

SESSION 9  
COMMENTATORS ON *METAPHYSICS* Λ.7.1072b18-26  
THE PRIME MOVER AS INTELLECTUAL ACTIVITY

Having established that the prime mover is always in actuality or activity (*energeia*), Aristotle argues that this activity is the same as (or even exceeds) the highest activity of which human beings are capable: the act of thinking (*noēsis*).

**Translation (7.1072b18-26)**

[1] And the act of thinking in its own right is of that which is best in itself, and the [act of thinking] most of all is of that which is [best] most of all. [2] And the intellect thinks of itself by participation in the intelligible object; for it becomes an intelligible object by touching and thinking of it, so that the intellect and intelligible object are the same. [3] For that which is receptive of the intelligible object and the substance, is the intellect, and it is acting when it possesses it. [4] Hence, it is the latter rather than the former\* which is the divine [state] that the intellect seems to possess, and contemplation is pleasantest and best. [5] If, therefore, the god is always in the good state that we are in sometimes, it is wonderful; and if it is more so, it is still more wonderful. But it is in this state.

\* 'the former rather than the latter' in the manuscripts and ps.-Alexander's lemma

**Text (ed. Ross and Jaeger)**

[1] ἡ δὲ νόησις ἢ καθ' αὐτήν τοῦ καθ' αὐτὸ ἀρίστου, καὶ ἡ μάλιστα τοῦ μάλιστα. [2] αὐτὸν δὲ νοεῖ ὁ νοῦς κατὰ μετάληψιν τοῦ νοητοῦ· νοητὸς γὰρ γίγνεται θιγγάνων καὶ νοῶν, ὥστε ταῦτόν νοῦς καὶ νοητόν. [3] τὸ γὰρ δεκτικὸν τοῦ νοητοῦ καὶ τῆς οὐσίας νοῦς, ἐνεργεῖ δὲ ἔχων, [4] ὥστ ἐκείνου μᾶλλον τοῦτο\* ὃ δοκεῖ ὁ νοῦς θεῖον ἔχειν, καὶ ἡ θεωρία τὸ ἥδιστον καὶ ἄριστον. [5] εἰ οὖν οὕτως εἴ ἔχει, ὡς ἡμεῖς ποτέ, ὁ θεὸς ἀεὶ, θαυμαστόν· εἰ δὲ μᾶλλον, ἔτι θαυμασιώτερον. ἔχει δὲ ὧδε.

\*ἐκεῖνο μᾶλλον τούτου codd. Al

**Assignment**

In order to facilitate our discussion, Aristotle's passage is divided into five sections marked by square brackets, and the three commentaries quoted below are similarly divided. Note that different commentators concentrate on different sections of the passage. Also, in some cases their discussions overlap these divisions.

General question: Aristotle presents this brief passage in the form of an argument with connectives such as 'for' (*gar*), 'hence' (*hōste*), and 'therefore' (*oun*). Is there, in fact, an

argument here? If so, what are the major steps leading from premisses to conclusion? What additional assumptions would be required in order to make the argument valid?

Compare the commentaries focusing on the different sections. How do they differ? Which of them helps to answer the following questions? (Feel free to raise questions of your own.)

[1] To what does “the act of thinking in its own right” refer? What is the basis for the claim that it is of that which is best in itself? To what does “the [act of thinking in itself] most of all” refer? What is the basis of the claim that it is of that which is best most of all? How is the discussion of thinking in this passage related to Aristotle’s theory of the intellect (*nous*) in *De Anima* III.4-8? How does this theory lay a theoretical basis for what follows? See especially ps.-Alexander.

[2] When Aristotle says that “the intellect thinks of itself by participation in the intelligible object”, what sort of intellect is he talking about? He uses the term *metalêpsis* which has a Platonic connotation. Do you think this is deliberate? How does Aristotle’s account of thinking differ from Plato’s? In terms of Aristotle’s theory, how does it come about that the intellect engages in an act of thinking? How is the intellect able to “think of itself”? How does the intellect “become the same as its object”? What is implied by the term “touching” (*thinganein*)?

[3] In what sense is the intellect receptive (*dektikos*) of the intelligible object and the substance? To what does “the substance” (*ousia*) refer to in this context? How is the distinction between potentiality and actuality implied by this section (on which see especially Aquinas). Why does Aquinas make the curious suggestion that Plato might have been on the right track at least concerning the way the celestial intellects think?

