

Metaphysics Λ 9

Thinking Actively

The Basic Structure of $\Lambda 9$

- 1074b15-17: Prolegomenon
- 1074b17-21: First *aporia*:
 - If it thinks nothing, the UM is not worthy of reverence (σεμνόν)
- 1074b28-35: Second *aporia*:
 - If it thinks something else having control over it, it would not be the best—for it would be in potentiality, and its essence would not be thinking actively (νόησις).
- 1074b28-35: Resolutions of these *aporiai*
- 1074b35-1075a10: Remaining *aporiai*
- 1074b35-1075b10: Resolutions of these remaining *aporiai*

Three Preliminary Concerns

- How is *Metaphysics* Λ 9 related to Λ 7?
 - What is its primary topic: divine intellect or intellect in general?
Or?
- A Shift in Terminology and a Tricky Point of Translation
- The Basic Contours of Aristotle's Account of Reasoning / Thinking / Intellection ($\nu\acute{o}\eta\sigma\iota\varsigma$)

The Relation of *Metaphysics* Λ 9 to Λ 7

- This is partly answered by a prior question, namely: what is the primary subject matter of *Metaphysics* Λ 9. The chapter opens by referring to ‘the mind’ (ὁ νοῦς; 1075b19) (or ‘the intellect’ or ‘mind’ or ‘reason’ or ‘its intellect’ or . . .).
- Thereafter, as Judson (2019, 297) documents, the chapter grows shy about providing overt subjects for its sentences.
 - On the assumption that the implicit subject throughout is ‘the intellect’ (ὁ νοῦς), we might think that the subject of the chapter is to be taken in one of two broad ways:
 - ‘intellect’ is taken generically or as a singular distributive term
 - generically: we are speaking of intellect as such (as in ‘Intellect, unlike perception, cannot detect colors.’)
 - singular distributive: we are speaking of the individual intellects of some class, perhaps all rational creatures or all the immaterial substances generally (as in ‘In the case of immaterial substances, the intellect does not require phantasms to think.’)
 - ‘the intellect’ is a singular term, picking out, well, *the* intellect, namely the prime mover, god.
 - On the assumption of the second broad approach, *Metaphysics* Λ 9 seems a continuation of Λ 7: we are picking up our characterization of the separate, eternal, unmoved, immutable, living, thinking, fully actual substance characterized there (Λ 7, 1072b15-1073a13), and are now specifying more minutely the character of its essential intellectual activity.

A Shift in Terminology

- *Metaphysics* Λ 7 and Λ 9 share a fair bit of terminology, but with one shift in emphasis:
 - *Metaphysics* Λ 7 tends to use the pair *thinking* (the infinitive τὸ νοεῖν) with *being thought* or *being an object of thought* (the adjective, which can be a substantive, τὸ νοητόν)
 - *Metaphysics* Λ 9 tends to use the pair [*actively*] *thinking* (the abstract noun, νόησις) and *being* [*actively*] *thought* or *what is being thought* [*just now*] (the middle/passive participle, νοούμενον)
- The main difference, subtle though surely real, turns on the degree of activity characterized: the second pair connotes *occurrent activity* whereas the first does not or at least does not to the same degree.
- This is roughly the difference between the use in English of the gerund ('Exercising is important for healthy circulation.') and the occurrent continuative ('He can't answer the phone just now because he's exercising his biceps.')

