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WHAT DOES ARISTOTLE'S PRIME MOVER DO?
(A discussion of the theology of Metaphysics Lambda)

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1. Introduction

Let us start by distinguishing two types of noetic activity, one contemplative, one kinetic. The difference is in intrinsic character or form. For now it is enough to specify the contemplative kind by contrast with the kinetic. Contemplation is noësis that is not in itself geared to bring about change in or of the physical universe. (This includes changes in the subject so far as the subject has a physical dimension.) For a clear illustration, see Aristotle's account of theoretical activity in EN X. There it is stated that theorizing seeks nothing beyond itself (1177 b 19-20; cf. Meta. 982 b 20-28). Whatever the difference this activity essentially makes, the difference is not physical. Theoretical activity may result, of course, in a physical difference. Someone may find theorizing so fulfilling that he takes practical steps to create more opportunities for it, and the steps will involve some physical changes. But théoria is not of its own nature a source of such change. Practical activity, by contrast, is a prime example of the kind of noetic activity which I term 'kinetic'. It not only gives rise to physical change, but aims to do so under some description (even though the practical significance of an intended change may not be explicable in wholly physical terms).

The Prime Mover of Metaphysics Lambda is the source, above all, of eternal motion in the first sphere. It may seem silly to ask 'What (according to Lambda) does the Prime Mover do?' The answer is obvious: 'He -- or it -- gives rise to the motion of the first sphere'. But according to a widely accepted interpretation, this is not what the Prime Mover does first and foremost; instead, the Mover essentially contemplates. This contemplative conception is my target here. I shall adduce reasons for suspecting that the contemplative Prime Mover is not an Aristotelian postulate in Lambda, but an exegetical construct. I shall simultaneously make a case for holding that the actual Prime Mover in Lambda should be viewed as a kinetic agent (which is how the Prime Mover is generally presented elsewhere in the corpus).

These arguments are founded on conceptual as well as textual considerations, and on reasonable assumptions concerning Aristotle's aims in Lambda and his capacity for self-criticism especially in respect of absurdities for which he castigates other philosophers. I shall not, however, rely on debatable hypotheses about the development of his theology through several treatises, or about his journey towards or away from Platonism. I shall be concerned with the Prime Mover only in Metaphysics Lambda, and within Lambda I shall restrict the discussion to relations that may be thought to obtain between the Prime Mover, the first sphere, and the movement of that sphere. And as well as saying almost nothing about the other spheres and their movers, I shall touch only briefly on the celebrated doctrine in Ch. 9 that the Prime Mover's activity is a thinking of thinking.

Before launching into detailed discussion, let us note several requirements for a satisfactory interpretation of the Prime Mover theory in Lambda. It must do justice to Aristotle's main objectives in the treatise, among them these: (a) He wants to explain the eternal motion of the first heaven (this is taken as an established fact by the time he turns to the Prime Mover). (b) He is therefore led to postulate as ultimate an eternal unitary cause of motion. (This is by contrast with theories that postulate contrariety or some pair of contraries as the ultimate principle of change in the universe.) (c) Since Aristotle maintains that the ultimate source of eternal motion must be an absolutely changeless non-sensible substance, he is concerned to show that its metaphysical status is quite different from that of a Platonic Form. (For one of his recurring complaints against Platonism is that the Forms cannot explain movement or any sort of change.) (d) Aristotle wants to maintain that something good -- indeed, supremely good -- is the ground of order in the universe, principally by being source of the eternal emotion that provides general conditions for all other ongoing processes. More precisely, he wants to maintain that the supremely good being is the ground of all else primarily because it is good, and not because of any other attributes, even attributes closely bound up with its goodness.
In the light of requirements (a)-(c) we can see that Aristotle has reason to avoid any theory that would leave it a mystery how the Prime Mover moves anything. And given (d), he should be reluctant to embrace any theory entailing that whatever depends on the Prime Mover depends on something ultimately pointless.

2. The Commonly Held View and Some of its Difficulties

Here are the main points of what seems to be the prevailing interpretation of the Prime Mover theory in Lambda. (a) The Prime Mover causes eternal motion by being an object of love or desire, or (in other words) by being 'that for the sake of which' (in the sense of 'end', not 'beneficiary'; 1072 a 26-b 3). (b) Although an object of love or desire might never exist (it might remain a forever unfulfilled ideal or objective), the Prime Mover, as the text makes clear, is an actually existent active being. (c) The Prime Mover's activity is pure contemplation. (d) Movement of the first sphere arises because a soul or spiritual entity which is not the Prime Mover loves or desires the Prime Mover or the latter's contemplative activity. (In such a case, the activity is hardly to be distinguished from its subject.) This other spirit, as an expression of love, gives rise to a physical image of eternal contemplation -- which physical image is the eternal movement of the sphere. I shall sometimes refer to the second spirit as the soul of the first sphere, but however we label it, this spirit alone is efficient cause of the motion. The Prime Mover, though real, is not efficient, but is only (in some sense) the final cause of motion.

It is embarrassing for this interpretation that Lambda never mentions a spiritual agency that both moves the sphere and is other than the Prime Mover. Equally embarrassing, too, that Aristotle begins by speaking of the Prime Mover as final cause, but soon presents it as also efficient. In general, nothing stands in the way of applying the notions efficient and final cause to what is in some sense the same entity, even in respect of the same movement or change (cf. DA 415 b 9 ff.) But there is a problem in this case, since we are assuming (c): that the Prime Mover's activity is contemplative. How, in one and the same being, can contemplation give rise to motion as an efficient cause? Should we then say that the Prime Mover has an efficient-causal activity that is other than contemplation? If so, how are two such different activities related in the one being?

In face of these conceptual difficulties one might think it prudent (textual evidence notwithstanding) to cling to the idea of the Prime Mover as through and through contemplative, and as only a final cause of motion. The efficient cause, then, is the distinct sphere-soul, which must now be understood as referred to in any passages dealing with the efficient-causing of the primary motion. The story is that the sphere-soul, from love, seeks to imitate the divine contemplation, and eternal motion is the best it can do in this regard. But Aristotle says nothing about imitation here. (Nor is this surprising, given that imitation implies distinct identities of imitator and imitated; for so far as his account relates to the first sphere it does not mention a sphere-soul that is other than the Prime Mover.) However, let us push on and ask how the motion can be supposed to arise through imitation. Is the sphere-soul's love itself a kind of contemplation of the loved object? Yes, in a way, since this love does not produce or cause changes in its object. Yet this love is held to give rise to motion. So the sphere-soul loves one thing and gives rise to something else. But if giving rise to motion is itself a sort of noetic activity, must we not say that the object of this activity is loved -- or at least desired? In the present context Aristotle uses 'love' and 'desire' as virtual synonyms, so we can think of the sphere-soul as having love for motion in the sphere. Then that alone seems enough to explain the motion; so what difference does it make for motion that the sphere-soul loves the divine contemplator? If none, then divine contemplation falls out of the picture. It plays no part in the causation of eternal motion, which is what this picture is meant to explain.

All the same, let us continue with the assumption that according to Lambda the sphere-soul engages in a pair of activities of love or desire, one of which, love for the Prime Mover, somehow gives rise to the other, desire for motion in the sphere. We note that Aristotle never says that more than one object is loved or desired in the production of this motion. We should also register discomfort at having to attribute to the single sphere-soul these different noetic activities, even if they are related. It seemed to make sense to postulate a distinct sphere-soul in order to safeguard the integrity of the Prime Mover's role in the theory, but now the safeguard itself turns out to be something of a hodgepodge. Let us, however, return to the point that the sphere-soul's love for the Prime Mover is a sort of contemplation
of its object. We might ask: if this soul can contemplate the Prime Mover, isn't that already the best form of imitation? So why should it be thought that the soul also desires to generate movement? It contemplates God, and God, we are told, contemplates himself, so in one sense they do the same thing. Again, if the sphere-soul contemplates and also, somehow as a result, desires to produce an eternal movement as an image or symbol of contemplation, then why not attribute these diverse activities to the Prime Mover itself? -- in other words, why not identify the Prime Mover with what I am calling the first sphere-soul?

But if the ultimate cause is simple and unitary as Aristotle says (1071 a 32), perhaps he ascribes to it just one noetic activity. Assume this to be pure contemplation. And assume, too, that this contemplation is also a sort of love. Different theories are possible: he loves and contemplates himself, or the essences, or his own activity of contemplation. And on some interpretations these are different descriptions of the same state of affairs. At any rate, what is loved must be wholly internal to the contemplation. Then what about motion? On this view, all we can say is that motion occurs as a spin-off from pure contemplation. The motion is not desired by its so called agent, since the latter's noetic activity is not geared to produce physical change. Then the motion simply happens -- a cosmic eternal accident. There is nothing outside the divine contemplator that could trip him into inadvertently causing motion, nor any mechanism within him that could respond in that way to an external stimulus. For ex hypothesi this contemplator contains no mechanism for anything but contemplation.

