Intellection and divine causation in Aristotle

In *De anima* [henceforth DA] II. 5 Aristotle famously distinguishes between two intellects, one which he calls the Passive Intellect (*nous pathetikos*) and the other which Greek commentators called the Agent Intellect (*nous poiētikos*).

Since in every class of objects, just as in the whole of nature, there is something which is their matter, i.e., which is potentially all the individuals, and something else which is their cause or agent (*aition kai poiētikon*) in that it makes them all—the two things being related as an art to its material—these distinct elements must be present in the soul also. Mind in the passive sense (ho tooutos nous) is such because it becomes all things, but mind has another aspect in that it makes all things (*panta poiein*); this is a kind of positive state like light; for in a sense light makes potential into actual colours. Mind in this sense is separable, impassive and unmixed, since it is essentially an activity; for the agent is always superior to the patient, and the originating cause to the matter. (...) When isolated (*chōristhēs*) it is its true self and nothing more, and this alone is immortal and everlasting (...) and without this nothing thinks. [*De anima*, II. 5, 430 a 10-25, tr. Hett].

Aristotle offers two main arguments in support of this distinction. The first one is that in all changes there must be something which undergoes change and something that produces it; therefore, in the intellect there must be something that becomes everything – the *nous pathetikos* – and some other faculty which makes everything, the *nous poiētikos* (430 a 14-15). The second reason is that the structure of intellection mirrors that of sense perception, particularly visual perception. For sight to occur three things are required: the sense, the sensible object, and light (418 b 2; III. 3, 429 a 4); similarly, three things must be needed for intellection to occur: the intellect (as a receptive faculty), the object, as well as an intellect that “makes all things”, which Aristotle describes as “a kind of positive state like light” (430 a 15).

The structures of sensation and intellection, however, are not entirely isomorphic. For one thing, sense perception requires only a passive sense, whereas intellection requires an active and a passive intellect. Commentators have been puzzled by this. Are there really two intellects? What does Aristotle say elsewhere?

In the *Posterior Analytics*, II. 19, Aristotle discerns four steps in the cognitive path that leads from perception to comprehension. He first points out that in order to have knowledge of principles we must possess a capacity (*dynamis*) for so doing; he then distinguishes the following four stages: 1) perception 2) the retaining of percepts 3) experience and, finally, 4) the acquisition of concepts. We could try to read the distinction between two souls into this account. The capacity (*dynamis*) would then correspond in some sense to the passive intellect and the final stage of the “cognitive path”, what in the
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Posterior Analytics he calls “understanding” (episteme), would correspond to the Agent Intellect, and such an interpretation has had its proponents.\(^1\)

But as Michael Frede\(^2\) has pointed out, Aristotle’s depiction of the cognitive process and the faculties implied in it in the Posterior Analytics contrasts starkly with that provided in the De anima. Episteme in the Posterior Analytics is the final stage of an experiential process that begins with perception; it is a natural outgrowth, at least in rational beings, of perception. Not so, apparently, the Agent Intellect in the De anima, as we can tell from the hand out. Aristotle famously describes the Agent Intellect as “separable, impassive and unmixed”, a description more reminiscent of his characterization of the divine intellect in Metaphysics XII, 7. Might it be that this is what Aristotle believes, that the Agent Intellect is none other than the Divine Intellect of Lambda 7? The suggestion is an old one, going back to Alexander of Aphrodisias, but it has been recently exhumed and refined by Michael Frede whose proposal I here discuss.

There are at least three indications in DA III, 5 that the Agent Intellect must be a faculty of the soul.\(^3\) The first indication is that Aristotle tells us that the act/potency distinction “must be present in the soul also”. The second indication occurs further on when Aristotle states that it is “when separated” that the Agent Intellect is its true self, which implies that there is a time when it is not separated. The third indication is when he states that “this alone is immortal”, implying that the other parts of the soul, e.g., the passive intellect, are not immortal.

