POLITICS AND PEDAGOGY IN ARISTOTLE’S META PHYSICS

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ABSTRACT

Most scholars of Aristotle see him as disagreeing fundamentally with Plato on the character of philosophy and what philosophy can and should achieve. Some see Plato as an idealist and Aristotle as a realist; others see philosophy for Plato as essentially knowledge of ignorance, whereas for Aristotle philosophy is a system whereby we achieve systematic knowledge of the world. Recently, however, many have suggested that Aristotle and Plato agree more than they disagree—in particular, they agree that philosophy is a continuous search rather than a systematic construction. Political philosophy, as the search for the best regime, is not programmatic, therefore, but critical insofar as it shows us the flaws in any regime. The existence of the *Metaphysics* threatens this interpretation of Aristotle, however, because it seems to be an account of being—it implies, therefore, that Aristotle thinks we can attain wisdom, and not merely seek it.

I argue, on the contrary, that Aristotle primarily intends in the *Metaphysics* to provoke his audience to question their intentions in pursuing the knowledge of causes the work purports to demonstrate. In asking why philosophy is a worthwhile pursuit, his audience is led back to the questions that animate the *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics*: what is the best life for a human being? What is it we desire most of all? Is a life devoted to political action the best life, or one devoted to contemplation—or is there a kind of philosophic life that is active? I conclude that the
Metaphysics is a work of zetetic philosophy, much like that illustrated by Plato’s Socrates, the end of which is self-examination and a search for knowledge of causes that necessarily begins with an attempt to know oneself. Aristotle characterizes the study of politics as the study of what human beings hold to be noble and just—and why they hold them to be so. Insofar as the Metaphysics forces us to ask why the pursuit of philosophy is noble and just it adds to our understanding of the core political questions.
For Laura

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Introduction

Aristotle’s Genre: The *Metaphysics* as an Exercise in Zetetic Philosophy

Therefore Aristotle proceeded in a book that he called *Metaphysics* to inquire into, and to investigate, the beings in a manner different than natural inquiry…the understanding of the causes of visible things, which the soul desired, is more human than that knowledge that was construed to be necessary knowledge…And it has become evident that the knowledge that he [Aristotle] investigated at the outset just because he loved to do so, and inspected for the sake of explaining the truth about the abovementioned pursuits, has turned out to be necessary for realizing the political activity for the sake of which man is made. The knowledge that comes next is investigated for two purposes: one, to render perfect the human activity for the sake of which man is made, and second, to perfect our defective natural science, *for we do not possess metaphysical science.*

The quotation above, which closes Alfarabi’s “Philosophy of Aristotle,” illustrates the question I will address in this dissertation. Alfarabi seems not to consider metaphysics a complete science. Furthermore, he connects our lack of metaphysical science with the need to realize and render perfect a “political activity” and a “human activity” each of which is the end of human life. The *Metaphysics*, Alfarabi seems to be saying, does not present a complete account of first philosophy, but instead reveals the nature of the best possible life for a human being. As to the way in which it does this, Alfarabi does not say here. If the *Metaphysics* is not, or not entirely, Aristotle’s attempt to give an account of the causes of beings as beings, then what

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is it? In what way could Alfarabi be right in thinking the *Metaphysics* has a political dimension, and one that relates to the best life for a human being?

However intriguing this question may be, it is insufficient alone to prompt an investigation. Another way to see the problem is to begin with the difference between Aristotle’s manner of writing and Plato’s. Martin Heidegger, in his course on Aristotle that came to be known as the “Aristotle breakfast club,” \(^2\) began his first lecture saying, “As regards Aristotle himself, as regards the circumstances and the course of his life, suffice it to say: Aristotle was born, spent his life philosophizing, and died.” Jacob Klein finds this lacking and adds: “Whenever we try to understand what Aristotle is saying, we stumble on something that we simply cannot ignore, and that is that his words bring up the words of another man who was his teacher and bore the name of Plato.” \(^3\) We cannot help but compare Aristotle to Plato, especially since they seem on the surface to disagree, both in style and in substance. More specifically, Plato mainly wrote dialogues and Aristotle mainly wrote treatises. Many scholars (to be discussed below) have taken this difference in form to reflect a disagreement regarding substance. In particular, Plato’s Socrates says he knows of nothing both noble and good (*Apology* 21d), and that he is expert only in erotics (*Symposium* 177d). Socrates’s pursuit of knowledge, then, seems to be a never-to-be-completed erotic hunt for wisdom—a pursuit that necessarily takes the form of conversations. Aristotle seems to imply the very opposite: his treatises give the impression of a system that is based on purer motives than eros—a subject he almost never addresses—which culminates in absolute knowledge of causes—in the knowledge of the divine