So if the Prime Mover's single activity is contemplation, doing away with a distinct soul for the first sphere leaves us without any basis for an intelligible account of eternal motion as somehow caused by the Prime Mover. This is a point in favor of the received interpretation, according to which a distinct sphere-soul gives rise to motion in the first sphere by way of imitation of the divine contemplative activity. That, supposedly, is what Aristotle means when he says that the Prime Mover moves as object of love or as that-for-the-sake-of-which in the sense of 'end'. At 1072 b1-3 Aristotle pauses to distinguish two senses of 'that-for-the-sake-of-which', only one of which he regards as relevant here: the sense of objective or end of action as distinct from beneficiary of action. He does not, however, linger over possible ambiguities in the notion of 'objective'. An objective is realized or approximately realized by the subject whose objective it is, and this being realized by the subject is a function of the objective's status as such. Now if the sphere-soul's love of divine contemplation takes the form of an impulse to imitate it in a physical medium, then in relation to this imitative activity the divine contemplation is not an objective. For the sphere-soul's activity of producing motion cannot be said even approximately to enable the divine contemplation to be. Rather, the end desired and brought about is a condition of the sphere itself considered as a living soul-governed being. This is the condition of its being like (more so than otherwise) the beloved object. We have already noticed the awkwardness of having to suppose that there are different objects of love and desire, since the text mentions only one. Now we have to accept that when Aristotle says that the Prime Mover functions as that-for-the-sake-of-which in the sense of 'objective' or 'end', he is not speaking about an objective in the recognized sense, even though this is a context where he consciously aims for precision -- as well he might, given the obscurity of his topic. Divine contemplation, on the present account, is not the final cause of motion strictly speaking, but its exemplary cause. The final cause, as already observed, is the property (belonging to sphere-soul or sphere) of actively being as similar as possible to a perfect contemplator.

I have just used the indefinite article to signal the fact, often remarked, that this explanation does not require that the perfect contemplator should actually, as we would put it, exist. The sphere-soul's imitative activity cannot bring such a God into existence, and such a God need not already exist for the soul to aspire to be godlike in its own way. Aristotle should know better than to expose the divine Prime Mover to this objection, because in the Metaphysics one of his reasons for complaining that Plato's Forms (perfect exemplars) fail to account for change is that they might as well not exist for all the difference they make (see e.g. 991 a 19-27; b 6-7; cf. 1071 a 20-22).

This existential problem might be overcome if it were possible to argue that the sphere-soul, by engaging in its kinetic activity, ensures the actual existence of that which it is supposed thus to imitate. And such a move would have the additional advantage of justifying Aristotle's choice of the notion 'objective' or 'end' to characterize the way
in which the supreme being is cause of motion. For the supreme being (or its active existence) could not be thought of as the end of that motion in the familiar, straightforward, sense of 'end'. But this seems impossible if the being in question is a pure contemplator. How could kinetic activity give rise to this, any more than this could give rise of itself to motion?

If the Prime Mover is a pure contemplator, then whether or not Aristotle is entitled to hold that such a Mover must exist, it seems clear that in saying that the Mover is the 'end' of motion Aristotle must mean, rather, that it is the exemplary cause. Assuming for the moment that he does mean this, I now turn to a further difficulty which will take a little time to develop. Let us ask whether divine contemplation, as well as being the 'end' (in that strained sense) of the first sphere's kinetic activity, is also in some sense an end in relation to the divine contemplator. From the perspective of Lambda, the answer should surely be Yes. One of Lambda's central concerns is to show how the universe depends on something supremely good. This means that it depends on that good qua good. Something good may be an efficient cause of X, but in that case its causing X is not an immediate function of its goodness. As efficient cause, it causes X because it has the power or will to do so, and only indirectly (if at all) because it, the cause, is good. For example, it may be good because it has this will or power, in which case its goodness is consequent on its efficient causal rôle. Or it may have the will or power because it is good, in which case its goodness, again, is not as such the immediate cause of X. But that which is good makes a difference qua good only through being acted towards as good, i.e. through being an end (cf. 988 b 8-16; 1091 b 16-20). (This is why in Lambda Aristotle first emphasizes that the Prime Mover moves as an end, even though he then goes on to treat the Prime Mover as also efficient cause of the motion.) Our question now is whether the Mover's essential activity is an end for the very being that engages in it. It must be, because otherwise however good the activity may be, it is devoid of purpose. It is engaged in, but not because it is good. Perhaps the being in question contemplates or does whatever it does simply because it has an eternal tendency to do so, and there is nothing inside or outside to stop it. Or, again, perhaps it does what it does by a sort of blind necessity -- blind, that is, to value; for a being might know what it is doing and even be voraciously keen on doing it, and yet lack all sense of the value of what it is doing. And yet its activity might still be splendid enough (by comparison with other things) to function as a model which the first sphere-soul does its best to imitate by producing motion. In that case, although the motion of that sphere, and whatever else depends on it, does depend on the highest activity as final (in the odd sense of 'exemplary') cause, it seems also in a way a matter of sheer brute fact that there exists a highest activity for the rest to depend on through love and imitation. In other words: we have a cosmos alive forever with order and beauty, yet ultimately unfounded on the good. But if this is credible, the Aristotelian philosopher should not be so sure that the processes within the cosmos take place because they or their ends are fair and good -- if the goodness of the principle on which all else depends is ultimately irrelevant to its existence.

The proposition that the divine activity is, in the ordinary sense, an end for the being engaged in it is required by Aristotle's project in Lambda (as well as by his teleological approach to sublunary physics). And the proposition would surely be accepted as part of the Lambda theory by those who believe that Lambda's God is lost in contemplation and "acts on" the universe only as exemplary cause. That the divine contemplation is an end for itself is entirely in keeping with the general spirit of that picture. But if we fuss about details and insist on expecting from Lambda a well made theory, we run up against this difficulty: if the theory represents the Prime Mover as contemplative, there is no single sense of 'end' in terms of which the key relations can all be expressed. For as well as using the notion in the extraordinary sense of 'exemplary cause', Aristotle must use it in the same context in its ordinary sense too. This is because of the absurdity of supposing that God's activity takes place because God models himself on an exemplar of divine activity. It is like supposing that a Platonic Form is what it is because it imitates or partakes of itself. No one is more sensitive to this type of problem than Aristotle. Moreover, if something is already sufficiently perfect to function as exemplar for other beings, then it has no need to imitate itself or anything else in order to be as perfect as the theory of motion requires. So: for the exemplary being itself, its own activity, of whatever nature, must be an end in the ordinary sense: something that is enabled to be through being valued.

The difficulties which we have reviewed are remarkably similar. At every point of pressure one is forced to countenance one or another multiplication of entities unmentioned by the text. There had to be postulated a sphere-soul (for the first sphere) distinct from the Prime Mover; and for that sphere-soul to do its job intelligibly, there had
to be assumed two different objects of love or desire. Again, it was hard to make sense of the sphere-soul’s function without ascribing to it two noetic activities different in kind. Finally, the account depends on multiplying senses of 'end' not distinguished by Aristotle and using them together in the one theory. All this suggests some single central error whose effects may be containable by one means or other, but always at the expense of the text and of theoretical simplicity. The mistake, in my view, lies in supposing the Prime Mover’s activity contemplative. If, on the contrary, we suppose it essentially kinetic, we immediately cancel the need for a distinct efficient cause of motion. And without that distinct efficient cause, there is nothing to which the Prime Mover must stand as exemplar; and nothing that requires to be understood as active twice over in different ways and with different objects.

3. The Alternative Proposal, with Objections and Replies

Aristotle begins his explanation of the primary motion by stating that its cause is a cause in the mode of final causality: an object of love or desire. In other words, the eternal circular motion occurs in order that some objective be realized. What objective? The natural answer is: the eternal motion itself, or something whose reality is essentially bound up with this. Perhaps what is desired is more than the motion, but something which it would not make sense to desire without desiring the motion. Such an answer is natural, because (I assume) to Aristotle nothing is more intelligible than that what one desires one brings about, given the opportunity and if nothing stands in the way. The point is not just that he would treat this as a necessary truth, but that he finds no metaphysical mystery in its being true. The proposition that X is an end for an unhindered agent A says all that we need for understanding why A does what is necessary for realizing X, and hence for understanding why X comes about.

