

Class Fourteen - Aristotle on the Divine

Appearance and Reality - Ryan Simonelli

May 1, 2024

1 Some Context

- **Aristotle:** Some facts:
 - Lived from 384BC to 322BC.
 - Was born in Macedonia and had close ties with Macedonian royalty.
 - * His father, Nicomachus (which will also be the name of his son), was the doctor of King Amyntas III, who will end up being the grandfather of Alexander the Great.
 - Learned about biology from his father—they would dissect animals together—and this scientific, empirically-oriented approach that he acquired from childhood would have huge impact on his philosophy.
 - Moved to Athens at the age of seventeen and was a student of Plato's Academy for twenty years, until the age of thirty-seven.
 - Left Athens around the time of Plato's death, possibly because he expected to become head of Plato's academy but it was instead left to Plato's nephew.
 - Traveled around a bit before going back to Macedonia (in 343BC) to tutor Phillip II's (the son of Amyntas III) son, Alexander (who'd eventually be "the Great").
 - Eventually returns to Athens in 335BC to establish his own school, the Lyceum, where most of his major works were recorded (either written as lecture notes by Aristotle himself or by one of his students).
 - These works that we have of Aristotle's are not actually what he intended as his finished philosophical products.
 - * Aristotle actually wrote dialogues just like Plato, but, sadly, these have all been lost.
- **Three Works:** I had you look at excerpts from three of Aristotle's major works:
 - **De Anima:** Aristotle's most significant investigation into the philosophical principles of living things (plants, animals, humans).
 - **The Nicomachean Ethics:** Aristotle's investigation into what it is for a human being to live a human life well.
 - **The Metaphysics:** Aristotle's investigation into being as such, which is, for reasons that are made clear in the text, also an investigation into the divine.

2 Climbing the Ladder of Substance

- **Some Basic Aristotelian Categories:**
 - **Substance:** The primary sorts of things in Aristotle's ontology. Other sorts of things that can be said to "be" only make sense with reference to substances. A substance (in the primary sense of the term) is something that is and is what it is through its own activity.
 - * **Living things as Exemplary Substances:** A living thing is a living thing in and through *living*. That is, it's through actually living—doing the sort of things that living things do—that a living thing is a living thing at all.

- **Activity (Energeia):** The basic principle of substance is *activity*. For anything that's any sort of thing at all, it's only through doing the sort of thing that something of that sort does that such a thing is what it is.
- **Material and Form, Capacity and Activity:** Living bodily substances like ourselves are *hylomorphic*. That is, we can be articulated in terms of two aspects: our bodily *material*, through which we are *able* to do the various things that we do, and our *form of life*, which we exemplify in living the life that we do.
 - * **Immanent rather than Transcendent Forms:** The form of a living thing is a *general* thing that a particular living thing exemplifies through living the life that it does, but it is not completely *extrinsic* to that thing's activity. Rather it's *immanent in* that thing's activity.
 - If you want to see the form of tiger, you don't need to look anywhere else than a particular tiger. The general form is *there* in any particular tiger's living life as tigers do.
- **The Ladder of Living Things:** For Aristotle, there is a hierarchy of living things determined by what living is for such a thing. Each rung in the ladder (except for the very final one), contains all of the previous rungs but *transformed* by the addition of the higher capacity.
 - **Nutritive Life (Plants):** Plants live a life of nutrition and replication, aimed at sustaining themselves as what they are (in number, and, if not in number, then in form).
 - * **Nutrition:** The basic capacity constitutive of a living thing. Nutrition "can be separated from the other [capacities], but among mortal beings the others cannot be separated from this," (413a).
 - * **Replication:** Another basic capacity constitutive of living things. Aristotle conceives of replication as a way of thing's preserving itself, if not but in form:

