

God as Pure Thinking. An Interpretation of *Metaphysics* Λ 7, 1072b14–26¹

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In *Metaphysics* Λ 6–7 Aristotle gives a more precise elaboration of several features which characterize the mode of being of the first principle (eternal, pure actuality, free of matter, metaphysically simple; moving without itself being moved, in the highest degree intelligible and desirable; pure thinking, best and eternal life). In this article I will be concerned exclusively with the feature of thinking in the sense that the first principle is not only the highest object of thinking, but it is itself pure thinking. When at *Met.* Λ 7, 1072b14–26 Aristotle ascribes to the first principle a certain kind of life, and qualifies this more specifically as the activity of reason in the mode of contemplation, he argues for this feature in a significantly different way from the previous characteristics. In what follows I will develop and defend an interpretation of this passage according to which we are here dealing with an argument from analogy. On my reading, Aristotle wants to show in this passage how it is that we can determine the ‘pure actuality’ of the first principle based on the highest realization of human thought. He succeeds in doing so by showing that in human thinking there is a special ‘structure of actuality’, which, however, due to his ontological perfection has to be present in God in a higher form. I will show that, contrary to the usual reading of this passage, the interpretation developed in this essay requires fewer additional assumptions, is closer to the text and, in general, can better accommodate the unique topic discussed at *Met.* Λ 6–7.

¹ The following article is a reworked and shortened version of chapter 4 of Herzberg, S. 2013: *Menschliche und göttliche Kontemplation. Eine Untersuchung zum *bios theoretikos* bei Aristoteles*, Heidelberg. I thank Manfred Weltecke for translating my text into English.

I. The Thesis (1072b14–16)

“And its life is such as the best which we enjoy, and enjoy for but a short time. For it is ever in this state (which we cannot be).”²
(1072b14–16)

This is a *thesis* which consists of two parts: (1) the first principle leads a life (διαγωγή), i.e., the mode of its actuality or activity (ἐνέργεια)³ is identified as a form of life,⁴ and (2) this form of life is comparable with the best of our own, which we, however, can only enjoy for a short time. Both parts of the thesis deserve a detailed elucidation.

By beginning the sentence with διαγωγή Aristotle wants to draw our attention to the fact that saying of the first principle, on which heaven and nature depend, that it leads a certain life, is an astonishing claim indeed.⁵ What do we know, at this point, about the mode of being of this first principle? In order to guarantee the eternal and uninterrupted motion of the first heaven, the first principle must be eternal and, in addition, in actuality. More precisely, it must be in actuality in the special way that it is not the actuality of an underlying potentiality. If it were the actuality of an underlying potentiality, then it would also be possible that its potentiality might, at times, not be actualized and would, therefore, not generate any motion. Yet since the motion has always existed, Aristotle reaches the conclusion that this principle has to be actuality according to its own essence, i.e. its essence is actuality. So it must not possess any kind of potentiality.⁶ Furthermore, being an *actus purus* of this kind the first principle is without matter, inasmuch as matter is the principle of potentiality. These features or predicates of perfection form a *first series* of predicates by which the essence of the first principle is characterized more precisely. Aristotle derives these characteristics in a purely conceptual way (λόγῳ):⁷ his starting point is the question of how the nature of

2 Barnes, J. 1984: The Complete Works of Aristotle, Princeton. Volume II. All translations are from Barnes unless otherwise indicated.

3 See Horn, C. 2002: In welchem Sinn enthält Metaphysik Lambda eine Theologie? In: Jahrbuch für Religionsphilosophie, 1, 39 on this double meaning of ἐνέργεια.

4 Cf. also E. N. X 4, 1175a12: ἡ δὲ ζωὴ ἐνέργειά τις.

5 See Laks, A. 2000: Metaphysics Λ 7, in: M. Frede/D. Charles (eds.), Aristotle's Metaphysics Lambda. Symposium Aristotelicum, Oxford, 232: “Whether one renders the term by ‘way of life’ or, perhaps more neutrally, by ‘occupation’, something more than mere existence is presupposed, namely a life.” See also Bordt, M. 2006: Aristoteles' Metaphysik XII, Darmstadt, 116 f.

6 Cf. Met. Λ 6, 1071b19 f.: δεῖ ἄρα εἶναι ἀρχὴν τοιαύτην ἥς ἡ οὐσία ἐνέργεια. See also Λ 7, 1072a32; Λ 8, 1074a35 f.

7 Cf. Bordt (see note 5), 101.

something that can guarantee an eternal and continuous motion must be conceived. This then leads him to the concept of ‘pure actuality’. This concept describes the essence of the first principle of motion and the other (two) characteristics are connected with this concept via a conceptual necessity.⁸ Within a *second series* of predicates the first principle is qualified further; more precisely, it is thus qualified with regard to the eternal and uninterrupted motion of the first heaven. The first feature in this series characterizes the first principle as moving other things, while it itself is unmoved.⁹ In support of this claim Aristotle gives the following argument: “There is therefore also something which moves them. And since that which is moved and moves is intermediate, there is a mover which moves without being moved, being eternal, substance, and actuality” (Λ 7, 1072a23–26).¹⁰ Aristotle develops this argument further at *Phys.* VIII 5. Here he proves the necessary existence of some unmoved moving being.¹¹ The eternal and immaterial substance, which essence consists in actuality and which is identified as unmoved, moves in the way an object of desire and thought moves other things, and this is the second feature in this series of predicates. For objects of desire and thought move as mere final causes, without being moved themselves. In order to justify that the first principle does *de facto* move other things in this way,¹² Aristotle tries to show that the *primary* instances of what is desirable and what is thinkable are identical: The primarily desirable is not that which just

⁸ To this first series other characteristics can be added, e.g. that owing to its pure actuality this principle “can in no way be otherwise than as it is” (Λ 7, 1072b8) and that it is “absolutely necessary” (b13); or the characteristics that this principle exists “separate from sensible things” (1073a4 f.), is “without parts and indivisible” (1073a6 f.; see also Λ 9, 1075a6 f.) and “one both in formula and in number” (Λ 8, 1074a36 f.; I owe this last point to Lloyd Gerson). Following Horn (see note 3) one may indeed call these “divine attributes” (32 f.) or also “predicates of perfection” (41).

⁹ Bordt, M. 2011: Why Aristotle’s God is Not the Unmoved Mover, in: Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy, 40, 91–109 is right to point out that to be an unmoved mover is not an *essential* feature of the first substance, but merely a relational one, i.e., it has this feature only in relation to the realm of the perceptible and changeable substances (see previously Menn, S. 1992: Aristotle and Plato on God as Nous and as the Good, in: Review of *Metaphysics*, 45, 545). The first substance is later identified with God (1072b30), not insofar as it is an unmoved mover but insofar as it leads the best kind of life, which is the activity of reason.

¹⁰ At this point it becomes clear that the second series of predicates is joined with the first series (*ἀίδιον καὶ οὐσία καὶ ἐνέργεια οὐδα*).

¹¹ There is no agreement as to which passage of *Phys.* VIII 5 Aristotle is referring here. See Laks (see note 5), 217–219, for more details on this question.