So if the object of love or desire is or includes the motion, that motion results is immediately intelligible; whereas if what is loved is pure contemplation, the connection between love and motion is not only not self-explanatory, but requires us to accept an unhappy proliferation of entities. But what, more precisely, is the object of love? It cannot be simply the motion, because in that case Aristotle would be saying that the Prime Mover is the motion itself considered as end of final cause. But in fact he says that the Prime Mover is noetically active, and indeed is nothing but noetic activity. (And there is no reason to assume that when Aristotle says this he is not thinking of the Prime Mover as final cause but only in some other capacity.) Rotation, however, is a physical process, and although it is an actuality of sorts, it is not a noetic activity, since if it were we ought to say that a top’s spinning is its thinking.

All the same, the rotation of the first heaven is the visible aspect of its agent’s noetic activity, since this (I shall now assume) is an activity of desiring that movement. For under the circumstances -- metaphysically peculiar circumstances -- to desire the movement is already actually to generate it. So generating it is a noetic act, one surely valued by the agent, if only because it is his and expresses him. Thus he values his own activity, not only its physical effect. And since the generative activity and its effect are eternal, and each impossible without the other, one would hardly know how to decide which, if either, is subordinate. Is the action of generating the movement engaged in so that there be that movement, or is generating movement the principal end, the movement itself an essential concomitant? What is more, since generating the motion is a noetic activity, the agent is immediately aware of it, and, in the case we are considering, the awareness is pleasure (1072 b 17-24). Aristotle holds that pleasure enhances the pleasurable activity not only in the sense of making it more worthwhile for the agent, but also by making him better at it -- more focussed and effective (EN 1075 a 30-36). One way of understanding this is to think of enjoying an activity as a way of spontaneously valuing it, and to see this valuing as immediately expressed in intense and controlled application to what one is doing.

The case we are considering lies at the conceptual limit where there is no disengaging the eternal motion from the noetic act of generating it, nor the act of generating from the pleasurable awareness of itself. So as well as being able to see why the motion occurs (because it is a valued end), perhaps we can see why it is also right to say, too, that the end (the Prime Mover as final cause) is a noetic activity. This analysis also explains how Aristotle can easily shift between speaking of the Mover as final and as efficient cause. What is valued here is an activity that must be described in the same terms as the activity which values it and thereby efficiently secures its existence. And finally
the analysis gives two pointers (which I shall not follow much further in this paper) towards making sense of Aristotle's statement that the Prime Mover's thinking is a thinking of thinking (1074 b 33-35). It is a noetic activity which (i) carries awareness of itself, and (ii) noetically aims at activity such as itself.

The salient feature of this interpretation is that, according to it, the activity of pure contemplation plays no part in Lambda's explanation of eternal motion. I now pass on to consider objections, but not without noting that it does not follow from the present account that Aristotle cannot consistently hold that God contemplates. My contention is not that Aristotle never recognizes a contemplative divinity, but that contemplation is not what constitutes God Prime Mover according to the Lambda account. Since, however, Lambda is primarily concerned with the eternal motion and its ultimate cause, rather than with the topic of divinity as such, the claim just made amounts to the claim (for which I shall continue to argue) that Lambda has no place for a purely contemplative God.

I now discuss four objections (or sets of objections) in turn.

Objection A

Aristotle insists that the Prime Mover is absolutely changeless (e.g., 1073 a 22-25). But how can a changeless being be, by its desiring, kinetically active and an efficient cause? That these functions exclude changelessness seems clear from 1072 a 30, where the intellect is said to be moved by its object (to noëton). The context (1072 a 26-29) shows that the object of intellect is also the object of desire. Presumably desiring counts as a kind of being moved (cf. DA 433 b 10-16; MA 700 b 24 - 701 a 1). But in that case, the being which desires is not the unmoved Prime Mover. And if we assume that the being which desires is the efficient cause of movement, then the Prime Mover can at most be the final cause (in some sense). But if the Mover is not an efficient cause of motion, its characteristic activity cannot be kinetic; hence it must be contemplative, since these are the only options under consideration.

In reply: It is necessary, perhaps, to emphasize that the Prime Mover's changelessness does not entail that the Mover is not a corporeal agent. According to Aristotle's conceptions, being an agent of physical change is not itself a change undergone by the agent. Nor is an agent as such the subject of the change which it brings about. Nor is an agent necessarily liable to suffer change in consequence of bringing about a change in something else (e.g., a rebound effect). This applies only to corporeal agents which act through physical contact with their patients. Again, living corporeal agents like ourselves cannot produce change in external objects except by means of changes in their own bodies; hence in causing change we also undergo change. But if, for example, the external change is willed by the living agent, then the ultimate source of this change is the soul, which acts by giving rise to intermediate changes in the agent's body. And although the psycho-physical compounding cannot produce external changes without itself undergoing change, this is no ground for thinking that the soul itself, considered in abstraction, must undergo change in order to give rise to the bodily change. And in fact Aristotle holds that in animals the soul as such is unchanging insofar as it is the efficient cause of animal locomotion. (For these doctrines, see Phys. III. 3; DA 417 b 8-9; GC 1.6; DA 1.3.) Again, in our own case the desires from which we act often come to us with a flurry of emotion (pathos). But the flurry itself is not what directs and controls the desired change. Direction and control are due to practical intelligence, and a flurry can even diminish our effectiveness. Now the Prime Mover, on the view which I am advocating, is related to the sphere which it immediately moves in something like the way in which soul is related to body in an organism (on this, see under Objection B). The Prime Mover is not a corporeal thing; its causal activity is eternal; and the intensity of its eternal interest never fluctuates. Hence this Mover is in an absolutely steady state of activity (though Aristotle would not call it a 'state'). And although (on this account) the Prime Mover is said to 'love' (eραν) its own activity, it is absurd (and certainly unnecessary) to equate this love with a disturbing fit of feeling.

However, all this does not alter the fact that at 1072 a 30 Aristotle says that intellect is moved by its object, which is also the object of love and desire. So intellect qua efficient cause is here said to be in movement itself -- in psychic movement. How, then, can the absolutely changeless Mover operate as an intellectual efficient cause?
In reply: The statement occurs at the beginning of Aristotle's discussion of the Prime Mover, and he begins in this way because (as it seems to me) he wants to emphasize the Prime Mover's rôle as final cause. (This, we have seen, is due to his concern to show how the good qua good is the ultimate principle of the universe.) When we think of the desired end as cause, the desire for that end figures as an intermediate link in the causal chain. In this passage (as elsewhere; cf. Phys. VIII. 5, DA 433 b 13 ff.) Aristotle applies an abstract schema of causal series. In the schema, the series originates from a first, and unmoved, mover, while the subsequent members (up to the last) have the distinct rôle of moved movers (i.e. movers which cause motion through being moved). In the schema, in short, being moved is virtually synonymous with not being first. Hence desire (or the faculty of desire), being intermediate, is a movement (or subject of movement). However, we can also think of the desire (the efficient cause) as having co-primacy with the final cause, since the desired end would not be a cause were it not for the desire which brings it about. That is: without the desire, no end would be aimed at, nor would there be any outcome requiring to be explained in terms of the end. From this point of view the first cause includes desire. It is not just the end, but desire-for-the-end (or, alternatively, the end-as-desired). So desire is not now intermediate, and need not be viewed as a movement. In sum: the fact that desire can figure as a change is not an independent ground for denying it the status of first (hence changeless) mover, because in Aristotle's schema we see it as a change just when, and because, we adopt a perspective from which it appears as a causal intermediary.

One must also bear in mind that when Aristotle initiates his account of the Prime Mover, 1072 a 24 ff., he draws on what is familiar to us; how else could he hope to render the Prime Mover intelligible? In saying that the object of desire moves the intellect, he makes a general point, and one that we can grasp straightaway, since we all know what it is to desire something and thereby be set in motion to bring it about. In our case, occurrent (as distinct from dispositional) desire is of course episodic, because we are moved by different desires in different situations, and sometimes we are not moved by desire at all. Perhaps the language of 1072 a 30 reflects this feature of the familiar case, but we need not assume that Aristotle means to transfer it to the extraordinary case which he is trying to expound.

But it is still true that a desire is for something of a different nature from itself, and in this respect is like a kinesis that tends to some state in which it naturally terminates. Such intrinsically term-directed processes are classed as incomplete (or unfulfilled) actualities (Phys. 201 b 31-32; Meta. 1048 b 18 ff.), and it seems that desire has essentially the same structure. How can incomplete actuality be found in the perfectly actual Prime Mover?

