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ARISTOTLE ON THE MECHANICS OF THOUGHT: ABSTRACT

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A number of crucial but quite difficult theses shape Aristotle's discussion of thought. Even if we put aside the most infamous of these, De Anima III.5's distinction between productive and receptive mind, there remains much that is puzzling. Consider: (1) the mind in activity is the same as the object of thought; (2) thinking is caused by the object of thought; (3) thinking is up to us [1]; (4) the object of thought is somehow in the soul; (5) thought is of the universal.

It is clear that Aristotle regards these as central to his account of thinking. What is not clear is their exact role. Indeed, it is unclear whether they can be fit into a single, unified account at all. The paper attempts just such an account. And it does so, in part, by relating the theses to the notorious productive -- receptive mind distinction.

A background assumption of the paper is that in De Anima Aristotle takes seriously the notion of levels of explanation. Evident in De Anima I.4's early reminder that we should say not that the mind thinks but rather that Socrates thinks in virtue of his mind, the assumption is featured centrally in his account of thought. Roughly, this works as follows. De Anima accepts as fact that we are able to exercise a variety of cognitive functions. The most impressive of these is thought, especially theoretical thought. In particular, De Anima aims to say something about how persons, more exactly their souls, must be structured or organized in order to accomplish this. It is not enough to say that persons think in virtue of their minds. That will locate but it will not explain the requisite mechanisms. On the reading I shall propose, all five theses, as well as the distinction between productive and receptive mind, concern the cognitive mechanisms underlying thinking.

Thus, the so-called productive and receptive minds should not be seen as two separate entities. Rather they are parts or features of the mind, lower level mechanisms, introduced to explain, for example, how from a ready stock of concepts persons are able to think autonomously. They are, in short, part of the cognitive equipment needed to explain thinking. Likewise 1-5 are best seen as figuring in an account of the cognitive mechanisms required for thought. Thus, to take an example, (1) is not to be explained as a Pre-socratic remnant nor as the result of accepting a misleading analogy between perception and thought. Rather it proposes a cognitivist style explanation of the role of internal states in episodes of thinking, in particular, how mental states can represent objects of thought.

Some attention is devoted to clarifying and tracing the relation between these theses but most of it is directed at (2). In particular, I puzzle out what Aristotle might mean in saying that it is by contact (αφή) with the νοητόν that νοûς is brought...
to active thinking. This is especially puzzling in light of the fact that (5) appears to require that a system that is particular, namely the mind of the individual person, is causally effected by a universal. This difficulty is resolved by focusing on the way a particular system might be capable of representing universal propositions and by taking advantage of what so far has been seen as a claim incompatible with (5) -- namely, *Metaphysica* XIII.10's claim that the object of active knowing is not universal but particular. In the course of discussing (2) I suggest a way to honor *De Anima* III.6's apparent interest in thought of incomposite objects without committing the account to the objection that such "non-discursive" thought entails the absurdity that one can think an object without thinking anything *about* it.