¹² See Bordt (see note 9), 107: “Aristotle is not interested only in some general claim to the effect that there are cases where something unmoved can move something else; rather, he is aiming to show that one very particular state of affairs actually obtains, namely that the unmoved mover *in fact* does move (what it moves) as an object of thought and desire”.

appears good to someone (τὸ φαινόμενον καλόν), but that which is real good (τὸ ὄν καλόν). The latter is not an object of appetite (ἐπιθυμία), but of rational desire or wish (βούλησις). This, however, implies a judgment of reason.¹³ The theoretical basis for such a definition of the πρῶτον ὀρεκτόν is Aristotle's objective theory of the good:¹⁴ "For the apparent good is the object of appetite, and the real good is the primary object of wish. But desire is consequent on opinion rather than opinion on desire: for the thinking is the starting-point" (1072a27–30). The paradigm among the objects of thought is determined by means of what is "in itself thinkable", that is by means of a positive series of concepts (συστοιχία).¹⁵ In this positive series substance (οὐσία) comes first and within this genus of being the simple and fully actual substance (ἡ ἀπλῆ καὶ κατ' ἐνέργειαν: 1072a30–32) comes first.¹⁶ The first intelligible, i.e. the highest object of thought, is thus the immaterial and essentially actual substance, which, as such, has the highest ontological determination (or 'positivity'). In this positive *systoichia* we also find the καλόν, i.e. that which is desirable for its own sake and laudable.¹⁷ The first principle of motion is always the best or it is at least that which is analogous to the best (1072a34–b1).¹⁸ The unmoved mover, as the highest object of thought and desire, thus moves everything else by being its ultimate final cause. It does this solely by the attractiveness of its ontological perfection. As an absolute unchangeable and self-sufficient *telos*,¹⁹ which is separate from perceivable reality, it moves the first heaven by being loved (ὡς ἐρώμενον) and through this motion everything else is moved (1072b3 f.).²⁰ Therefore Aristotle can say that heaven and

13 Cf. *De an.* III 9, 432b5–7; III 10, 433a24–30; *Rhet.* I 10, 1368b36–1369a4.

14 Cf. Horn (see note 3), 35 f.

15 On the origin of this ontological ordering instrument in the Old Academy see Krämer, H.-J. 1964: *Der Ursprung der Geistmetaphysik. Untersuchungen zur Geschichte des Platonismus zwischen Platon und Plotin*, Amsterdam, 153–159.

16 With this, the series sketched in *Met.* A 1, 1069a20 f. (τῷ ἐφεξῆς) is differentiated further; in this passage Aristotle is merely dealing with οὐσία as the primary being as opposed to quality, quantity, motion, and negation.

17 For the term καλόν see *Met.* M 3, 1078a31 f.; *E. E.* VIII 3, 1248b18–20.

18 For this identification of the best with the highest object of thinking, see also *Met.* A 2, 982b6 f.: τοῦτο δ' ἐστὶ τὰγαθὸν ἐκάστου, ὅλως δὲ τὸ ἀριστον ἐν τῇ φύσει πάση. The unmoved mover, as the primary object of wisdom, is also what is best in the entire cosmos.

19 Cf. *Met.* A 7, 1072b2 f.; *E. E.* VIII 3, 1249b15 f. For Aristotle's distinction between οὐ ἕνεκα τινός (the absolute aim) and οὐ ἕνεκα τινί (the beneficiary) see Gaiser, K. 1969: *Das zweifache Telos bei Aristoteles*, in: I. Düring (ed.), *Naturphilosophie bei Aristoteles und Theophrast*, Heidelberg, 97–113.

20 The platonic background is emphasized by Richardson Lear, G. 2004: *Happy Lives and the Highest Good. An Essay on Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, Princeton, 79: "Aristotle's Prime Mover is an object of desire of a special sort: It is an object of Platonic love. As such, it is a final cause as an object of aspiration, imitation, or approximation. Such an end may be, in principle, unchangeable as well as separable from the physical world."

the world of nature depend (ἡρτῆται: 1072b13 f.) on such a principle. Yet the beings below the first heaven are also related to the first principle as their ultimate final cause. For every being tries to partake in the eternal and divine to the greatest extent possible.²¹ This striving towards the divine, which we find in the entire cosmos, is manifest in the fact that every being imitates the divine substance, i.e. its perfect (eternal and pure) actuality, according to the possibilities inherent in its own essence.²² Thus the entire cosmos is revealed as a universal interrelated whole that imitates the divine way of being.²³ For the individual being to imitate the divine actuality in its own specific way is for it to realize its own nature in the best possible way.²⁴

Through these two series of predicates we now know that the first principle of motion is a special kind of substance which, on the one hand, is essentially actuality (from which other predicates, e.g., that it is immaterial, invariant, necessary, indivisible, simple etc. may be derived) and, on the other hand, that it is something which is, in the highest degree, intelligible and desirable and which, thus, moves everything else as a principally unmoved and separate substance and as their final cause. At this point one might think that the characterization of the mode of being of the first principle is completed. The open questions which Aristotle had raised with regard to this third kind of substance, at least those pertaining to its existence and essence,²⁵ now seem to have been clarified. It has been shown that an eternal and unmoved substance necessarily exists and that its essence is pure actuality.

21 Cf. *De an.* II 4, 415a29 f.: ... ἵνα τοῦ ἀεὶ καὶ τοῦ θεοῦ μετέχωσιν ἢ δύνανται πάντα γὰρ ἐκείνου ὀρέγεται ...

22 Cf. *E. N.* X 7, 1177b33 f.; *De an.* II 4, 415a26–b7; *De gen. an.* II 1, 731b24–732a11; *De gen. et corr.* II 10, 337a1–7, *Met.* IX 8, 1050b28 f.

23 Cf. Sedley, D. 2007: *Creationism and Its Critics in Antiquity*, Berkeley–Los Angeles–London, 171: “It is, in short, scarcely an exaggeration to say that for Aristotle the entire functioning of the natural world, as also that of the heavens, is ultimately to be understood as a shared striving towards godlike actuality.” According to Sedley, Aristotle manages to harmonize two contrasting motives by having recourse to the platonic view of God as the highest object of imitation: that God is a transcendent substance separate from the world and that God is the highest explanatory principle of reality. See also Menn (see note 9), 573.

24 Cf. Richardson Lear (see note 20), 86: “... when we approximate the divine to the extent possible for us, we realize our own nature.”

25 Cf. the fourth aporia (*Met.* III 1, 995b13–18; III 2, 997a34–998a19), where Aristotle states that it is necessary to clarify whether there are other substances separate from those which we can perceive and whether these exist in one or several kinds. Concerning the question about the existence and mode of being of the separate substance see also *Met.* VII 2, 1028b27–32 (πότερον εἰσὶ τινες παρὰ τὰς αἰσθητάς ἢ οὐκ εἰσὶ, καὶ αὐταὶ πῶς εἰσὶ, καὶ πότερον ἔστι τις χωριστὴ οὐσία ...) and Λ 1, 1069a33 f.

When at *Met.* Λ 7, 1072b14–30 Aristotle qualifies the ‘pure actuality’ of the first principle more precisely as life and ascribes a very specific kind of life to the first principle, i.e., the activity of thinking, which – as will emerge – this principle *is* according to its essence (1072b27),²⁶ this is, in my view, not in line with the characteristics mentioned up to this point. Whereas the characteristics of the ‘first series’ were “conceptually” derived from the essential predicate of ‘pure actuality’ and whereas such a method of deduction could, in principle, also be given for the characteristics of the ‘second series’,²⁷ this is impossible in the case of the characteristics of life and the activity of reason. First, life is only a certain kind of actuality among others (*E. N.* X 4, 1175a12: ἡ δὲ ζωὴ ἐνέργειά τις). Moreover, “life” is predicated in many ways (*De an.* II 2, 413a22; *Top.* VI 10, 148a26–31). The concept of actuality or activity (ἐνέργεια), which describes the essence of the unmoved mover, is an *analogical* concept which is applied in entirely different areas of being (*Met.* IX 6, 1048b6–9). Thus, it is, in principle, thinkable that the first principle – as an immaterial, unmoved and separate substance – could have an entirely different mode of actuality from the ones familiar to us, i.e., the mode of actuality which is life in the sense of the activity of reason. In *E. N.* X 8 Aristotle says that the activity of God “surpasses all others in blessedness” (1178b21 f.: ὥστε ἡ τοῦ θεοῦ ἐνέργεια, μακαριότητι διαφέρουσα ...). In the famous fragment from the lost treatise “On prayer” Aristotle mentions the two options that the God “is either intellect or something more beyond intellect” (fr. 49 Rose).²⁸ For Aristotle it is precisely the complete ontological determination and separation – which the first principle has on account of its ‘pure actuality’ – that make it into something which *simpliciter* or “by nature” is most known. Yet because of this the first principle is, from the perspective of our finite knowledge, which begins with perception, most remote.²⁹ As is well known, Aristotle compares the relation of our reason to the things “which are by nature most evident of all” to the relation that the eyes of bats have to daylight (*Met.* II 1, 993b7–11). This epistemic distance of the first principle results from its ontological perfection or transcendence, even if, for Aristotle, this transcendence does not go as far as Plato’s ἐπέκεινα

26 God does not *have* an intellect, which he exercises, for then it would be possible, in principle, that this intellect might at one time not be actualised. Rather, God *is* the activity of the intellect itself and thus pure thinking or activity of reason. Cf. Menn (see note 9), 561 f.; Bordt (see note 9), 92.