[4] This passage is controversial. Ross and Jaeger both emend the Greek text (reversing “the latter” and “the former”) in attempt to make it more comprehensible. The excerpts from the commentators (as translated) all seem to have read the text as emended. Assuming the text should be emended with Ross and Jaeger consider the following: To what do “the latter” and “the former” refer and what is meant by “the divine [state]” (*theion*)? How does [4] follow logically from [3]? Note that ps.-Alexander understands [4] in a different way than Averroes and Aquinas. Judson disagrees with Ross and Jaeger and contends that the text can be translated in conformity with the manuscripts. See his discussions pp. 330-2 and 375-6 note on 1072b23. How does his interpretation stack up in comparison with the traditional commentators?

[5] Why *is* the divine intellect in a better state than the human intellect?

**Ps.-Alexander (697, 15-699,16; tr. Miller)**

Note: the first two paragraphs borrow extensively from Alexander of Aphrodisias, *De Anima* 85,11-87,1.

[1] And, Aristotle says, “the act of thinking in itself is of that which is best in itself” (1072b18-19). And by “the act of thinking in itself” he means the actual intellect, which is different from the dispositional intellect, which again as dispositional is different from the potential intellect. For the dispositional intellect is a form and a potentiality and a completion of the potential intellect, a disposition which occurs in it as a result of its comprehension of the universal /20/ and its capacity to separate forms from matter, which [i.e. the forms] are in a way the same as each other. For that which has grasped a form of something separately from the matter possesses that which is both common and universal (for instance, when it has grasped the form of human being apart from the material circumstances, it possesses the common human being; for the difference of the individuals [i.e. human beings] from each other is received from the matter, /25/ since their forms, at least in respect to which they are human beings, are not distinct). And again that which has comprehended what is common to individuals grasps the form separately from the matter; for it is this that is common and the same in them. And this dispositional state occurs in the intellect at the beginning in the transition from the continuous activity concerning perceptible objects, just as [the intellect] /30/ obtains from them a theoretical vision of the universal, which at first is called a thought or a notion, and when it becomes abundant, variegated, and many-faceted so as to have the potential to produce this even separately from its perceptual basis, it is already an intellect. For whenever it comes into a dispositional state as a result of continuous activities in such a way that it has the potential to do the rest by means of itself, then there comes about the intellect called “dispositional”, since it is analogous /35/ to the knower which is intermediate between being called a potential knower and being actively engaged in knowledge. This intellect, to the extent that it seems to fall short of the intellect that is actively engaged in knowledge, surpasses the intellect that is potentially knowing. And when this disposition is acting, the actual intellect comes to be. For the dispositional intellect is in a way the aggregate of thoughts that are laid aside and at rest .

And /698/ since the actual intellect is none other than the form that is being thought of, just as actual perception is the actual perceptible object, it is the dispositional intellect (that is, the intellect that is able to think by itself and receive the forms of objects that are intelligible in themselves) which is already able to think of itself; for since /5/ it is itself the form that is being thought of, if indeed by thinking of it, it becomes what it thinks of (cf. 1072b19-21). So the intellect that possesses the disposition to think of forms possesses the disposition and potential to think of itself. For what has the potential to think comes itself to be thinking, and it is, whenever it thinks, thinking of the intelligible form beforehand and in virtue of itself, and accidentally [thinking of] itself, because whenever it thinks it accidentally becomes the object of which it thinks. Now, before /10/ the intellect is actually thinking, that which is thinking and that which is being thought of are related to each other and are opposed to each other as correlatives; and

whenever they are acting, they become one and there ceases to be the opposition. For they can no longer fit under the rubric of relatives. That is why the actual intellect becomes the same as the intelligible object, and it is reasonable to say that it thinks of itself. Thus the actual intellect thinks /15/ of itself, since it becomes what it thinks of. For it thinks of the forms separately from matter, since it is not this but the being [i.e. essence] of this that it thinks of, as was said before (697,21-8).