But Michael Frede has argued that these texts are not incompatible with the view that the Agent Intellect is God. The Agent Intellect so described could be God if Aristotle’s God were a principle operating within individual souls without ceasing to be a separate transcendent substance.\(^4\)

If this view proved a correct means of construing the hypothesis that the Agent Intellect is God, it would represent a distinct advantage over Alexander’s proposal in his commentary on the De anima. Alexander’s interpretation of the Agent Intellect relies heavily on Plato’s discussion of the Good in Republic, VI and VII. The Agent Intellect is “productive” for Alexander in the sense in which the Good is, according to Plato, the cause of being and intelligibility in things.\(^5\) Because Alexander thinks of the Agent Intellect in such lofty terms, it comes as no surprise that he should claim that the Agent Intellect “was shown by Aristotle to be the First Cause.”\(^6\) Alexander thus pays no attention to those remarks in De anima III, 5 which suggest that the Agent Intellect might in fact be a property of the individual soul.\(^7\) Frede’s proposal represents an advantage over Alexander’s, because it tries to account for both series of texts, those that make the Agent Intellect an operation of the soul, those that describe it as something impassive and unmixed. But how can it be both? How can a transcendent God act immanently?
According to Frede one can say that God is an immanent cause because for Aristotle God is a final cause; he acts as a final cause by operating “within animals by giving a certain structure and content to their desires and by guiding their actions”⁸. Yet, although Aristotle describes God as moving as a final cause he also describes him as the transcendent cause of the universe in *Metaphysics*, XII, 7. But there is no inconsistency in saying that the Agent Intellect operates within the soul and in identifying it with God.

But why suppose that Aristotle in DA III,5 is referring to a God similar or identical to the God of Metaphysics XII, 7? After all, saying that the Agent Intellect is unmixed need not mean that it is literally separate. Scholars usually point to two principal reasons. First of all, in order to describe the Agent Intellect in DA III, 5 and elsewhere, Aristotle uses terminology used by Anaxagoras to describe the Divine intellect as well as precise technical vocabulary he himself uses to describe the Divine intellect in *Metaphysics* XII, 7. He explicitly refers to the doctrine in DA II, 2 405 b 20 where he writes that “Anaxagoras is alone in his belief that mind is impassive (apathes), and that it has nothing in common with anything else.” He further alludes to the impassivity of mind in 429 b 22-24. Finally, in 430 a 17 Aristotle also uses the word amiges (unmixed) to refer to the AI, which has to be an obvious reference to Anaxagoras, as that word does not belong to Aristotle’s technical vocabulary⁹.

Also, in DA III, 5, Aristotle says that the Agent Intellect is “essentially an activity” (energeia) and is eternal (aïdios), the very same attributes he uses to describe the Divine Intellect in *Metaphysics* XII, 7, 1072 b 26.

But it is one thing to state that God is both a transcendent cause and the immanent cause of intellection, it is quite another to show that Aristotle thinks of God as acting in this fashion. What does Aristotle tell us about divine motion?

The most detailed account is that of *Metaphysics* XII, 7, where he explains that the prime mover moves as an object of desire. It moves, he says, as the Good and the desirable. But this appears to make the prime mover a purely extrinsic cause, which is why Frede who refers to this passage then refers to DA II, 4 415b 5, a passage that provides a better way of understanding how God can operate within the soul. Aristotle explains that beings strive to imitate the prime mover in the best way they can. In the case of lower animals, this happens through reproduction; in the case of man, we learn from *Nicomachean Ethics* X, it happens through intellect.

In *De an.*, II, 4, 415 b 1, [Aristotle] accounts for the desire of plants and animals by their desire of the divine. He holds that, for this reason, the entire natural behavior of these living beings is because of the divine. Naturally, plants do not strictly speaking have desires. And animals, even if they do have desires, do not desire the divine in the way in which one could say that they desire something to eat.
But in their behavior they follow a goal destined to their reproduction and thus their perpetuation, if
not as individuals, at least as species. This is how they participate in eternal and the divine itself which
guides animal in their behavior by guiding their desires. Thus this divine operates within animals by
giving a certain structure and content to their desires. 15

It is essentially on the basis of *Metaphysics* XII and *De anima* II, 4 415b 5 that
Frede wants to argue that the Agent Intellect for Aristotle is an immanent cause
of intellection: God is a cause of intellection (for rational beings) by the mere fact
that he is a final cause (for the whole of nature).