27 One could deduce the fact that God is unmoved also from the immateriality and see the highest intelligibility grounded in the complete actuality qua determination.

28 ὁ θεὸς ἢ νοῦς ἐστὶν ἢ ἐπέκεινά τι τοῦ νοῦ. Like Oehler (1997, 60 f.) I take this alternative to be strictly disjunctive. The second alternative is a terminological reference to the Platonic ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας at *Pol.* 509b.

29 Cf. *Anal. Post.* I 2, 71b33–72a5; *Met.* VII 3, 1029b4–12.

τῆς οὐσίας: the first principle is οὐσία in the absolute primary sense. It manifests in a perfect and thus also paradigmatic way what it means to be, and, as such, it belongs – in contrast to Plato – to the logical space of being.

On account of the transcendence of the first principle it is understandable that Aristotle expresses himself carefully in part (ii) of the thesis quoted above: “And its life is such as the best which we enjoy, and enjoy for but a short time” (1072b14–16). Here our best way of life serves as an element of a comparison (οἷα ἡ ἀρίστη).³⁰ Therefore, Aristotle thinks that we can take the highest form of human life which we can enjoy as our departing point when we want to qualify the kind of life the first principle enjoys. In my view – and this is crucial for a proper understanding of this passage – we are dealing here with an assumption which stands in need of justification. This need of justification follows from the ontological perfection of the first principle we discussed earlier and from the resulting ‘epistemic distance’ from us. The justification for this thesis is developed in section 1072b18–24. According to my own reading of this passage, Aristotle claims to have shown why we are entitled to use the “to us better known” highest activity of human beings, contemplation (θεωρία),³¹ in order to characterize the perfect actuality of God more closely. Most commentators overlook that at 1072b14 f. Aristotle expresses a thesis which calls for a more detailed justification. According to the standard reading, Aristotle simply assumes that the mode of life of the first principle is of the same kind as our best form of life, i.e. θεωρία, without offering any further arguments for this assumption.³² When engaged in contemplation human beings exercise, for a short time, exactly the same kind of activity which God exercises at all times. On the basis of this assumption in 1072b18–24 Aristotle is supposed to be in a position to illustrate or explain divine thinking with reference to human thinking.³³ However, against

³⁰ Cf. Laks (see note 5), 233. In this context Laks rightly points out that this leaves it open whether this is an identity or a mere similarity. See also Kosman, A. 2000: *Metaphysics* Λ 9: Divine Thought, in: M. Frede/D. Charles (eds.), *Aristotle's Metaphysics Lambda*. Symposium Aristotelicum, Oxford, 309: “Aristotle there sets out to give us an idea of the mode of existence of this being, known up to now only as a principle of activity, and he does so by means of a figurative account that relies upon simile to convey to the reader that mode of existence”.

³¹ Cf. E. N. X 7, 1177a18; X 8, 1178b7–32.

³² Cf. for example Ross, W. D. 1924 (ed.): *Aristotle's Metaphysics*. A Revised Text with Introduction and Commentary, Oxford II, 378: “... Aristotle assumes that it must be such as the highest actuality or activity that we know, viz. νόησις, immediate or intuitive knowledge.”

³³ Cf. Bordt (see note 5), 116: According to Bordt, Aristotle can proceed in this way because there is no categorical difference between the rational activity of human beings and the rational activity of the first *ousia*. Ibid. 118: According to Bordt, what holds for human reason also holds with the exception of continuance and duration for the rational activity of the first principle.

the assumption of such a unity one can advance the following *prima facie* arguments: Nowhere does Aristotle state that divine and human thinking are of the same kind. Rather, in *E. N.* X 8 the question of what kind of similarity it is that holds between human and divine contemplation, is precisely left open (1178b27). A strong argument against the assumption of an identity in kind, with a gradual difference merely with regard to temporal duration, is the passage which concludes our section of the text: "If, then, God is always (ἀεὶ) in that good state in which we sometimes (ποτέ) are, this compels our wonder; and if in a higher degree (μᾶλλον), this compels it yet more. And God is in such a state (ἔχει δὲ ὧδε)" (1072b24–26; Barnes with modifications). That μᾶλλον should here carry a merely quantitative-temporal difference can be ruled out, as this difference is already expressed in the previous sentence.³⁴ If it is the case that "even things different in species admit of degree" (*E. N.* VIII 2, 1155b14 f.³⁵), then it is reasonable to suppose that this difference refers to the activity itself, i.e. to the essence of θεωρία. In this case the God would realize what it means to be active in the mode of contemplation in a way still higher than human beings, namely in a perfect, unlimited way. This kind of difference, or rather the eminence of divine contemplation, has to be elaborated further on the basis of the text. It suffices, at this point, to keep in mind that a merely temporal difference for μᾶλλον is ruled out, and that the indicated difference is explicitly maintained to exist (ἔχει δὲ ὧδε: 1072b26). In what follows I will develop an interpretation of the passage 1072b14–26 in which a unity of kind of divine and human contemplation is, contrary to the standard interpretation, precisely not assumed. Rather, on my view, in this passage Aristotle wants to show why it is legitimate at all to further characterize the form of life of the first principle on the basis of our most consummate form of life.³⁶

34 Cf. Wedin, M. V. 1988: *Mind and Imagination in Aristotle*, New Haven/London, 228, 233: "But the passage indicates a difference in the state itself and, thus, certainly appears to countenance difference in kind." See also Kosman (see note 30), 311: "The view that Aristotle offers, it seems, is not simply that God thinks as we do, only all the time rather than merely some of the time; it is rather that God engages in an activity that is like thinking, but something *more*." See also *E. E.* VII 12, 1245b16–19.

35 "... whether there is one species of friendship or more than one. Those who think there is only one because it admits of degrees have relied on an inadequate indication; for even things different in species admit of degree."

36 See also Gabriel, M. 2006: *Gottes transzendenter Seinsvollzug. Zur Aristotelischen Ontotheologie im A der Metaphysik*, in: *Jahrbuch für Religionsphilosophie*, 5, 99, 113n54, who reads the section 1072b20–24 as an analogical extrapolation. See previously Oehler, K. 1985: *Die Lehre vom Noetischen und Dianoetischen Denken bei Platon und Aristoteles. Ein Beitrag zur Erforschung der Geschichte des Bewusstseinsproblems in der Antike*, Hamburg, 203.

II. Thinking as a suitable Candidate (1072b14–19)

Now if, according to its very nature, the first principle is actuality, and if this actuality consists in leading (διαγωγή) a form of life, which is comparable to our best form of life, then this διαγωγή, which is not yet qualified any further, is true of the first principle *always*: “And its life is such as the best which we enjoy, and enjoy for but a short time. For it is ever in this state (which we cannot be)” (1072b14–16). Aristotle mentions an additional reason for the excellence of the first principle’s form of life: “since its actuality is also pleasure”.³⁷ For if pleasure accompanies a perfect activity as a supervenient perfection,³⁸ and if the first principle, according to its very nature, is actuality or activity, then the first principle is essentially also pleasure and, therefore, pure pleasure (cf. *E. N.* VII 15, 1154b25 f.).³⁹ In view of this perfect activity with its pure pleasure, which is not yet qualified any further, *human* activities like waking, perceiving and thinking (to their various different degrees) are pleasant in a derivative sense. Hopes and memories in turn are pleasurable insofar as they relate to these activities: “And therefore waking, perception and thinking are very pleasant (ἡδιστον),⁴⁰ and hopes and memories are so because of their reference to these (activities)” (1072b17 f.).

