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ARISTOTLE AND PLATO ON GOD AS NOUS
AND AS THE GOOD¹

STEPHEN MENN

I

ARISTOTLE PRESENTS HIS DOCTRINE OF GOD as the first unmoved mover as the crown of his metaphysics, and thus of his entire theoretical philosophy. He obviously considers it an important achievement. Yet the doctrine has been peculiarly resistant to interpretation. It is difficult to know where to break in to Aristotle's theology: certainly not with his proof that the first mover must be unmoved. The proof has clearly been developed for the sake of the conclusion and not vice versa. How did this conclusion occur to Aristotle, and why did he want it to be true?

The most promising approach has been to compare Aristotle's theology with the doctrines of his predecessors, and especially with Plato. There is a rough scholarly consensus that there is something Platonic about Aristotle's doctrine of God: not that Plato himself believed that some divine being is the first unmoved source of motion, but that Aristotle, in constructing this doctrine and the arguments for it, was deliberately taking Plato's position and modifying it, to present a reformed Platonism as an alternative to Plato's position. Werner Jaeger thought that Aristotle's doctrine of God as unmoved mover belonged to an early semi-Platonist stage in Aristotle's thought, and that this doctrine emerged from discussions in the Academy. Hans von Arnim thought, to the contrary, that the doctrine belonged to a later period of Aristotle's life, when he was setting up a school in competition with the Academy. They both agree,

¹ The present paper is a sequel to my monograph, "Plato on God as Nous" (forthcoming in the *Journal of the History of Philosophy* Monograph Series), but is intended to stand on its own. I would like to thank Charles Brittain and Joseph di Filippo for helpful comments on the present paper. All translations from Greek are my own.

however, that Aristotle's doctrine emerged from a process of modification of Plato's position, and that Aristotle presented it as his alternative to a Platonic theology which his own and others' criticisms had undermined.²

It is not obvious, however, which "Platonic theology" Aristotle's theology should be compared to. Jaeger suggested that Aristotle's God was in some way a replacement for the Platonic Forms as suprasensible objects of knowledge; but the usual comparison has been with Plato's discussion of soul in *Laws* 10. Plato argues there that every motion proceeds from a mover, and that if (as he assumes) an infinite regress of movers is impossible, the first mover must be moved by itself rather than by something else. This self-moving source of motion Plato identifies with soul, and he thinks that, beyond human and brute souls, some one or more divine souls supply the motions of the heavenly bodies, and thus govern the universe. As Friedrich Solmsen and others have seen, Aristotle is starting with this argument in *Physics* 8, but is modifying it: as Aristotle points out, the first mover need not be self-moved, because it need not be moved at all in order to move something else.³ Aristotle actually agrees with Plato that every object which is moved by another must ultimately be moved by a self-mover, but he argues that every self-mover decomposes into a first unmoved component that moves the other, and a second component that is moved by the first. Thus Aristotle transforms Plato's argument for a self-moved first mover into an argument for an unmoved first mover. Plato's one-or-several divine souls are thus replaced by the one-or-several unmoved movers of the heavenly bodies.

Although this approach obviously says something right about the argument of *Physics* 8, and although it has yielded some results,

² Werner Jaeger, *Aristotle: Fundamentals of the History of his Development*, trans. Richard Robinson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1948), chs. 6 and 8; Hans von Arnim, *Die Entstehung der Gotteslehre des Aristoteles* (Sitzungsberichte der Akademie der Wissenschaften in Wien, Vienna, 1931). For an account of the controversy, see W. K. C. Guthrie, "The Development of Aristotle's Theology," I and II, *Classical Quarterly* 27 (1933): 162-71; and 28 (1934): 90-8.

³ See the chapter "The Unmoved Mover" in Friedrich Solmsen, *Aristotle's System of the Physical World* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1960), 222-49. Solmsen says that "the only antecedent that really matters for his [Aristotle's] own doctrine is clearly the movement of the Platonic world-soul" (p. 247).

I think it is not an adequate approach for understanding Aristotle's doctrine of God, and I think it is taking the wrong point of comparison in Plato. What point of comparison in Plato we find plausible depends on how we describe the being which Aristotle is discussing in *Metaphysics* 12.7, 9, 10, and parallel passages: if we describe this being as the "unmoved mover," then it seems natural enough to see it as a modification of Plato's self-moved movers. This will tell us about Aristotle on unmoved movers, but, for two reasons, it will not tell us anything essential about the object of *Metaphysics* 12.7, 9, 10. First, "unmoved mover" or "first mover" are relational descriptions which do not indicate the essence of the thing which satisfies them. Second, there are just too many unmoved movers. When Aristotle, in *Physics* 8, criticizes and modifies Plato's argument in *Laws* 10, he concludes that souls are unmoved movers and not self-movers. Thus instead of Plato's large plurality of self-moved movers (souls divine, human, or brute), Aristotle has a large plurality of unmoved movers, each initiating some one or many causal chains. The argument from motion to the initiator of motion is sufficient to get to souls, but it is not sufficient to get to a single first principle "on which heaven and nature depend" (1072b13-14), which is what Aristotle is seeking. Even in *Physics* 8, when Aristotle wishes to discover this first principle, he turns away from the argument about an infinite regress of movers, and uses a quite different argument about the need for a single eternal principle regulating the infinite series of unmoved movers (*Physics* 8.6). To understand Aristotle's doctrine of the first principle (as opposed to his general doctrine of unmoved movers), we must identify Aristotle's conception of the specific essence of this principle, not settling for general or relational descriptions.⁴ Once this has been done correctly, I will argue, an approach similar to Jaeger's or von Arnim's or Solmsen's will yield a much deeper and more precise understanding of what Aristotle is doing in his theology.

We may begin by asking what names Aristotle gives to his first principle, names which, unlike "unmoved mover" or "first principle,"

⁴ In what follows I will be concerned only with the first principle (which is called *nous* and the Good), not with other unmoved movers, that is, (a) souls and (b) the movers of the nonequatorial celestial motions. These latter are not called "soul," and they are also not called *nous*; their status is a notorious problem, on which I have some views, but which I will scrupulously avoid in this paper.

will be names of the essence.⁵ Occasionally Aristotle applies to this being the name “god” (*theos*), or somewhat more often, the adjective “divine” (*theios*). These names are not relational, but they have too little content to be really useful. For this reason Aristotle puts no weight on them: the first principle is a god or something divine, but so are the planets, the Olympians, and Heracles. Even if the Olympians do not actually exist, the fact that such beings would be called *theoi* shows that *theos* does not convey anything precise about the first principle. Two names that do convey something about the essence of the principle are good (*agathon*, *tagathon*) and *nous*.⁶ These names might seem to convey no more about the essence than “god” or “unmoved mover,” because these too seem to have very wide extensions: if *nous* can mean the rational soul, then there are at least as many of them as there are human beings, and there are even more goods. As Aristotle says in *Nicomachean Ethics* 1.6 and *Eudemian Ethics* 1.8, “good” is predicated in all of the categories. Nonetheless, it is easy to show that Aristotle takes both “the Good” and *nous* to be names of the essence of God. Now Plato too takes “the Good” as the name of the highest divine principle; and Plato also uses *nous* to name a (different) god, the source of order to the physical world. Plato says in the *Philebus* that “all the wise agree that *nous* is king for us of heaven and earth” (28c6–8), and this *nous* is identical with the demiurge of the *Timaeus*.⁷ I will try in this paper to show how Aristotle takes over, criticizes, and modifies Plato’s doctrines of the Good as the first divine principle, and of *nous*

⁵ I am using a common theological idiom: some names of God are names of his essence, while others are names of his attributes or of his acts directed to other things. In Islam (the tradition I am most familiar with) it is most often thought that “God,” “Truth,” and “necessary being” are names of the essence; that “Living,” “Knowing,” “Powerful,” and “Willing” are names of the attributes; and that “Creator,” “Lord,” “Life-giver,” and so on are names of the acts. It is more difficult and more valuable to know what God is like than to know what He does, and it is yet more difficult and valuable to know what He is (simply learning the names, of course, does not automatically convey knowledge of what they signify).

⁶ I will leave the word *nous* untranslated; I discuss further on what its English equivalent might be.

⁷ I have written at length on this subject in “Plato on God as Nous,” from which I will draw in some of what follows. As I argue there, Plato intends the demiurge of the *Timaeus* as a real being, identical with the *nous* of the *Philebus* and of *Laws* 12; some things may be said about him mythically, but this does not make him a “mythical character.”

as an inferior divine principle, and how he presents as his alternative to Plato's theology his own doctrine of a divine principle which is both *nous* and the Good. After some initial remarks on the Good, I will turn to *nous*, since this name allows an easier approach; but in discussing *nous*, I will try to show how Aristotle connects *nous* with the Good.

