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Thinking, Thought and Nous in Aristotle's De Anima

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Abstract for Thinking, Thought and Nous in Aristotle’s De Anima

Michael Wedin in his “Tracking Aristotle’s Nous” wishes to argue that the most plausible interpretation of De Anima, Book III, chapter 5 is “…that these chapters provide the essentials of a thoroughly finitistic account of individual noetic activity.” I want to argue that Wedin’s account is not the most plausible interpretation of Aristotle’s theory of individual noetic activity. I think Wedin’s interpretation misses a crucial distinction between the actualization of mind and the being of mind, insofar as he argues that mind is identical simpliciter with its object in the act of knowing when in fact, for Aristotle, mind is only identical with its object qua second actualization in the act of knowing but they are never identical in being, for example, the being of mind is such that it is capable of taking on any intelligible form in the act of knowledge) whereas the objects of knowledge are not capable of this. I will argue that making this crucial distinction helps us understand what Aristotle is saying in the notoriously difficult chapter 5 of Book III.
Thinking, Thought and Nous in Aristotle’s De Anima

Michael Wedin in his “Tracking Aristotle’s Nous” wishes to argue that the most plausible interpretation of De Anima, Book III, chapter 5 is “...that these chapters provide the essentials of a thoroughly finitistic account of individual noetic activity.”¹ I want to argue that Wedin’s account is not the most plausible interpretation of Aristotle’s theory of individual noetic activity and give some indication why the criticisms I make allows us to better understand what is going on in chapter 5 of Book III of De Anima. I think Wedin’s interpretation misses a crucial distinction between the actualization of mind and the being of mind, insofar as he argues that mind is identical simpliciter with its object in the act of knowing when in fact, for Aristotle, mind is only identical with its object qua second actualization in the act of knowing but they are never identical in being, for example, the being of mind is such that it is potentially any intelligible form (i.e., it is capable of taking on any intelligible form in the act of knowledge) whereas the objects of knowledge are not capable of this. I will argue that making this crucial distinction helps us understand what Aristotle is saying in the notoriously difficult chapter 5 of Book III.

Wedin takes there to be six crucial characteristics of Nous in the De Anima,

1. Thinking is something like being affected (429a 14-15).
2. One can think of what one wishes (429a 17).
3. Actual thinking is produced by the object of thought (429a 13-14).
4. Mind is nothing actual until it thinks (429a 24).
5. Mind is identical with its object (430a 3-5).

Wedin glosses number 6 as:

7. Whenever one actually thinks (i.e. when the mind is identical with the object of thought), then the mind thinks itself.²

² Ibid., pgs. 131-132.
Wedin then asks the question, “What sort of picture of mind underlies an account containing the features we have just discussed?”\(^3\) He answers with a theory of the mind that he calls M,

\[
\text{At } t \text{ a thinks (noetically) of something } P \text{ if, and only if, at } t \text{ a’s mind not only produces } P \text{ but also produces itself by producing } P. \quad (4)
\]

Wedin believes that this definition of mind fairly straightforwardly satisfies 4, 5 and 6. However, I am not so sure.

Aristotle makes clear in *De Anima* that two notions of actuality must be distinguished:

But we must make distinctions concerning potentiality and actuality; for at the moment we are speaking of them in an unqualified way. For there are knowers in that we should speak of a man as a knower because man is one of those who are knowers and have knowledge; then there are knowers in that we speak of the man who has knowledge of grammar as a knower...There is thirdly the man who is already contemplating, the man who is actually and in the proper sense knowing this particular A.\(^5\)

Wedin’s number 4 must be qualified since in only one sense of actuality, i.e., the sense in which someone is actually contemplating this particular A [second actuality], is *Nous* nothing actual before it thinks. In the other sense of actuality [first actuality], i.e., that sense analogous to the one in which someone has knowledge without necessarily contemplating it, *Nous* is actual in a person even though that person is not thinking of something in particular. It could be that there are stages to *Nous*’ actuality. For instance, it could be that one does not actually have *Nous*, in the sense of first actuality, until one is a member of a linguistic community, before which time one is not capable of thinking about anything. When the individual becomes a member of a linguistic community then

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\(^3\) Ibid., pg. 133.