[2] Now, since the actual intellect is best in itself, its act of thinking, by which it thinks of itself, is the act of thinking in itself also of the object that is best in itself. The actual intellect is best, not because it becomes the forms separately from matter by thinking of them, /20/ but because it becomes in a way the first intellect, to the extent that it is able, by thinking of it. If, therefore, the act of thinking in itself is of what is best in itself, then also the act of thinking that is most of all in itself will be thinking of what is best in itself most of all (cf. 1072b19). And this is the [thinking] which has as its object the first intellect, by which [i.e. thinking] it thinks of itself and by which it is both that which thinks and that which is thought of. Therefore, the actual intellect thinks of itself “by participation /25/ in the intelligible object” (1072b20). For [it does this] by possessing a disposition, as was said, to think of the forms by “touching” (1072b21). Moreover, the actual intellect is like the form of the potential intellect, so that it possesses as well the disposition to think of itself. Hence, whenever it thinks of itself, the intellect and the intelligible object become the same.

[3] “For that which is receptive of the intelligible object, that is, the substance”, or rather of the intellect, is itself “the intellect”. And this is the sort of intellect that “is acting when it possesses” /30/ in itself the intelligible objects when it has separated them; for it has separated [them] from the matter and [actively] keeps them in its possession and thinks of them (cf. 1072b22-3).

[4] Of all the things belonging to the intellect the most divine is contemplation. Therefore, the divine [state] which /35/ the actual intellect possesses (and thinking of oneself is a divine [state]), “the latter [belongs] more to the former” (1072b23), that is, to the first intellect. Therefore, [understanding] “the former” as that which essentially seems to be a most divine and honourable [state] of the actual intellect, and “the latter” as thinking of itself, Aristotle states that the latter belongs rather to the former [state of] the first intellect. For the first intellect thinks of itself most precisely, more so than even the actual intellect [thinks] of itself.

Now, the actual /40/ intellect does not think of itself in the way that the first intellect [thinks] of itself, nor [does it do so] always, but [only] at times and infrequently. /699/ But the first intellect thinks of itself always (cf. 1072b24-5). For the first intellect does not think of anything other than itself. For that it is thought of by itself by being intelligible, and that it will always be an object of thought by being intelligible in actuality and by its own nature—are clear

from that which is thinking <always> in actuality. And [the first] intellect is itself alone always actually thinking. /5/ So it will always be thinking of itself.

[5] This is still more the case in so far as it is simple; for a simple intellect thinks of a simple object, and no other intelligible object is simple except for it. For it is unmixed and immaterial and possessing no potentially in itself. So it will think of itself alone. For in so far as it is intellect, it will think of itself as an intelligible object; and in so far as it is both intellect and actually intelligible, it will always think of itself. Further, in so far /10/ as it alone is simple, it will think of itself alone. For since it alone is simple, it is capable of thinking of something simple, and it alone is a simple intelligible object.

And “contemplation”, in which it thinks of itself, is “pleasantest and best” (1072b24). If, therefore, the god is always in a good state just as we are in a good state some of the time, the divine would be an object of wonder. And if it is in an indescribably better and greater state than the actual [human] intellect, /15/ to the extent that it surpasses it will be so much the more wonderful. But it is in fact in this state. So the divine is most wonderful and highly honourable (cf. 1072b24-6).

#### **Averroes (*Tafsīr* 1616-19; tr. Genequand)**

[1] Then [Aristotle] says: “intelligence in itself is of that which is best in itself” (1072b18-19). He means: that which thinks by itself, not by something else, is better than that which thinks by an intellect in it [as in the case of a human intellect]. . . .

[2-3] Then he says: “that which thinks its essence is the intellect by acquisition of the intelligible” (1072b19-20). He means: that which understands its own essence feels pleasure by itself; it is that which truly feels pleasure; that which possesses this attribute is the intellect: when it acquires the intelligible and understands it, it understands its own essence, for its own essence is nothing but the intelligible which understands. Thus the intellect is that which understands. Thus the intellect is that which feels pleasure by itself.

The words: “it becomes intelligible when it is in contact and thinks” (1072b20-1) mean: our intellect thinks its essence when it is in contact with the intelligible and obtains a representation [i.e. concept] of it in actuality, not when it is in potentiality before it has a representation of the intelligible, because when it thinks the intelligible it becomes one with it. It is as if he wanted thereby to distinguish between the faculty of the intellect which is sometimes in potentiality and sometimes in actuality and the intellect which is always in actuality, the intellect which is not in matter. Therefore our intellect thinks itself only at times, not permanently.

Then he says: “intellect and intelligible, then, are the same because that which receives the intelligible and its essence is intellect” (1072b21-2). He means: intelligible and intellect

become one when it thinks because the receiving part and the received part of the intellect constitute among themselves the intellect. Therefore the thinking part of the intellect and the part of it which is object of thought go back to one single thing and are distinguished only with regard to the states existing in the intellect. For insofar as it thinks the intelligible it is said to be “thinking”, and insofar as it thinks by itself, the thinking is the intellect itself, as opposed to that which thinks by means of something else, and insofar as the thinking part is the object of thought itself, it is said that the intellect is the intelligible.