II

“The Good” is claimed as a name for God at the beginning of *Metaphysics* 12.10:

We must investigate in which way the universe possesses the good and the best, whether as something separate and itself-by-itself [*kechōrismenon ti kai auto kath' hauto*], or as [the universe's own] order. Or rather, in both ways, like an army? For the good [*to eu*: whatever is responsible for the army's being as it should be] is in the order and is also the general, and more so [*mallon*] the latter: for he is not good on account of the order, but the order is good on account of him. (1075a11-15)

That is, although the order of the universe (like the order of an army) is good, the good in a stronger sense (*mallon*) is something separate existing by itself (like the general of the army). The universe is good because it possesses the good, and this means primarily that it possesses the good as a separately existing first principle, and secondarily, as a consequence, that it is ordered well. When Aristotle asks whether the good is “something separate and itself-by-itself,” he is obviously and self-consciously using Plato's terms, to ask whether there is some one first separate Good-itself through which other things are, in a weaker sense, good; and he is saying that Plato was right. The phrase in which this affirmation is initially made looks tentative, but this is typical of Aristotle and implies no real hesitation. As the rest of the chapter bears out, Aristotle is firmly committed to identifying the first principle as the Good-itself, and is especially eager to defend this identification against Speusippus, who “does not even make good and evil [to be] principles,” whereas in fact “in all things the good is most of all a principle” (1075a36-7). Aristotle is here only carrying out the program of *Metaphysics* 1.2, which had said that wisdom should be the science treating the for-the-sake-of-which, and that “this is the good of each thing, and universally, the best in all nature” (982b6-7).

At this point it is important to avert a misunderstanding. One might think that when Aristotle, in *Metaphysics* 12.10, endorses the Platonic separation of the Good, he is going against his own usual doctrine. Does he not elsewhere criticize Plato in general terms for positing separate entities existing themselves-by-themselves, and does he not (in *Nicomachean Ethics* 1.6 and *Eudemian Ethics* 1.8) apply this critique specifically to Plato's positing of a Good-itself? The answer is no on both counts. Aristotle criticizes Plato for separating things (for example, animals and numbers) which Aristotle thinks cannot exist apart from the conditions of matter; but he does not think this applies to the good.⁸ In *Nicomachean Ethics* 1.6 and *Eudemian Ethics* 1.8 Aristotle criticizes Plato's positing of an "Idea of the good," but this phrase is not necessarily equivalent to "Good-itself." In the *Eudemian Ethics* passage, at least, Aristotle sharply distinguishes between these two expressions. Aristotle begins *Eudemian Ethics* 1.8 by asking about "the best" (*to ariston*), which he immediately identifies with "the Good-itself" (*auto to agathon*) (just as in *Metaphysics* 12.10 he asks about *to agathon kai to ariston*, *kai* being epexegetic: "the good, that is, the best"). He explains that "the Good-itself" means "that to which it belongs both to be first among goods, and to be by its presence the cause to the others of their being good" (*Eudemian Ethics* 1217b4-5).⁹ There are, however, Aristotle says, three different opinions about what this Good-itself is, of which he rejects two and accepts the third: "It is clear that neither (i) the Idea of the good, nor (ii) the common character [i.e.,

⁸ Aristotle does say at *Eudemian Ethics* 1218a34 that the arguments he has given against a Form of the Good constitute *aporiai* against a Good-itself, and so they do; but Aristotle can solve these *aporiai* if he can exhibit some other Good-itself which is not the Form of the Good, and which is immune to the arguments against the Form of the Good. As far as I know, there are no other passages where Aristotle expresses doubts about a Good-itself. *Metaphysics* 9.9, strikingly, denies that evil exists *para ta pragmata* (1051a17-18), while making no such judgment about good.

⁹ These criteria for the *auto to agathon* are reminiscent of Plato's criteria for the *auto to kalon* at *Hippias Major* 289d7-8 (and 289d2-4): We must give in answer "what is the *kalon* thing, through which also all other things are adorned and appear *kala* when it becomes present to them." Hippias's candidates for the *auto to kalon* are rejected either because they are not perfectly *kala* (and so are *aischra* in some respect), or because they fail to make *kalon* something in which they are present. In Plato, it seems, something might be *auto to X* without being an abstracted universal *X*-ness; so it should not be surprising that Aristotle makes use of this possibility.

the goodness immanent equally in all good things] is the Good-itself we are seeking . . . rather, (iii) the for-the-sake-of-which is the best and the cause of the [goods] below it and the first of all [goods], so that this would be the Good-itself” (1218b7–12). Plato’s mistake was not in positing a good-itself, nor in making this separate, but in identifying it with the Idea of the good and not with the final cause.

Aristotle assumes (doubtless unfairly) that an Idea of the good, if there were one, would be simply the result “if someone were to make the common character separate” (1218a9) by positing an “eternal and separate” instantiation of the common character (1218a12–13). Aristotle objects that there is no Idea of the good, both because “good” is equivocal, and because even univocal universal terms do not have corresponding Ideas. Even if there were an Idea of the good, Aristotle claims that this would not be the Good-itself, because it would be merely one more good thing, and “it will be no more good for being eternal.”¹⁰ Thus it will not satisfy the criteria of being the best of all things and the source of diminished goodness to everything else. Aristotle justifies this claim by noting that “that which is white for many days is no more white than that which is white for one day” (*Eudemian Ethics* 1218a13–14; cf. *Nicomachean Ethics* 1096b4–5). This is a deliberate parody of Plato’s remark in the *Philebus* that “a small pure white is whiter than a great mixed white” (53b4–5). As Plato recognizes that we cannot discover the most good (or the most white) by making the familiar good (or white) more spatially extended, so also Plato cannot discover the most good by making the familiar good more temporally extended or even eternal. Aristotle’s proposal is to discover the most good, not by separating and eternalizing the common character, but by finding that for the sake of which the other goods are valued, as exercise is valued for the sake of health. If there is some one ultimate final cause, it will satisfy the criteria of being the best and the cause of goodness to the other goods.

At this stage, I do not want to investigate more deeply whether there is some one final cause satisfying these criteria. My point is simply that Aristotle distinguishes between what a “Good-itself”

¹⁰ *Nicomachean Ethics* 1096b3–4. A parallel passage has apparently dropped out of the manuscripts of *Eudemian Ethics* 1.8; rather than try to reconstruct it, I just cite the *Nicomachean Ethics* parallel.

must be and what an “Idea of the good” would be if there were one; Aristotle joins Plato’s search for a Good-itself while rejecting his positing of an Idea of the good. The Good-itself must be more good (*mallon agathon*) than the other good things, and this means not merely that it must be quantitatively more valuable, but that it must be good in a stronger sense, since the other things become good through it and with reference to it. Aristotle thinks that the existence of an Idea of the good is actually incompatible with the existence of a Good-itself, since there could be an Idea of the good only if it and all other goods were good univocally. If there is a Good-itself, goodness must be a *pros hen* equivocal. Because goodness is a *pros hen* equivocal, it is possible to answer the objection we made above, that “good” cannot name the divine essence, because many things besides God are also good—they are good, but not in the same sense that God is good. God is the only thing that is good in the sense of “good” in which God is good.

This does not get us very far toward understanding how Aristotle conceives of God, because we have not described this special sense of goodness which is predicated only of one being. In *Nicomachean Ethics* 1.6 and *Eudemian Ethics* 1.8, in proving that there is no Idea of the good because goodness is not univocal, Aristotle gives a list of different ways in which goodness is said:

Good is said in many ways, and in as many ways as being. For being (as has been distinguished elsewhere) sometimes means substance, sometimes quality, quantity or time, and also moving and being-moved, and the good is in each of these cases, in substance *nous* and God [*ho nous kai ho theos*], in quality the just, in quantity due measure, in time opportunity, in motion teaching and being taught. So just as being is not some one thing in all these instances, so neither is the good. (*Eudemian Ethics* 1217b26–34; cf. *Nicomachean Ethics* 1096a23–29)

Neither being nor goodness, however, is a merely chance equivocal: being is said primarily of substance or of what a thing is, and then, by reference to this primary sense, it is also predicated in the other categories. Goodness will follow the same pattern: a substance which is good in its essence surely will not derive its goodness from having a good quality or from being in the right place at the right time. Rather, if goodness is indeed predicated *pros hen*, justice and the due measure will ultimately derive their goodness from a relation

to what is good in substance.¹¹ It is, however, more difficult to understand how a substance can be good in its essence than to understand how it can have justice as a good quality; this difficulty is only natural, since the ordinarily accessible substances are not good by being what they are, but only by having accidents which are good.¹² To illustrate how a substance can be essentially good, Aristotle gives *ho nous kai ho theos*. This seems to exhaust what is good in substance, as due measure exhausts what is good in quantity. To understand how the first principle is the Good-itself, or the Good in the primary sense, we must first understand what it means for the first principle to be *nous*.