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unmoved mover of the *Metaphysics*. Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics*, however, suggest that Aristotle’s intention is not to construct a philosophic system, but is dialogic in a similar way to Plato’s dialogues, implying a similar, Socratic interpretation of knowledge and erotic longing for wisdom. If this is the case, however, what are we to make of the *Metaphysics*, which seems, at least, to be a straightforward, if abstruse and monologic treatise?

This project is a reading of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*. We read great books or classic texts because they uniquely help us think about the questions that are at their heart. Some scholars think there isn’t a question at the heart of the *Metaphysics*—that it is a haphazardly assembled jumble of notes lacking coherence—while others see it as a coherent whole, but that its coherence consists in the elaboration of a philosophical doctrine entirely separable from Aristotle’s other writings. I will argue, on the contrary, that the *Metaphysics* is coherent, but with respect to Aristotle’s political and pedagogical intent. This intent is political insofar as politics has to do with the just and the noble or beautiful, and Aristotle points his audience toward asking about the justice and nobility of the philosophic life throughout this work. It is pedagogical insofar as Aristotle is concerned that his audience of convinced students of philosophy ask themselves why they are so drawn to the study of being—and whether they truly understand the alternative lives they could be living, especially the political life. Furthermore, there are two points about human beings that we gain from reading the *Metaphysics* alongside the *NE* and *Politics*. First, we are able better to see our character as incomplete beings because we can see what we would need in order to know the first principles and causes of all things—in order to be wise. We would need knowledge of a god that orders the world in the way we

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4 Hereafter abbreviated *NE*. 

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believe it may be ordered, and we would need the knowledge this god possesses. Second, in reading the *Metaphysics*, we can see that in restricting our reading to the *Ethics* and the *Politics* we run the risk of thinking that all philosophy begins and ends with a study of human things as seen through politics. We risk of falling into the trap Aristotle describes in the *Ethics* as limiting ourselves to mortal thoughts because we are mortal. But reading the *Metaphysics* without recourse to the *NE* and *Politics*, on the other hand, might convince us that we do not need to consider the just and the noble—or, consequently, our motivations for pursuing knowledge of the divine. Each text requires the other, and forms a kind of virtuous hermeneutic circle.

I

What does Aristotle want to teach us in the *Metaphysics*? This might strike someone who is familiar with this text as a strange question because the answer seems obvious: Aristotle wants to lay out his doctrine of being-as-being. But is this the same as his doctrine of *ousia*, or substance—his *ousiology*, as some have called it?\(^5\) Joseph Owens observes that the doctrine of separate substances promised in the first six books of the *Metaphysics* is in no way explained in what follows, especially in book Lambda where Aristotle offers his depiction of a god that is separate, eternal, and motionless, but whose attributes only describe its own being, not that of things we see around us.\(^6\) Some have found Aristotle’s purpose in the *Metaphysics* so opaque as


to despair of ever finding a unified argument. Owens presumes that we do not possess Aristotle’s final doctrine of being—whether because it was never written or because it was lost—and he attempts a reconstruction based on the extant text.