A Tricky Point of Translation

- First, then, if it is not thinking [*noêsis*] but but potentiality, it is reasonable <to suppose> that the continuity of its thinking [*tês noêseôs*] is burdensome to it. Second, it is clear that something else would be more honourable than its intellect, namely what is thought. For both thinking (*to noein*] and grasping in thought [*noêsis*] will belong even to the one who is thinking the worst thing; so that if this is to be avoided (for even not seeing some things is better than seeing), its thinking [*hê noêsis*] would be the best thing (*Met.* Λ 9, 1074b28-33). —tr. Judson
- First, then, if it is not an act of thinking but a potentiality, it is reasonable to suppose that the continuousness of the activity if thinking is toilsome for it. Next, it is clear that there would be something else more honorable than the intellect, namely, the object of its thinking. For, also, thinking and the act of thinking will belong even to one who thinks of the worst object. Hence, if this is to be avoided (for there are also some objects which it is better not to see than to see), the act of thinking would not be the best thing (*Met.* Λ 9, 1074b28-33). —tr. Miller
- πρῶτον μὲν οὖν εἰ μὴ νόησις ἐστὶν ἀλλὰ δύναμις, εὐλογον ἐπίπονον εἶναι τὸ συνεχὲς αὐτῷ τῆς νοήσεως· ἔπειτα δῆλον ὅτι ἄλλο τι ἂν εἴη τὸ τιμιώτερον ἢ ὁ νοῦς, τὸ νοούμενον. καὶ γὰρ τὸ νοεῖν καὶ ἡ νόησις ὑπάρξει καὶ τὸ χείριστον νοοῦντι, ὥστ' εἰ φευκτὸν τοῦτο (καὶ γὰρ μὴ ὁρᾶν ἔνια κρεῖττον ἢ ὁρᾶν), οὐκ ἂν εἴη τὸ ἄριστον ἢ νόησις.
- The crucial bit: ‘For both thinking (*to noein*] and grasping in thought [*noêsis*]. . .(LJ)’ or ‘For, also, thinking and the act of thinking . . . ’ or ‘For, also, thinking, that is, [actively] thinking. . . ’ (CS).
 - Aristotle here specifies thinking in general as the activity of thinking, moving from an articular infinitive (τὸ νοεῖν) to an abstract noun (ἡ νόησις), with an ending regularly denoting a action or a doing (that is, the suffix —σις, which denotes the activity, as in δόσις (giving), θέσις (setting or placing).)
 - We shall return to this point anon.

Aristotle's Account of Thinking

- The basic framework for thinking parallels the basic framework for perceiving (αἴσθησις), both employing some notion of form-reception:
 - S thinks *o* if and only if: (i) S has the capacity requisite for receiving *o*'s intelligible form; (ii) *o* acts upon that capacity by enforming it; and, as a result, (iii) S's relevant capacity becomes isomorphic with that form.
- Three features of this account relevant to *Metaphysics* Λ 9
 - A thinker and its object become 'one in form' in an act of thinking
 - A thinker's coming to think something is *inter alia* a coming to be; so it evidently involves a change from potentiality to actuality.
 - When you first came to think of the paradox generated by the Russell set, something about you changed: what you had been able to understand, but had not yet understood, gave way to an understanding, marking a shift from potentiality thinking *o* to your actually thinking *o*.
 - A thinker, having come to understand something, can call it forth at will.
 - When, having learnt the paradox generated by the Russell set, you came to contemplate it actively, a transition in you occurred—though it was not a coming to be in the sense in which your coming to understand this paradox was.
 - This kind of transition 'not an instance of alteration ... or is a different kind of alteration,' where one 'should not speak of being affected, unless <one allows that> there are two kinds of alteration' (*DA* ii 5, 417b6–16).

Nous and its Object becoming One

- Aristotle says things which may on their surface (and indeed even a good deal below their surface) seem utterly baffling, suggesting that the intellect, when thinking, becomes one with the object being thought (so, e.g. *DA* iii 8, 431b26-28).
- One obvious misunderstanding set aside: 'it is not the stone which is in the soul, but its form' (*De Anima* iii 8, 431b29–432a1; cf. iii 4, 429a27).
- So, he seems to mean, and indeed specifies that he means (*DA* iii 8, 431b28-29), 'one and the same in form'. But this, too, is ambiguous, as between:
 - x and y being numerically identical in form, so that $(x = y)$
 - x and y exemplifying the same form, so that $(Fx \ \& \ Fy)$
 - x and y becoming isomorphic without its being the case that x and y both exemplify F
 - This is possible only if there is a sense of being- ϕ without exemplifying ϕ

