking something else." But the motivation for this alleged problem is very weak. The mere fact that god's νόησις is different from familiar cognitive states is not surprising. To get a problem, we need at least some rational grounds for thinking that cognitive states in general have other things, not themselves, as objects.

I have sketched such a motivation, but the problem that emerged is surely not the issue here, since it has already been solved. Moreover, that problem concerned only cognitive states, such as perception and (human) νόησις, that are the action of an object of cognition on a subject of cognition. Knowledge, however, does not seem to be such a state.³⁵ It is very doubtful whether

³⁵It must surely be connected, somehow or other, with episodes of νόησις that are such,

opinion and reflection are such states. False opinions are particularly problematic. Surely they are sometimes the result of errors in judgment that are not the action of anything on the person judging?³⁶

I suggest that Aristotle is posing a different problem. The problem is not how it is possible for something to think itself at all, or even for a single cognitive state to have itself as object, but rather how to understand the content of such a state. The conception of perception and νόησις as action yields an elegant account of their content: the subject perceives or thinks the object that acts on it.

So how are we to think of the cognitive content of the νόησις νοήσεως? Is this conception of god's thinking not in danger of evacuating it of all content? This is the first, implicit problem. It flows directly from the conception of νόησις as action, and from reading νοήσεως as a subjective rather than objective genitive. If both νοῦς and νοητόν just are the νόησις, then there is no content for the νόησις to be the thought of.

The second problem, too, emerges from the previous pair of problems. For our picture of god's νόησις would now seem to be something like this. The god-νοῦς is like an eternal doctor, eternally sick, eternally healing herself. Of course, any real doctor who heals herself requires an active and a passive capacity, whereas the god-νοῦς has neither. Nevertheless, an action-like ἐνέργεια occurs. As I put it above, "thinks" is a two-place predicate. And it is not only a two-place predicate, but the two places play different roles with respect to the predicate.

How might Aristotle want to express this idea? I think he would say about νόησις what he says about full-blooded actions in *Physics* III.3 (202b9 ff.). Take the construction of a house. The process of building (which the builder carries out) and the process of being built (which the materials undergo) are one and the same event. But they differ in being. Aristotle compares this to the route from Thebes to Athens and the route from Athens to Thebes. These are not two different routes; there is only one route. Going from Athens to Thebes is nevertheless not the same (in being) as going from Thebes to Athens. Building and being built are different in being, but when "they" occur, only one event occurs.³⁷ In both cases, there is a direction ("from

but it is not itself such. We have knowledge of things even when they are not present and we are not acted on by them.

³⁶I do not have a sufficiently clear grasp of διάνοια to say anything helpful about it.

³⁷Perhaps one could put it as follows. If one person is traveling from Athens to Thebes and another from Thebes to Athens, then there is only one route they are traversing. But

Thebes to Athens” or *vice versa*). Likewise, the action comes *from* the agent to the patient (which is where it occurs); the doing and the getting done are thus one, but different in being.

Applying this to god’s νόησις, there is only one event (ἐνέργεια). The thinking and the being thought are one (and presumably neither could exist without the other). Yet to the extent that νόησις is an action, they are different in being. This is, I think, what Aristotle means by, οὐδὲ γὰρ ταῦτὸ τὸ εἶναι νοήσει καὶ νοουμένῳ. The parallel usage of νοήσει and νοουμένῳ is surprising. With νοουμένῳ, we would expect νῶ. But perhaps Aristotle struggling with the limitations of Greek vocabulary. He has just used νοεῖν and νοεῖσθαι, and he wants to use a noun with τὸ εἶναι to refer to the being of something. “The being of thinking/being thought” might sound tolerable in English, but τὸ εἶναι τῷ νοεῖν/τῷ νοεῖσθαι seems to me like very strange Greek. So he uses νοήσει to refer to the being of thinking (active), νοουμένῳ to refer to the being of being thought (passive). And we already have a reasoned account of the value of νόησις conceived as an action. It derives from the νοούμενον. This is because the νοούμενον is the agent.

Where, then, is the problem? Why doesn’t Aristotle simply accept the conclusion that god as subject of thinking derives his value from himself as object of thought? The value of god as νοητόν is transmitted by νόησις to god as νοῦς. This may seem shocking, but it is not at all an outlandish idea. Aristotle himself presents things this way in Λ.7 (1072b18–24).