In reply: We must distinguish logical incompleteness from incompleteness in a more substantial sense. An ordinary desire counts as an 'incomplete actuality', because it "asks for" fulfillment before being fulfilled (and it may be frustrated). The Prime Mover cannot be subject to such a desire, any more than the eternally moving heaven is subject to the parallel type of kinesis, i.e. the self-terminating type. When dealing with sublunary processes, Aristotle tends to treat self-terminating kinesis as the paradigm of change and motion; but he is nonetheless willing to apply the 'kinesis' to the endless rotation of the heavens. Why should he not also be willing to ascribe to the Prime Mover a kind of desire that admittedly fails to count as 'desire' if we take sublunary cases as paradigms -- a desire which is never (in the substantial sense) incomplete because it is never not fulfilled, and which is all the same endless because its object is endless too? However, in the logical sense a desire on the part of the Prime Mover is as incomplete as the humblest desire. That is to say: desire is necessarily for something else, because 'He desires' is a logically incomplete expression. A desire that is incomplete in this sense is not an incomplete actuality, since it is not a possible actuality at all. If on this ground we refuse to ascribe desire for X (whatever the X) to the Prime Mover (our reason being that this Mover must not be associated with a state in itself so radically incomplete that it cannot be real at all unless logically completed by an object), we can be dealt a quick and compelling answer: by the same token, no sort of noetic activity, not even contemplation, is ascribable to the perfect being, since any noetic activity must have an object.
Objection B

On the account which I am proposing, the Prime Mover is identical with what I have so far referred to as the soul of the first sphere. If this is Aristotle's meaning in Lambda, why does he omit to say that the Prime Mover is the soul of the heaven or indeed a soul at all?

In reply: It is not surprising that he does not state that the Prime Mover is the soul (ψυχή) of the sphere, because in De Anima he defines soul as the first actuality of a natural organic body (412 a 27-28). By contrast, the primary sphere is not an organic body, and the Prime Mover is nothing but second (complete, fully functioning) actuality -- in all but name, since there is nothing in the Mover in relation to which it is second. Thus the term 'ψυχή' is reserved for that level of life that preserves the organism's fitness for active functioning, but which cannot be aroused into active functioning except by external stimuli (cf. Phys. 253 a 11-20). It is the modern approach to discuss soul in terms of certain relations to body: for us, the burning question is whether we should think of a soul as essentially, perhaps categorically, different from any corporeal object, even if specially connected with one corporeal object in particular. From the point of view of this debate, the Mover of the first sphere and the soul of an animal may seem to have more in common metaphysically than either would have with a supposedly transcendent spirit that engages in no corporeal activity. But for Aristotle, I think, the more important distinction would be between the life of a being that is intermittently active in relation to environmental stimuli, and an absolutely independent continuously active life. From this point of view there is more in common between the Mover of the first sphere (the only unenvironed physical object) and the supposed transcendent spirit, than between the Prime Mover and any animal soul. For Aristotle and those around him, there would be a natural conceptual boundary between the animal soul and the other two cases. Thus it would be natural for them to restrict the term 'ψυχή' to its usual biological context.

Objection C

If the Prime Mover's activity is kinetic, why is it necessary to suppose the Mover a noetic being at all? Aristotle explains many cases of motion without tracing it back to mind or soul, as when he treats the falling of earth as the expression of a simple corporeal nature. Again, ends can function as final causes without being desired or grasped in thought; the living world is full of examples. It would seem that if Aristotle conceives of the primary source of motion as an essentially kinetic agent, he could have grounded the movement in the sphere itself, that solid corporeal substance, saying (as he does in DC I.2) that it is simply the nature of this body to rotate. The appropriateness of rotation for a body like this would then be cited as the end that explains the motion -- not a transcendent end, to be sure, but one which a scientist like Aristotle could readily make sense of, since it has nothing in it of the supernatural. In effect, then, the rotation, or else the rotating sphere itself -- that physical object -- would be the Prime Mover. Or if this seems too bleak, then perhaps Aristotle could have grounded its motion in something like a soul (even if he would not have called it 'soul' for the reason discussed under Objection B): say, a principle of desire and pleasurable awareness, but not an intellectual principle. The Prime Mover must of course be perfectly active, but why should the life of perfect activity be a life of intellect? These concepts do not seem to be immediately connected, and the experience and ordinary opinions of Aristotle's audience even suggest that they may not be necessarily connected at all. For on the one hand it is much more obvious to those whom he addresses that the heaven is perpetually active than that it is powered by intellect; and on the other hand our own intellectual activity is intermittent by any ordinary standard of judgment. And even if Aristotle has reason to think that the intellect simply is its activity, having nothing of itself left over, so to speak, to be the separately identifiable potential for that activity, he would not be entitled from that to conclude that this all-or-nothing character belongs uniquely to intellect. Perhaps there is another such potential-free kind of activity that would explain why the containing sphere of the universe could not be in motion at all were it not in motion with perfect continuity for always.

Does Aristotle make his Prime Mover noetic simply because he wants to elevate intellect in his scheme? That may be why, but then this deification of intellect is nothing but an act of intellect-worship; it is not motivated by the demands of a theory explaining the primary motion. It is better to say (and this is the objection) that Aristotle makes
the Prime Mover noetic precisely because he attributes to the Mover an activity whose place in the theory could not be taken by some non-intellectual process in the way in which the alleged kinetic noetic activity could be mimicked or reproduced by one that involves no intellect and perhaps not even soul. But that must be because he takes the Prime Mover’s activity to be essentially contemplative, since only contemplation has no effects that could conceivably be produced by something other than an intellect.

It is worth noting, before we go to the reply, that the way in which this objection has been developed makes it harder than ever to understand how Aristotle, if he really wanted to explain the motion of the sphere, could resort to the concept of the contemplating Prime Mover. For we have just been looking at two possible accounts of the motion which are both well within Aristotle’s grasp and which make the contemplative Mover redundant. It is also worth noting that the problem of explaining why the Prime Cause in Lambda is an intellect is peculiarly baffling in view of the fact that this Cause only gives rise (somehow) to a simple motion. Hardly anything in Lambda suggests that the divine mind also determines the intricate sublunar forms that work on the whole so well to all eternity. These are the forms which, as often as not, have compelled the belief that ‘there is a Mind behind it all’, whether this is held as an article of faith or as the most rational hypothesis. By contrast, the divine intellect of Lambda is in charge of an effect so monolithic that it hardly needs mind to explain it, and might even seem not to require explanation at all.

In reply: The Prime Mover is the source of an eternal (a’dios) movement, which means, I think, not that the Mover eternally produces movement, but that what the Mover produces is a movement essentially eternal and all-containing in time and space. This (or producing this) is the Prime Mover’s end, comprehensive and indivisible. But something like this could hardly be an end at all unless it were an end for an intellect; to be brought into being, it has to be understood. And now we can see that the sheer rotation itself, so easy to describe in physical terms, is not what is centrally aimed for; instead (as Aristotle argues in detail in Physics VIII) the rotation is simply what the intellect knows must take place if there is to be an eternal world-making movement -- the Prime Mover’s true objective.

Add to this that it cannot be by accident that the effect of the primary rotation pervades the entire universe, not only contributing to the motions of the inner spheres, but thereby eventually providing the ongoing conditions (though not the particular structures and forms) of all that takes place in the sublunar domain. The Prime Mover is not the soul of the world, if by this we mean a single principle that steers all things so that the life of all things is its one life. Rather, it is a spirit that acts to make possible the generations of many independently natured substances through infinite time. But such a general end could not be an end except to one capable of grasping it intellectually. The analogy of the military commander in Lambda 10 (1075 a 11 ff.) makes the point. A commander sets the framework for operations; he does not expressly dictate the detail that unfolds within the field secured by his influence. The Prime Mover of Lambda need not and probably cannot be omniscient. But it does not follow that the cosmos is something not meant by the Mover -- whether because he is lost in pure contemplation or because he is only a rudimentary impulse, corporeal or psychic, that issues in circular motion.

Objection D

In making the Prime Mover an essentially kinetic agent, am I not bringing it down too low? This is not just a question of dignity, but of explanatory power. If the Mover is as closely related to the first sphere and its motion as I am suggesting, then it verges on sharing the physical nature of what it is supposed to explain. Yet Aristotle plainly denies this when, for example, he says at 1073 a 4-5 that the Prime Mover is a substance ‘separated from sensible things’ (kechôrismenê tòn aisthëtôn). Can we take this statement seriously without being led back to the contemplation story?