Becoming Isomorphic I

- In garden variety instances, the hylomorphic analysis of change involves a literal acquisition of a form: a grey garden fence painted white acquires the form *being white*.
- In perception, this becomes attenuated, since Aristotle says that the faculty of perception acquires the form 'without the matter':
 - 'It is necessary to grasp, concerning the whole of perception generally, that perception is what is capable of receiving perceptible forms without the matter, as wax receives the seal of a signet ring without the iron or gold' (*DA* ii 12, 424a17-21).
- In reasoning, this becomes still more attenuated, since Aristotle adds that reason (*νοῦς*) lacks an organ (*DA* iii 4, 429a24–7); and, further, that reason is 'in a certain way in potentiality the objects of reason,' though he adds, somewhat mysteriously, it is 'nothing in actuality before it reasons' (*DA* iii 4, 429b30-31)

Becoming Isomorphic II

- Two ways for x to be isomorphic with y :
 - x and y can be conspecific: two tigers are one in species and thus share the form ϕ , for instance, *being a tiger*.
 - Let us say that in this case, x and y exemplify ϕ
 - x and y can stand in a depictive, representational, or, generally speaking, non-conspecific manner of realization.
 - This is the sense in which Aristotle is prepared to think of the 'form in the craftsman's soul' (*Gen. An.* i 22, 732b14, iii 11, 762a17).
 - One illustration: the predicate '*...is a church*' might be said of a church building or of a blueprint or of a computer generated architectural representation of a church.
 - Let us say in these cases that:
 - x exemplifies ϕ while y encodes ϕ
 - (This distinction descends from one deployed by Brentano, who in turn developed an earlier distinction of Ernst Mally, between two ways to realize a predicate, namely *determinieren* and *erfüllen*; Mally's distinction was later again appropriated and developed, this time by Zalta, into an axiomatic theory using the terminology employed here. Brentano, trained to a high standard in the philosophy of Aristotle, claimed to find an antecedent of this distinction in Aquinas.)

Thinking Thinking of Thinking

- An extraordinary sentence:
 - *Itself, therefore, is what it thinks, seeing that it is the greatest thing, and its thinking is a thinking of thinking* (*Met.* Λ 9, 1074b3433-35) —tr. Judson
 - αὐτὸν ἄρα νοεῖ, εἶπερ ἐστὶ τὸ κράτιστον, καὶ ἔστιν ἡ νόησις νοήσεως νόησις.
- Some alternatives:
 - <The divine understanding,> then, must understand itself, so that its understanding is an understanding of understanding. tr. Irwin/Fine
 - Therefore it must be itself that thought thinks (since it is the most excellent of things), and its thinking is a thinking on thinking. —ROT, tr. Ross, rev. Barnes
 - cf. Ross's (1924, vol. II, 398 gloss—not trans.): Its knowing is a knowing of knowing.
 - So it seems that it thinks itself, if indeed it is the best, and thinking is a thinking of thinking. —tr. Kosman
 - Therefore it thinks itself, if indeed it is most powerful, and its thinking is the thinking of thinking. —tr. DeFilippo
 - Therefore Mind thinks itself, if it is that which is best; and its thinking is a thinking of thinking.—tr. Treddenick
 - So, it is of itself that it thinks, since it is the most excellent object, and the act of thinking is an act of thinking of the act of thinking. —tr. Miller
 - L'intelligence suprême se pense donc elle même, puisqu'elle est ce qu'il y a de plus excellent, et sa Pensée est pensée de pensée. —tr. Tricot
 - Sich selbst also erkennt die Vernunft, wenn anders sie das Beste ist, und die Vernunfterkenntnis (bzw. -tätigkeit) ist Erkenntnis ihrer Erkenntnis (-tätigkeit). —tr. Bonitz, rev. Seidel

