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**Aristotle's God, Thinking, and Friendship**

**Introduction**

Aristotle's theology addresses three main issues: first, the existence of God; second, the activity of God; and third, the nature of God. In answering the first two issues, Aristotle contends that an Unmoved Mover and Final Cause for the universe must exist, and this ultimate reality is called God. As for the third issue, Aristotle characterized the nature of God in *Metaphysics* XII/9 as thought thinking itself: "Therefore it must be of itself that the divine thought thinks (since it is the most excellent of things), and its thinking is a thinking on thinking" (Aristotle, *Metaphysics* XII/9: 1074b34).<sup>1</sup> This paper will focus on Aristotle's account of the nature or essence of God and the way in which his characterization of the divine nature brings together Aristotle's metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics. In particular, to understand the meaning of "thought thinking itself," attention must be given to chapters 7 and 9 of *Metaphysics* XII, as well as to Aristotle's discussion of thinking in *De Anima* and friendship in the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

***Metaphysics* XII/7 and *De Anima* III/4: God and Thinking**

Aristotle's discussion on the divine activity begins in the second half of *Metaphysics* XII, chapter seven. The first half of the chapter raises the issue of the universality of motion in the universe. All sensible substances, whether earthly and perishable or heavenly and eternal, are in motion, which raises the question: "What is the origin of motion in the universe?" For Aristotle the only plausible explanation of the origin of motion is the necessary existence of a Prime Mover, that which moves things without itself being moved. This unmoved mover must have ultimate value in the universe, acting like an object of desire which gives rise to change and movement to others without itself being affected by change. Hence, Aristotle is able to establish that a Prime Mover (God) exists, and that the divine activity is moving other substances without being moved.

He then turns to characterize the nature of the Prime Mover's life as a life of thought and contemplation:

... it is a life such as the best we enjoy, and enjoy for but a short time. . . since its actuality is also pleasure. . . And thinking in itself deals with that which is best in itself, and that which is thinking in the fullest sense with that which is best in its fullest sense. And thought thinks on itself because it shares the nature of the object of thought; for it becomes an object of thought in coming into contact with and thinking its objects, so that thought and object of thought are the same. . . Therefore the possession rather than the receptivity is the divine element which thought seems to contain, and the act of contemplation is what is most pleasant and best. (*Metaphysics* XII/9: 1072b14 - 23.)

What is significant in this description is the connection Aristotle makes between human life and the divine life. The same language Aristotle used of rational beings in general is now being applied to the divinity. With this common language Aristotle brings together two issues. Not only does Aristotle offer a formal description of God's activity as a "thinking on thinking," but also "we find attempts to give substance to the statement that God is the perfect being whom we imperfectly desire to resemble," as Christopher Stead observes (Stead 1977: 90). The divine nature, therefore, is thinking which is eternal and is pure actuality. It is the paradigmatic instance of *nous*, the rationality which is not limited to cognitive, analytic thinking but which engages one's whole being. Human beings can only engage in such activity for a short time because of their contingency in the mutable world and their potential for change, but they do seek to resemble such thinking. A comparison can clearly be made, then, between divine thought in *Metaphysics* XII and the general theory of active thought found in *De Anima*.

In *De Anima*, Aristotle regards thinking, whether speculative or practical, "as akin to a form of perceiving" (Aristotle, *De Anima* III/4: 13). Richard Norman correctly argues that the paradigm of perception led Aristotle to view all thinking in terms of the subject-object distinction (Norman 1978: 93).<sup>2</sup> The five sense faculties (sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch) are themselves neutral subjects, having the potential to become identical in character with their object(s), but without actually becoming their object(s).<sup>3</sup> In perception the senses become actually identical with the essential forms (or definable characteristics) of an object, but not with the matter of the object; matter is stripped away in perception so that the sense can become one with its object (Aristotle, *De Anima* III/4: 429b10 - 24).

Although Aristotle is emphatic about the difference between perceiving and thinking in *De Anima*, he does say that thinking occurs either in the same way as perception, or in a different but analogous way (Aristotle, *De Anima* III/4: 429b13 - 14). In fact his theory is about two sorts of thinking, the first passive or potential, the second active or actual (Norman 1978: 94 - 95; Elders 1972: 23 - 24). In the first place, passive or potential thinking takes place in a way similar to that of perception. One similarity between perception and passive thinking concerns the nature of the subject of perception and thought. On the level of passive thinking, the mind (that whereby a subject thinks and judges) is like the senses (that whereby a subject perceives objects) because neither has its own nature as such; each has only the capacity or potentiality to become identical with its object (Aristotle, *De Anima* III/4: 429a29 - 24).<sup>4</sup> Further, both mind and perception can be called "impassable." However, the senses are not purely "impassable," for a severely intense stimulus (object) can momentarily (if not permanently) hinder the proper function of a sense organ. The senses are thus dependent upon the body. On the other hand, when the passive mind is stimulated by a highly intelligible thought (object), it becomes even more capable of thinking about less intelligible objects. Hence, the mind is separable from the body and is truly impassible (Aristotle, *De Anima* III/4: 429a29 - b4).