The statement is usually understood to mean that the Prime Mover is remote from sensible things in a way in which a soul is not remote from its body. Yet on the account here proposed, the relation of the Mover to the first sphere is obviously similar to that of soul to body, despite the difference discussed above between the Mover and what Aristotle would be happy to term a ‘soul’. Now an ordinary body-soul composite (an organism) is as a metaphysical
whole (not merely qua body) a natural substance, part of the natural world. How, then, am I not implying that the complex consisting of Prime Mover and first sphere stands on the same metaphysical level (despite its extraordinary physical position) as a humble organism? But in that case the spirit which moves the sphere is no more and no less 'separated from sensible things' than the soul of any animal.

In reply: In the case of an animal or a plant, the soul is soul-of-a-body because the psychic activities characteristic of the organism are also corporeal, involving a body. The reason, we could say, why the soul is of a body is that it is the sort of life-principle to be expressed by such functions or activities. It is not as if the psychosomatic activities result because the soul, independently characterized, is somehow connected with a body. Rather, the soul relates to the body so that there should occur just such activities. In other words the soul's nature is to be the source of these kinds of activities, and that is why it is related to a body: because only so are the activities possible.

Accepting the parallel with the Prime Mover and the sphere, let us apply this point to their case. We get the result that the Mover is to be thought of not as primarily connected with the sphere and consequently giving rise to eternal movement; but as first of a nature to give rise to this movement, and hence connected with a suitable mobile: the sphere. The sphere, of course, is perceptible (or so Aristotle assumes), but not so the movement. I return to the point that the nature (eternal) of such a movement can be grasped only by intellect. But now what is relevant is not the Prime Mover's grasp of this end, but ours. We cannot form the idea of such a movement from sense experience along with memory and sensory imagination. And our knowledge that it occurs cannot be got by observations, but only through intellectual reflection. Observation can confirm that the motion is circular, but not that it is eternal. Thus what the Prime Mover does cannot be grasped through perception. (We can perceive arbitrarily selected finite portions of eternal rotation, but none of these is what per se the Mover gives rise to."

If, then, we characterize the Prime Mover in terms of what it does, we do arrive at a sense in which the Mover, so considered, is beyond anything perceptible: a sense that does not apply to an ordinary soul because an ordinary soul's activities are spelt out in effects which can be observed from beginning to end. It is interesting that this distinction can be sustained even if we suppose that the Prime Mover is as intimately related to the sphere as any organic soul to its body. However, I shall now argue that in the case of the Prime Mover, the relation is more intimate still.

Let me begin by noting that, notwithstanding the previous argument, it is hard to shake off the impression that when Aristotle says that the Prime Mover is separated from sensible things, he means that the Mover is somehow infinitely remote from anything physical. How does this impression arise? Because, I suggest, we tend to think of Prime Mover as introducing motion into the first sphere. Of course there was never a temporal beginning of the motion, so it is as if the Mover has never not been inducing it. Even so, we picture the source of motion as metaphysically external to the sphere. Naturally one regards this as a symmetric relation, so the sphere is external to the Mover. This can be stated by saying that if we suppose per impossibile that there had been no motion (and no activity on the part of the Mover), it does not follow that there would not have been the sphere. The sphere receives the motion and has always been receiving it, but we can imagine the sphere existing independently of its motion even though the hypothesis of independence could never be tested since the test would require an impossible situation. But now there is a problem. If the sphere exists whether or not it is in motion, then it exists whether or not the Mover exists. (For we know nothing of what we are calling 'the Mover' except that it moves the sphere. For all we know, without that kinetic activity it would simply not be.) But this independently existing sphere must have some sort of locomotory nature. Is it its nature to rotate, as Aristotle suggests at DC 1.2? If so, then if there were after all a distinct Mover, there would be nothing for the Mover to do. On the other hand, it is inconceivable to Aristotle that the sphere should be of a nature to remain at rest or to move in a straight line, since then the Mover would be stuck with the Sisyphean task of forcing it to move against nature for all eternity (cf. DC 284 a 14 - b 1).

Our assumption is that the sphere would exist even if (per impossibile) it were not in motion. Let us now ask: if (per impossibile) the sphere did not even exist, would its Mover exist? Certainly not as an actual or potential Mover, so not at all if the Mover is only or essentially that. Thus as soon as we hypothesize the non-existence of the
sphere, a perceptible entity, we risk plunging the Prime Mover into hypothetical non-existence. This is hardly being 'separated from sensible things'. Or rather: the Prime Mover can be salvaged, but only if we suppose that whatever it is that moves the sphere is also and primarily something else whose activity does not depend on the availability of the sphere. This something else is of course the contemplator, who as such is able to be separate from sensible things, including the sphere.

Let us bring this into relation with the previous problem, that of the nature of the independent sphere. Apparently we must say that the sphere, a physical object, has in itself no nature for movement or rest in any way rather than another. By itself one might be prepared to accept this Aristotelian anomaly; after all, the primary sphere is an unusual entity in other ways too. But now look where we have landed. Not only are we compelled to postulate a Prime Mover whose essential activity is in no way kinetic, but the same path has led to a corresponding mobile devoid of any nature for motion or rest. And these are supposed to explain the motion of the universe! One might as well explain it as the result of a transaction between a number from pure arithmetic and a figure of pure geometry.

Both sides of this conundrum arise from the same assumption: that the mover imparts motion to the sphere as an independently existing subject. But this assumption does not appear in Lambda. At 1069 b 24-26 Aristotle says that eternal moving things (the spheres) have matter for being in one place or another (sc. with respect to their parts), though not matter for generation and destruction. But this does not at all imply that they have matter for being or not being in motion. Rest is impossible for the first heaven: not merely physically impossible but metaphysically so. There is no rest without time, and no time independently of the motion of the first sphere (Phys. 223 b 12 ff.; cf. 1071 b 9-10). A sphere neither at rest nor in motion is not any sort of physical thing but a geometrical abstraction, which is why the first sphere, considered apart from its Mover, turned out to lack locomotory nature. Its motion is what gives physical being to the sphere, and thereby creates the conditions of spatio-temporality for all other objects. Motion is no more an attribute of the sphere than life or existence is an attribute. It may even be too weak to say that the sphere is essentially in motion, because in general if something essentially F ceases to be F, then although that substance has ceased to be, there is something of it left over, remnants or rudiments for something else. But if the sphere were not in motion there would be nothing at all. It is as if the motion is not only the essence of the sphere, but its matter. Indeed, it has no matter (except for "local" matter) if matter is distinct from essence. This raises the interesting possibility that when Aristotle speaks of essences without matter, what he has in mind need not be incorporeal.

The present account can do justice to Aristotle's statement that the Prime Mover is 'separated from sensible things'. The Prime Mover is indeed less remote from the sphere than an organic soul from its body, for the organism's body cannot be entirely within reach of its soul in the way in which the sphere is held in being by the Prime Mover. The organic body has material components which are independent of the organism since they remain after death. But the sphere's existence is through and through the effect of the Mover-intellect. We perceive this effect -- the sphere in motion -- when we perceive the stars carried round on it. And we are then perceiving the condition of all other physical processes including those necessary for sense perception itself. In short, the intellect that moves the sphere is beyond all sensible things because on such a principle depends the entire system of sensibles, or, as Aristotle says, 'the heavens and the world of nature' (1072 b 13-14).

4. Theoria in Lambda and in Nicomachean Ethics X

I have argued: (i) that if Lambda equates the Prime Mover's activity with contemplation (understood according to the distinction in Section 1), then Lambda fails as a theory of the motion which the Prime Mover is introduced to explain; (ii) that a reasonable theory emerges if we suppose the activity straightforwardly kinetic; and (iii) that this interpretation can accommodate such crucial positions as that the Prime Mover is a thinking of thinking, that it functions as a final cause, that it is separated from sensible things, and that it is not in any ordinary sense a soul. But these arguments against the traditional view are worthless if Aristotle's text decisively favors a contemplative Prime Mover. The passage to which I now turn is star witness for that view.
On such a principle, then, depend the heavens and the world of nature. And its life (diagnosis) is such as the best which we enjoy, and enjoy but for a short time. For it is ever in this state (which we cannot be), since its actuality is also pleasure. (And therefore waking, perception and thinking are most pleasant, and hopes and memories are so because of their reference to these.) And thought in itself (the noesis he kath' hauten) deals with that which is best in itself, and that which is thought in the fullest sense with that which is best in the fullest sense. And thought thinks itself because it shares the nature of the object of thought; for it becomes an object of thought in coming into contact with and thinking its objects, so that thought and the object of thought are the same. For that which is capable of receiving the object of thought, i.e. the essence, is thought. And it is active when it possesses this object. Therefore the latter [sc. possession] rather than the former [sc. receptivity] is the divine element which thought seems to contain, and theoria is what is most pleasant and best. If, then, God is always in that good state in which we sometimes are, this compels our wonder; and if in a better this compels it yet more.... (1072 b 13-26, Revised Oxford Translation).