I want to suggest, however, that there is a unity to the *Metaphysics* as it is in its current form, although it is not my intention here to offer the line-by-line commentary that would be necessary to appreciate this unity fully. Instead, I will argue that the apparent lack of unity is due to what we expect from the *Metaphysics*, namely a doctrine, rather than a set of questions or provocations. This expectation is understandable if we think of Aristotle as writing straightforward treatises, rather than dialogues. If, however, we discern a dialogic or provocative purpose in Aristotle’s seeming-treatises, we may treat them as more akin to dialogues, insofar as they offer questions rather than answers. If Aristotle is offering such a set of questions, this

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7 Jonathan Barnes, for example, remarks, “A close reading of the *Metaphysics* does not reveal any subtle or underlying unity: the work is a collection of essays rather than a connected treatise. The collection was presumably made by Andronicus for his edition of Aristotle’s works. Why these particular essays were collected and why they were placed in this particular order are questions to which no reasonable answer is apparent” (Jonathan Barnes, “Metaphysics,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Aristotle* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995] 67).

8 I will address this point more fully below. It is true, according to Diogenes Laertius and to Aristotle himself, that Aristotle wrote dialogues as well (Cf. Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*, I, 464-475). Aristotle refers to these writings as “*hoi exoterikoi logoi*,” or his *logoi* intended for an audience “outside” the Lyceum (cf. *NE* 1096a4, 1102a26-27, 1140a3; and *Politics* 1278b, 1323a). These have not survived, except for a few fragments and the reconstructed *Protrepticus*. Despite the existence of Aristotelian dialogues, however, Aristotle’s way of writing, and hence his way of living as a philosopher, seems to differ remarkably from that of Plato. This is true even if we include Plato’s *Epistulae*, especially if we note that Thrasyllus of Mendes groups the *Epistulae* together with the *Minos, Laws*, and *Epinomis* in his fourth tetralogy, thus treating them as a coherent “dialogue”. Furthermore, we should note that Plato says in his seventh letter, “There does not exist, nor will there ever exist, any treatise of mine dealing [with the subjects I study]. For it does not at all admit of verbal expression like other studies, but, as a result of continued application to the subject itself and communion therewith, it is brought to birth in the soul on a sudden, as a light that is kindled by a leaping
implies that the *Metaphysics* does not serve as the theoretical grounding for a philosophical system. In other words, we cannot move from the first principles given in the *Metaphysics* and the “Organon” (the logical treatises) to the doctrines presented in the works of natural science, and finally to the practical works. If the *Metaphysics* is ultimately concerned with questions of first philosophy, these questions might be the end rather than the beginning: we would move from political or practical questions to ones dealing with nature, and finally to questions dealing with the most fundamental relations beings bear to one another.

But if Aristotle is concerned with provoking his audience, he is concerned with their education—with cultivating them according to what is best, or prodding them to ask what is best. In this way, Aristotle is concerned with the human good or human happiness—the subject of the *NE* and *Politics*. I thus also call into question the claim that the *Metaphysics* is simply separate from the *NE* and *Politics*—that a strict separation can be made between theory and practice in Aristotle’s writings. If Aristotle primarily intends to raise questions and, even more to the point, to provoke us to ask these questions, his intention is pedagogical rather than doctrinal. In asking about causes, however, Aristotle is well aware that he is prodding a boundary that is most often set by poets or legislators: we learn about what things are and are not, as well as the beginnings of things, from the laws and from the stories about the gods. An investigation into the causes of beings is inevitably a political investigation, especially if this investigation does not seek to

spark, and thereafter nourishes itself” (Plato, “Seventh Letter,” in Plato *Timaeus, Critias, Cleitophon, Menexenus, Epistles*, trans. R. G. Bury [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1929], Loeb ed., 341c-d). This difference, however, disappears (or, at least, is mitigated) if one reads Aristotle’s treatises as serving a similar purpose to Plato’s dialogues: they can say different things to different people, or the same person at different stages of her development (cf. Plato, *Phaedrus*, 276a).
provide a grounding or foundation for political action: by implying that a move from questions about the laws and the gods results ultimately in questions—not necessarily answers—regarding the first things, Aristotle seeks a moveable grounding in questioning itself for philosophical investigation that exists apart from the laws that claim to be definitive.