\(^4\) Ibid., pg. 133.
Nous is actual [first actuality] in him and this does not imply that he has Nous in its second actuality, i.e., he is not now thinking of anything. This is just like the case of the knower that Aristotle mentions. One begins by not knowing, one comes to have knowledge [first actuality] through teaching and learning and finally one can exercise that knowledge [second actuality].

This is important to the discussion because Wedin takes it that “...mind not only produces P but also produces itself by producing P.” However, if I am right this is not quite true and Wedin can at most conclude that, for Aristotle, Nous not only actualizes P but also actualizes itself [second actuality] by actualizing P. This seriously hinders Wedin’s interpretation of Nous because, given this, correct formulations of 4, 5 and 6 become much more complicated than Wedin wants.

With regard to 5, we must qualify what Aristotle means when Wedin takes him to say “Mind is identical with its object.” For, if I am right, what we should conclude is only that Nous in second actuality is identical with its object. Clearly, Nous insofar as it is actualized in its first actuality is not identical with its object. For Nous in its first actuality is capable of thinking anything whatsoever (429a18), i.e., “…it must have no other nature than this, that it is potential,” whereas the objects of thought have no actuality similar to this, i.e., being capable of thinking anything whatsoever. Therefore, Nous manifested in its second actuality, i.e., in thinking of a particular object, is identical with the object of thought, but this does not mean that Nous generally is identical with the object of thought.

Aristotle is sensitive to this point, for in discussing whether the soul and body are one he says that “…while unity and being are so spoken of in many ways, that which is most properly spoken of is the actuality.” That is, the most proper sense of unity and being is actuality. Therefore, even though Nous and the object of thought are most properly actualized and, thus, most properly identical in second actuality this does not mean that Aristotle would say that they are identical in the strong sense Wedin wants,

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6 Ibid., 429a19.
7 Ibid., 412b9.
viz., identical simpliciter, or, as Aristotle would put it, "identical in being," And this makes sense given what I have said above.

Similarly with Wedin's number 6. It is not simply the case that for Aristotle Nous thinks itself in the sense that it brings itself into existence by thinking of an object. It is true that Nous actualizes itself [second actuality] when it thinks of an object, but Aristotle expressly denies that Nous, therefore, brings itself into existence. For example he says, "Again, the states of the intellectual part of the soul are not alterations, nor is there any becoming of them." And, "...that which has knowledge comes to contemplate, and this is either not an alteration (for the development of the thing is into itself and into actuality) or a different kind of alteration. For this reason it is not right to say that something which understands is altered when it understands, any more than a builder when he builds."

Wedin takes number 3 from *De Anima* 429a 13-14 which says,

Now if thinking is akin to perceiving, it would be either
being affected in some way by the object of thought or
something else of this kind.

But the text continues,

It must then be unaffected, but capable of receiving the
form, and potentially such as it, although not identical with it...

I think it is wrong for Wedin to read into passage number 3 that actual thinking is *produced* by the object of thought. Again, Wedin takes this to mean that since actual thinking and the object of thought are identical the *production* of the object of thought is clearly also the *production* of Nous and that Nous itself produces the object. However, as I argued before, Wedin is not careful enough in distinguishing what is "produced."

Nothing comes to be, i.e., there is no becoming, rather Nous "develops into its true self or actuality." Both Wedin's interpretation of Nous, with regard to numbers 1 and 2, face similar problems.

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9 *De Anima*, 417b5-7.
What I would like to do is quickly look at chapters 4 and 5 to show how the criticisms I have made of Wedin’s account help us better to understand what Aristotle’s account of Nous is, specifically insofar is it allows us to understand the role the prime mover qua pure actuality plays in Aristotle’s account of Nous.