Now, in what kind of activity does the διαγωγή of the first principle consist? How can this activity, to which pleasure belongs as such or *simpliciter*, be further qualified? In 1072b17–8, Aristotle lists three activities of *human* life which are each pleasant to a high degree (waking, perceiving, and thinking). The next sentence addresses thinking “in itself”: “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 the fullest sense” (ἡ δὲ νόησις ἡ καθ’ αὐτὴν τοῦ καθ’ αὐτὸ ἀρίστου, καὶ ἡ μάλιστα τοῦ μάλιστα: 1072b18–9; trans. Barnes with modifications). Now, it makes a great difference to how we understand this passage, whether we do or do not read Aristotle in such a way, that he assumes the unity in kind of divine and human thinking (or θεωρία) right from the beginning. Commentators making this assumption often think that the statement just quoted (1072b18–9) relates to the divine thinking itself. According to the ‘positive *systoichia*’ mentioned in 1072a31 f., the highest object of thinking would be the simple and essentially

³⁷ ἐπεὶ καὶ ἡδονὴ ἡ ἐνέργεια (1072b16). On this see Laks (see note 5), 233 f.

³⁸ Cf. *E. N.* X 4, 1174b31–33; X 5, 1175a29 f.

³⁹ See also Bordt (see note 5), 117: According to Bordt, what pleasure is becomes paradigmatically clear from the real activity of the first principle, because in this case pleasure appears in its purest and fullest form.

⁴⁰ Because of the derivative character I read ἡδιστον in an elative sense (cf. also Laks (see note 5), 233).

actual substance. From this it would follow – though left unmentioned here by Aristotle – that the object of God’s thinking must be God himself. After all, the object of his thinking is “that which is best in the fullest sense”. Otherwise something else would be better, which would mean that God is not the highest being.⁴¹ This implicit divine thinking-himself would then be explained further by the following sentences (1072b20–24) with reference to human thinking. Because of the assumed identity of kind with divine thinking, human thinking likewise has a self-referential structure (αὐτὸν δὲ νοεῖ ὁ νοῦς), and has it *in the same sense* as divine thinking.

One can, however, think of another way in which the expression ἡ δὲ νόησις ἡ καθ’ αὐτήν in 1072b18 f. could be interpreted. I will develop this interpretation in what follows. Not only does it not need to assume a unity of kind, it can also avoid the assumption of a conclusion which is not drawn *expressis verbis*.⁴²

This interpretation can give the passage 1072b14–26 an altogether more philosophically sophisticated sense insofar as it shows that this passage can be regarded as a consistent justification for why we are entitled to qualify the form of life of the first principle by starting from our own highest form of life.

After Aristotle has mentioned waking, perceiving and thinking in 1072b17 from the human sphere, which are pleasant with respect to the ‘pure activity’ and ‘pure pleasure’ of the first principle, he selects *from these*

41 Cf. Ross (see note 32) II, 379: “In order to find the connexion between these two sentences, it seems necessary to suppose that when Aristotle says that the divine νόησις ἡ καθ’ αὐτήν is of τὸ καθ’ αὐτὸ ἄριστον he means the conclusion to be drawn ‘and therefore of the divine νοῦς itself’, which has been exhibited as the πρῶτον ὁρεκτόν (a27), in other words as the ἄριστον (a35). He then goes on to show *how* νοῦς knows itself”. Cf. Oehler, K. 1974: Aristotle on Self-Knowledge, in: Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society, 118, 499: “Since the highest type of activity is thought, Aristotle defines the nature of the Prime Mover to be thought, and thought in its purest form, that is as pure Noesis, without restriction to the sensory content of perception and imagination. The object of this highest, purest Noesis of the Prime Mover is that which is best in itself; that which is in the highest degree thought has as its object that which is in the highest degree good [...] It is hardly surprising that Aristotle does not add *expressis verbis* the conclusion ‘therefore the Prime Mover thinks itself’. The notebook-like style of Book Lambda makes the enthymeme appropriate”.

42 Norman, R. 1969: Aristotle’s philosopher-God, in: Phronesis, 14, 63–74 argues against such an ‘implicit syllogism’. According to him, such a syllogism would disrupt the continuity of the argument developed from 1072b15 to 1072b26 unnecessarily (68 f.). Regardless of this point, with which I agree, although it is not further developed based on the text, Norman also defends the problematic thesis that the unmoved mover has to be ascribed the *same kind of thinking* as humans, i.e. the αὐτὸν νοεῖν, which Norman (with reference to Aristotle’s analysis in *De an.* III 4, 429b5–9) contrasts as a “theoretical” kind of thinking with a “receptive” kind (67).

three activities thinking or activity of reason (νόησις) in the next sentence: “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 the fullest sense” (1072b18–9). Thus the particle δέ in ἡ δὲ νόησις ἢ καθ’ αὐτήν is not used in a connective-*adversative* sense – as in the standard interpretation – i.e., in such a way as to imply that human νόησις were here contrasted with divine νόησις. Rather, the particle δέ is understood in a connective-*continuative* sense; it refers back to the previously mentioned νόησις.⁴³ This thinking is considered *in a certain respect*, namely “as such” (καθ’ αὐτήν). Especially if one takes into account the context of Aristotle’s psychology, the qualifier καθ’ αὐτό plays the role of highlighting a faculty with respect to its very own function (ἔργον), for the sake of which it came into being. It also highlights a faculty with respect to the objects (τὰ ἀντικείμενα) through which it is defined⁴⁴, or with respect to an effect it produces by itself.⁴⁵ In the case of thinking this means to abstract from the specific human dependence on perception and imagination (φαντασία).⁴⁶ This dependence is reflected on the one hand in the fact that we have to examine the perceptible objects with their immanent forms (τὸ εἶδος τὸ ἐνόν)⁴⁷ if we want to acquire knowledge (ἐπιστήμη) about the world,⁴⁸ and, on the other hand, in the fact that every act of human thinking is accompanied by some content of the imagination (φαντάσματα).⁴⁹ This dependence of thinking on φαντασία and thus on perception implies that in human beings thinking cannot separate itself from their bodies (*De an.* I 1, 403a8–10; III 7, 431a16 f.). If, therefore, thinking is considered “in itself” this particular dependence of human thinking on sensibility is disregarded.

Now, although it is the case that the thinking of God, as we learn in *Met.* Λ 9, is an eternal, non-procedural thinking not dependent on perception or imagination,⁵⁰ it is not necessary to assume that at 1072b18 f. Aristotle

43 Cf. Denniston, J. D. ²1950: *The Greek Particles*, Oxford, 162.

44 In this way the different senses are determined by the “objects perceptible in themselves” (*De an.* II 6).

45 Cf. the discussion on the movement of the soul (*De an.* I 3, 406a7, a11, b15).

46 Cf. *De an.* III 3, 427b14–16; III 7, 431a14–17, 431b2–19.

47 Cf. *Met.* VII 11, 1037a29; *De an.* III 8, 432a3–6.

48 Cf. *Anal. Post.* I 31, 88a2–8; II 19. On this see the more detailed discussion in Herzberg, S. 2011: *Wahrnehmung und Wissen bei Aristoteles. Zur epistemologischen Funktion der Wahrnehmung*, Berlin–New York.

49 Cf. *De mem.* 449b30–450a9. Both forms of dependence on the senses are expressed by Aristotle in the following sentence: “Hence no one can learn or understand anything in the absence of sense, and when the mind is actively aware of anything it is necessarily aware of it along with an image (ἀνάγκη ἕμα φάντασμά τι θεωρεῖν)” (*De an.* III 8, 432a7–9).