There has never been the slightest doubt, so far as I know, that 'the best which we enjoy' alludes to the ethical doctrine that perfect human happiness is contemplation. So we must view this passage in the light of the argument of EN X 6-8, where the doctrine is most fully expounded. And we are bound to give special attention to the subsidiary argument at EN 1178 b 7-22 proving that the gods do nothing but contemplate. Our question, then, is whether Metaphysics 1072 b 13-26 tells us that the divine activity is contemplation.

Let me begin with the occurrence of 'theoria' at line 24. I have not translated, since to do so would settle the issue in advance. The word is usually correctly rendered by 'contemplation' or a synonym. But if this is its meaning here, what leads up to the proposition that contemplation is 'most pleasant and best'? The immediately preceding lines 22-23 are beside the point, since they say that noetic activity is more divine than capacity, whereas what we need is a reason why one special kind of noetic activity is best, namely contemplation. Lines 19-21 may provide a reason. They speak of thought as in some way the same as its object. However, this fails to connect with the point that contemplation is best unless we assume (A1) that the identity of thought with its object applies exclusively to contemplation. But that assumption is not mandatory, if, as I argued in Section 3, divine kinetic activity can be understood as an intellectual desire for what is not other than itself (and see further below).

So let us go back to lines 14-15 where Aristotle compares God's activity with the best that human beings can engage in. This can be read as paving the way to a statement about contemplation provided we assume (A2) that Aristotle not only has it in mind here that contemplation is the best human activity, but also means the comparison in respect of contemplation. This assumption is not mandatory either, as I shall argue presently. Yet in the absence of both A1 and A2, the passage as a whole contains nothing to motivate the statement at 24 that theoria is best, if what this means is: 'Contemplation is best'. But it need not mean this. In Peripatetic circles, 'theorein' had taken on the sense of intelligent activity in general as contrasted with a corresponding capacity or disposition. (No doubt this was because the standard illustrations make the point in terms of theoretical knowledge, its exercise and its possession; cf. DA 417 a 31-32; GA 735 a 10-12; Plato, Theaetetus, 197 b - 199 b.) If we take 24 as saying that noetic activity (of whatever kind) is best by comparison with the various grades of potentiality that apply in the human case, then the statement is well connected with what precedes.

I shall come to A1 at the end of this paper. For the moment let us consider A2. It might conceivably be argued that when Aristotle compares the divine activity to the best that human beings enjoy, he is not referring to human contemplation in particular. He might merely be saying: 'Whatever activity of ours we reasonably hold most precious can afford us a glimpse of what it is like to be God'. But several themes in the context (as well as some of the language) are so reminiscent of doctrines in EN X that it would be unrealistic not to accept that he has human contemplation expressly in mind. Even so, we must note that what he stresses at 1072 b 14 ff. are certain general characteristics (such as continuity and pleasure) of divine activity which correspond to criteria used in the Ethics (cf. 1177 a 21-27) for deciding which human activity is perfect human happiness. There is nothing about the way in which these characteristics are presented in Lambda that compels the inference that the supreme human activity resembles the divine in anything more specific than just those general respects. Hence even if Aristotle is specifically referring
to contemplation when he speaks of the best human activity, he need not be implying that the divine activity is contemplative. On the other hand, it is difficult to resist the inference that he does imply this, in view of the argument at EN 1178 b 7 ff. that contemplation is the only activity that it makes sense to ascribe to the gods. That gives the ethical philosopher an additional reason for identifying the supreme human good with contemplation; 'we should strive to live like the immortals as far as possible' (1177 b 31-34).

But let us be clear that there is only one statement in Lambda itself that justifies transferring to the Prime Mover of Lambda the contemplative notion of divinity which appears in EN X. This is the remark that the Mover's life is like human activity at its best. And the evidential value of this not only depends on the plausibility of assumption A2 (which I continue to discuss), but is not increased by the presence of the word 'theoria' at 1072 b 24, since there is no independent ground for interpreting this as 'contemplation'. But it may all the same seem obvious that since (a) (as I admit) Aristotle has human contemplation in mind at 1072 b 14-15, and (b) one of his reasons in EN X for equating contemplation with the human sumnum bonum is that the gods do nothing but contemplate, he must, in Lambda, be endorsing exactly that picture of God when he illustrates divine beatitude by a comparison with human happiness. However, the principle of charity should make us cautious about embracing this interpretation, although of course charity is only one consideration amongst others. For if the interpretation is correct, Aristotle has made a dubious move. It is one thing to allude to an ethical doctrine about the place of contemplation in human life in order to illustrate the quality of the divine existence; another to press the grounds of the ethical doctrine into service as part of a metaphysical theory of the Prime Mover's nature. Aristotle's abstract propositions about the Prime Mover in Lambda do not depend on the reference to human contemplation, since this is only illustrative; hence they do not depend on a reason given elsewhere, in an ethical treatise, why contemplation should be what we refer to when we refer to the finest human activity. For even if that reason is weak (in fact, even if no reason at all had been given), the illustration would still make its purely illustrative point in the metaphysical context. In other words, merely by using the illustration, the metaphysician does not make himself responsible for considerations that were used in the Ethics to justify treating contemplation as the supreme end of human life. But the metaphysician would be making himself responsible for those considerations if he means to import them (not merely their illustrative conclusion) into his metaphysical theory. So if Aristotle does intend this in Lambda, one is entitled to expect him to do here what he does not: to present and defend afresh the thesis that God is solely contemplative, and to present it in a form that fits it for the metaphysical context.

This objection is not as tenuous as it may at first seem. What has escaped notice so far (in this and many other attempts to interpret this portion of Lambda) is that the point about divine contemplation in the Ethics is logically as well as methodologically unsuitable for direct transference into the doctrine of Lambda. This is because Lambda is primarily not about God, but about the Prime Mover. If Aristotle wants to assimilate the Prime Mover to the gods of EN X, he needs to do more in Lambda than simply remind us (by means of a reference to human happiness) of the EN picture of the gods. For nothing in that picture suggests that divine contemplation is a final cause of any sort of cause of physical motion in anything. To secure this position in Lambda, Aristotle would still have to add that divine contemplation is somehow the cause of motion. And (so I have argued) there is nothing in Lambda independently considered, any more than there is in the Ethics, to suggest that he means that addition or expects us to take it for granted.

On the contrary, insofar as Lambda is intended to show that the Prime Mover should be equated with God (on the grounds that the Mover enjoys perfect life, goodness and pleasure), Aristotle would do well to have us forget the ethical view of the gods as sheerly contemplative. The purpose of that argument in the Ethics is to recommend contemplation as the crowning activity of human existence. To make this case, he must undermine the pretensions of excellent practical and political activity, which many in his audience would regard as the most honorable human occupation, especially when conducted on a grand scale and successfully. The need to correct this misconception would be all the greater if, as is often supposed, the Nicomachean Ethics is addressed to youths being groomed for statesmanship. (Aristotle must know that they are in for a surprise in the last lap of his lectures; after all, he has said at the memorable beginning:

Even if [human happiness] is the same [sc. in definition] for an individual and a city, it is better and more
perfect to secure it and preserve it for the city. For while one should be glad of it even in the case of a single individual alone, it is more noble and more divine when achieved for a nation and for cities (1094 b 7-10, Revised Oxford Translation).

And has he not, at a later stage, lectured on the virtue of magnificence?) To refute the rival claim of political activity (the only serious contender), Aristotle argues, inter alia, that the life of the noblest beings of all allows no scope for human-style practical excellence, since this is exercised always in response to challenges arising from the social and physical environment. For the gods, then, contemplation is the only activity left over out of the various activities considered worthwhile in the Ethics. The Ethics, however, is of course concerned only with activities open to man. In short, one kind of worthwhile activity that inevitably gets no mention in the Ethics is that of causing the world-making motion of the universe!