The problem comes, I think, from the firm conviction that the ultimate and divine principles of reality have to derive their value from what they do, not what is done to them. This conviction finds expression in the comparison of the god-νοῦς with a sleeper: it is supposed to be obviously unacceptable that a god should be inert, inactive. This is justified by god’s being august (σεμνός), as no sleeper is. The word alludes to a passage of Plato’s *Sophist* in which this conviction is made an explicit premise of argument (248e-249a). The ultimate principles of reality must have intelligence, soul, and life. The Eleatic Visitor infers that they must be subject to change, whereas Aristotle

someone might ask about the person traveling to Athens, “What route is he taking?” And someone might ask about the person traveling to Thebes, “What route is he taking?” Those are distinct questions, even if the answers to them refer to the same route. Back to building. If someone asks, “What is happening to those buildable materials?” the answer is, “Building” (οἰκοδόμησις). If someone asks, “What is that builder doing?” the answer is, “Building” (οἰκοδόμησις). And these answers refer to the very same event-token. But still, they are the answers to two different questions.

can say that they are subjects of activities that are not changes (ἐνέργεια). The important point for Λ.9 is the conviction that god's special standing is a matter of what god does, not what is done to god. It must therefore be a matter of god's thinking, rather than than god's being thought. Yet our conception of νόησις makes being acted on, not acting, the bearer of god's value.³⁸

This problem arises because of a way in which νόησις is exceptional among actions. The agent in a case of νόησις is the νοητόν, not the νοητικόν. This is the reverse of the case for housebuilding, where the agent is the house-builder (οἰκοδομικόν) and the patient is the buildable (οἰκοδομητόν). This is not merely a point about the forms of words. The νόησις, like the housebuilding (οἰκοδόμησις), is in the patient, but we think that the patient of νόησις is the one doing the thinking, whereas at the patient of οἰκοδόμησις is the thing being built.³⁹

Aristotle's solution to the problem is to deny that thinking and being thought are distinct in being for a god-νοῦς. Before stating this more or less directly, he prepares the reader by introducing some considerations that also bear on the first problem: how to understand the content of thinking's thinking. Aristotle claims that even for familiar cases of knowledge, the knowledge is the same as its own object. There are several things to note

³⁸Compare Brunschwig, p. 293: "Perhaps Aristotle left it to his students to find the fairly easy answer: that given the general superiority of activity to passivity, the *noēsis noēseōs* is good because it intelligizes, rather than because it is intelligized." Brunschwig expresses the very conviction that is, in my view, one side of the *aporia*. This gives some support to my claim that it could contribute to the problem. But he and I differ about everything else in the interpretation of these and the surrounding lines. First, Brunschwig thinks that the problem is how self-thinking is possible (except "by the way"). I see a different problem. What Brunschwig sees as the solution, I see as one of the sources of the problem. I agree that the solution that Brunschwig attributes to Aristotle is not stated. But that is because it is not Aristotle's solution. The solution is to deny that there is a distinction between activity and passivity in god's self-thinking.

³⁹I am strongly inclined to think that the same is true for perception. It is simply not quite as blatant because αἰσθάνεσθαι is deponent. If this is so, then it might be an implicit concern of Aristotle's in *de Anima* II.5. One might deny this; then one would think that both perception and νόησις (at least to the extent that it functions like perception) are simply passions, events brought about in passive perceivers and thinkers. Aristotle might think that. There would, however, be a significant loss for the interpretation of Λ.9. For I do not see how the "problem" (ἀπορία) concerning the source of god's goodness would have any motivation. Rather than a problem or impasse (ἀπορία), we would simply have an open question about whether god's goodness derives from thinking or being thought.

about this.

To begin with a simple observation: νόησις is being compared with knowledge. This is a natural comparison. Both are elevated cognitive achievements. But, as I already noted, knowledge is not the action of a known object on the knower. (In Aristotelian jargon, it is a first actuality, i.e., a second potentiality: a capacity that is itself the result of a process of change.) I assume that knowledge can only come about if objects of the relevant class act on the knower so as to produce perception or νόησις or perhaps other states, but knowledge is not itself this action. Aristotle uses the example of knowledge to move the reader away from the conception of νόησις as action.