This raises an immediate objection: if all that is meant by saying that
God is the cause of intellection is that he is a final cause, then saying that appears
to be no more informative than saying that he is the cause of reproduction: he is
trivially both because he is the cause of everything as the object of desire. And
the problem with this understanding of God’s causality is that it is incompatible
with the very precise role Aristotle ascribes to the Agent Intellect in DA III, 5:
the Agent Intellect is not merely a general cause of intellection, it is a productive
cause of intellection, making what is potentially X be actually X, a fact Frede is
naturally aware of:

Thus, to understand how the divine intellect could be considered as the agent, the motive cause of all
human thought, we must consider how God is the first principle. 11

The Agent Intellect is a cause of change in the manner in which Aristotle speaks
of a motive cause being a cause of change in *Phys*. II, 3. Nowhere does Aristotle
claim that God moves in this fashion, although he does say that the sphere of the
fixed heavens moves in this way. In *Met.*, II (994 a 1 sqq), he states that it is
impossible that there be an infinite series of material, productive, formal or final
causes ‘in the upward direction’ (eis euthuōrion). This implies that there is a first
productive cause; it does not imply that the first productive cause is God. In *Phys*
260 a 1-5, where Aristotle discusses the direct effect of the prime mover, he
explains that God, as an eternal being, can only account for the eternity of
motion, not the alternating motions of increase and decline, birth and death. But if
God cannot account for regular change in nature, i.e. for a type of change, how
can he explain the particular instances of change that occur in the process of
intellection? If the Fredean proposal is to hold water, we will need to find some
evidence in Aristotle that the divine intellect can also move as a productive cause.
We won’t find much evidence for it, obviously, as the position that God causes as
a motive cause is just not one Aristotle is apt to hold, and Frede is of course well
aware of this, but can we find any? Frede believes we can. He refers in particular
to an intriguing passage occurring in the course of Aristotle’s discussion of luck
in the *Eudemian Ethics* (=EE).
Aristotle’s concern here is to provide an explanation for good fortune, the fact that some people fare well despite the fact that they are poor practical reasoners. Can chance be the cause of their good fortune? After much discussion, Aristotle finally decides that good fortune results from a natural gift. Some people are poor practical reasoners but have impulses (hormai) that make them desire the right things. But what about those impulses? Are they themselves due to chance? Aristotle rules this out, but then argues that if they are not due to chance they must be due to a first cause. Here is the complete passage; the context is given in the smaller type-font, the text I wish to isolate for discussion in the larger font.

The question might be raised ‘Is luck the cause of this very thing—desiring what one should or when one should?’ Or will luck in that way be the cause of everything? For it will be the cause both of thinking and of deliberating; for a man who deliberates has not deliberated already before deliberating and deliberated also about that—there is some starting-point. Nor did he think, after thinking already before thinking, and so on to infinity. Intelligence, therefore, is not the starting-point of thinking, nor is counsel the starting-point of deliberation. So what else is there save luck? Thus everything will be by luck. Or is there some starting-point beyond which there is no other, and this—because it is of such a sort—can have such an effect? [1] But what is being sought is this: What is the starting-point of change in the soul? [2] It is now evident: as it is a god that moves in the whole universe, so it is in the soul. [3] For, in a sense, the divine element (theion ti) in us moves everything; [4] but the starting-point of reason is not reason but something superior. [5] What then could be superior (ti kretton) to knowledge and intelligence but a god? [6] For virtue is an instrument of intelligence. [Eudemian Ethics VIII, 2, 1248 a 25-29 (tr. Woods)]

From this text Frede infers the following conclusion:

Thus it is not an analogon of God, for instance the intellect or reason, which rules in the soul, it is God himself, who is the principle within the soul, of the operations of the soul, even of its thoughts. 12

Now there have been two dominant interpretations regarding the general meaning of this passage, i.e., sentences [1] to [6] and, in particular, two ways of understanding what Aristotle might have meant by the word ‘God’. According to one interpretation, when Aristotle speaks of a “divine element” in [3] he means to refer to reason, whereas the God referred to in [5] is the transcendent God of Metaphysics XII. 13 According to the other interpretation, what Aristotle is pointing to in both sentences is something divine that is both in the soul and superior to reason. 14 Frede’s remarks show that he favors this second way of reading the passage. He believes, firstly, that the theion ti alluded to by Aristotle is in the soul; secondly, that the theion ti is not merely God-like or analogous to God, but that it is God itself.

Frede is probably right in believing that the theion ti refers to something in the soul other than reason, despite the fact that elsewhere when Aristotle refers to something divine in the soul he is usually referring to nous, whereas he explicitly says in our passage that the divine is above nous—which in turn is why
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Dirlmeier and Décarie supposed that he must be referring to God. I mention two such passages because they illustrate the imprecision of Aristotle’s concept of divinity. One occurs in Book X, 7 1177 a 16 of the Nicomachean Ethics. Aristotle is explaining that if happiness consists in activity in accordance with excellence, it must be in accordance with the highest excellence, that of the best part of us. This is probably intellect (nous) he surmises; whatever it is, this faculty has the ability to know the divine “either as being itself actually divine (theion), or as being relatively the divinest part of us (to theiotaton)”. What is striking about this formulation is that Aristotle is not sure whether nous is literally godly as opposed to (merely) God-like. We find similar indications, and similar indecisiveness, in a later passage in NE X 7-9, where after discussing the life of contemplation, Aristotle concludes that such a life is “higher than the human level” and is attainable only in virtue of something in man that is divine (theion), for “if the intellect is something divine (theion) in comparison with man, so is the life of the intellect divine in comparison with human life.” To say that the intellect is divine in comparison with man might mean that the intellect is godly; it might also mean that it is God-like, i.e. that which most closely approximates God. It could mean either; the point is that Aristotle just does not tell us.¹⁵

Frede, I said, is probably right to think that God refers to something in the soul in our passage from the EE, and although Aristotle, when talking of the divine in man, usually refers to nous, he does not always. In particular he does not in Aristotle’s discussion of pleasure in the Nicomachean Ethics, a passage whose resemblance with EE has been underscored by scholars.¹⁶

But they do not all pursue the same pleasure, since the natural state and the best state neither is nor seems to be the same for them all; yet still they pursue pleasure. Indeed it is possible that in reality they do not pursue the pleasure which they think and would say they do, but all the same pleasure; for nature has implanted in all things something divine [NE VIII, 13 1153 b 31].

Aristotle in this text is pointing to two things: first, that pleasures are specifically distinct: the pleasure proper to rational beings is distinct from the pleasure of a sensitive being; He is also pointing to the fact that above and beyond these species-specific pleasures, animated beings are also unconsciously aiming toward the same pleasure, i.e. the Good, of the universe. Thus, as Gauthier and Jolif remind us,¹⁷ when a plant produces a plant, or an animal an animal, it is in order to perpetuate the species, but at the root of this desire to perpetuate the species lies the desire to participate in the eternity of God whose eternal activity is described by Aristotle in Met XII, 7, 1072 b 13 as a life of pleasure. Now assuming this to be the correct reading of XII, 7, 1072 b 13, the question we want to ask is what kind of cause, if any, Aristotle is ascribing to God. It seems that Aristotle could point to no more than to the fact that the desire to imitate God is the cause of all species-specific actions. But this brings us right back to the very general kind of causation exercised by God by virtue of his being a Final Cause.
What is divine according to Aristotle is that in spite of the vast differences in the nature of the acts performed by each class of animal—reproduction for lower animals, contemplation for humans—animals and humans are actually, unconsciously, striving to imitate the divine life of pleasure. The allusion to God is not so much an explanation of the mechanism involved as the expression of wonderment at the harmony of nature. What is divine about nature is that it should be as it is! To sum up: when Aristotle talks about the divine in man in texts that are unlike the above text from EE in that they refer to nous as divine, he does not clearly indicate whether he means something God-like or something godly; when he talks about the divine in man in texts that do resemble ours, the causation he ascribes to it seems to be of the vague variety and is consistent in an uncontroversial way with the clearest statements on God’s mode of operation in Metaphysics, XII, 7. So we have no independent evidence that Aristotle thought of his God as acting immanently.