50 This is especially emphasized by Wedin (see note 34), 229, 245.

already refers to divine thinking.⁵¹ It is more likely that this passage refers to thinking as it is treated in a *general and structural* manner in *De an.* III 4. In this chapter Aristotle wants to indicate clearly which *differentia specifica* defines the power of thinking and how thinking takes place. The faculty of reason is characterized, in an analogy to perception, as a receptive faculty (although not bound to an organ), which is “in itself” related to intelligible objects (νοητά):

“The thinking part of the soul must therefore be, while impassible (ἀπαθές), capable of receiving (δεκτικόν) the form of an object [...] Thinking must be related to what is thinkable, as sense is to what is sensible.” (429a15–18)

If one disregards the specific dependence of human thinking on perception, then (theoretical) thinking is related “in itself” to what is of high ontological rank, namely to the *simpliciter* or “by nature” better-known essential structures which underlie reality (cf. *Met.* Λ 7, 1072a31). This ontological dignity is signalled by Aristotle with appropriate predicates like τίμιον, ἀγαθόν, θεῖον and their comparative forms. This is especially clear at *E. N.* X 7, 1177a14 f., where he says, of the capacity which underlies the activity in accordance with highest virtue, that due to its nature (κατὰ φύσιν) it has a cognitive access to the beautiful and divine things (ἐννοῖαν ἔχειν περὶ καλῶν καὶ θεῶν; see also 1177a19–21). Yet *Met.* Λ 7, 1072b18 f. does not just declare the essential relation of thinking to the objects of high ontological rank, the passage also states that there is a dependence of the dignity of the act of thinking on the dignity of its object: “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 the fullest sense” (1072b18 f.).

This dependence on the dignity of the object, which Aristotle will explicitly come back to in Λ 9 (1074b29 f.), also shows itself in the pleasure which accompanies thinking: “the most complete is the most pleasant activity, and that of a well-conditioned organ in relation to the worthiest of its objects is the most complete” (*E. N.* X 4, 1174b21–23; trans. Barnes, slightly altered). Thus “as such” thinking (νόησις), if it is directed to the best objects, can grant us the highest pleasure. This is what distinguishes it from all other conscious activities. With this we have found the *suitable candidate* for the activity on the basis of which we can further qualify the ‘pure actuality’ which constitutes the essence of the first principle and to which belongs ‘absolute pleasure’.

51 Like Ross (see note 32 II, 379) and Oehler (see note 41, 499), for example.

III. The Divine in Human Thinking (1072b19–24)

After identifying human νόησις as a suitable candidate for an analogy to the divine mode of being, in a further step Aristotle subjects it to a detailed investigation by exploring the human intellect with regard to a divine element it contains (cf. 1072b23: ὃ δοκεῖ ὁ νοῦς θεῖον ἔχειν). Before I present my interpretation of this passage, I will have to mention two things: (1) in most cases Aristotle uses the predicate “divine” to describe the dignity of something of high ontological rank. This results from the realization of different characteristics to different degrees, e.g. of actuality, separateness, eternity or being unmoved, which stand in a certain order of rank to each other.⁵² Since the highest principle of reality has so far been identified as that which, by its very nature, is actuality (Λ 6, 1071b20; Λ 7, 1072a32), it is reasonable to think of the dignifying predicate θεῖον in the first instance in the sense of *being actual*. In my view, one cannot presuppose a more elaborate meaning of θεῖον at this point unless one makes the problematic assumption that in 1072b20 Aristotle has reached God’s thinking-himself as an unstated conclusion, and unless one regards this special self-referring cognitive act as what θεῖον means here. (2) If Aristotle wants to point out something divine in human thinking, and thus to identify an affinity with the mode of being of the highest principle, then, in my view, this passage has the function of stating a reason why we are entitled to characterize God’s ‘pure activity’ on the basis of the “for us better known” human thinking, i.e. “from the bottom up”. Since, as the highest οὐσία, God belongs to the logical space of being and is thus precisely not ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας, we can regard the uncovering of a special ‘structure of actuality’⁵³ (and simultaneously of a high ontological dignity) in a certain activity of human life as proof of an affinity with the divine mode of being. Furthermore, we can claim – taking this as our starting point – to be able to gain knowledge of the kind and manner of his actuality, i.e., his essence. Thus, after having selected νόησις, which has the highest dignity in relation to the highest objects, from the preceding list of activities in 1072b18f. Aristotle proceeds to examine this νόησις with regard to its ontological value. Now, the intellect or thinking is not a uniform phenomenon. Rather, we can distinguish different levels of this capacity to which belong different modes of activity. One may ask which mode of activity has the closest affinity to the mode of being of the highest principle. It is striking that Aristotle immediately begins with the intellect’s thinking itself:

⁵² Cf. *Met.* VI 1, 1026a20–29, Λ 8, 1073b3–5; *De part. an.* I 5, 644b25 f.; *De cael.* I 9, 279a32; *De an.* I 4, 408b29.

⁵³ For this term see also Buddensiek, F. 1999: *Die Theorie des Glücks in Aristoteles’ Eudemischer Ethik*, Göttingen, 236 f.

“And thinking thinks itself because it shares the nature of the object of thinking; for it becomes an object of thinking in coming into contact with and thinking its objects, so that thinking and the object of thinking are the same.”⁵⁴

(1072b20 f.; trans. Barnes with modifications)

The question of why Aristotle begins with a statement which, at first glance, is so hard to understand can only be answered by looking at *De an.* III 4. He seems to presuppose that the reader is familiar with this chapter. According to Aristotle, the human intellect, before it acquires any knowledge, exists in pure potentiality. It does not, therefore, belong to the things that exist in actuality: “it follows that it can have no nature of its own, other than that of having a certain capacity. Thus that in the soul which is called thought (by thought I mean that by which the soul thinks and judges) is, before it thinks, not actually any real thing” (*De an.* III 4, 429a21–24; 429b30–430a2). As part of the acquisition of knowledge the intellect receives the intelligible forms by which it becomes identical with the thinkable objects that are present in potentiality in the perceptible objects.⁵⁵ Since, by its nature, the human intellect is a potentiality,⁵⁶ it does not, as such, prior to the acquisition of knowledge, belong to the things which exist in actuality. It is for this reason that the possession of the immaterial intelligible objects, i.e., the fact that it knows these habitually, means that the intellect and what is thought of are the same (430a3 f.). Through its “participation in the intelligible” the intellect has become thinkable for itself. In this state, the intellect is on the level of the ‘first actuality’. While it is still something which is potentially a thinker (more precisely: a contemplator) it can, however, in contrast to an intellect which merely has the potential for knowledge acquisition, at any time, “when it wants” or “through itself”, move to the activity, i.e., the contemplation of the knowledge it has already acquired (*De an.* II 5, 417a26–28, b23 f.). This actualization consists then in nothing other than the intellect’s thinking itself:

“When thought becomes each intelligible thing in the way in which a man who actually knows is said to do so”⁵⁷ (this happens when he is able

54 αὐτὸν δὲ νοεῖ ὁ νοῦς κατὰ μετάληψιν τοῦ νοητοῦ· νοητὸς γὰρ γίγνεται θιγγάνων καὶ νοῶν, ὥστε ταῦτόν νοῦς καὶ νοητόν.

55 This cognitive identity is one that is mediated through the intelligible forms, as Aristotle emphasizes especially at *De an.* III 8, 431b20–432a3. On form as a cognitive means of reference see Owens, J. 1980: Form and Cognition in Aristotle, in: *Ancient Philosophy*, 1, 17–27; Perler, D. 2004: *Theorien der Intentionalität im Mittelalter*, Frankfurt a. M.; Burnyeat, M. F. 2008: *Aristotle’s Divine Intellect*, Milwaukee, 20–24.