It is also important that Aristotle draws the comparison between νόησις and knowledge—a cognitive achievement—not between νόησις and a knower. (The latter might have been justified since the νόησις under consideration is performed by a νοῦς that is a νόησις.) So Aristotle is focusing, in the human case, on the the sameness of knowledge and its content, not on the sameness of a knower and what it knows.⁴⁰

Aristotle mentions two familiar sorts of case: productive knowledge and theoretical knowledge. Both are cases of qualified sameness of the knowledge and the object known. In the case of productive knowledge, the knowledge is itself the essence of the product (τὸ τί ἦν εἶναι; 1075a2). Such a knowledge is knowledge of something that can be produced, which must be a composite of matter and form. Thus there is a sense in which knowledge and known object are the same: the art of house-building is the knowledge of houses, but is itself also a house, namely, the form or essence of the house. Houses, however, are composites of matter and form, whereas the knowledge is only the form. Nevertheless, there is a sense in which even productive knowledge is knowledge of itself.

In the case of theoretical knowledge of things that are not hylomorphic composites, the sameness of knowledge and known objects is stronger.⁴¹

⁴⁰For this reason, I would take ἡ νόησις in 1075a3 as a predicate parallel with τὸ πρᾶγμα: the λόγος is, on the one hand, the object known and, on the other hand, the νόησις, so that λόγος serves as the middle term to identify knowledge and object known.

⁴¹Aristotle speaks of theoretical knowledge without qualification, but I cannot see how to make sense of his argument unless it is somehow restricted to the knowledge of things that are not hylomorphic composites. Biology would seem to be the same as its object in just the same way as a productive science. Since it is a natural science, it is knowledge of enmattered forms, yet the knowledge obviously does not have the matter it knows. Presumably parts of first philosophy as well as mathematics are theoretical sciences of the relevant sort.

Here, the known object does not have matter. Thus the knowledge and the known object are the same in a stronger sense: both are entities that are not hylomorphic composites. They are, as it were, forms that neither do nor can have matter. I say “as it were” because there are, I think, only forms of hylomorphic composites. However, in the human case, the possessor of theoretical knowledge has acquired their knowledge. This can happen because the knower-in-capacity is rational, i.e., possesses νοῦς. I assume that only hylomorphic composites have capacities.⁴² So the sameness of knowledge and known is qualified, in this case, by the fact that the knowledge is in the possession of a knower that has matter. This is presumably closely connected with the sort of νόησις described in Λ.7, in which the νοῦς *becomes* the same as what it thinks (and ceases to be the same when it stops thinking it). The processes by which a knower acquires knowledge that they did not have before, or a νοῦς thinks something that it did not think before, require capacities and being enmattered. The theoretical knowledge that Aristotle is talking about is a state of sameness between something enmattered (e.g., a human being’s νοῦς or soul) and something that has no matter.

In all these states, the knowledge is knowledge of itself. This is not because, so to speak, knowledge of knowledge is enough to yield knowledge with a content, but because the knowledge of something is the same as the content known. In normal cases, there is no “danger” of completely collapsing the distinction between knowledge and known object, because the knowledge is in a knower that is obviously different from the known object.

There is yet another case, in which the sameness of knower and known would be unqualified: just in case neither is a hylomorphic composite. And precisely this applies to the god-νοῦς. The idea is not that god thinks thinking in general (in abstraction from any determine content), but that god’s thinking has a fully determinate content: itself. This thinking is the same as its own content, without any qualification whatsoever, in just the way one would expect, given the qualified sameness of ordinary knowledge and its content. As with theoretical knowledge’s identity with its object, god thinks himself just by thinking at all, not by thinking himself rather than something else. Thus the phrase, “god thinks himself,” is misleading, because it suggests the thinking is a relation in which god stands to god—a relation in

⁴²The heavenly spheres, for example, seem to possess matter (strange “topical” matter) precisely to the extent that they have capacities (*Metaphysics* H.1 1042b6, Θ.8 1050b20–28).

which god might stand to something else. Yet precisely this is being denied.