What about in our passage from the EE? According to Frede, we are to take the passage as identifying the theion ti within with the God without. If he were right, our passage from EE would provide very strong evidence in favor of Frede’s view. For it seems quite plain that what Aristotle is after in our passage is a trigger of motion in the soul, a motive cause of deliberation. The success of the interpretation depends on his being able to show that Aristotle is identifying the two Gods and that the Agent Intellect causes as a motive cause. Does Aristotle identify them? Does he even connect the theion ti within with the theos without? If we examine our passage above, we see that at least sentence [2] does make some sort of connection between the two. Sentence [3] talks only about the divine in the soul without identifying it; subsequent sentences merely expand on [3]. Only [2] therefore explicitly connects, or at least, seems to connect the theion ti within, with the prime mover outside of the soul. But what does [2] actually say?

[2] says that just as there is a God in the universe that moves everything in the universe, so too there is a God in the soul that moves everything there. But how do we know that it is the same God? Notice first, before we attempt to answer this question, that even if it was the same God, that would not necessarily make God the cause of intellection. For as Aristotle will himself explain (1248b5), the theion ti is only meant to account for motion in the soul of those who enjoy good fortune, so that even if we accept that the suggestion that what Aristotle is saying is that God is exercising his causation from within the soul, this would only be true for a certain, limited, class of individuals, whereas the Agent Intellect presumably belongs to each human being, not just fortunate ones.

Still, if Aristotle were claiming that God acted immanently, albeit only in the limited case of the fortunate, he would be making a highly interesting and unusual claim in the context of his philosophy, so the point is well worth
investigating, but once again, why suppose that Aristotle is referring to the same God?¹⁹

The fact is that [2] does not unambiguously tell us that the God that moves in the universe is the same as the one that moves in the soul; as we will see shortly, it does not even come close to telling us anything like that. But if that is the case, it seems to me that we can hardly appeal to this passage as evidence in favor of an understanding of divine causation that is devoid of textual support elsewhere in the corpus. To see how far it is from making such a claim we need to look at it more closely.

For all its lack of explicitness [2] seems like a perfectly readable and intelligible sentence, but its good looks are the result of some heavy reconstructive surgery on the part of classical scholars. [2] according to the best Greek manuscripts²⁰ editors rely on reads as follows:

[2a] hōsper en tō holō theos, kai pan ekeinō
Just as in the universe God, so everything through it(masc.)

The sentence, as it stands, has no verb. Some editors think that the word kai is actually a corruption of the missing verb, kinei (it moves), and that the word pan (everything) is actually kan (and in). Such is the case of Ross who emends the text as follows²¹:

[2b] hōsper en tō holō theos, kinei kan ekeinō
But other editors think that the verb kinei (it moves) is elided, i.e. Aristotle meant kinei, but did not write it. Such is the case of Décarie,²² as also of the of the OCT edition of Walzer and Mingay.