There is a very interesting and illuminating passage - especially with regard to the discussion of Nous in De Anima - in book 12, chapter 9 of the Metaphysics. It is as follows,

Therefore it must be of itself that the divine thought thinks (since it is the most excellent of things), and its thinking is a thinking on thinking.

But evidently knowledge and perception and opinion and understanding have always something else as their object, and themselves only by the way...We answer that in some cases the knowledge is the object. In the productive sciences it is the substance or essence of the object, matter omitted, and in the theoretical sciences the definition or the act of thinking is the object. Since, then, thought and the object of thought are not different in the case of things that have not matter, the divine thought and its object will be the same, i.e., the thinking will be one with the object of its thought.10

This passage is particularly interesting because almost the exact formulation arises at the end of book 4 of De Anima, where Aristotle says that, “...in the case of those things which have no matter, that which thinks and that which is thought are the same; for contemplative knowledge and that which is known in that way are the same.”11 This is precisely the passage which Wedin interprets as 5, “Mind is identical with its object.”

Aristotle never goes so far. Aristotle does conclude in the passage from the Metaphysics that I quoted above that “divine thought and its object will be the same” and

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10 Aristotle Metaphysics, 1074b34-1075a5. Italics mine. All the translations from the Metaphysics are from W.D. Ross’ translation in The Complete works of Aristotle.
11 De Anima, 430a2.
that this should be read in the sense that divine thought and its object are identical in being, i.e., "...it must be of itself that the divine thought thinks." However, Aristotle never asserts thesis 5 the way Wedin interprets it, viz., that *Nous* is identical with its object in the sense that they have the same being, i.e., that *Nous* "produces" itself when it "produces" the thought of P. As I argued above, this is precisely what Aristotle denies.

Aristotle says that, "if thinking is akin to perceiving, it would be either being affected in some way by the object of thought or something else of this kind. It must then be unaffected, but capable of receiving the form, and potentially such as it, *although not identical with it*..."\(^\text{12}\) Here Aristotle is making a similar point to the one he makes in book III, chapter 2, "The activity of the object of perception and of the sense is one and the same, although what it is for them to be such is not the same."\(^\text{13}\) That is, in second actuality, sensation, and likewise *Nous*, are identical with their object, but are yet still *different* with regard to their being. *Nous* is identical to the object of thought in one sense, that of second actuality, but they are different in another sense, that of their being. However, this is not *always* true. In the case of divine thought there is no difference in being either. Divine thought just is the divinity itself. As Aristotle says in the passage from the *Metaphysics* I quoted, the sole object of divine thought is itself. But this does not hold in our case.

In our case, Aristotle says that we think of ourselves "only by the way." This amounts to the claim that, it is true that we think ourselves in thought, but only insofar as, in us, second actuality of *Nous* is identical with the object of thought so when we think a particular thing we think the second actuality of *Nous* in us, but we do not think the being of *Nous* in us for the being of *Nous* in us is different from the being of the object of thought even when we are actively thinking of that object. This is because regardless whether we are actively thinking about something we are *always* potentially thinking about something else. This is the character of the being of *Nous* in us. It is actualized when we think of something, but it is still always potential insofar as it is capable of thinking about other objects. In other words, *Nous* is *never* fully actualized in us.

\(^{12}\) *De Anima*, 429a13-15.  
\(^{13}\) *De Anima*, 425b26.
On the other hand, *Nous* is fully actualized in divine thought for divine thought is "pure actuality." It thinks eternally of itself, i.e., it thinks of thinking itself, and nothing else. In this case, *Nous* and the object of *Nous* are identical in being as well as actuality.

How does this make the interpretation of chapter 5 of book III any more understandable? In the space left, I should like to give a brief analysis of this difficult chapter.