One might have hoped for some further specification of the content of god's thinking, over and above its thinking itself.⁴³ But this is a vain and misguided hope. Aristotle attempts to relieve us of this misguided hope via his considerations about the reflexive character of all human knowledge. Each case of human knowledge is also knowledge of itself, because there is some content known which is the same as the knowledge of that content. All knowledge is thus self-reflexive because the knowledge just *is* the object known. In the case of god's thinking, this means that one should not think of god's thinking as abyss that never reaches a bottom (thinking of thinking of thinking of thinking . . .), but as utterly simple, and thus non-relational in a way that no human thinking could be. God's thinking is not a relation at all, not even a reflexive one.⁴⁴

One might object that god's thinking has now turned out to be so radically different from human thinking that we have lost all grip on the sense in which it is thinking at all.⁴⁵ I take this to be an objection to Aristotle's view, not to my interpretation. On Aristotle's behalf, I would say that god's thinking is thinking in a special sense.⁴⁶ Aristotle might have agreed that human thinking and god's thinking both count as thinking only homonymously. The argument of $\Lambda.6$, 7, and 9 proceeded by arguing for the existence of a first unmoved mover, then arguing that it is a νοητόν and a νοῦς and a god, and then arguing that its thinking is radically different from ours. As $\Lambda.7$ said, our own activity of thinking gives us an inkling of what god does. God's activity counts as thinking in that we understand god's activity, to the extent that we understand it at all, in the following way: starting with human thinking, or at least a certain view of it, we solve certain problem and clarify

⁴³Cf. Jonathan Lear's queries, "What does God's thinking himself consist in? Is this a totally empty conception, a mere solution to a puzzle?" [6, p. 300].

⁴⁴In fact, it seems very plausible that if there were some specification of what god's thinks in any other terms (e.g., by spelling out the definitions of all the essences in a unified system of essences), then the content of god's thought could not be the same as the act of thinking that content. For then there would be some other act of thinking that same content (viz. ours) which is not identical with god's act. (I am here assuming that the Averroist interpretation, on which there is only one νοῦς, is false.) This is another reason to doubt the conjecture mentioned in note 34 on page 20.

⁴⁵Cf., again, Lear: "God's activity is thinking, an activity in which we can engage" [6, p. 298].

⁴⁶Cf. [3, p. 560].

certain confusions, to arrive at a clearer view of god's activity.⁴⁷

One might feel that this is not enough to vindicate god's role as the first cause of our orderly and good world (as Aristotle supposes).⁴⁸ This returns us to the second problem of this pair, about the source of god's goodness. The solution to this problem emerges from the very theme we have just been considering. Aristotle spells this out as follows: "The νοῦς and the νοούμενον not being different in cases in which they do not have matter, the νόησις and the νοούμενον will be the same and one" (1075a3–5).⁴⁹ Νόησις and νοούμενον pick up νοήσει and νοουμένω from 1074b38; they refer, again, to thinking and being thought. When both the subject and the object of νόησις have no matter, the thinking and the being thought are the same in being. Thus there is no sense in asking whether god has the good in virtue of thinking or being thought. God's thinking just is god's being thought. This means not only that they are only one single νόησις, but that god's thinking himself is not god's standing, doctor-like, in an agent-patient relation with himself. The νόησις does not have the directed structure that action has. Again, it would be misleading to call it self-reflection or a reflexive relation.

Thus god's thinking turns out to be self-thinking in a yet more radical sense than we have so far seen. It is not only that the subject and object of

⁴⁷This might be a reason to identify god with a unified system of essences (cf. n. 34, p. 20). One might then think that human beings, in thinking the system of essences, engage in νόησις. God and human beings can do the very same thing. This proposal faces grave difficulties. First, I see no hope of reconciling it with the presupposition at 1075a7–9 that human beings, but not god, have νόησις of complex objects. Second, it is in tension with the claim later in Λ.9 that the object of god's thought is not composite. The defender of this reading would have to say that the system of essences is unified in such a way that it is not, in the relevant sense, composite. I am rather skeptical about this move, but cannot definitely rule it out. Third, this view would have the consequence that human beings, when they "think" only some essences, do not engage in νόησις. It would thus commit Aristotle to a version of the Platonic thesis of the unity of knowledge: one has νόησις of anything only if one has νόησις of everything. It is hard to see how Aristotle's doctrine of the independence of various sciences could then be maintained (especially given that he seems to think we can have νοῦς separately of the various principles of various sciences). Fourth, it is incompatible with my interpretation of Aristotle's view about the sameness of god's act of thinking and the content of that thinking.

⁴⁸Cf., yet again, Lear: if god's thinking himself is "a totally empty conception, a mere solution to a puzzle," then "how could Aristotle have believed that God was an unmoved mover of the world?" [6, p. 300].

⁴⁹One should consult the apparatus here. The text has obviously been disrupted. At the moment, I cannot do better than Ross's printed text. The same idea occurs in *de Anima* III.4 (430a2–5).

thinking are the same, but that the thinking is not a subject-object relation between a thing and itself, but is simply the thinking of itself. The νόησις is not a relation of thinking between a thing and itself. Rather, the νόησις is directly of itself.