[2c] hōsper en tō holō theos (kinei), kai pan ekeinō
The problem with [2a], [2b] and [2c] is that they all have a masculine pronoun (ekeinō) that refers to no identifiable masculine subject. That does not bother Décarie who translates [2c] as

[2c/tr.] Just as God moves everything in the universe, so too he moves everything through it (i.e. the intellect)

But it does bother another scholar, Spengel—as well as Woods, whose translation of the passage we have quoted above—who emends ekeinō to ekeinē, a feminine pronoun that refers back to the feminine subject, psuchē. So we now get
Another scholar, Jackson, is dissatisfied with both readings; he drops ekeinō/ē altogether, and suggests the following emendation:

[2e] hōsper en tō holō theos, kai pan ekei kinei
[2e/tr.] Just as God moves everything in the universe, so he moves everything here

One reason for supplying kinei is that the next sentence starts with the same word (kinei gar…). We could therefore suppose, or so Jackson and Kenny assure us, that one of the two occurrences of the word dropped out by haplography. But Kenny adds one last twist: he surmises that ekeinō (through it) was originally ekein (there through intellect [or mind]) and that the two words were subsequently connected by some inattentive copyist:

[2f] hōsper en tō holō theos, kai pan ekeinō kinei
[2f/tr.] as in the universe, so here, God moves everything by mind

Fortunately, P,L,C is not all we have to rely on. The chapter of EE on Good fortune was translated in the Middle Ages and circulated independently under the title of Liber de bona fortuna. The Greek manuscripts on which that translation is based have been lost, but fortunately the translation is a highly literal one, so literal in fact, that we can tell from it that the Greek original provided many different readings from P,L,C and in some instances, better readings than P,L, C. Indeed our sentence [2] reads quite differently in this translation. In its naked form can be literally translated thus:

[2g] just as in the universe God, so all that.

This is the reading preferred by Dirlmeier in his influential translation and commentary of the EE. But it hardly qualifies as a clear exposition of Aristotle’s thought! Dirlmeier therefore reconstructs the sentence, which is taken to mean:

[2g/tr.] just as it is God (that moves) in the universe, so he (i.e., another God) moves all that (in the soul)

Let me speak briefly about Dirlmeier’s interpretation, because it exhibits an assumption that is shared by a good many scholars. Now clearly the text as reconstructed and translated by Dirlmeier does not tell us that God is transcendent whilst moving the soul immanently but it does seem to say that God is related as a motive cause, an external trigger, to the motion of the soul. In fact, Dirlmeier takes [2] together with [3, 4 and 5] as saying five things: 1) that God is the trigger that sets things in motion, 2) that the cosmic God is not directly present in us and
3) that what is present in us is the theion ti which is related to nous and logos; 4) this theion ti sets the soul’s faculties in motion and 5) the cosmic God (theos) stands over and above the psychic God (theios) as an ultimate or first cause. The psychic God is thus part of a causal chain that starts with the Cosmic God and terminates in action.

So on Dirlmeier’s reading God is a motive cause. Note however that this is not sufficient for Frede’s purpose. Aristotle would need to be identifying both Gods. But as we have seen above, there is no compelling reason to see the reference to God in [3], [4] and [5] of our passage as a reference to anything else but an in-soul God. Everything hinges on [2] and whether we see it as effecting a link between the two Gods, which Dirlmeier (and others) clearly do. But the text does not explicitly make this connection which is why Verdenius, who, somewhat amusingly assures us that [2] is “usually misunderstood”, believes it should actually be translated thus:

[2h] Just as in the universe God <is the starting-point of motion> and everything <is moved> by him <, so there is a similar starting-point in the soul>. 23

I shall not try to argue positively that this is the correct construal of [2], that [2h] is what Aristotle meant or what he wrote, as this claim would undercut the point which I hope has by now emerged from the foregoing, viz., that we do not really know what Aristotle said in [2]! And if we do not know what he meant, no controversial interpretation of Aristotle’s philosophy should be based on our passage from EE.

What should also be clear by now is that even assuming that the correct reading of [2] is amongst those suggested by scholars, none of those proposed readings comes anywhere near telling us that God moves-in-the-soul-as-a-motive-cause. [2a], [2b] or [2d] would make the intellect or the soul an instrumental cause of God. But if the nous is the instrumental cause of God, it follows that it cannot be God. [2g], by contrast, just says that God moves everything, which is true on Aristotle’s principles, but uninformative. [2f] adds that God moves everything by mind, an interesting claim, but a very general one, and nothing follows from it regarding the relation between the divine nous and the human one. In order to read such a complex metaphysical doctrine into [2] we would need more than the odd word or cryptic remark.