III

In the phrase *ho nous kai ho theos* of *Eudemian Ethics* 1217b31, and the parallel *ho theos kai ho nous* of *Nicomachean Ethics* 1096a24–25, the *kai* is epexegetic, connecting two names for the same entity rather than two entities. Some commentators have tried to take

¹¹ It may be objected that *Nicomachean Ethics* 1096b27ff suggests that “good” is said by analogy, rather than *pros hen*. I think *both* must be true. The program of showing how all good things are good by reference to the substantial Good is realized in the concluding sentences of the *Eudemian Ethics*: God is the final cause *hou*, the for-the-sake-of-which as the to-attain-which, and all other things are good because of their relation to God. Aristotle does not mean, however, that they have their goodness only extrinsically, by contributing to something else which is intrinsically good: Aristotle seems to believe this only for what is good in relational categories (*to chrēsimon* is the good in the category of *pros ti*; *Nicomachean Ethics* 1096a26), not for what is good in quality or quantity, thus not for health or the virtues. The case of goodness may be compared to the case of health, which is predicated analogically of a man and a horse, predicated *pros hen* of an animal and a diet, but predicated *both pros hen* and analogically of an animal and a heart or a liver. The heart or the liver, like the diet, has its health in contributing to the health of the animal; unlike the diet, it contributes intrinsically. It is true that the health of a heart is to a heart as the health of an animal is to an animal (that is, it is the proper functioning of that sort of thing, occurring when the matter of the thing is in proper subordination to the form). It is not true in any serious sense that the health of a diet is to a diet as the health of an animal is to the animal.

¹² The scholastic doctrine, that all beings are good insofar as they are beings, derives from the neo-Platonists (via Augustine and Boethius), and is incorrect as an interpretation of Aristotle.

nous here as the human mind, but this is hopeless. A human mind, like a body, can be good or bad according to the qualities it possesses, such as “justice” (*Eudemian Ethics* 1217b32) or “the virtues” (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1096a25), listed here as qualitative rather than substantial goods. If *nous* were the human mind, it could not possibly be called a substantial good. In fact a phrase like *ho nous kai ho theos* or *ho theos kai ho nous* must have been a standard way of referring to the first principle. We find *ho theos kai ho nous* at *Politics* 1287a28; *ho nous kai ho theos* in Theophrastus’s *Metaphysics* 7b22–23; *to agathon kai ho nous* in Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* 1075b11. The Epicurean in Cicero’s *De Natura Deorum* 1.13.33 says that Aristotle, in book 3 of *On Philosophy*, while also naming other things as gods, “attributes all divinity to *mens*,” surely translating a Greek *nous*. In addition, the only surviving fragment of Aristotle’s *On Prayer* says that “*ho theos* is either *nous* or something even beyond *nous* [*ē kai epekeina ti tou nou*],”¹³ where presumably Aristotle accepts the former view himself and attributes the latter to Plato (*epekeina tou nou* would recall the description of the Good *epekeina*

¹³ The fragment is quoted by Simplicius, *In De Caelo* 485, 21–22. Some manuscripts leave out the word *kai*, but nothing much hangs on this. There seems to be no reason to doubt its authenticity; other ancient writers mention the *On Prayer*, but nobody quotes from it. The authenticity of the fragment is greatly supported by the fact that it does not say what Simplicius wants it to say: Simplicius wants Aristotle to recognize something “beyond *nous* and *ousia*” (Simplicius, line 20; cf. the context, line 16ff). All Aristotle will say, however, is that some people think God is *nous* and some people think there is a higher god beyond *nous*, and that which of these parties is right does not matter for the particular argument of the *On Prayer*. (Aristotle was presumably arguing, like Plato in the *Laws*, that the gods cannot be bribed by prayers and sacrifices, and that the function of prayer is to assimilate ourselves to the gods rather than to change their attitude to us.) But Simplicius is certainly right that Aristotle’s phrase *epekeina tou nou* is a deliberate reference to Plato’s *epekeina tēs ousias* (against Harold F. Cherniss, [*Aristotle’s Criticism of Plato and the Academy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1944), 592 and 609] who wants *nous* here to mean the human mind, and the thing *epekeina tou nou* to be the divine *noēsis noēseōs*). *Epekeina* is quite an unusual word: it occurs only three times in Plato: twice in the *Republic* and once in the *Phaedo*, there spelled *ep’ ekeina*. The only time in Plato’s writings that it occurs, as here, without the article, is in the *Republic*’s description of the Good. The word apparently occurs four more times in Aristotle, never in a metaphysical sense. Even apart from the fact that the content fits—that is, that the only plausible candidate for a highest god superior to *nous* is the Platonic Good, which Aristotle (against Plato) wishes to identify with *nous*—Aristotle’s language would inevitably recall the Platonic phrase.

tēs ousias at *Republic* 509b9). From these texts and others it is clear that *nous* was a standard way of naming one divine principle, which Aristotle (although not everyone) held to be the highest principle. When two names are given together, each serves to confirm the sense of the other: *ho theos kai ho nous* means “God, I mean [not the gods of the state but] *nous*”; and *ho nous kai ho theos* means “*nous*, I mean [not the human mind but] God.”

Aristotle tries to express what the first principle is by saying that it is *nous*. So to understand his conception of the essence of this principle, we must understand the meaning of the word *nous*, in the sense in which Aristotle applies this word to the first principle. Aristotle does not mean to say that God is simply one instance of *nous* among others, even the first and highest instance. God is also the first and highest instance of *ousia*, but Aristotle cannot refer to the first principle as *hē ousia kai ho theos*. God must be *nous* in such a way that God is the only being which can be called *nous* in that sense of the word. It is of course also true that God is the only being which can be called good in the special sense in which God is good; but Aristotle *explains* this sense of goodness by saying that this is the sense in which *nous* is said to be good. So it seems that the word *nous* could be used without qualification to signify, exclusively, a certain divine being (the word would, of course, have other meanings in other contexts). This is brought out nicely in the opening sentences of *Metaphysics* 12.9:

The doctrine of *nous* [*ta peri ton noun*] involves some *aporiai*. For this seems to be the most divine of the things which are evident to us; but how it [*nous*] would be disposed in order to be such [sc. most divine] involves some difficulties. (1074b15–17)

Ross translates the first sentence as “the nature of the divine thought involves certain problems,” and this is indeed what Aristotle means; but the word “divine” does not correspond to anything in the Greek. Ross’s translation might suggest that thought is just something God has, or at least, if God is thought, that there could be other thoughts which are not the divine thought. In fact Aristotle takes *ta peri ton noun* by itself, without any additional word for divinity, as marking out a certain scientific study, call it “noetics,” namely, the study of the divine being named by *nous*. Aristotle assumes that his audience recognizes a being called *nous*, at least by this point in the argument, and that this is the highest being

they can distinctly conceive. He also assumes, however, that they will not yet have reached agreement on how further it is to be described, so he proceeds to address this further question. It is assumed throughout that *nous* means exclusively God.

What then does *nous* mean so that there should be just one *nous*, so that it should be something divine, and so that it should be self-evidently a substantial good, not just something with good qualities? So far I have avoided giving a translation for *nous*, and it is a very delicate question as to what the word means. Translators have generally been at a loss with the word, and they are often forced to split it up into many different English words.¹⁴ Grammatically, *nous* is derived from the verb *noein*, which can be as broad as “to think,” but which often means, more precisely, to perceive or intuit something intellectually.¹⁵ Even if, however, we have determined the relevant sense of the verb *noein*, this is not enough to determine the meaning of the derived noun *nous*: sometimes *nous* denotes the action which takes place when someone *noei* something, but very often what it denotes is not an action, but something related to the verb *noein* in some other way. We may render *nous* as “thought” or “intuition” when it denotes an action; but translation is more difficult in other cases. If, like many translators, we render *nous* on these occasions as “mind” or “intellect,” we are suggesting that *nous* denotes the thing in us which *noei*, the rational soul or the rational part or faculty of the soul. But in fact, although *nous* can have this sense, it is fairly infrequent that it does, and the translations “mind” and “intellect” have been seriously misleading. You and I each have a mind, and we together have two minds, but it would be extremely unusual to say that we have two *nouses*.¹⁶

¹⁴ Even in passages where Aristotle is using *nous* as a name of God, Ross translates the word at least as “reason,” “thought,” and “mind”—sometimes capitalized, sometimes not. Other writers use “intellect” and “intelligence”; in nontheological senses, we find all of these plus “intuition,” “comprehension,” “sense,” “attention,” and other terms.

¹⁵ This is the sense of *noein* presupposed in the Sun passage of the *Republic*, where *nous* is in the soul as *opsis* is in the body; and again in the Divided Line passage, where *noēsis* is the highest kind of cognition, an immediate apprehension of intelligible beings.