The second sort of thinking (*i.e.*, active or actual) presupposes this first sort in which the mind is a pure potentiality. In the second sort of thinking, "the mind. . . is then able to think itself" (Aristotle, *De Anima* III/4: 429b5 - 10). Norman explains this to mean, ". . . having become the objects of thought [through the potential intellect] it is now able to think itself" (Norman 1978: 94). In the first sort of thinking, the mind is potentially the form of its object; in the second, the mind is actually the form of its object. Norman identifies the second sort of thinking as "theoretical" or speculative (Norman 1978: 95). In this way is the mind able to "think itself."

Aristotle extends this analysis to the activity of the Prime Mover in *Metaphysics* XII/7, so that the divine mind is the supreme example of actual intellect. Indeed, this being is the final cause of Aristotle's entire system, which W. K. C. Guthrie characterizes as an "organic unity" (Guthrie 1981: 263).<sup>5</sup> The purpose or goal of the cosmos is this supreme reality which is pure actuality, unchangeable, unaffected by potentiality, unencumbered by matter (Guthrie 1981: 263; Ross 1923: 156 - 157). "The prime mover is not only form and actuality, but life and mind," notes W. D. Ross, "and the term God, which has not so far appeared, begins to be applied to it" (Ross 1923: 182). The Prime Mover is therefore the apex of his system, and if the

analysis of *De Anima* is correct, the form of its thinking is pure theoretical thought ("thought thinking on itself") (*Metaphysics* XII/7: 1072b14).<sup>6</sup>

### Metaphysics XII 9; God and Friendship

Aristotle recognizes that portraying the formal nature of divine life as thought thinking itself presents several problems, and he attempts to answer these problems in chapter 9 of *Metaphysics* XII. Aristotle consequently changes his starting point for discussing the divine. While Aristotle discusses the First Being as Unmoved Mover in Book XII, chapter 7, Elders observes that the argument in *Metaphysics* XII/9 "starts from the assumption that there is a supreme *nous* in the universe" (Elders 1972: 249).<sup>7</sup>

The main problem centers on the object of God's thinking: why does God think God? W. D. Ross interprets Aristotle as equating "thought thinking itself" with theoretic thinking, which leads to the following syllogism:

1. God always thinks the best.
2. God is the best.
3. Therefore, God thinks God. (Ross 1923: 182)

Is this consistent with Aristotle's argument, however? A more careful reading of Aristotle suggests that God does not think God because God is the best, but God thinks God because *self-knowledge* is the best.

God cannot think nothing, says Aristotle, for then God's status would be as one who sleeps (*Metaphysics* XII/9: 1074b17 - 18). Divine thought must have an object which is either (a) itself or (b) something else. If it thinks something else, then it either thinks (c) that which is always different, or (d) that which is always the same. If it thinks (c), that which is always different, then it must think (e) of any random object. If it thinks (d), that which is always the same, then it must think (f), of the highest things. If it thinks (f), the highest things, its objects will either be (g), changing or (h), without change (*Metaphysics* XII/9: 1074b21 - 24).<sup>8</sup> In short, if divine thinking does not have (a), itself as its object, then it must either think (e), any random object, (g), the highest things which are changing, or (h), the highest things without change.

In the course of his argument, Aristotle rejects God's thinking (e), any random object, for God must think of "that which is most divine and precious," that which is not tainted with change, for "change would be change for the worse" (*Metaphysics* XII/9: 1074b26 - 28; Elders 1972: 253). For similar reasons, he rejects God's thinking (g), of the highest things

which are changing, since it would imply potentiality and changeability in the divine mind, and the divine mind would also be determined by its object (*Metaphysics* XII/9: 1074b28 - 30; Elders 1972: 254). Finally, God cannot think (h), the highest things without change: "if this object would not be the first being itself but something else, it would be of higher rank than the first being" (Elders 1972: 255; Aristotle, *Metaphysics* XII/9: 1074b29 - 35). Elders notes that the implication of this schema is that "self-knowledge is distinct from the knowledge of intelligible objects other than the self" (Elders 1972: 253). This means that the divine "thought thinking itself" is not merely a description of the theoretical character of its thought. Rather, God's thinking of itself carries a related significance not limited to theoretical thinking.

This significance is seen in the notion of friendship in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. For Aristotle self-love and self-knowledge are necessary for the proper functioning of one's virtue, for it is only in self-knowledge that one is supremely happy (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* VIII/3). Although one has difficulty in perceiving the span of one's life, the life of a friend can be more easily understood. This friend, then, acts as a mirror for one's life, giving a picture of how virtues (excellences) occur in human life (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* IX/8: 116ab30 - 1170b5; see Norman 1969: 30 - 31). Aristotle thus holds that friendship proceeds from the desire to know oneself (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* IX/4: 1166a1 - 3).