[4] Then he says: “intellect, then, is this divine element rather than the former” (1072b23). He means: if our intellect is sometimes in potentiality and sometimes in actuality, and this divine intellect is always in actuality, and this divine intellect is always in actuality, it is clear that it is much better than the intellect in us.

[5] Then he says: “if God is eternally in the state in which we are for a while, it is wonderful; if He is more so, it is more wonderful. But He is so.” (1072b24-6) He means: this is why we think that if God’s pleasure in apprehending His own essence is equal to the pleasure we feel when our intellect apprehends its own essence, that is to say in the instant in which it is freed from potentiality, and if that which belongs to us for a short while belongs to God eternally, that is very wonderful; if that which belongs to Him eternally is much better than that which belongs to us, this is more and more wonderful. Alexander (fr. 31F) says: by “pleasure”, one must not understand here the pleasure that is the result of passion; the effect that is the result of passion is the opposite of pain, but the pleasure which is in the intellect itself is not a passion and has no opposite because no ignorance is the opposite of this apprehension. For pleasure is a necessary attribute of apprehension, just as the shadow is a necessary effect of the body. If there is an apprehension which has no opposite and is never in potentiality, then the subject of this apprehension will never be in a state of non-apprehension.

#### **Aquinas (2539-43, tr. Blackwell)**

[1-2] 2539. Then he shows that the act of understanding and the pleasure found in the first intelligible object are even more perfect than those found in the thing that understands and desires it. He says that it is characteristic of an intellect to understand itself inasmuch as it takes on or conceives within itself some intelligible object; for an intellect becomes intelligible by reason of the fact that it apprehends something intelligible. Hence, since the intellect becomes intelligible by conceiving some intelligible object, it follows that the intellect and its intelligible object are the same.

[3] 2540. He explains how an intellect attains its intelligible object. For an intellect is related to an intelligible object as potentiality is to actuality, and as something perfectible to its perfection. And just as something perfectible is receptive of a perfection, so too an intellect is

receptive of its intelligible object. Now its proper intelligible object is substance, since the object of the intellect is a quiddity. Hence he says that the intellect is receptive of something intelligible and of substance. And since each thing becomes actual inasmuch as it attains its own perfection, it follows that the intellect becomes actual inasmuch as it receives its intelligible object. Now to be intelligible is to be actual in the class of intelligible things. And since each thing is active to the extent that it is actual, it follows that the intellect becomes active or operative, i.e., understanding, to the extent that it attains its intelligible object.

2541. But it should be borne in mind that material substances are not actually intelligible but only potentially; and they become actually intelligible by reason of the fact that the likenesses of them which are gotten by way of the sensory powers are made immaterial by the agent intellect. And these likenesses are not substances but certain intelligible forms received into the possible intellect. But according to Plato the intelligible forms of material things are self-subsistent entities. Hence he claimed that our intellect becomes actually understanding by coming in contact with separate self-subsistent forms of this kind. But in Aristotle's opinion the intelligible forms of material things are not substances which subsist of themselves.

2542. Yet there is an intelligible substance which subsists of itself, and it is of this that he is now speaking. For the first mover must be a substance which is both understanding and intelligible. Hence it follows that the relationship between the intellect of the first sphere and the first intelligible substance, which causes motion, is similar to the relationship which the Platonists posited between our intellect and the separate intelligible Forms, inasmuch as our intellect becomes actual by coming in contact with and participating in these Forms, as Plato himself says. Hence the intellect of the first sphere becomes actually understanding through some kind of contact with the first intelligible substance.

[4] 2543. Further, since the cause of some attribute of a thing has that attribute in a higher degree, it follows that anything that is divine and noble, such as understanding and taking pleasure, which is found in the intellect having the contact, is found in a much higher degree in the first intelligible object with which it is in contact. Hence its intellectual activity is most pleasant and best.

[5] But the first intelligible object of this kind is God. Therefore, since the pleasure which we experience in understanding is the highest, although we can enjoy it only for a short time, if God is always in that state in which we sometimes are, His happiness is wondrous. But if He is always in that state (which we enjoy for only a short time) in a higher degree, this is even more wondrous.