¹⁶ The plural is so rare that it is unclear whether the classical nominative would have been *noi* or *noes*. I know of only one occurrence of *nous* in the plural before the imperial period, Aristophanes frag. 471 Edmonds, and there it is in the accusative—and it doesn’t mean “minds.” Aris-

When *nous* does not denote an action it has two other senses, each more common than the sense “rational soul.” Sometimes *nous* is the internal object which someone *noei*, his thought or intention or plan; this sense is presupposed in the idioms *noun prosechein*, to turn one’s thought or attention toward something, and *kata noun einai tini*, to be in accord with someone’s desires or plan. Most often, however, *nous* is what someone possesses when he acts or thinks rationally, the habit or virtue of rationality, roughly synonymous with *phronēsis*. This sense is presupposed in the idioms *noun echein* and *noun ktasthai*, to possess or acquire reason, to be or become rational. *Nous* in this sense should be translated as “reason” or “intelligence”; it is seriously misleading to translate it as “mind.”

I have argued in a separate monograph¹⁷ that the philosophers before Aristotle who made *nous* a divine principle ruling the cosmos meant *nous* as a virtue, not *nous* in the sense of “mind.” There is abundant evidence that Plato meant *nous* in this sense. I have also argued that Plato’s predecessors, especially Anaxagoras, also meant *nous* as a virtue when they made *nous* a principle. Plato declares in the *Philebus* that “all the wise agree that *nous* is king for us of heaven and earth” (28c6–8). “The wise” would immediately suggest Anaxagoras, described in the *Phaedo* as making *nous* the orderer (*diakosmōn*) of all things (97c1–2). But Plato also interprets other Presocratics (notably Empedocles and Diogenes of Apollonia) as agreeing with Anaxagoras. Plato himself, insofar as he hopes to

tophanes is defending himself against the charge that, although he has made fun of Euripides, he imitates Euripides in his own work. Aristophanes admits to making use of Euripides’ aphoristic style, but says, “I make *tous nous agoraios* less than he does.” *Nous* here are something like Euripides’ moral opinions, the intellectual content of his verses as opposed to their style. According to the material printed in Euripides frag. 1114 Nauck (but doubted by Nauck), the phrase *agoraios nous* is Euripidean, *agoraios* meaning something like “vulgar.” If so, we may well owe our one pre-imperial plural of *nous* to an Aristophanic parody of Euripidean diction. Liddell-Scott-Jones (*A Greek Lexicon*) cite a nominative plural *noes* from Philo 1.86, but I cannot find it there. A search of the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* yields no nominative plurals before Plotinus, who is split between *noes* and *noi*.

¹⁷ Menn, “Plato on God as Nous.” In addition to the evidence there cited, note Diogenes Laertius’s report of Euclid of Megara: “He asserted that the good is one thing, called by many names: for sometimes it is called *phronēsis*, sometimes God, sometimes *nous* and others names”; Diogenes Laertius 2.106.

be wise about corporeal nature, tries to display *nous* as the governor of the physical world. In the *Philebus* itself (28c8–30e8), Socrates and Protarchus digress into cosmology to confirm their predecessors' doctrine (*noun panta diakosmein* [28e3]). In addition, the Athenian Stranger in *Laws* 12 says that certain more recent thinkers, who must be Plato and his colleagues at the Academy, have taken up the old doctrine that “*nous* is the orderer [*diakekosmēkōs*] of all that is within the heaven” (967b5–6), and have supplemented it with a theory of celestial souls. This is just what Plato had done, not only in the *Philebus*, but especially in the *Timaeus*: he gave a detailed hypothetical account of how *nous* may have ordered the physical world (*diakosmōn . . . ouranon* [*Timaeus* 37d5–6]) using celestial souls as its instruments.

My point here is that *nous* is not identified with mind or rational soul in any of these dialogues, and is clearly distinguished from souls in the *Laws* and *Timaeus*,¹⁸ the *nous* that is the cause and orderer of the physical world is instead the virtue of reason. Thus the sages of the *Philebus* say equivalently that *nous* is king (28c7); that “a marvelous coordinating *nous* and *phronēsis* governs” (28d8–9); or that there is a cause “ordering and coordinating years and seasons and months, which would most rightly be called *sophia* and *nous*” (30c5–7). *Nous* is clearly identical with *phronēsis* and *sophia*, and they are clearly a virtue. Although Plato says that *nous* cannot come-to-be or be present in anything without soul (*Philebus* 30c9–10; *Timaeus* 30b3; *Sophist* 249a4–8), this does not mean that *nous* is itself a rational soul; nor does it mean that *nous* does not exist by itself in separation from souls. Thus the passage at *Philebus* 30c9–10 says that “*sophia* and *nous* could never come to be without soul,” and this principle applies to *nous* in exactly the same sense that it applies to *sophia*. Plato is not saying that *sophia* and *nous* are souls, or that these virtues do not exist in separation from souls (Plato of course believes that the virtues exist separately and themselves-by-themselves); he is saying that nothing except a soul can participate in *sophia* or *nous*.

¹⁸ The *Laws* distinguishes the doctrine of soul from the doctrine of *nous* at 966d6ff, and speaks of a soul “taking *nous* as its companion” 897b1–2; the demiurge of the *Timaeus* creates souls.

Plato makes the point equivalently by saying that “the being to which alone it belongs to acquire *nous*, is soul” (*Timaeus* 46d5–6), or that nothing can have *nous* except in soul (*Sophist* 249a4–8). As I have already noted, these phrases “to acquire *nous*” and “to have *nous*” are idiomatic for becoming and being reasonable, acquiring and possessing the virtue of reason. The demiurge of the *Timaeus*, who is Reason itself, wishes to make a world which will resemble him or participate in him as much as possible; this is why he endows the world with a soul, because he recognizes that only a soul can possess or participate in Reason (*Timaeus* 30a2–c1).

Plato attributes to his predecessors, including Anaxagoras, the doctrine that *nous* governs the cosmos; but in *Laws* 12 he tells us that these same philosophers then got into difficulty because they did not recognize that the heavenly bodies were ensouled, or that soul was prior to body. (The point of Plato’s assertions that only soul can participate in *nous* is precisely to show that, if we are to carry out Anaxagoras’s project of showing how *nous* governs the cosmos, we must reject Anaxagoras’s reliance on mechanical causes, and instead assign a cosmic role to souls.) Clearly Plato does not take Anaxagoras to believe that the *nous* which governs the cosmos is a cosmic rational soul, or even that it is a virtue possessed by some cosmic rational soul. It is just a virtue, existing by itself, and somehow governing the cosmos. I have argued that Plato is here interpreting Anaxagoras correctly.¹⁹ Anaxagoras analyzes predicates like “to be hot” or “to be gold[en]” as “to share in, or possess within oneself a portion of the hot,” or “to possess within oneself a portion of gold,” where “the hot” and “gold” signify vast bodies broken up into little bits and distributed throughout the universe, whose portions may be present to greater or lesser degrees in other bodies. Similarly, the predicate “to be reasonable” is expressed, as it may be in quite ordinary Greek, by “to share in *nous*” or “to possess within oneself a portion of *nous*.” The virtue of *nous*, like gold or the hot, is a vast body distributed throughout the universe, by the presence of which animal and cosmic bodies (rather than souls) come to behave in a rationally ordered way.

Plato, of course, believes that *nous* is an incorporeal substance which souls “share in” in some quite different way than by having

¹⁹ See Menn, “Plato on God as *Nous*,” ch. 5.

bits of it physically inside them. Plato's difference from Anaxagoras on the nature of *nous*, however, is just a part of his general difference from Anaxagoras on what, for example, gold-itself or the hot-itself are, and on what it means to participate in them. Both Plato and Anaxagoras, in their different ways, believe that *nous* (that is, that which someone possesses when he *noun echei*, when he is behaving reasonably) is a self-existent substance which comes to be present in other things, and so governs the cosmos. When Plato says that "all the wise agree that *nous* [or *nous* and *sophia*, or *nous* and *phronēsis*] is king of heaven and earth," it is this opinion which he is ascribing to his predecessors, and which he is himself endorsing.²⁰

Aristotle apparently takes the same path, following Plato's model. Aristotle, like Plato, falls into line with "all the wise" in declaring that *nous* is king of heaven and earth, directly ruling the heavens, which in turn govern sublunar things. Aristotle, like Plato, begins by praising Anaxagoras, as against more narrowly materialist philosophers, for proposing *nous* as a principle: "When someone said that *nous* is present, as in animals so also in nature, as the cause of order [*kosmos*] and all orderliness [*taxis*], he seemed like a sober man in contrast to those who had spoken at random before him" (*Metaphysics* 984b15–18).²¹ Here Aristotle, like Plato, seizes on Anaxagoras's assertion *panta diekosmēse nous*, and takes this as programmatic for Anaxagoras's whole philosophy. Anaxagoras was improving on his predecessors, Aristotle thinks, both by positing an efficient cause (a cause of coming-to-be [984b12], the sort of cause whence motion [984b21–22]) where his predecessors had posited only

²⁰ It may seem strange for someone to posit an abstraction of this kind as a divinity, but of course the Greeks recognized, and sometimes built temples to, many divinized abstractions. Euripides, in Aristophanes' *Frogs* 892, prays to a god called *sunesis*, "prudence," and Aristophanes is probably just reporting a funny fact rather than distorting for comic purposes; Aeschines, at the end of his speech *Against Ctesiphon*, prays to "earth and sun and virtue and *sunesis* and *paideia* by which we distinguish the noble from the base." So there is no obstacle to a virtue being a god.