56 Cf. also *De an.* III 5, 430a14 f.

57 Cf. also *De an.* III 7, 431b16 f. (ὅλως δὲ ὁ νοῦς ἐστίν, ὁ κατ’ ἐνέργειαν, τὰ πράγματα). In this passage it becomes clear that the passage quoted above is about the intellect on the level of ‘first actuality’. See also Burnyeat (see note 55), 23.

to exercise the power on his own initiative), its condition is still one of potentiality but in a different sense from the potentiality which preceded the acquisition of knowledge by learning or discovery; and thought is then able to think itself.”⁵⁸

(*De an.* III 4, 429b5–10; trans. Barnes with modifications)

So, in humans, the thinking-itself of the intellect refers to nothing other than the act by which one reflects on the epistemic content previously acquired. This thinking-itself, which has to be sharply distinguished from the reflexive consciousness of this self-reference,⁵⁹ is *thinking* in the primary sense.⁶⁰ While we can also speak of thinking when we consider a certain *synthesis* of thoughts in order to arrive at a judgment which can be true or false,⁶¹ the primary meaning of thinking is the contemplation of the contents of knowledge already acquired – with which one is already sufficiently familiar – in their different interconnections.⁶² According to *De an.* II 5, 417b6 f., we are here dealing with a “development into its true self or actuality” (εἰς αὐτὸ γὰρ ἢ ἐπίδοσις καὶ εἰς ἐντελέχειαν). Such an actualization confers greater joy on a cognitive act than the acquisition of knowledge (*E. N.* X 7, 1177a26 f.). Because Aristotle is here concerned with thinking in the primary and definition-al sense, he addresses it right at the beginning of this passage.

In this passage Aristotle also points out that the self-referential activity of the intellect is possible only because of its prior grasp of or sharing in intelligible objects (κατὰ μετάληψιν τοῦ νοητοῦ). Intellect becomes thinkable for itself only when it has received certain objects (1072b20 f.). The depen-

58 From what has been elaborated above, it becomes clear that it is possible – against the emendation of Bywater (δὲ αὐτοῦ), which is followed by Ross – to retain the variant of the surviving manuscripts (δὲ αὐτὸν). Cf. Kahn, C. H. 1992: Aristotle on Thinking, in: M. C. Nussbaum/A. Oksenberg Rorty (eds.), *Essays on Aristotle's De Anima*, 372–375; Gerson, L. P. 2009: *Ancient Epistemology*, Cambridge, 78 f.

59 Cf. Oehler (see note 41), 498. As in the case of the other cognitive acts of *human* beings (perception, opinion) the reflexive consciousness of this thinking is incidental or secondary (cf. *Met.* Λ 9, 1074b35 f.).

60 Cf. Gerson (see note 58), 79: “It is this actualisation that enables the intellect to ‘think itself’. It is this latter actualisation that constitutes thinking in the primary, definitional sense.”

61 Cf. the connection between διάνοια und ὑπόληψις in *De an.* III 3, 427b14–16, b25. Both are related to one another like the process to its result (cf. Hicks, R. D. 1907: Aristotle. *De Anima*. With translation, introduction and notes, Amsterdam, 457; Gerson (see note 58), 63): The discursive thinking on a certain state of affairs *aims* at a judgement which either takes the form of δόξα, ἐπιστήμη or φρόνησις.

62 Cf. Dahl, N. O. 2011: Contemplation and eudaimonia in the Nicomachean Ethics, in: J. Miller (ed.), *Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics. A Critical Guide*, Cambridge, 70: “Contemplation, thus, turns out to be reflective appreciation of the nature of the world as revealed by Aristotelian science.”

dency on other objects for the actualization of νόησις reveals the nature of the *human* intellect, which consists in ‘pure potentiality’. This characterization of its essential nature does not only entail its basic receptivity⁶³ and a merely limited self-sufficiency, insofar as self-referential thinking presupposes an arduous process of learning and is not simply available as such,⁶⁴ but νόησις (or θεωρεῖν) is also determined in its content by the previously received intelligible objects and thus depends for its value on the value of the νοητά. This already shows the finitude of human thinking: the human mind is incapable of thinking itself in an unmediated way.⁶⁵ Aristotle expresses this limitation of human thinking in the following sentences:

“For that which is capable of receiving the object of thought, i.e. the substance,⁶⁶ is thought. And it is active when it possesses this object. Therefore the latter rather than the former is the divine element which thought seems to contain, and the act of contemplation is what is most pleasant and best.”⁶⁷
(1072b22–24)

Thus the human intellect is receptive (δεκτικόν) according to its nature and it can be active only when it already has certain intelligible objects at its disposal (ἐνεργεῖ δὲ ἔχων), which then form the content of its contemplation (θεωρήματα: *E. N.* IX 4, 1166a26). With the help of his “triple scheme”⁶⁸ Aristotle has distinguished different modal levels in which the intellect can exist and which correspond to different modes of thinking. On the basis of this, one can now ask what exactly it is about the human intellect that has the characteristic of being divine (θεῖον), i.e., possesses a ‘structure of actuality’ akin to the divine mode of being, to ‘pure actuality’.

63 Cf. Burnyeat, M. F. 2002: *De Anima* II 5, in: *Phronesis*, 47, 71.

64 In *E. N.* X 7, 1177a27 f. Aristotle claims that the criterion of self-sufficiency applies most to the contemplating activity (ἡ τε λεγομένη αὐτάρκεια περὶ τὴν θεωρητικὴν μάλιστα ἂν εἴη). When the wise man has all the things which are necessary for life and leisure he can embark on the contemplation of the knowledge he has acquired previously. But only few people have the opportunity to acquire theoretical knowledge and even if they possess it there are hindrances to reflecting on it as such (see the precise observation in *De an.* II 5, 417a28). Thus human nature reveals itself as “in many ways in bondage”. One can indeed regard the acquisition of wisdom as beyond human power (*Met.* I 2, 982b28–30).

65 Cf. Oehler, K. 1997: *Subjektivität und Selbstbewußtsein in der Antike*, Würzburg, 41.

66 καὶ is here to be understood in an explicative sense (cf. Bordt (see note 5), 120).

67 τὸ γὰρ δεκτικὸν τοῦ νοητοῦ καὶ τῆς οὐσίας νοῦς, ἐνεργεῖ δὲ ἔχων, ὥστ’ ἐκείνου μᾶλλον τοῦτο δοκεῖ ὁ νοῦς θεῖον ἔχειν, καὶ ἡ θεωρία τὸ ἥδιστον καὶ ἀριστον. Here I follow Ross and Jaeger who, contrary to the manuscripts and with the *paraphrasis* of the commentary of Ps.-Alexander of Aphrodisias, prefer ἐκείνου μᾶλλον τοῦτο.

68 Cf. Burnyeat (see note 63), 48.

At this point, in the text there is an unclarity regarding the correct reading and translation of the Greek.⁶⁹ The reason for this is that Aristotle mentions two elements, of which the one (= A) “more” (μᾶλλον) than the other (= B) realizes “the divine (θεῖον) which thought seems to contain”. However, he leaves the reference of both elements underdetermined by just using demonstrative pronouns. Moreover, the search for the respective object of reference is made more difficult by the fact that Aristotle does not say explicitly what the meaning of θεῖον is in this passage. If we understand Aristotle in such a way that he is looking for something divine in human thinking, namely in the sense of a structure of actuality which is similar to the ‘pure actuality’ of the first principle, then it may be natural to think – as in Ross’s and Jaeger’s reading of this passage – that τοῦτο (= A) refers to ἐνεργεῖ and ἐκείνου (= B) refers to δεκτικόν. Since we are here dealing with human thinking, which can be explained more precisely with the “triple scheme”, the higher ontological dignity lies with ἐνεργεῖ, on the basis of possession (ἔχων⁷⁰), i.e. the habitual knowledge, of the intelligible objects (‘first actuality’), and thus with the act of contemplating certain epistemic contents (‘second actuality’) with which it has previously become identical (1072b19–21). By contrast, the δεκτικόν is the intellect on the level of the ‘first potentiality’ which has no other nature than to be potentially identical in character with its object (*De an.* III 4, 429a15 f., a21–25). Therefore the sentence is to be understood in such a way that “the latter”, i.e., the activity in the sense of the thinking-itself of *human* thinking, “rather than the former”, i.e., that “which is capable of receiving the object of thought”, is “the divine element which thought seems to contain”.⁷¹ From this it follows immediately that in human beings contemplation (θεωρία) is the most pleasant and best activity.⁷²

69 The surviving manuscripts read ὥστ’ ἐκεῖνο (= A) μᾶλλον τούτου (= B) ὁ δοκεῖ ὁ νοῦς θεῖον ἔχειν, καὶ ἡ θεωρία τὸ ἥδιστον καὶ ἀριστον. However, in their respective editions Ross and Jaeger (whom many translators follow in this) read ὥστ’ ἐκείνου (= B) μᾶλλον τοῦτο (= A) ὁ δοκεῖ ὁ νοῦς θεῖον ἔχειν, καὶ ἡ θεωρία τὸ ἥδιστον καὶ ἀριστον with the *paraphrasis* of the commentary of Ps.-Alexander of Aphrodisias (698, 35 Hayduck).