But now, what about other passages of EE, III, chapters 7 and 8? Nowhere else in EE does Aristotle say anything in connection with God that can be taken to imply these types of causation. In fact we can point to one passage in particular that suggests the very opposite. This passage occurs in chapter 3 where Aristotle flatly states that “the god is a governor not in a prescriptive fashion, but it is that for which practical wisdom prescribes … since the god is need of
nothing” (1249 b 13-15). Aristotle is, once again, depicting God (which one matters not) as he is wont to do, as a final cause of action, and such a cause is unsuitable to explain the change involved in intellection.24

I conclude, therefore, that Frede’s proposal fails to account for the two sets of statements one finds in DA, III, 5 regarding the nature and functioning of the Agent Intellect. Frede wants to show that God being a final cause implies that he acts as an immanent cause, but this can only be true in a metaphorical way, whereas Frede is adamant that Aristotle believes that it is God himself that acts in the soul. Moreover, in order for the proposal to work one would have to show that God moves as a productive cause, for that is how the Agent Intellect is said by Aristotle to function in DA III, 5. Yet the passage adduced by Frede in this connection can nowise support the reading that God functions as an immanent cause or as a productive cause in the sense required by De anima III, 5.

I would like to conclude with a few general remarks on Aristotle’s theology. Aristotle’s God is one of whom not much is required, at least in the context of his own metaphysics. The problem is that subsequent philosophers and readers of Aristotle have often had a much more demanding view of what a God must do. For those readers, Aristotle’s theology can only have seemed incomplete. It certainly seemed that way to the Neoplatonists. Proclus, for instance, in his commentary on the Parmenides, chided Aristotle for not seeing that if God were a final cause he also had to be an efficient cause, i.e. a cause of existence.25

It is true that Aristotle’s theology did not seem incomplete to the 13th century Scholastics, but part of the reason for that might be that they usually counted as an authentic Aristotelian treatise the Anonymous Book of Causes which was shown in 1271 by Aquinas to depend on the Elements of Theology of the Neoplatonist Proclus.26 The early scholastics cited the Book of Causes frequently when discussing the nature of divine causation. One proposition they were particularly fond of quoting was the first one which states that God acts as an immanent cause. The Book of Causes supplied a very clear doctrine of divine immanence, a fact the Medievals were well aware of which is why they quoted from it, because they could not find the doctrine anywhere else in the Stagirite’s authentic works.

More generally, the Medievals had a well-known propensity to think of Aristotle as having all the right answers, especially in the area of natural theology and the theory of knowledge, a propensity which sometimes inclined them to attribute to him doctrines that were not clearly his own. Generations of scholars have been taken in by the familiar ut dicit Aristoteles (we need only think of the once common complaint that, e.g., Thomas “gets all his philosophy from
Aristotle’s own exegesis of the Liber de bona fortuna is a case in point. Thomas naturally reads our passage as trying to prove the existence of a first (divine) cause – a trigger – of voluntary motion through the impossibility of an infinite regress. But he can only extract that meaning from the EE text by introducing concepts that are decidedly foreign to Aristotle, and by making distinctions which were not clearly made by the Stagirite, two moves the modern scholar is not at liberty to make.

Aristotle’s conception of the relation between God and nature, or rather between God and other parts of nature, as it is to be found in the authentic corpus is unsystematic. It is also clearly incomplete, and, in any case, profoundly mysterious.

NOTES

1 A first version of this paper was presented at the University of Waikato in New Zealand in July of 2003. A second, improved, version was presented in November of the same year to colleagues and students of the Philosophy Department at the University of Ottawa. A third version, improved yet again, was presented at the CPA/ACP meeting in Winnipeg in June 2004. I wish to thank participants in all three seminars.

2 Frede refers to J. Barnes, “Aristotle’s Concept of Mind”, Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, 72 (1971-1972):101-114, but Barnes does not mention the article or make the connection with the De anima in his Clarendon Aristotle Series translation and commentary of the Posterior Analytics.