So even if in the Ethics Aristotle has it in mind that, were he doing metaphysics he would be arguing that God is mover of the first heaven, it would be absurdly pedantic to introduce this thought when what concerns him is not to give a complete theory of the divine life, but to attend to just that aspect that can be identified with a value practicable by human beings. I do not mean to deny that he sincerely holds in the Ethics (and possibly elsewhere) that God contemplates; but I am suggesting that it would be naive to take EN X as evidence that Aristotle makes it a point of theology that God does nothing but contemplate. There are reasons why EN X should ignore any divine kinetic activity. Not only is contemplation the one godlike activity that can inspire a practicable human ideal, but to mention God's kinetic agency would even be counterproductive in this context. It would tend to reinforce the commonsense view that splendid political activity is the acme of human life. Thus when Aristotle moralizes in EN X that we can engage in fine and noble actions without being rulers over earth and sea (1179 a 4-5), it will not help his case if at this moment his audience remembers that the gods, the aristocracy of the universe, are usually imagined as lords of nature, and that cosmologists as different as Aristotle and Anaxagoras have raised this into a truth of metaphysics. And, in reverse, it is equally clear that when Aristotle is engaged on the argument of Lambda, it is better for him to ignore than to highlight what he says about God in the context of ethics, since there the salient feature of divinity is its total disconnection from physical change.22

The remark at 1072 b 14-15 that the Prime Mover's activity is like the best that we enjoy has been treated by commentators as a funnel through which to inject into Lambda the contemplative God of the Ethics. How would the course of interpretation have run if Aristotle had not said just that? This is a pertinent question, because, as I argued, any implied allusion to human contemplation is illustrative rather than logically necessary for the theory of the Prime Mover. Had he said only what was strictly necessary, and if at 1072 b 24 he had used the word 'energeia' instead of 'theoria' (its synonym in this context),23 then the contemplating gods of the Ethics would have made no impact on the interpretation of Lambda, and the doctrine of Lambda would probably have been seen as a refined version of that of the Physics, according to which the Prime Mover is efficient cause and kinetic agent. The refinements consist in the introduction of the idea that the Mover is also a final cause, and in the explicit claim that it is noetic.

But whatever the fate of Lambda-exegesis in the counterfactual absence of the "funnel" statement, the statement cannot ensure a happy passage between the protreptic of EN X 6-8 and the metaphysics of the Prime Mover. The ethical concern calls for a God that makes no physical difference (not one that makes a difference but only as a final cause), whereas the metaphysical explanation needs a deity that can be intelligibly related to motion. The internal requirements of both contexts are best served by mutual insulation. If, as I imagine, Aristotle could sense this as clearly as I believe we can work it out, then we cannot suppose that at 1072 b 14-15 he intended to equate the divine activity with contemplation. Hence we must take the statement as (no doubt) consciously referring to human contemplation, but not as assimilating God's happiness to ours in this specific respect. Instead, the comparison is in respect of these characteristics of human contemplation that make it (as compared with other human activities) uniquely godlike, i.e. uniquely similar to God's intellectual projection of the eternal motion. Some of these characteristics are discussed in EN X.7; thus, for instance, contemplation is the work of what is sovereign in us (i.e. intellect); it is in the highest degree continuous (i.e. contains no internal causes or reasons for ceasing); it is in the highest degree pleasant, self-sufficient and leisurely (i.e. not shaped in response to external demands); and it seeks nothing beyond itself (1177 a 12-b 24).24
The last of these attributes calls for comment, necessarily brief. How can the divine kinetic activity be thought to seek no end beyond itself? By definition, it seeks the motion of the first sphere (or the first-sphere-in-motion). Something more can be said about this than was earlier said to explain the activity's reflexive structure. For we can also draw on the argument of Section 3 showing how the sphere itself exists only in dependence on the Mover. The Mover, then, is at one with the sphere since the latter lacks separate existence. The Prime Mover is the substance of the sphere and its motion (though not in such a way as to be subject, itself, of predicates like 'revolving' and 'fast'). This should remind us of the way in which, as Aristotle says, the human intellect is one with its objects, so that it would be false to say that in thinking them it relates to something different from itself. But this holds of the human intellect only when it contemplates essences in abstraction from matter and physical particulars (cf. DA 430 a 2-9; Meta. 1074 b 38 - 1075 a 5). Otherwise, as in practical and productive human thinking, the objects of intellect also lead independent lives in the world of nature where they are able to be concretely more than whatever they are for the intellect. So for human beings, contemplation alone is wholly at one with its objects. A version of godlike independence is indeed possible for us, but only if we abstract ourselves and our thoughts from changing sensible things. This is because so far as we do connect with the natural order, we connect through being within it and subject to its alien influences. But the Prime Mover's connection with nature is utterly different. The Cause of the world is set in no physical environment from which it must withdraw in order to exercise its complete noetic freedom. That is why the divine reality, unlike ours, can sustain itself in its full perfection without being severed from the world in contemplation.\footnote{26,27}

NOTES

1. Phys. VIII, MA, DC (except for 292 a 18 - b 25, on which see note 2).

2. I do not claim that Aristotle never held a view of this kind. Something like it appears at DC 292 a 18 - b 25. But there are notable differences between this and the position (however we interpret it) in Lambda, viz: (a) the theiotata arche of the DC passage is clearly not an efficient cause, whereas the Prime Mover in Lambda seems (and, I would argue, is; see note 4) efficient as well as final. (b) Although the health analogy suggests that the arche is the final (or possibly exemplary) cause of the celestial motions, this is not actually stated. (c) The relations between the heavenly bodies and the arche are explained in terms of distance (spatial, but presumably also metaphysical), and nothing is said of love or desire. (d) The context shows that Aristotle is not, as in Lambda, trying to account for eternal motion in the universe, but to explain why the motions of the planets are more complicated than those of sun, moon, and fixed stars. A unitary explanation must relate these diverse motions to a single principle, but (because of the diversity) the single principle cannot be an efficient cause, hence must be vaguely conceived as final or exemplary. One has the impression in DC that as long as Aristotle is considering the motion of the fixed stars or first heaven alone, he is happy to account for it entirely in terms of an internal efficient causal principle (either a "nature" or an in-dwelling divinity). Mention should also be made of DA 415 a 26 ff., GC 336 b 25 ff. and GA 731 b 24 ff., since it is often claimed that they refer to something like the Prime Mover theory of Lambda (according to the usual interpretation of this). But in these passages Aristotle is not concerned with the motion of the first heaven. Participation in, or imitation of, the divine principle is invoked to explain the reproduction of species whose members are mortal. (Again, at Meta. 1050 b 28 inanimate perishable bodies are said to imitate the eternal.) There is nothing here to suggest that the motion of the immortal heaven must be explained as imitatio dei. (In fact, these passages can be taken as implying [or stating: cf. GC 337 a 3-4] that the object of imitation [or participation] is either the heavenly motion itself or a divine efficient-causal activity of producing it. Such a theory may be awkward to reconcile with the usual interpretation of Lambda, since whatever has the status of object of imitation can hardly be explained as the result of imitation itself.)

3. This is essentially Ross' interpretation (Aristotle's Metaphysics (Oxford, 1924), vol. I, pp. cxxx ff.), although Ross hesitates to deny that the Prime Mover is efficient cause. But this is not so much because Ross thinks that the Mover must be efficient as because he sees that its actual existence is not guaranteed by its rôle as final cause.

4. (a) The argument at 1072 b 30 ff. against the Pythagoreans and Speusippus is ineffectual unless 'to kalliston kai ariston' at 32 refers to the efficient cause. (b) 1073 a 5 ff. quotes Phys. VIII.10 for the argument that the Prime
4. Mover has no magnitude. In the Physics the Prime Mover is an efficient cause; and it would be senseless to apply that argument to anything but an efficient cause. (c) The strategos in the analogy in Ch. 10 is an efficient cause. (d) At 1073 a 25-30 the internal accusatives ("kinēsin" and, by implication, "phoran") suggest efficient causation. So does the preposition 'hupo' (carefully aligned with agency at Phys. 202 b 21-22).

5. In any event, the soul of the first sphere has noēsis, since the orekton is noēton (1072 a 26-30). Hence it follows from the usual view that two intellects (not merely two spiritual beings) are required to account for the primary motion. But at 1074 a 14-16 Aristotle clearly implies that the number of eternally active intelligences is the same as the number of celestial spheres, i.e. 54 plus 1 (the first sphere). That gives 55 intelligences, but on the usual view there should be 56.