²¹ It is difficult to render this sentence exactly. Aristotle is making a kind of pun in saying that Anaxagoras's predecessors spoke "at random" (*eikē* [i]). Plato had demanded a choice between making *nous* and *phronēsis* the governor of the universe, or consigning it to "the power of irrationality and randomness" (*tēn tou alogou kai eikē(i) dunamin*); *Philebus* 28d6–7. Anaxagoras, in ascribing the governance of the universe to reason, spoke rationally; his predecessors, in citing only irrational and random material causes, spoke at random.

material causes, and also by positing a cause of order, that is, of “things’ being well and beautifully arranged” (*tau eu kai kalōs ta men echein*) (984b11–12; cf. b21–22). Anaxagoras’s *nous* fulfills the functions both of causing motion and of causing order, but what is proper to *nous* is to cause good order. Other things can also cause motion, even if they move toward disorder rather than toward order, but *nous*, just because it is *nous*, is “the cause of [cosmic] order and all orderliness.”

Aristotle thus takes Anaxagoras’s *nous* to be much the same thing as Empedocles’ *philia*, since Empedocles said (or *should* have said [985a4–5]) that *philia* is the cause of goods and *neikos* of evils. Thus Empedocles may be said to have made the good (and also, unlike Anaxagoras, the evil) a principle, “if indeed [a single thing which is] the cause of all goods is the Good-itself [*auto tagathon*]” (985a9–10). Aristotle thus concludes that “those who speak of *nous* or *philia* posit these causes as the good” (988b8–9).²² *Nous* and *philia* here are clearly not rational souls (why should these always produce good effects?), but virtues or principles of goodness operating throughout the universe.²³

²² In parallel texts at *Metaphysics* 1075b1–11 and 1091b8–12, Empedocles and Anaxagoras are explicitly named and yoked together.

²³ Aristotle does say in *De Anima* 1.2 that Anaxagoras identified *nous* and soul; but Aristotle fails to convince even himself. Anaxagoras “is not clear” on the subject; *De Anima* 404b1. He “seems to say that soul and *nous* are different . . . but he uses them as a single nature”; 405a13–15. Aristotle is trying to find what Anaxagoras says about soul; it looks as if Aristotle has found nothing at all on the subject in Anaxagoras, and is guessing (there is certainly nothing to be found in the extant fragments). The argument that Anaxagoras more or less identified *nous* and soul is that “he assigns to the same principle both knowing and moving [*kinein*], when he says that *nous* moved the All”; *De Anima* 405a17–18. *Nous* is the principle of knowing, and soul of *kinein*, so Anaxagoras must have identified soul and *nous*. Aristotle gives a fuller version of the argument at 404b1–6: “Anaxagoras is less clear about [soul and *nous*]. For he says in many places that *nous* is the cause [*to aition*] of [what is done] beautifully and rightly, but elsewhere he says that this [*touton*] is soul, for he says that this is present in all living things both great and small, both noble and ignoble. But *nous* in the sense of *phronēsis* [*ho ge kata phronēsin legomenos nous*] does not seem to be present similarly in all living things; not even in all men.” This passage shows a great deal both about what Aristotle found in Anaxagoras and about the presuppositions with which Aristotle approached the text. The key point to note is that the antecedent of *touton* in 404b3 is unambiguously the masculine *ton nous*, not the neuter *to aition* (the Oxford translation fudges the issue so as to suggest the

Aristotle praises Anaxagoras for his program of explanation through *nous* and the good. Then, of course, Aristotle, like Plato, criticizes Anaxagoras for failing to carry out his own program, for “making no use” of *nous* (*Metaphysics* 985a17; cf. *Phaedo* 98b9) and falling back on material causes: “Anaxagoras uses *nous* as a device [*mēchanē*] for producing the cosmos, and whenever he is at a loss to say for what cause [*aitia*] something should be necessary, then he drags in *nous*, but otherwise he assigns anything rather than *nous* as a cause for the things which come to be” (985a18–21).²⁴ Connected

opposite construal). Anaxagoras often says that *nous* is the cause of what is done beautifully and rightly, that is, he is using *nous* in the proper sense, to mean a virtue. But then, Aristotle complains, he seems to turn around and use *nous* in the sense of “soul”: he says that *nous* is present even in worms and the like, and this is certainly not true of “*nous* in the sense of *phronēsis*,” a virtue which even most human beings don’t have. Really, however, it is quite clear that Anaxagoras meant one thing by *nous* throughout, and that he thought it was present in various concentrations in different parts of the universe, although not everywhere, subjecting each of them to varying degrees of rational control. *Nous* never means soul, and if Anaxagoras said that there was a small amount of pure rationality in worms, this should not be expurgated. If Anaxagoras did say somewhere that *nous* and soul are the same thing, then he meant what Diogenes of Apollonia meant when he said (frag. 4) that air is both soul and *noēsis* to animals, namely, that the presence of one and the same principle causes both vital motion and intelligence (Diogenes argues from what happens if you remove the air). Plato says, in a not very serious context (*Cratylus* 400a8ff), that Anaxagoras made “*nous* and soul order and hold [*echein*] the nature of all other things,” implying that Anaxagoras identified *nous* and soul. But here *nous* is associated with *diakosmein* (as usual), and soul is associated with *echein*. This association is used to argue that the word *psuchē* is short for *phusechē*, “nature-holding.” There is probably nothing genuinely Anaxagorean behind this at all (Plato has taken the usual catch phrase *noun panta diakosmein*, and put in the words *psuchē*, *echein*, and *phusis* to insinuate the proposed etymology for *psuchē*). If there is, then the point is that one and the same substance is responsible both for introducing order into things and for holding things together, the former being a characteristic function of *nous*, and the latter of soul.

²⁴ The implication is that Anaxagoras uses *nous* as the tragedians use a *deus ex machina*: whenever they are at a loss. This is what Plato says the tragedians do (*Cratylus* 425d5–6), and he there compares this to what a philosopher might be tempted to do, bringing in a god to explain the first imposition of names. Plato does not seem to use this comparison in attacking Anaxagoras, however, though of course the substance of Aristotle’s complaint echoes the *Phaedo*. (Plato compares Socrates’ judgment on the folly of human pursuits to the pronouncements of a *deus ex machina* at the end of a tragedy, *Clitophon* 407a6–8, but this seems to be an unrelated comparison. Something like the *Clitophon* comparison may also be implied at *Sophist* 216c2ff, esp. c5–6.)

with this also is the charge that Anaxagoras and Empedocles, although they posit *nous* or *philia* as the good, do not make it a cause *qua* good, since “they do not say that anything either is or comes-to-be *for the sake of* these, but rather that they are the sources of motion” (988b9–11).

Aristotle echoes the disappointment of Socrates in the *Phaedo*, who “would never have thought that [Anaxagoras], while saying that [the heavenly bodies] have been ordered by *nous*, would introduce any other explanation [*aitia*] for them except that it was best that they should be as they are” (*Phaedo* 98a6–b1). So Aristotle, like Plato in the *Timaeus*, undertakes to carry out Anaxagoras’s program better than Anaxagoras himself had done, explaining the order of the physical world from *nous*, without citing material causes as anything more than the *sunaitia* which *nous* adapts for its purposes, and without abandoning the program of explanation through the best.