4 Frede mentions four, but only three have a direct bearing on our problem.

5 “Quant aux trois premiers, je vais expliquer comment Dieu se peut considérer comme un principe opérant à l’intérieur de chaque âme humaine sans cesser d’être le premier principe de tout.” Frede, 383. Note that Frede is not alone in believing that the divine nous inhabits the human soul. See E. Zeller, Die Philosophie der Griechen in ihrer geschichtlichen Entwicklung, II, 2 (Georg Olms: Hildesheim, 1963), 572.

6 See Alexander, De anima, ed. I. Bruns, 89, 11: “eiē an kai tautē poiētikos [sc. ho toioutos nous], hē autos aitios tou einai pasi tois nooumenois.”

7 Ibid., 16-18.

8 This is pointed out by Zeller, op. cit., 572.

9 “Ainsi ce divin opère à l’intérieur des animaux en tant qu’il donne une certaine structure et un contenu à leurs désirs.” Frede, 387.

10 Now it is not entirely clear why the use of Anaxagorean terminology would mean that the Agent Intellect is the same as the Divine Intellect; Aristotle could simply be wanting to point out how different from and superior to, other parts of the soul, the Agent Intellect is; and what better way to do that than to use terminology usually used to describe the Divine Intellect? But it is often assumed by scholars that every time an ancient philosopher uses another philosopher’s vocabulary he must be alluding to the doctrine that vocabulary is used to express.
Dans De an., II, 4, 415 b 1, [Aristote] explique la reproduction des plantes et des animaux par leur désir du divin. Il soutient que, de ce fait, tous les comportements naturels de ces êtres vivants sont en raison du divin. Evidemment les plantes n’ont pas stricto sensu de désirs. Et les animaux, même s’ils ont des désirs, ne désirent pas le divin dans le sens où nous pourrions dire qu’ils désirent quelque chose à manger. Mais dans leur comportement ils suivent un dessein finalisé à leur reproduction et ainsi leur perpétuation, sinon comme des individus, du moins comme des espèces. C’est ainsi qu’ils réussissent à participer à l’éternel et au divin lui-même qui guide les animaux dans leur comportement en les guidant dans leurs désirs. Ainsi ce divin opère à l’intérieur des animaux en tant qu’il donne une certaine structure et un contenu à ces désirs.”

Frede, 387.

“Alors, pour comprendre comment l’intellect divin pourrait être considéré comme l’agent, la cause motrice de toute pensée humaine, nous devons tenir compte de la façon dont Dieu est le principe premier.” Frede, 386.

“Ce n’est donc pas un analogue de Dieu, par exemple l’intellect ou la raison, qui règne dans l’âme, c’est Dieu lui-même, qui est le principe à l’intérieur de l’âme, des opérations de l’âme, même de ses pensées.” Frede, 388.

This is the interpretation favored by Dirlmeier and Décarie. See the former’s German translation and commentary of the Eudemian Ethics; Eudemische Ethik (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1984), 490, and the latter’s French translation of the same work: Éthique à Eudème, (Paris: Vrin/ Montreal: Presses de l’université de Montréal, 1978), 215, n. 46.


Gauthier and Jolif, 810.

See, above, the quotation referenced in note 12.


These are Codex Vaticanus 1342, Codex Cantabrinus 1879 and Codex Laurentianus 81.15; these are abbreviated P, C and L respectively by Harlfinger whose stemma codicum is followed by the Oxford Classical Texts edition of Walzer and Mingay (Aristotelis Ethica Eudemia, [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991]).

See the critical apparatus of this section of the EE in the Walzer and Mingay edition, p. 120.

Décarie, 215, n. 46.

Verdenius, 288, n. 6.


Aquinas was not however the first to surmise that Aristotle was not the author of the work.

See his brief discussion in e.g. Summa Contra Gentiles, III, c. 89.

See Deman’s paper, particularly 41-44.