6. 'That-for-the-sake-of-which' may have the sense of 'exemplar' at DC 292 a 21 - b 26 (at least, so the argument requires). Cf. DA 415 b 1, where W. Kullmann ('Different Concepts of the Final Cause in Aristotle', in Aristotle on Nature and Living Things, ed. A. Gotthelf [Pittsburgh, 1985], pp. 169-75), detects the exemplary sense. But this is not required unless 'ekeinou' refers to God, and it is just as naturally taken to refer to participation in what is godlike and eternal.

7. It is no use replying that the potentiality for imitative activity must on Aristotelian principles be metaphysically posterior to a corresponding actuality. This does not entail that there must be an actual God to be imitated, but only that there must at any time be an actual imitator.

8. If it is too dumb to appreciate the value of its own (otherwise) supremely good activity, it is not absolutely perfect; but the model theory does not require it to be.

9. This can be taken in at least three senses: (i) the activity of thinking involves an awareness of itself; (ii) the thinking has some kind of intellectual activity as its object or objective; (iii) the object(s) of thought are at one with the thinking, hence the thinking of them is not a thinking of something other than itself. (i) and (ii) are relevant to the argument of Section 3; (iii) will be relevant at the end of Section 4. (On a fourth, but questionable, sense, see note 26.)

10. The concept of God appears in Lambda only because the attributes demonstrated for the Prime Mover (perfect noetic activity, consequently pleasure, and consequently life) are those which we ascribe to God (cf. 1072 b 23-30, and note 21 below).

11. This objection assumes that although the object of desire is a cause of intellectual movement (= desire), this is not in general true of objects of intellect. Otherwise even a purely contemplative Mover would be intellectually moved by its object of contemplation. Again, the objection must assume that the contemplator does not desire or value its own contemplation, since that would import movement into the Prime Mover.

12. Thus in DA III.9-10 (up to 433 b 3, which begins a discussion of the good), desire figures as a first mover and is not said to be either a movement or in movement. At 433 b 10 ff. the perspective shifts; the first mover is said to be the object desired, and desire is now said to be a movement.

13. I owe this observation to Richard McKirahan.

14. It may be said: 'for Aristotle, if this principle of locomotion is psychic at all, it must be intellectual or sensory; and it cannot be sensory, since "sensory" entails sense organs affected by an environment'. This is too mechanical to be a satisfactory explanation. It was Aristotle (not some Higher Authority) who laid down the division invoked here, and no one is more adept than Aristotle in stretching existing concepts for the sake of a theoretical advance. If he had had no positive reason for holding the celestial principle to be an intellect, he could surely have found a way to avoid representing it as rational without being committed to endowing it with sense organs. (Would he not say, e.g., that non-rational animals desire to live, and if so would he think that the desire itself, as distinct from various
actions taken accordingly, involves the exercise of sense organs?)

15. Since 'ergo' at 1072 a 22 means 'to observation', the remark refers only to the circularity of the motion, not its eternity. See 1075 a 5-10, which seems to make the point that just as a human good might need a finite period of time in which to exist (so that the good aimed at would be had only in the whole time, not in this or that portion of it), in the same way the good aimed at by the Prime Mover needs an eternity in which to occur.


17. Cf. Phys. 250 b 11-15 on eternal motion as the life of the natural order. See also Theophrastus, Metaphysics 6 a 5-14.

18. There could not be the Mover (qua Mover) without the sphere, just as there cannot be a cause without its effect. But the Mover is not on that account dependent on the sphere, as if the existence of the sphere were a precondition of its operation.

19. This discussion does not assume that the composition of EN X preceded that of Lambda, only that the writer of Lambda was familiar with the doctrines of EN X.


21. It may be thought that the EN premiss (S1), 'God does nothing but contemplate' plus the Lambda premiss (S2), 'The Prime Mover is God' provides Lambda with the conclusion (S3), 'The Prime Mover's activity is contemplation'. But this reverses the order of argument in Lambda, where the divinity of the Prime Mover is deduced from what it is about the Prime Mover in virtue of which he or it is Prime Mover (i.e., perfect actuality; see esp. 1072 b 23 with Ross's note). Going in this direction, one might conclude to S1 from S2, given independent reason for holding that the Prime Mover is, qua contemplator, cause of motion.

22. It is worth pointing out that if one goes to the Ethics in search of support for the received interpretation of the Prime Mover theory in Lambda, then one should look for evidence that theôria in the Ethics stands to good praxis as its exemplary cause. But there is no sign of such a theory, according to which the excellence of a praxis would depend on its degree of similarity to contemplation. Good praxis does, of course, resemble theôria, in that both are stable, self-sufficient, pleasant etc. activities. Consequently, each (in its place) is identified with eudaimonia, since those are the characteristics that qualify it for identification. Thus the resemblance is due to this common relation to eudaimonia, not to any direct imitation of theôria by praxis.

23. Aristotle may have suspected an etymological connection between 'theos' and 'theôria'. Or/and 'theôria, in the sense of 'contemplation' may have come to stand not merely for intellectual activity in general, but for self-sufficient intellectual activity in general, since contemplation is the best paradigm of this in the human context. The shift in meaning would be encouraged by conceptual links between self-sufficiency and activity. (The supreme instances of activity, in which there is only activity and no independent capacity, are possible only if they are entirely self-sufficient.)

24. Meta. 982 b 24 - 983 a 11 (a passage very similar to EN 1178 b 7-22) adds nothing to the case for interpreting the Prime Mover in Lambda as contemplative. Here Aristotle recommends the study of first philosophy as a divine sort of knowledge, on the grounds (a) that unlike other forms of human knowledge, it is pursued for its own sake alone, and (b) that God is its object. On both grounds it is said to be the sort of knowledge (tên toiautên, 983 a 9) that
God would have. Notice that these divine characteristics belong, indifferently, to human first philosophy (which is contemplative since it treats its objects as necessarily there independently) and to the Prime Mover's practical or kinetic knowledge of the eternal motion and his own generative activity. Though the activity is world-making, it is not productive in the sense of producing an article that could possibly exist without it. See also Pol. 1326 14-30, where Aristotle argues that contemplation should count as a praxis, on the ground that a praxis need not be outwardly directed. To show that self-contained praxis can be good, he cites God, the universe, and the activities of a city deliberately founded in a remote place.

25. So is the moving heaven "in" the Prime Mover's mind? There might be reason for saying so, but it does not yield a species of Berkeleian idealism. Sublunary substances exist within the heaven, and they, it would seem, are not noetic objects for the Prime Mover. Hence beings that are not in the Mover's intellect are in, with a different sense of 'in', what is. On both senses, cf. Phys. 210 a 21-24.

26. The history of how the Prime Mover in Lambda came to be regarded as contemplative, is a matter for further study. There is also the question of how the view remains so influential. It is extraordinary that modern scholars are not more puzzled by the absence of God as contemplator from Theophrastus' Metaphysics, an all but contemporary work which focuses on some version of Lambda. (The version in question may have lacked our present ch. 8, as has been argued by D. Frede, "Theophrasts Kritik am unbewegten Beweger des Aristoteles", Phronesis XVI (1971). But this does not affect the point, since the passages seeming to indicate a divine contemplator occur in Lambda 7 and 9). It is remarkable that at 6 a 1-2 Theophrastus writes as if the author of Lambda assumes that God wills the disposition of the universe. Ross notes the discrepancy with the standard (= his own) view, and dismisses the lines as 'curiously inconsequent' (Theophrastus Metaphysics, text with translation, commentary and introduction by W. D. Ross and F. H. Fobes, Chicago, p. 48, 1978. For a more considered treatment, see M. van Raalte, Theophrastus. Metaphysics, with Introduction, Translation and Commentary, Leiden, 1993, pp. 236 ff.) No doubt the equation of the Prime Mover's activity with contemplation has been fostered by a long standing (though possibly not ancient: see R. Norman, 'Aristotle's Philosopher God', Phronesis XIV, 1969, especially pp. 72-3) construal of the divine self-thinking. According to this, the divine thinking is not merely self-aware and self-valuing, but is exclusively about itself, or takes only itself as its object. In that case, the Prime Mover cannot stand in noetic relation to anything physical. However, nothing in Aristotle's text compels this reading. (On the history of this interpretation of divine self-thinking, see also J. Kraye, 'Aristotle's God and the authenticity of De Mundo: An Early Modern Controversy', Journal of the History of Philosophy 28, 1990, especially note 3.)

27. This paper, which was first delivered at the Princeton Colloquium for Classical Philosophy in December 1990, has appeared (translated into French by J. Brunschwig) in Revue Philosophique, 1993. I am grateful to colloquium participants at Princeton for their responses, and especially to Richard McKirahan, who commented on the paper. I also wish to thank SAGP's administration for offering me the present opportunity for further discussion.