"Since, then, these things are incapable of sharing in the everlasting and the divine by existing continuously (because among perishable things nothing can remain the same and one in number), each has a share insofar as it is able to partake in this [replication], some more and some less, and remains not itself but such as it is, not one in number but one in form," (415b).
 - **Perceptive/Active Life (Animals):** Animals live a life of nutrition and replication, but they live this life *perceptively and actively*, actively pursue nutrition and replication by going about their environment perceiving things and acting in response.
 - * **Passive and Active:** Perception is a *passive, receptive* faculty, and action is an *active, spontaneous* faculty.
 - **Rational Life (Humans):** We a life of perception and actions, but we live this life *rationally*, perceiving things and *understanding what it is* that we perceive and reasoning about *what is to be done*. In virtue of possessing reason, we are capable of *understanding* and *contemplating*.
 - * **Passive and Active, Again:** Our *perceptual faculty*, through which we get the contents for us to think, is "not without body, whereas reason is separate," (429b).
 - * **On Reason Itself (the Pure Part of Ourselves, as Rational Beings):** "And this reason is separate and unaffected and unmixed, being in its essence actuality. For what acts is always superior to what is affected, as too the first principle is to the matter. [...] But it is not the case that sometimes it reasons and sometimes it does not. And having been separated, this alone is just what it is, and this alone is deathless and everlasting, though we do not remember, because this is unaffected, whereas passive reason is perishable. And without this, nothing reasons," (430a10).
 - * **Contemplation as the Highest Activity:** "For this is the highest activity, intellect being the highest element in us, and its objects [the proper object of which is the divine] are the highest objects of knowledge. And it is also the most continuous, since we can contemplate more continuously than we can do anything," (Ethics 1177a).

- * **The Contemplative Life:** “Someone [who lives the contemplative life] lives thus, not in so far as he is a human being, but in so far as there is some divine element within him. [...] We ought rather to take on immortality as much as possible, and do all that we can to live in accordance with the highest element within us;
- **Divine Life (God):** A life of pure intellectual activity, consisting in nothing but the thinking of the activity of thinking that it itself is doing.
 - * **Pure Activity:** “There must, therefore, be a principle of this sort, whose substance is activity. Moreover, these substances must be without matter; for they must be eternal, at any rate if anything else is eternal. [They are] Activity, then,” (Met. 1071b).
 - * **The Principle of all Things:** “But since there is something which causes motion but is itself unmoved, and which exists in actuality, this thing cannot in any way be otherwise,” (Met.
 - **Recall:** Plants aim to partake in the divine: it is for this reason that they replicate themselves. They want to partake in the eternal, unchanging.
 - * **Thinking Thinking Thinking:** Divine activity is the activity of thinking, and since divine substance is nothing but activity, it is itself nothing but thinking. What is it is thinking is nothing but its own thinking. So, it is thinking thinking thinking.

“And thinking in itself is of what is best in itself, and the highest kind of thinking is of the highest kind of what is best. And it is itself which the intellect thinks, by sharing in the object of thought; for [intellect] comes to be an object of thought in touching and thinking [it], so that the intellect and the object of thought are the same,” (1072b).

“First, if it is not thinking but potentiality, it is reasonable [to suppose] that the continuity of its thinking 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 and grasping in thought 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 would not be the best thing. Itself, therefore, is what it thinks, seeing that it is the greatest thing, and its thinking is a thinking of thinking,” (1074b).

3 Some Big-Picture Remarks

- **A Contrast Between Bodily Substances and Divine Substances**
 - **Bodily Substances:** Bodily substances like ourselves generally fall short of being perfectly what we are.
 - * For instance, a tiger with three legs is still a tiger, but it’s lived activity manifests this imperfection.
 - * It’s part of what it is to be a bodily thing that one is always striving to restore oneself as what one is, and this constitutively involves the possibility of falling short of what one aims to be. One is always aiming to become what one is.
 - * Indeed, it is part of the very idea of *movement* that one is short of where one aims to be.
 - **Divine Substance:** Divine thinking, which is pure activity, is always perfectly what it is. There is never any *movement*—only *energeia*.
 - * **The Nature of the Prime Mover:** It moves everything without itself moving just insofar as everything aims to be just what it is, and everything’s aiming to be just what it is is nothing other than everything’s aiming to be *it*.
- **The Hierarchy of Forms, Re-articulated:** Like Plato, Aristotle has a hierarchy of forms, but, unlike Plato, the hierarchy of forms is *immanent* in things being as they are.

- **Our “True Self”:** There is a sense in which our true self—the highest aspect of ourselves—is identical with divine thinking. Such thinking is unaffected, and so without individuation.
- **A Sense of “Immortality”:** Aristotle says that we should strive to partake in what is immortal, eternal, unchanging, but our partaking in such a thing is our separating ourselves from whatever aspect of us is affected, and, as such, individuated.