70 Cf. *De an.* II 5, 417a25, a32 f., b5.

71 Cf. Kosman (see note 30), 310: “we learn that it is active thinking that is most divine in us”. Interestingly, the intellect “which is what it is by virtue of making all things” and which is essentially actuality and activity (*De an.* III 5, 430a18) is not included in this analysis. For a different interpretation see Reeve, C. D. C. 2012: *Action, contemplation, and happiness: an essay on Aristotle*, Cambridge–London, 215.

72 If one keeps to the reading of the manuscripts, ἐκεῖνο (= A) can either be seen as referring to the δεκτικόν or the τοῦ νοητοῦ. However, the intellect on the level of the ‘first potentiality’ (δεκτικόν) cannot be of higher dignity than the intellect on the level of the ‘first actuality’ (ἔχων) or the ‘second actuality’ (ἐνεργεῖ). However, the intelligible object (τοῦ νοητοῦ) cannot be of higher dignity than the possession of knowledge of it or rather the actuality based on this possession. While it is indeed the case that the value of the act of thinking depends on the value of the object thought of and while the objects have priority insofar as it is through

If one looks back to the interpretation of *Met.* 1072b19–24 just developed, it becomes evident that it requires fewer additional assumptions (no presupposition of an identity of kind) than the standard interpretation, that it is closer to the text (no unstated conclusions) and that, in general, it is more faithful to Aristotle's procedure in *Met.* Λ 6–7, which is guided by the nature of the subject matter (the 'transcendence' of the first principle). If this interpretation is correct, then Aristotle's aim in this whole passage is to justify why we are entitled to take the "for us better known" human thinking as our point of departure when characterizing in more detail the mode of being of the eternal, unmoved and separate substance. Through an analysis of human thinking, which is guided by the "triple schema", it becomes clear that among human activities contemplation, *qua* actualization of previously acquired knowledge, has the highest ontological dignity. Due to its special 'structure of actuality'⁷³ and its specific pleasure, θεωρία emerges as, among all human activities, *most akin* to the mode of being of the first principle, which is essentially actuality and purest pleasure. The διαγωγή of the first principle can, therefore, be characterized as θεωρία or νόησις; in 1072b15 it is θεωρία which can be called upon as a point of comparison.⁷⁴ The God is always active in this magnificent way, which is possible for us to do only sometimes (1072b24 f.)

One does not have to read the next sentence (εἰ δὲ μᾶλλον ...) in order to realize already that besides the merely temporal duration of the act there has to be a deeper difference between human and divine contemplation which relates to the nature of this activity itself. Human contemplation is

them that the different capacities are defined (*De an.* II 4, 415a20–22; *Met.* IX 8) it is nevertheless true that prior to their being received by the intellect the intelligible objects lie in the individual perceptible objects, which have matter, only *in potentiality* (*De an.* III 4, 430a6 f.; III 8, 432a3–5). If it were otherwise, Aristotle would have no objective reason to introduce something like the 'active intellect' which – like a non-material medium – makes the intelligible objects, which reside in the perceptible individual things in potentiality, actually knowable, so that they can be received by the 'passive intellect' (*De an.* III 5, 430a15–17).

73 Contemplation is an activity (ἐνέργεια) in the narrow, technical sense of *Met.* IX 6, 1048b18–36. Learning, or the acquisition of knowledge, is a process which, as such, has an external goal and where the reaching of this goal also coincides with the temporal end of the process (it comes "to a standstill": *Phys.* VIII 3, 247b11 f.). Thinking, however, in the sense of contemplation is a perfect activity: it has its goal in itself; in every moment of its actualization its goal is reached. An activity of this kind can be continued for any length of time. In this respect this kind of thinking is similar to the circular motion.

74 Cf. Kosman (see note 30), 311: "The claim that God thinks turns out to mean that since the activity of thinking is divine, it may therefore be the clearest icon we have of the being of the divine principle whose essential nature is activity, and on which depend heaven and earth."

only possible because of a previous acquisition of knowledge which is based on an intellect which by its nature is ‘pure potentiality’. Because of this dependence on other objects, human contemplation is self-sufficient in a limited sense only, and in its content and dignity it depends in each case on the objects received (ἄλλο κύριον). It is a thinking that can think itself only *via* reference to ‘other beings’.⁷⁵ This cognitive self-reference, mediated, as it is, by external objects, has only an “incidental” (ἐν παρέργῳ; *Met.* Λ 9, 1074b36) reflexive consciousness. As Wedin rightly points out against a presumed unity of kind, the fact that thinking-itself is, as Aristotle states, based on an ‘intellect in potentiality’, affects the mode of θεωρία itself. One is, therefore, not allowed to simply, and without further qualification, make θεωρία, as it occurs in humans, the standard, i.e., to carry it over in the very same sense to God.⁷⁶ Aristotle himself draws our attention to the foundations upon which human thinking rests and that it is only a certain mode of this thinking which contains something divine, i.e., has an ontological affinity to God’s mode of being.

Thus, in our passage, Aristotle gives us a further characterization of God’s mode of being: God is pure thinking without any potentiality. However, unlike the previous features, it cannot be “conceptually” deduced from the ‘pure actuality’, but only transferred to God – albeit with modifications – by taking as our starting point the “for us better known” highest human activity. We do not, at this point, know what exactly God’s θεωρία consists in (see *Met.* Λ 9); yet we do know this much: that God’s thinking, since he is ‘pure actuality’, cannot be based on an intellect which is potentiality by nature and, therefore, likewise cannot be based on an acquisition of knowledge in which ‘external’ intelligible objects are received (see *E. E.* VII 12, 1245b17–19). It is for this reason that divine thinking cannot be identical in kind with human thinking.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Cf. Oehler (see note 65), 40–43.

⁷⁶ Wedin (see note 34, 233) argues against Norman’s thesis as follows: “First, if Norman is correct about sameness in degree, then man’s theoretic *activity* will be the measure of the god’s. For *as activity* the fact that our mind is also a potentiality does not enter the picture and that is what is relevant here. The point, rather, is that the two sorts of *activity* differ – unless, what Norman cannot allow, admixture of potentiality affects, downward, the *quality* of human theorizing.” (italics in the original)

⁷⁷ In the case of God there is no relation to external objects: he can think himself, i.e., pure thinking without it being necessary to have received external objects before (cf. Oehler (see note 41)). He is self-sufficient in an eminent sense. His thinking cannot be regarded as a mere instance of the thinking-itself referred to at 1072b19–21: it differs from this thinking in an essential way. In the case of God the reflexive consciousness, which appears only ἐν παρέργῳ in human cognition (1074b36), moves – due to the absence of a cognitive relation to the world – to the centre.