This further illuminates the sense in which god's thinking is its own content. God's thinking can serve as a determinate content in a way that ordinary thinking cannot, because god's thinking is not a relationship between god and something further. In normal cases, a νοῦς thinks itself precisely by becoming the same as the thinkable object. But god thinks himself just because the object thought and the thinking of it are one and the same νόησις.

Aristotle does not spell out reasons for this because it follows immediately from the results of the first part of the chapter. In ordinary cases, the distinction between νοῦς and νόησις is the distinction between a capacity and its exercise. But Aristotle has already argued that god's νόησις is not the exercise of a capacity for thinking. So there is no basis for distinguishing between the νοῦς and its activity (ἐνέργεια), νόησις. But recall, too, that god thinks himself. So it now turns out that the νόησις is also its own object. Thus there is no basis for distinguishing between the νόησις and its object.

Aristotle now points out the consequence of this fact for the conception of νόησις as action, a consequence that is astonishing from the perspective of Aristotelian physics. He points this out by raising a problem that would arise by failing to see the consequence, the problem of determining whether god's goodness derives from thinking or being thought. Since god is a case of thinking that is thinking this very instance of thinking, there is nothing to choose between.

Even this might not be enough to dispel the inchoate sense that such a god is too anemic to be the good first principle of a splendid world. Surely, one might want to insist, we ought to be able to spell out what it is about god, or god's thoughts, that is so good that he is the final cause of all the good order we can see and understand. But this, I think, is to misunderstand what is, for Aristotle, good and intelligible (and thus qualified to be an unmoved mover). In arguing for god's radical simplicity—such that there is not even a distinction in being between god's thinking and being thought—we have been spelling out precisely god's sublime goodness, in virtue of which god moves, as a final cause, the whole cosmos. One should not think that god has turned out to be a rather anemic good, but that supreme goodness has turned out to be an extreme of simplicity and activity that is incompatible

with the complex albeit orderly goodness familiar in the sublunary realm.⁵⁰

5 Postscript: The Simplicity of the Object of Thought (1075a5–10)

About the concluding lines of the chapter, I would simply like to observe how they, too, emerge naturally from the preceding considerations. The focus shifts from νόησις to νοούμενον. The question is whether the νοούμενον is simple. Aristotle is probably thinking of Plato’s *Timaeus*, where the divine craftsman models the cosmos on a model (παρόδειγμα) that is explicitly said to be complex. This picture is to be rejected. There may be other issues in play as well. Perhaps this is yet another case of Aristotle’s considering the relationship between νοῦς understood on the model of the human case and divine thought.⁵¹ Human beings do not always think composites, but sometimes they do. When they do, their thinking is a good thing not in this or that portion of the time it takes to think the whole, but only in the whole time. Alternatively, Aristotle might be trying to ensure that the reader has fully grasped the lesson of the last solution. The reader should not be thinking that the νοούμενον, which in this case is also a νοῦς and a νόησις, has any complexity. In particular, the reader should not be thinking that the νοούμενον has three “aspects,” as an object thought, as an episode of thinking, and as a thinker. There is not even a distinction among various aspects or roles or anything like that. The νοούμενον is absolutely simple. Aristotle reinforces this by arguing that the god-νοῦς cannot think something composite, because it would change in successively thinking the various parts of the composite (1075a7). Here, as at 1074b27, this is assumed to be unacceptable. Lest we have any anxiety about whether it is problematic to deny the complexity of god as thought object, Aristotle reassures that that in fact everything that has no matter is indivisible.

⁵⁰Thus it may well turn out that “the order of the world is an attempted physical realization of God’s thought” [6, p. 296], even if we deny that “God is actively thinking the primary substances to be found in the world” [6, p. 295].

⁵¹Brunschwig makes a similar suggestion (pp. 300-1).

Glossary of Greek Terms

νοῦς	<i>nous</i>	capacity to think	noun
νοεῖν	<i>noein</i>	to think, thinking	active infinitive
νοεῖσθαι	<i>noeisthai</i>	to be thought, being thought	passive infinitive
νοούμενον	<i>nooumenon</i>	thing that is being thought	passive participle
νοητόν	<i>noēton</i>	thinkable or thought thing(s)	adjective, noun
νόησις	<i>noēsis</i>	thinking	noun

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