What Mr Tulliver is Thinking On

- “But there’s one thing I’m thinking on,” said Mr Tulliver, turning his head on one side and looking at Mr Riley, after a long perusal of the carpet. “Wouldn’t a parson be almost too high-learnt to bring up a lad to be a man o’ business? My notion o’ the parsons was as they’d got a sort o’ learning as lay mostly out o’ sight. And that isn’t what I want for Tom. I want him to know figures, and write like print, and see into things quick, and know what folks mean, and how to wrap things up in words as aren’t actionable. It’s an uncommon fine thing, that is,” concluded Mr Tulliver, shaking his head, “when you can let a man know what you think of him without paying for it.” (*Mill on the Floss*, Book I, Chapter 3)
- I would have them seriously think on the shortness of their time. —Addison (1711), *Spectator*

One Intriguing Byway

- (De Felippo (1995, 557): ‘The genitive νοήσεως, “of thinking,” should therefore be interpreted as a subjective genitive. It denotes not the object or content of God's thinking but the nature of the subject of that thinking.’ (Also endorsed by Beere (2010) and Judson (2019).)
- So, effectively, periphrastically, ‘thinking’s thinking [= god’s thinking] is thinking.
 - Intriguing suggestion, but difficult to reconcile with the argument structure, which turns crucially on there being an object of *de re* thought distinct from the available object which is god.
- Still taking that suggestion forward for the moment, and wedding it to Prof. Miller’s insight about activity, we get:
 - The active thinking’s active thinking is active thinking—and so, periphrastically: ‘the active thinking belonging to god, who is, quite simply, active thinking, is active thinking—as opposed to that kind of thinking which belongs to a thinker who is not in her essence actively thinking, like, say, Ramona, whose thinking is episodic and periodic, and who must work to maintain its continuity.

The Opening *Aporiae* of Λ 9

- Plausibly these are not discrete, but form a sort of aporetic argument:
 - (1) Either god thinks nothing or god thinks something.
 - (2) If god thinks nothing, god is unworthy—god would then be as unaccomplished as someone sleeping.
 - (3) If god thinks something, then god stands in potentiality to that object of thought.
 - (4) If god stands in potentiality to some object of thought, then god is not in its essence actuality / activity.
 - (5) So, god is either unworthy (and so not the best) or stands in the subjugation of potentiality to something beside itself (and so not the best).
 - (6) Yet god is the best.
 - (7) So, god is the best and is not the best—we find ourselves in *aporia*.

On Behalf of (2)

- (2) If god thinks nothing, god is unworthy—god is as unaccomplished as someone sleeping (cf. *EN* I 8, 1098b30, and esp. *MM* ii 15, 1212b37-1213a7, which connects the question of god's thinking with the condition of being self-sufficient (αὐτάρκης).)
 - Some observations:
 - The phrase 'thinks nothing' (μηδὲν νοεῖ) is equivalent to 'is not thinking' and not to 'thinking but thinking of nothing at the moment'.
 - Note here that since Aristotle embraces a relational account of thinking, as given by his hylomorphic approach, it is not clear that he would even regard the second alternative as coherent.
 - Note, also in passing, that we have an unreal condition here, not often captured in English translations: 'If it were not to think at all, why would it be something august? Rather, it would be as if it were a man sleeping. . .'
 - Aristotle does not amplify why he thinks that god would be less than majestic (or august or worthy of reverence, σεμνόν) because of its not thinking.
 - The suggestion would seem to be, though, that it would impugn god's autonomy and actuality to be inactive—autonomy, because, due to the priority of actuality over potentiality, god would need to rely upon something actual to effect a transition to actuality, and actuality, because an inactive anything ϕ is in potentiality with regard to ϕ .
 - These conjoin to render an unthinking god inferior.