Aristotle, like Anaxagoras and Plato, posits *nous* as a separately existing substance which is the ultimate cause of motion, order, and goodness to the physical world: Aristotle praises Anaxagoras for making *nous* impassible and unmixed, for only thus can it move and master the world (*Physics* 256b24–27). *Nous* exists itself-by-itself, which means above all that it is separate from the things which merely *have nous*: there is not the least suggestion anywhere in Aristotle that the first principle is a soul, that is, the sort of thing which would *have nous*.²⁵ On the contrary, Aristotle insists that

²⁵ To avert confusion, I should note one controversial thesis which I take my claim to imply, and another which I do not take it to imply, and which I do not believe to be true. I do mean to imply that Aristotle did not identify the first principle, *nous*, with a soul at *any* stage in his career. Von Arnim’s attempts to find this identification in the fragments of the *De Philosophia*, and in parts of the *De Caelo*, are at best unsupported and often directly contradicted by the texts. Furthermore, von Arnim’s reasons for finding this position plausible (to show Aristotle gradually moving away from Platonism) collapse once we realize that Plato’s world-governing *nous* is not a soul. On the other hand, I do *not* mean to imply that Aristotle, at any stage in his career, thought that the heavenly bodies did not have souls; it is just that these souls are not identical with the first principle. Aristotle clearly asserts in the *De Philosophia* and the *De Caelo* that the heavenly bodies have souls; *De Caelo* 2.1, which has been taken to say that they do not have souls, says nothing of the kind, and *Metaphysics* 12, by saying that the heavens desire, presupposes that they have souls. It would, in the historical context, have been bizarre for Aristotle to reject the

its *ousia* is *nous*, that is, that *nous* is what it is and not what it has. He is even willing to say that its essence is *noēsis*, to show unambiguously that the first principle is not a psychic faculty, which should strictly be said to have (not to *be*) *nous*, or, if in a sense it *is nous*, at any rate *has noēsis*. The first principle is rather the *noēsis* itself which a psychic faculty might have (cf. *Metaphysics* 1074b17–22, 28–9).²⁶

We may have difficulty, however, in accepting the apparent conclusion that for Aristotle, as for Plato, it is the *virtue* of *nous* (which Aristotle recognizes, without discussing its nature, in *Nicomachean Ethics* 6.6) which is the first principle. *Nous*, in the sense in which it is the principle, is a single separately existing substance; and one might think that Aristotle does not regard the virtues as being such separately existing substances. Plato, of course, does regard the virtues in this way, but this is because of his theory of Forms. Just as things have other predicates by participating in separate Forms—being hot or golden or three by participating in the Hot-itself or Gold-itself or the Three-itself—so also they are virtuous by participating in the virtues—just by participating in Justice-itself, rational by participating in Reason-itself. Aristotle, however, does not believe in Forms, at least not if they are taken to exist separately, and he rejects Plato's way of explaining predication. Aristotle denies that things are hot or gold or three through participating in a separately existing Hot-itself or Gold-itself or Three-itself, so he should

doctrine that the heavenly bodies were ensouled—a doctrine which was at the time not in any way irrational or reactionary (as it is now, or was when Thomas Taylor held it), and which was rejected only by Epicurus, who rejected the science of astronomy along with it. The view that Aristotle did reject this doctrine seems to stem (i) from a misguided attempt to make Aristotle agree with modern scientific common sense; and (ii) from the difficulty of seeing how Aristotle could maintain both that *nous* causes the celestial rotations, and that a soul distinct from *nous* causes the celestial rotations. Aristotle has no more difficulty maintaining these two propositions, however, than he does maintaining that the soul of the artisan causes the production of the artifact, and that the *art* causes the production of the artifact.

²⁶ While I cannot pursue the point here, it should be evident that the *nous* of *De Anima* 3.5, the cause of *energeia* to the psychic *nous* of *De Anima* 3.4, is *nous* in the strict sense, that is, God. I hope that my comments in what follows on Aristotle's concept of God as *nous*, although not directly addressing the *De Anima*, will help to make the Alexandrist theological interpretation of *De Anima* 3.5 more intelligible and plausible.

also deny that people are intelligent through participating in a separately existing Intelligence-itself.

I think this is in fact a misleading picture of Aristotle (perhaps it is also a misleading picture of Plato). For Aristotle, as for Plato, “it is evident that there is some eternal and unmoved substance separated from the sensibles” (*Metaphysics* 1073a3–5), and Aristotle is willing to describe this in deliberately Platonic terms as “something separated and itself-by-itself” (1075a12–13). Aristotle certainly rejects many Platonic claims of the type “The *X* exists separately and itself-by-itself,” for example, “There is a Hot-itself, Gold-itself, Three-itself, existing separately from the many things which are hot, gold, three”; but he cannot be concerned to reject *all* claims of this type, since (as we have seen) he accepts the claim that there is a Good-itself existing separately from the many things which are good. Thus it is a mistake to ascribe to Aristotle a general concern to avoid the Platonic separation of predicates. Aristotle’s attitude toward separation depends on the nature of the predicate which is being separated. Aristotle’s general concern is not to avoid separation, but to avoid applying to divine, immaterial substances predicates which are in fact applicable only to things bound up with matter. Aristotle frequently charges the Platonists with improperly assimilating incorruptible things to corruptible things. He implies, polemically, that they do this because, lacking any genuine acquaintance with the separate substances, they are forced to describe these things in terms of the things down-here, which are the only ones they know. I will simply cite two key texts:

[The theory of forms] has difficulties in many places, but what is most absurd is to say that there are natures beyond those which are within the heaven, but to say that these are the same as the sensibles, except that the former are eternal and the latter are corruptible. For they say that there is a man-himself and horse-itself and health-itself, and nothing else, doing something close to those who said that there were gods, but in human form [*anthrōpoeideis*]: for neither did those people [the poets] make [the gods] anything other than eternal men, nor do these people [the Platonists] make the forms anything other than eternal sensibles. (*Metaphysics* 997b5–12)

Those who speak of Forms in one way speak rightly by separating them, if indeed these are substances; but in another way not rightly, because they say that the one-over-many is a Form. And the reason is that they cannot tell what the substances of this kind are, the incorruptible ones beyond the individuals and sensibles: so they make these the same in species [or form, *eidos*] with the corruptibles (for these we know), man-himself and horse-itself, adding to the sensibles

the word “itself.” But even if we had never seen the stars, nonetheless (I deem) there would still be eternal substances beyond those we knew; so also in the present case, even if we cannot tell what they are, it is still doubtless necessary that there should be some. (*Metaphysics* 1040b27–1041a3)²⁷

It is clear from these passages, and from many others, that Aristotle is willing to adopt as his own the Platonic search for separate intelligible substances, and within the context of this joint search, to accuse his Platonic companions of being too ready to settle for something less than the real object of their search, that is, to accept a sensible thing disguised as a separate substance. Aristotle turns against Plato the criticisms which Plato had used against Homer, Hesiod, and others for their anthropomorphic or otherwise unworthy representations of divine things. This does not always lead Aristotle to deny that there is a separately existing divine *X*-itself, by relation to which the many *X*'s become *X* in a lesser degree: it depends on whether *X* is the sort of predicate which essentially depends on matter, or whether it is, like “good,” the sort of predicate which would also apply to immaterial things, differently but in the strongest possible sense. Aristotle *always* rejects, however, the claim that the separate *X*-itself is the Form or Idea of *X*. As we have seen with respect to the Good, Aristotle assumes that the Idea of *X* (if, as we have no reason to believe, there were such a thing) would be merely an eternal separately existing instantiation of the predicate *X*; and “that which is white for many days is no more white than that which is white for one day” (*Eudemian Ethics* 1218a13–14). If, for a given predicate *X*, there is a separate *X*-itself,

²⁷ This passage is particularly biting. “Even if we had never seen the stars” means “even if we had never emerged from the cave.” (Aristotle gives a version of the cave allegory, in a fragment transmitted by Cicero at *De Natura Deorum* 2.27.95, which stresses the stars as the supreme object of contemplation from which the cave-dwellers are cut off.) Aristotle is suggesting that the Platonists, although they have recognized that we are living in a cave in the sensible world, have only fooled themselves into thinking they have found a passageway out: in fact they “have never seen the stars” and are still in the cave, although they have come to believe that some of the things they have seen down here are really the eternal objects up there. In the context of *Metaphysics* 7, Aristotle is offering this as a piece of consolation: Even though we have not managed to see the “stars” (separate immaterial substances) by looking for Forms, no doubt there are such substances, and we may be able to find another way which leads to them. This is what Aristotle claims to do in *Metaphysics* 12.

this must be *X* in a higher and more primary way than the other *X*'s are, and so we cannot acquire or communicate knowledge of it simply by abstracting out the *X*-ness inherent in the ordinary things which are *X*. So if there is, for example, a separate Justice-itself or Wisdom-itself, certainly these must be just or wise, but they must be (not merely quantitatively) more just and more wise than just or wise human beings, and than just or wise human qualities or actions. Thus if there is indeed a Justice-itself, it cannot be an Idea of Justice.

If there were a separate Horse-itself, it is hard to imagine what it could be except an immortal horse, that is, an Idea of horse in the debunking sense in which Aristotle understands "Idea." We might, of course, say that the Idea of Horse is horse in a different and higher sense than that in which ordinary sensible horses are horses. Aristotle charges, however, and very plausibly, that we would not mean anything at all by this, that we would have no genuine acquaintance with, and thus no genuine conception of, the allegedly higher sense of horseness which applies only to the eternal Horse-itself. From Aristotle's point of view, there is a better chance of discovering an eternal Justice-itself or Prudence-itself. To be sure, "just" and "prudent," as they are ordinarily predicated of human beings, signify qualities, and qualities are even less capable of separate existence than is a material substance like a horse. If there is a separate Justice-itself or Prudence-itself, these would have to be not qualities but substances. Yet it is only if we seek these things as the essence of justice or prudence in just and prudent people that we are stuck within the category of quality; and there is another and more promising way of looking for Justice-itself.