I wish to analyze the chapter in three parts. First I will consider 430a10-13:

Since [just as] in the whole of nature there is something which is matter to each kind of thing (and this is what is potentially all of them), while on the other hand there is something else which is their cause and is productive by producing them all - these being related as an art to its material - so there must also be these differences in the soul.

This is clearly a difficult passage to interpret. Many take it to suggest that there are two parts to the intellect [as Wedin does.] First there is the passive intellect, that which is potentially all intelligible forms and then active intellect which "impresses" the forms upon the passive intellect. The active intellect is then taken to be what is discussed throughout the rest of the chapter as, e.g., that which is eternal, etc. I want to take a minimal reading of this passage and say that Aristotle, though admitting that there must be two components to the soul, one passive and the other active, this does not necessarily mean that there are two components to human intellect or *Nous*. I would think rather that given Aristotle’s use of the analogy between art and its material, this passage refers to something akin to passive intellect (the wax tablet on which nothing is written which Aristotle refers to in ch. 4) and its relation to knowledge or the first actualization of *Nous*. That is, just as art does not imply the exercise of art, e.g., being a builder does not necessarily imply one is now building, so what Aristotle refers to as the cause and producer need not refer to actual thinking, but only to knowledge or the ability to think. Active intellect is not akin to art, but rather to the artisan who is actually working.
Therefore, I think my minimalist reading of the passage makes better sense of Aristotle's analogy.

Now I take it that in the rest of the chapter Aristotle begins to discuss something different than this division in the soul. Aristotle continues at 430a13-17,

> And there is an intellect which is of this kind by becoming all things, and there is another which is so by producing all things, as a kind of disposition, like light, does; for in a way light too makes colours which are potential into actual colours. And this intellect is distinct, unaffected, and unmixed, being in essence activity.

Here I believe Aristotle is distinguishing between human intellect (human *Nous*) and divine intellect (divine *Nous*). It is human *Nous* which is capable of *becoming* all things. This is how Aristotle characterizes human *Nous* in many places, that which is capable of taking on any intelligible form whatsoever (429a18-19). This is to be contrasted with divine thought as Aristotle does at *Metaphysics* 1072b21-24, “For that which is *capable* of receiving the object of thought, i.e., the essence, is thought. But it is *active* when it *possess* this object. Therefore the possession rather than the receptivity is the divine element which thought seems to contain, and the act of contemplation is what is most pleasant and best.” This is the intellect which is distinct, unaffected, unmixed and being in essence activity. These qualities together cannot possibly pertain to human intellect insofar as the last, being in essence activity, is precisely not what human intellect is. Otherwise, as Aristotle indicates in the next passage, human thought would never cease - we should never not be thinking. (430a5) That which is *essentially* activity cannot possibly be potential with regard to something. So I think that in this passage Aristotle is at least making a distinction between human and divine *Nous*.

Chapter 5 concludes,

> For that which acts is always superior to that which is affected, and the first principle to the matter. [Actual knowledge is identical with its object; but potential knowledge is prior in time in the individual but not prior
even in time in general]; and it is not the case that it sometimes thinks and at other times not. In separation it is just what it is, and this alone is immortal and eternal. (But we do not remember because this is unaffected, whereas the passive intellect is perishable, and without this thinks nothing.

I believe it is clear that here as well Aristotle is referring directly to the divine intellect. For not only is it consider a first principle\(^{14}\) but it is not the case that the divine intellect sometimes thinks and at other times does not for its very essence is to think. Only divine intellect could fulfill the characteristics of intellect set out here, viz., be a first principle, think always and be immortal and eternal. At least it is clear that human intellect sometimes thinks and sometimes does not. And it is at least highly doubtful that individual human intellects are first principles.

\(^{14}\) "the first mover, then, exists of necessity; and in so far as it exists by necessity, its mode of being is good, and it is in this sense a first principle." *Metaphysics*, 1072b10-11.