On Behalf of (3) and (4)

- (3) If god thinks something, then god stands in potentiality to that object of thought.
- (4) If god stands in potentiality to some object of thought, then god is not in its essence actuality / activity.
- Given the relational account of thinking recommended by the isomorphic account sketched above, *that* one thinks is a function of one's psychic endowment, but *what* one thinks is dependent upon the object thought.
 - This is one sense in which a normal, human thinker stands in potentiality to her object of thought.
 - Here the parallel with perceiving is instructive: *S* does not perceive magenta unless a magenta object of sense is present to *S*.
 - *S* is not at liberty to perceive (as opposed, perhaps, to imagine) magenta at will. To move from potentially thinking *o* to thinking *o* actually, *S* must, to use Aristotle's occasional idiom, *touch o* (cf. *Met.* Λ 7, 1072b21, Θ 10, 1051b25)
 - Compare:
 - One must also draw a distinction concerning potentiality and actuality. For we have just now been speaking of them without qualification. In the first case, something is a knower in the way in which we might say that a human knows because humans belong to the class of knowers and to those things which have knowledge; but in the second case, we say directly that the one who has grammatical knowledge knows. These are not in the same way potential knowers; instead, the first one because his genus and matter are of a certain sort, and the other because he has the potential to contemplate whensoever he wishes, so long as nothing external hinders him. (*DA* ii 5, 417a21-29)

The Context of Our Extraordinary Sentence

- First, then, if <it> is not thinking <actively> but is a potentiality, it is reasonable that the continuity of its thinking actively will be toilsome for it. Further, it is clear that something other would be more honorable than reason, namely the object being thought. For, again, thinking, that is thinking actively, will belong even to one thinking the basest object, so that if this is something to be avoided (for not seeing some things is better than seeing them), actively thinking would not be the best. It thinks itself, then, if indeed it is the most powerful, and its thinking actively is thinking actively of actively thinking.
- *πρῶτον μὲν οὖν εἰ μὴ νόησις ἐστὶν ἀλλὰ δύναμις, εὐλογον ἐπίπονον εἶναι τὸ συνεχὲς αὐτῷ τῆς νοήσεως· ἔπειτα δῆλον ὅτι ἄλλο τι ἂν εἴη τὸ τιμιώτερον ἢ ὁ νοῦς, τὸ νοούμενον. καὶ γὰρ τὸ νοεῖν καὶ ἡ νόησις ὑπάρξει καὶ τὸ χείριστον νοοῦντι, ὥστ' εἰ φευκτὸν τοῦτο (καὶ γὰρ μὴ ὄρᾶν ἔνια κρεῖττον ἢ ὄρᾶν), οὐκ ἂν εἴη τὸ ἄριστον ἢ νόησις. αὐτὸν ἄρα νοεῖ, εἶπερ ἐστὶ τὸ κράτιστον, καὶ ἐστὶν ἡ νόησις νοήσεως νόησις.*

The Progression to our Extraordinary Sentence

1. If god's thinking ($\tau\acute{o}$ νοεῖν) is a potentiality, then moving into a state of actively thinking (η νόησις), will require effort and will become toilsome to god.
2. Further, since god is the best, and the best thinks only the best, if god has some other object than itself, that object would be better, and hence more honorable than god.
3. Further, thinking even the lowliest of objects will qualify as an instance of actively thinking.
4. This would be unbecoming of god, and so is to be avoided—sometimes not seeing is better than seeing. For even god's active thinking in such a case would not be the best.
5. So, given that god is most powerful, subordinate to nothing, and most exalted, than honorable than all, god's object of thinking will be god itself.
6. God is in its essence actively thinking.
7. So, god's essence is god's thinking actively.