The moral and intellectual virtues are, for Aristotle, *hexeis*, and this means not merely that they are habits or states, but also that they are possessions, that they consist in having something. A person is just by having justice, intelligent by having *nous*, a geometer by possessing geometry, or by possessing particular geometrical theorems or *diagrammata*.²⁸ This analysis of the virtues does not

²⁸ For Aristotle's analysis of virtues as havings, see my article "The Origins of Aristotle's Concept of *Energeia*: *Energeia* and *Dunamis*," *Ancient Philosophy*, forthcoming. Aristotle takes this analysis from Plato's *Theaetetus* and *Euthydemus*, both of which, using different terminology, distinguish between merely having some object, such as a piece of

presuppose any particular theory of what the objects are that the mind possesses. Aristotle allows a wide variety of relations to be described by the phrase “*X* has *Y*” (or, equivalently, “*Y* is in *X*” or “*Y* belongs to *X*”): in each case, *X* is stably related to *Y* in some way that enables *X* to use or exercise (*chrēsthai*) *Y* or act according to (*energein kata*) *Y*. We are just through having justice, whatever justice may be: if it turns out that we are just through some relation of having to some separate substance, this substance will be Justice-itself. If, on the contrary, we are enabled to exercise justice only through a relation to something inseparable from the conditions of matter, then there will not be a separate Justice-itself.

In fact, Aristotle thinks that some virtues exist separately and others do not; or rather, he thinks that only *nous* exists separately, and that virtues which are not equivalent to *nous* are all inseparable from matter.²⁹ But even if only one virtue exists separately, this is still enough to show that Aristotle was not committed to any general principle implying that the virtues cannot exist apart from the souls (that is, the forms of living bodies) which possess these virtues. Aristotle does not, in principle, reject the Platonic separation of the virtues, but rather subjects it to a critical examination which yields different results for different virtues. Instead of asking how Aristotle can allow the virtue of *nous* to exist apart (for there is nothing intrinsically problematic in this), we should ask why he thinks that the other virtues *cannot* exist apart from the conditions of matter. I will not explore this question here in depth, since my concern is simply to eliminate an objection to interpreting Aristotle as agreeing with Plato and Anaxagoras that the *nous* which orders all things is the virtue of reason, rather than a soul or a mind. I will, however, cite one passage which, although it does not precisely

knowledge, and actually using it. As I show in the article cited, this distinction between having and using is the starting point for Aristotle’s distinction between *hexis* and *energeia*. In early works such as the *Protrepticus*, Aristotle frequently says *chrēsis*, “use,” where in later works he would say *energeia*.

²⁹ This does not necessarily imply that there is only one separately existing virtue, since *nous* might turn out to be a generic virtue including several distinct specific virtues. I suspect that this will turn out to explain the status of the movers of the nonequatorial celestial motions: they are the arts or intellectual virtues which enable the celestial souls to move their respective spheres. I will not pursue this point here, however, and for the remainder of this paper it can be assumed that *nous* is a single specific virtue.

formulate or precisely resolve the question whether the virtues can exist separately, does help to show the connection between Aristotle's critical review of Plato's separation of the virtues and Aristotle's critical review of Plato's separation of the forms of sensible substances. As *Metaphysics* 997b5-12 shows, Aristotle thinks that to posit an eternal Man-himself or Horse-itself is to give an anthropomorphic or theriomorphic description of a divine entity. The anti-anthropomorphic tradition gives Aristotle his starting point for criticizing assertions of separation: If X depends on the conditions of matter (especially of generable and corruptible matter), then X should not be predicated of a divine being, and X should not be said to exist separately. This principle clearly applies to men and horses, but also, less obviously, to some of the virtues:

We have supposed that the gods are most of all blessed and happy; so what kind of practical action is it fitting to attribute to them? *Just* actions? They would seem ridiculous, making contracts and returning deposits and the like. *Brave* actions, submitting to fearful things and accepting danger because it is noble? *Generous* actions? To whom will they give? It is absurd if they too are to have money or something of the kind. And *temperate* actions, what would they be? The praise is vulgar, for they do not have bad appetites. If we examine, all these things seem to be about actions which are petty and unworthy of the gods. Yet everyone has supposed that they live, and so that they act: surely they are not asleep like Endymion. But if someone is alive and practical action is taken away, and still more productive action, what is left to him except contemplation? So the activity of God, distinguished by blessedness, would be contemplative activity. (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1178b8-22, my emphasis)

This passage alone does not commit Aristotle to thinking that intellectual virtue exists itself-by-itself, independently of the things which participate in it; it does commit him to thinking that the moral virtues and the productive arts do not exist separately in this way. Through all the debates about the Forms or their replacements, it was taken for granted that Justice-itself, if there is such a thing, must be itself most just, as a Good-itself must be most good. So if the gods cannot be just, Justice-itself cannot be a god, and this means that it cannot exist separately from matter. Our passage from the *Nicomachean Ethics* seems to leave open the case of theoretical virtue: perhaps it exists just by itself (certainly we have seen no arguments against this), but perhaps the virtue is shared by one or more gods and by some human beings without existing as an individual apart from these many participants. But it is clear from

other Aristotelian texts that intellectual virtue does exist itself-by-itself. There is, of course, a plurality of intellectual virtues, knowing different objects, and the gods will not possess all of these. For any given virtue *V*, however, if *V* is possessed by some god *G*, at least if *G* is divine in the strictest sense, being purely immaterial and not merely everlasting like the heavenly bodies, then *V* must exist itself by itself. For an immaterial being is pure *energeia*, with no *dunamis*: consequently, *G* does not simply *have* the virtue *V*, in the sense in which a human being has *V* (which implies having a *dunamis* to act according to *V*). Instead, to avoid the implication of potentiality, *G* must itself *be* the activity of *V*. Thus in the passage we have already cited from *Metaphysics* 12.9, Aristotle argues that the substance or essence of the first principle is *nous*, in the sense of *noēsis*:

If it [*nous*] intellectually-perceives [*noei*] nothing, what in it would be worthy of worship? It would be as if it were asleep. But if it does intellectually-perceive, and something else is master over it (for the substance which it is is not *noēsis* but *dunamis*), it would not be the best substance: for what is valuable belongs to it through intellectually-perceiving [sc. and therefore it would acquire value from something else, namely the thing it perceives, and so this must be more valuable, contrary to hypothesis]. (1074b17-21)

Aristotle rejects both the possibility that *nous*-itself *noei* nothing, and the possibility that it *noei* as a *dunamis* which is brought to *energeia* by something outside it. He accepts the remaining possibility that its substance is *noēsis*. This is the only way to solve the problem posed at the beginning of the chapter, namely, of how *nous* is to be described in such a way that it will be most divine. The god is not simply a being which has intellectual virtue, but rather he is the intellectual virtue existing itself-by-itself.³⁰ This

³⁰ Note that God (*nous*) is identified with the Good, which is the object of his knowledge and the goal of his productive activity, on the ground that “the art of medicine is somehow the same thing as health”; *Metaphysics* 1075b10. God is here compared, not to a doctor, but to the medical art itself. A few lines further down (1075b20ff) Aristotle says that views other than his (for example, those of Anaxagoras, Empedocles, Plato) are forced to admit “that there is something contrary to wisdom and to the most valuable knowledge,” while Aristotle himself asserts that “there is nothing contrary to the First”; 1075b21-22. Aristotle’s meaning is clear enough: “Wisdom and the most valuable knowledge” are God himself, not (as Ross tries to make out) our knowledge of God. Empedocles had ad-

virtue, considered in itself, is not a *hexis* or *dunamis*, but an *energeia*. The god just *is* this *energeia*, while we can (at best) *have* the virtue as a *hexis*, allowing us to be brought from *dunamis* to *energeia* by something outside ourselves.

It is important to see that the virtue the god is is the same as the virtue we have or participate in: when we intellectually-perceive what the god perceives (namely, the god himself), we possess the very same intellectual virtue which the god possesses, that is, the same science specified by the same content. The difference is that the god possesses it in a stronger way, by being it; we possess it through a nonidentity relation, by perceiving it, since the virtue we possess is the same as the object we perceive, namely, the god:

In some cases the knowledge is the object: in the productive [arts] the knowledge is the essence and the substance without the matter; in the theoretical [sciences] the *logos* is both the object and the *noēsis*. So where the *nooumenon* and the *nous* are not different, in things which do not have matter, it will be the same thing, and the *noēsis* will be one with the *nooumenon*. (*Metaphysics* 1075a2-5)

Aristotle is not maintaining the bizarre thesis that an ordinary human knower is the same as the object of knowledge. He is maintaining that the *knowledge* is the same as the object of knowledge (without its matter, if it has any), and that if the knowledge exists separately the knowledge itself will be most knowing. Aristotle agrees with Plato that the self-subsisting virtue is itself most virtuous, and that human beings become virtuous, to a lesser degree, by participating in this. Aristotle disagrees about which virtues

mitted a contrary to *philia*, namely, *neikos*, and Aristotle had argued in *Metaphysics* 984b32ff that Anaxagoras logically should have admitted a contrary to *nous* in order to explain the existence of things contrary to the good. Plato contrasts the soul “which takes *nous* as its companion” and produces good works with the soul “which is conjoined with *anoia*” and produces evil works as if *nous* and *anoia* were two contrary Forms; *Laws* 897b1-4. Aristotle does not have to admit that his *nous* has a contrary, because it is not a formal or efficient but a final cause, and there is no final cause of evil works *qua* evil, as there is of good works *qua* good.