IV. A look at *E. N. X 8* and a conclusion

The method of argument we have just elaborated is significantly different from the one in *E. N. X 8*, 1178b7–32. In that passage, Aristotle provides a further reason for why the perfect happiness of humans is “a certain contemplative activity” (θεωρητική τις ἐνέργεια: 1178b7 f.). If we take the widespread opinion that the gods are blessed and happy to the highest degree⁷⁸ as our starting point (ὑπειλήφμεν: 1178b9), that they live⁷⁹ – as all assume (πάντες ὑπειλήφασιν) – and are, therefore, active (ζῆν [...] καὶ ἐνεργεῖν ἄρα: 1178b18 f.),⁸⁰ and if we can rule out that the gods are either engaged in virtuous action in its various forms or in the production⁸¹ of things, then the activity of the God, which surpasses everything else in blessedness (μακαριότητι διαφέρουσα), has to be one of contemplation (1178b22). Now, if God is happy to the highest degree and exclusively engaged in the activity of contemplation, then there has to be an intrinsic connection between θεωρία and happiness. Among all human activities the one that is most akin (συγγενεστάτη) to the activity of God will be associated with the greatest happiness. For humans, life is happy “insofar as some kind of likeness (ὁμοιωματι) of such activity belongs to them” (1178b26 f.).⁸² Aristotle combines this similarity relation with a gradation model: “Happiness extends, then, just so far as contemplation does, and those to whom contemplation more fully belongs are more truly happy (καὶ οἷς μᾶλλον ὑπάρχει τὸ θεωρεῖν, καὶ εὐδαιμονεῖν), not accidentally, but in virtue of the contemplation [...]”.⁸³

This gives rise to the fundamental question of whether the gradual difference pertains only to the temporal extension, during which in God and human beings the same kind of contemplation takes place to a different degree (that what God is engaged in permanently human beings can do only for a limited time), or whether it pertains to the nature of contemplation itself, which would, in that case, exist “as such” in different degrees. The latter would mean that, in contrast to God, human beings would manifest what it

78 Cf. also *E. N. I 12*, 1101b23f.

79 On this *endoxon* see also *Met. A 7*, 1072b28 f.

80 “Life” logically implies “activity” or “actuality”, but not *vice versa* (see above).

81 “Life” is here qualified as rational life, namely that it consists either in action, production or contemplation (cf. *Top. VI 6*, 145a15 f.; *Met. VI 1*, 1025b25; *E. N. VI 2*, 1139a27 f.).

82 In Aristotle’s writings the concept of similarity often occurs together with the concept of kinship, e.g., *E. N. VI 2*, 1139a10 f. (καθ’ ὁμοιότητά τινα καὶ οἰκειότητα); *Top. I 7*, 103a18 f. (ἅπαντα γὰρ τὰ τοιαῦτα συγγενῆ καὶ παραπλήσια ἀλλήλοις δοκεῖν εἶναι); *Top. I 10*, 104a19 f. (πάντα γὰρ ὅμοια καὶ συγγενῆ ταῦτ’ δοκεῖν εἶναι); *Rhet. I 11*, 1371b18 (πάντα τὰ συγγενῆ καὶ ὅμοια ἡδέα ὡς ἐπὶ τὸ πολὺ).

83 On this compare Kraut, R. 1989: Aristotle on the Human Good, Princeton, 39–77.

means to be active in the form of contemplation only in a limited way and that it cannot be predicated of them in a univocal, but only in a derivative or analogous sense.⁸⁴ Only God would manifest contemplation in an unlimited and perfect way. Looking towards him we could understand what it means, to lead a life of contemplation.

The concept of similarity, which Aristotle uses at 1178b27 to characterize the relation between human and divine contemplation, can be interpreted in both ways. It can be applied to things of the same kind, which differ in the way in which they individually express the nature of their respective kind, as well as to things which do not stand to each other in the relation of belonging to the same genus, as in an analogy or in the *pros hen*-unity (see *Top.* I 17; *E. N.* I 4, 1096b26–29).⁸⁵ A gradual difference ($\tau\acute{o}$ $\mu\acute{\alpha}\lambda\lambda\omicron\nu$ $\kappa\alpha\iota$ $\tau\acute{o}$ $\eta\tau\tau\omicron\nu$) is not only found in the category of quality (cf. *Cat.* 3b39–4a2), but for Aristotle things belonging to different kinds can also exist to different degrees: “Those who think there is only one (kind) because (friendship) admits of degrees ($\tau\acute{o}$ $\mu\acute{\alpha}\lambda\lambda\omicron\nu$ $\kappa\alpha\iota$ $\tau\acute{o}$ $\eta\tau\tau\omicron\nu$) have relied on an inadequate indication; for even things different in species ($\kappa\alpha\iota$ $\tau\acute{\alpha}$ $\epsilon\tau\epsilon\rho\alpha$ $\tau\acute{\omega}$ $\epsilon\iota\delta\epsilon\iota$) admit of degree” (*E. N.* VIII 2, 1155b13–15; trans. Barnes; slightly altered). Therefore, just because one can talk about the different degrees of something, this does not necessarily indicate that there is qualitative difference within one and the same kind. On the contrary, it can also be used for things differing in kind, as in the case of different kinds of friendship, for example,⁸⁶ or of different genera of being.⁸⁷

The fundamental question of whether divine and human contemplation coincide with regard to their kind cannot be decided on the basis of *E. N.* X 8. The main reason for this is the equivocal concept of similarity, which Aristotle does not specify any further in that text. In *E. N.* X 8 as well as in *Met.* Λ 7 he simply makes clear that contemplation can exist in different degrees (1178b29 f.; 1072b25). What follows from *E. N.* X 8 – and here especially from the emphasis on the superiority of divine happiness (1178b22) – leaves at least logical space for a reading which sees here an essential difference between divine and human contemplation.⁸⁸ My reading of *Met.* Λ 7,

⁸⁴ The indefinite pronoun in $\theta\epsilon\omega\rho\iota\alpha$ $\tau\iota\varsigma$ (1178b32) would have a “weakening” function here (cf. Wedin (see note 34), 212n3).

⁸⁵ For Aristotle, “similarity” is not an irreducible concept. Rather, for him it is a concept based on a certain kind of unity or common feature ‘below’ numerical unity and which can, at the same time, indicate a gradual difference that eludes a definitive definition. (cf. Rapp 1992). Basically, it is true to say: “[F]or in so far as they have any identical attribute, in so far they are alike” (*Top.* I 17, 108a16 f.).

⁸⁶ Cf. *E. N.* VIII 5, 1157a12–14; VIII 8, 1158b4 f.

⁸⁷ Cf. *Met.* VII 1, 1028a25 f.; XIV 1, 1088a29 f.

⁸⁸ Cf. also Wedin (see note 34), 211, 229, 245.

1072b14–26 has suggested that we should positively assume such a difference in kind. I have tried to show that such an alternative interpretation is indeed possible and also better. Moreover, with regard to *E. N. X 8* my interpretation has an interesting upshot concerning the way the argument unfolds. Whereas in *E. N. X 8* Aristotle characterizes the perfect happiness of human beings by proceeding “top down”, i.e., by starting with the perfect happiness of God and making use of *endoxa* for the further characterization of God’s activity, the argument in *Met. Λ 7*, 1072b14–26 takes exactly the opposite approach. Here Aristotle proceeds “bottom up” starting from the highest form of human thinking and transferring this *per analogiam* to the divine mode of being.⁸⁹ This can make better sense of the eternal, unmoved, separate substance whose essence is actuality. Because of the special ontological status, one has to assume that God manifests our best form of life, i.e. θεωρία, in an even higher way. Aristotle claims that this possibility is, in fact, realized by closing his argument with the following sentence: “If, then, God is always in that good state, this compels our wonder; and if in a better (μᾶλλον) this compels it even more. And God *is* in a better state (ἔχει δὲ ὤδε)” (1072b24–26; with *E. E.* 1245b16–19 and *E. N.* 1178b28–30).

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89 Cf. Oehler (see note 65), 58 f.: According to Oehler, although divine and human noetic thought are not identical, but different, they are not absolutely different. They stand to each other in a relation of analogy, namely of an *analogia attributionis*. Their characteristics correspond to each other, yet they do so in such a way that each of the characteristics of human noesis is lesser in degree when compared to the analogical characteristic of divine noesis.

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