Tidied Up Argumentatively

- (1) If god's thinking ($\tau\acute{o}$ νοεῖν) is a potentiality, then moving into a state of actively thinking (η νόησις), will require effort and will become toilsome to god.
- (2) Nothing is toilsome to god.
- (3) So, god's thinking is not a potentiality, but an actuality / activity.
- (4) If god thinks something other than itself, then, since god thinks what is best, that object would be better (and so more honorable) than god.
- (5) Nothing is better or more honorable than god.
- (6) So, there is no object of thought better than god available for god to think.
 - Indeed, (i) possibly, if god could think other things actively, god could think even the lowliest of objects; (ii) If god were to think the lowliest of objects, god's actively thinking would not be the best; (iii) plainly, god's actively thinking is the best; so, (iv) god's thinking actively will not be trained on lowly objects.
- (7) If god is the most powerful, god is beholden to nothing at all as regards what it may think.
- (8) God is the most powerful.
- (9) So, god is beholden to nothing at all as regards to what it may think.
- (10) So, god thinks itself.
- (11) In thinking itself, god grasps the essence of god, namely, actively thinking.
- (12) So, god's actively thinking is an actively thinking of actively thinking.

Tidier Still

- (1) If *nous* is not thinking of itself, its object will be either better than *nous* or worse than *nous*.
- (2) If the object is better, then *nous* won't be the best thing.
- (3) On the other hand, if the object is worse, then *nous* won't be the best thing either.
- (4) Hence, *nous* must be thinking of itself.

Thinking Thinking Itself?

- A Parting Aporia:
- How is it possible for something to think of itself alone?
 - ... if thinking of X is a way of exemplifying X?
 - Analogy: could a picture be a picture of itself alone?
 - ... if thinking of X is in a way representing X?
 - Analogy: could a map be a map of itself alone?

FM: ps.-Alexander's Findings 1

1. *Metaphysics* Λ is a unitary and consistent whole:

- the first five chapters anticipate and form the basis for the last five;
- Λ 7 looks forward to Λ 8 which completes the argument of Λ 7;
- similarly Λ 9 resolves several aporiai which arise from the discussion of Λ 7;
- the apparent monotheism of Λ 10 is consistent with the apparent polytheism of Λ 8.

FM: ps.-Alexander's Findings 2-4

2. When Aristotle speaks of the first mover as 'in actuality' (*energeiai*, dative) or 'an actuality' (*energeia*, nominative), he means not only that it is devoid of potentiality but also that it is acting (*energein*) in an 'occurrent' sense—that is, occurring forever.
3. The explanation at the end of Λ 6 of why there is always coming-to-be and perishing lays the foundation for the proof that there is an immovable mover at the beginning of Λ 7.
 - The latter cannot be properly understood in separation from the former.
4. In Λ 7, ps.-Alexander (unlike many modern commentators) reads 'there is, therefore, something which it moves' (*ti ho kinei*, where 'which' (*ho*) is direct object rather than subject) and construes Aristotle's argument as an application of the principle 'if Y is intermediate between X and Z, and both X and Y exist, then Z must also exist' (compare *Physics* VIII.5, 256b14-20 as interpreted by Simplicius).

FM: ps.-Alexander's Findings 5-8

5. The spheres are hylomorphic substances consisting of incorruptible matter (i.e. aether) and forms (i.e. souls).
6. The individual movers of the spheres are immovable *per accidens* as well as *per se*, so they must be separate immaterial substances rather than the souls of the spheres.
7. Aristotle's argument that there are at least as many immovable movers as there are spheres requires the premiss that each motion is caused by a unique mover.
 - This premiss is also assumed in the argument that there is only one heaven, and it is implied by the claim in Λ 5 that each substance has its own unique matter, form, and efficient cause.
8. Aristotle's conclusion in Λ 8 that there are no more separate substances than are required for stellar motions is based on two separate arguments, each of which involves a different sense of 'final cause' (as distinguished in Λ 7).

FM: ps.-Alexander's Findings 9-10

9. The first divine intellect thinks only of itself or its own essence, while each subordinate divine intellect thinks of itself and thus of the first intellect to the extent that its essence is the same as the first intellect's.
10. The prime mover is not only a final cause but also an efficient cause.
 - However, the prime mover is not an efficient cause in the sense of a creator (as in Christianity), but rather in the sense of a source of noetic superabundance which percolates through the other movers and spheres (as in Neoplatonism).