Eis to enantion at 1075b23-4 should be retained: the point is that an ignorance contrary to the highest knowledge would be contrary to a contrary, not that it would be about a contrary. Aristotle gets a *reductio ad absurdum*: if there were an ignorance contrary to *nous*, then *nous* would itself be a contrary; but “all contraries have a matter, and these things are in potentiality” (1075b22-23), so *nous* would not be pure *energeia*. If Ross’s translation were right, there would be no argument.

exist separately, throwing out the arts and the moral virtues and many of the intellectual virtues as well, always on the ground that they presuppose matter (like knowing the essence of snubness) or potentiality (like discursive science). Again, Aristotle denies that a separately existing knowledge is the Idea of knowledge, because this too would involve potentiality: "If there are such natures or substances as the dialecticians describe the Ideas as being, there will be something much more knowing than Knowledge-itself and more moved than Motion, for these [ordinary instances of knowledge and motion] are more *activities*, and those [the Ideas] are [merely] powers for these" (*Metaphysics* 1050b34–1051a2). For an Idea cannot be changing in its own right, and the relational Idea of knowledge would not in itself be related to anything in particular.

Aristotle takes it as an absurd conclusion that Knowledge-itself should not itself be most knowing; and so, avoiding the doctrine of Ideas, he tries to exhibit a separate Knowledge-itself which is more knowing than we, because it is more activity. It must be the activity of knowing something in particular, namely the highest object of knowledge, namely itself. When we participate in a separate Knowledge this is what we share in knowing. Aristotle is here altering Plato's doctrine in order to avoid attributing to the gods anything which would depend on the conditions of matter or on potentiality. These alterations do not change the core of the doctrine, however, which is that virtue, the best virtue, exists by itself as a separate substance, and is the cause of order in the sensible universe.

IV

It is clear from what has been said that Aristotle's doctrine of the separate virtue *nous*-itself is related to Plato's doctrine of *nous* in much the same way that Aristotle's doctrine of the separate Good-itself is related to Plato's doctrine of the Good. Aristotle agrees that each of these things can exist separate and itself-by-itself, because they are not dependent on the conditions of matter. He rejects the claim that the *X*-itself is the Form of *X*, because the Form of *X* would be no more *X* than corruptible *X*'s are, and because it would not contribute causally to the *X*-ness of other things. Aristotle tries to describe the Good-itself, or *nous*-itself, in such a way that

it is most good, or most knowing, and the source of goodness or knowledge to other things. What is not yet clear, however, is why Aristotle thinks that *nous* and the Good are the same thing. A separately existing virtue would certainly be good, but it is not obvious that it would be the Good-itself; the fragment of *On Prayer* offers the alternative, "God is either *nous* or something even beyond *nous*," and Plato seems to have asserted that the highest God, the Form of the Good, is something beyond *nous*. How do Aristotle's modifications turn the Good and *nous* into the same thing? I cannot fully answer this question here, but I will try to sketch some key points in the development of Aristotle's argument.

Both the Good and *nous* are posited as causes of other things. The good should be the *final* cause (as in *Eudemian Ethics* 1.8), while *nous* seems to be an *efficient* cause (as in Aristotle's account of Anaxagoras in *Metaphysics* 1), but these two causes are closely linked, since *nous* does what it does for the sake of the good. As we learn from the *Phaedo*, Anaxagoras was abandoning his own goal of explanation through *nous* when he said that things were as they were for some reason other than that it was best for them to be so. The *Timaeus* attempts to fulfill Anaxagoras's program, showing that what *nous* does at each stage it does for the best; but Aristotle does not think that Plato has fully corrected the defects of Anaxagoras's physics. Plato wants the demiurge, because the latter is Reason-itself, to overcome the disorderly motion by persuasion (*peithō*) of the good, not by violence or constraint (*bia, anankē*), which are characteristic rather of the "wandering cause." In fact, though, some of the demiurge's works are clearly accomplished by brute force, and once Plato even says explicitly that the demiurge fits something together by violence (*sunarmottōn biā [i]*) (*Timaeus* 35a8). Aristotle is trying to describe *nous*'s causality in a manner appropriate to its nature both as *nous* and as pure *energeia*, and to free it from descriptions which are anthropomorphic or which presuppose that it contains *dunamis*. This process leads Aristotle not merely to prune away Plato's more obviously violent descriptions of *nous*'s activity, but to whittle down the complex cosmotheology of the *Timaeus* until all that is left is Aristotle's own much more austere doctrine of God's causality.³¹ If *nous* is pure *energeia*, it cannot now begin to

³¹ Cherniss and others have asked why Aristotle does not mention the

act after a period of inactivity (as if it had created the world out of preexisting chaos), nor can it produce effects which last only for a finite time (as if it intervened directly among sublunar bodies). It also cannot act on bodies in such a way that it would be reciprocally affected by their resistance (as when a body moves a body), or in such a way that it would be carried along by their motion (as when a soul moves its body). The only remaining way that *nous* can be an efficient cause, Aristotle thinks, is the way that an object of sensation or intellection causes the act of sensation or intellection, without itself being affected. So *nous* eternally causes the soul of the heaven to contemplate it, and because the soul of the heaven is always thinking this constant object, it imitates its constancy by producing a constant motion in the heavens; and the celestial motions in turn govern sublunar things. This is certainly one important causal chain which the *Timaeus* recognizes connecting *nous* with the world-order; it is the *only* chain which Aristotle allows to remain as consistent with the characterization of *nous* as pure *energeia*.

Aristotle continues to insist, like Anaxagoras and Plato, that *nous* is an efficient cause or source of motion. For him, however, *nous* moves only as an object of thought and of desire. But if *nous* causes as the object of desire, and as the object of rational desire on the part of a soul which is perfectly rational (because it participates perfectly in *nous*), then *nous* is the Good; for this is what a perfectly rational soul would desire. Plato would presumably agree that a perfectly rational soul desires the Good, and that it has this right desire by participating in *nous*. He would explain this, however, by saying not that *nous* is itself the Good, but that *nous* is Knowledge of the Good, so that what participates in *nous* knows (and thus also desires) the Good. For Aristotle, however, the Knowledge of the Good and the Good are the same thing: "For as we say, the art of medicine is somehow the same thing as health" (*Metaphysics* 1075b9–10).

demiurge of the *Timaeus*; Cherniss even conjectures that Aristotle may have thought (wrongly, in Cherniss's own view) that Plato did not take the demiurge as anything more than a myth; *Aristotle's Criticism of Plato and the Academy* 610. But the truth is that Aristotle says a great deal about the demiurge of the *Timaeus*, not by the relational name "demiurge," but by the essential name *nous*; Aristotle fails to criticize the demiurge, not because he refuses to take him seriously, but because he believes in him, although of course he does not believe many of the stories Plato tells about this god.

By reducing the causality of *nous* to final causality, Aristotle reduces the Good-itself to *nous*, dispensing with the mysterious Good which Plato had posited, beyond *nous* and *ousia*, as the formal cause of goodness to *nous* and to other things. By reducing the Good to *nous*, Aristotle shows how the Good is a cause. Aristotle complains in *Metaphysics* 12.10 that his predecessors “do not say how the Good is a principle, whether as end [final cause] or as mover [efficient cause] or as form” (1075a38–b1). Plato had made it a formal cause of goodness, or of unity, in other things, and so no better than what it causes. Clearly this is not the causality proper to the Good-itself. Anaxagoras and Empedocles, Aristotle says, identified the Good with *nous* or *philia*, and they were right; but then they used *nous* or *philia* only as a source of motion, and lost its connection with the final cause. Speusippus had given up entirely on showing how the Good could be a principle. Aristotle, by identifying the Good with *nous*, but showing that *nous* is a source of motion just by being a final cause, thinks that he has shown how the Good-itself is the first cause of the world-order, and is the source of goodness to other things. There is not a separate Form of the Good which would be the formal cause of goodness to other things, but the separate virtue of Reason-itself is the final cause for the sake of which the souls both of the heavens and of virtuous human beings perform such good works as they perform. In this sense Aristotle agrees with Plato that a separate Good-itself is a paradigm, not as a Form, but as the goal or model in imitation of which all good things, including the world-order, are produced.

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