Given this background in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, God's "thinking on thinking" can now be seen as the supreme instance of self-knowledge (Elders 1972: 33). Counter to Ross's syllogistic argument, God is the object of God's thinking because self-knowledge is the highest pleasure and because "this knowledge concerns the being of the First Principle" (Elders 1972: 33).<sup>9</sup>

### Conclusion: "Thinking on Thinking"

The divine life is characterized by Aristotle as thought thinking itself. According to Aristotle, all thinking is based on the paradigm of perception which distinguishes subject and object. The choice of *nous* or "rationality" as the central image for God is the logical outcome of Aristotle's conception of the world as an organic hierarchy which converges in this one purpose and goal (Guthrie 1981: 263; Ross 1923: 156 - 157). Not only is God conceived as the final cause of the world, but God's activity of thought thinking itself is the supreme example and goal of human thought. The supreme or virtuous activity of God is thus linked to the supreme activity of humanity.

"Thought thinking itself" is the highest type of pleasure available for rational beings. Human beings can have this type of pleasure through thinking. Human intellect is both potential (passive intellect) and actual (active intellect). Through potential intellect, the mind is potentially identical with the form of its object; through actual intellect, the mind is actually (if only temporarily) one with its object. When one with its (formal) object, the mind is engaged in theoretical thinking. The divine mind, on the other hand, shares in no potentiality but is rather purely active, actual intellect, more identical with its formal object than human theoretical thinking because God's thinking is eternal.

Not only is the divine activity theoretical thinking, the object of God's thinking is itself. Aristotle stresses the pleasure of self-knowledge in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, for it is in self-knowledge that one is able to live a life of virtue or excellence. Although human beings need virtuous friends to be mirrors for self-knowledge, God needs no one other than God for self-knowledge: God knows God directly, non-contingently, and theoretically. God's "thought thinking itself" is therefore the goal of human life worthy to be sought because it is (a), the pleasure inherent in theoretical thinking, and (b) the pleasure found in self-knowledge.

### Notes

1. All citations from Aristotle are from *The Basic Works of Aristotle*. Richard McKeon, ed. 1941. New York: Random House: *De Anima*. Trans. J. A. Smith (pp. 534-603); *Metaphysics*. Trans. W. D. Ross (pp. 682 - 926), and *Nicomachean Ethics*. Trans. W. D. Ross (pp. 927 - 1112).

2. Norman's article first appeared in *Phronesis* 14 [1969]: 63 - 74. Norman finds the paradigm of perception a "misleading model." See also Elders 1972: 255, #32.

3. For Aristotle's extended discussion on the five senses, see *De Anima* II/5 - 12: 416b32 - 424b19.

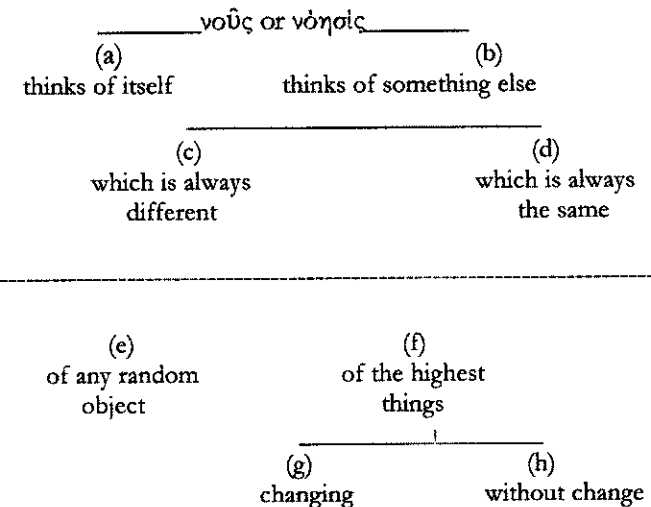
4. See Guthrie 1981: 262, and Ross 1923: 182. Guthrie summarizes, "Aristotle explains sensation and thought as assimilation by the *psyche* of the form (sensible or intelligible as the case may be) of something without its matter. ("Intelligible form," as we know, is its definable essence.)"

5. See also Owens 1951: 443, and Ross 1923: 156 - 157. Ross identifies a hierarchy of three "orders of entity," each with a corresponding science. Thus; (1) Physics studies those entities "which have separate substantial existence but are subject to change," (2) mathematics studies those entities "which are free from change but exist only as distinguishable aspects of concrete realities," and (3) theology or metaphysics studies those entities "which both have separate existence and are free from change."

6. Norman equates "thought thinking itself" with "theoretical" or speculative thinking (pp. 95 - 98).

7. Elders says, "The assertion that man's noblest pass-time or activity is that of God, is apparently based upon the assumption of an analogy between man and God, that is, on the conviction that man shares in the *nous*" (Elders 1972: 181).

8. Elders renders this schematically on p. 252:



9. Norman's article was written against this "Syllogistic Proof" in its attempt to equate "thought thinking itself" with theoretic thinking. His point is correct but incomplete, as Elders shows by linking "thought thinking itself" with self-knowledge. Both theoretic thinking and self-knowledge seem to be involved in Aristotle's discussion.

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