Aristotle simultaneously sets an example in the Metaphysics of philosophy as questioning and as doctrine. The Metaphysics seems to be doctrinaire because of its audience and what Aristotle determines this particular audience needs. The students reading this text or listening to these lectures will be convinced philosophy students. They will believe they know what philosophy is and that philosophy is the best way to structure their lives. It is this unquestioned, and so anti-philosophical, belief that Aristotle will attempt to shake. This shaking or provocation cannot take the form of a straightforward lecture because this again would be doctrinaire—it would simply be the unquestioned belief that we must not be so sure we know what philosophy is. The questioning itself must be generated in the souls of the listeners, and this can only come from the listeners or readers themselves. Aristotle has referred to doctrinaire philosophy in the Nicomachean Ethics and the Politics as a sort of study that is entirely apolitical and apart from action—it is “divorced from all external things” and involves “some sort of study, for example—which some assert is the only philosophic way of life.”9 Aristotle presents this way of life here, but he also presents the alternative, which is far richer if only because it comprehends the first. This alternative is the way of life Aristotle exemplifies in reading his audience, seeing what their souls require, and then writing in such a way as to attempt to bring this about. It is a kind of political philosophy, not because it investigates politics (although it does), but because it looks to

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9 Politics, 1324a28-30.
the good of human beings and the city, and primarily to one’s own good, in the act of investigation.

That this is Aristotle’s intention, however, remains to be seen. If we understand Aristotle as presenting a zetetic alternative to doctrinaire philosophy in the *Metaphysics*, we can shed light both on Aristotle’s more explicitly political works, especially the *NE* and the *Politics*, and on aspects of modern and post-modern political philosophy that criticize “metaphysics”. It will be helpful to look more closely at the audience Aristotle intends for the *Metaphysics* so that we can more fully understand why he writes the way he does and what aspects of the work should grab our attention as we read.

II

The first question that confronts us is why we should be interested in Aristotle’s audience at all. We should recognize, however, that our expectation that a text be a lucid presentation of an author’s argument, presumably accessible from the outset to all readers, is a modern, perhaps even a late modern, prejudice. Werner Jaeger’s assessment of the *Metaphysics* is that it in no way corresponds to any type of writing found in modern times. He and others have noted that the title may refer simply to the fourteen books’ placement “after” the books that comprise the *Physics*, and so were not intended as a complete book in the modern sense. Jaeger suggests that they were probably intended as treatises for use in the Lyceum. This would explain the dialectical nature of the texts: the argument seems to contradict itself only because earlier books are intended for beginning students and later books for ones who had mastered the earlier
material. Similarly, Owens concludes, “The ‘esoteric and quasi-personal’ character of the treatises reflects only the actual concrete conditions which Aristotle acknowledges in a definite and very limited group of ‘hearers.’”

Who are these hearers, though? And is it necessarily true that the text we possess is not in some sense a whole? After all, someone certainly collected and arranged the fourteen books of the *Metaphysics* in the order in which we find them, perhaps Andronicus of Rhodes, but perhaps Aristotle himself. In asking who the hearers are for whom this text is intended, the best and perhaps only reliable resource we have is the text itself. Several commentators have found such attention to audience fruitful in reading Aristotle’s *NE* and *Politics*, and so it will help if we look briefly at how Aristotle indicates who his audience is in these works. Aristotle explains near the outset of the *NE* that the adequate listener to the noble and just things, and the political things generally, “must be brought up nobly by means of habituation. For the ‘that’ is a principle, and if this should be sufficiently apparent, there will be no need of the ‘why’ in addition, and a person of the sort indicated has or would easily get hold of principles” (1095b5-9). In other words, Aristotle’s primary audience in the *NE* will begin from certain first

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11 Owens, Ibid. 31.
14 There is some dispute, among commentators who discuss Aristotle’s audience in the *NE*, as to which is Aristotle’s “primary” or “intended” audience, the one that does not ask “why” or the one that does. I am not sure they are necessarily different audiences, however—it is almost certainly the case that those who do eventually ask “why” must first learn the “that” as beyond question. Cf. Aristide Tessitore, *Reading Aristotle’s Ethics* (New York: SUNY Press, 1996), 17
principles of morality “known to us” and proceed to refine them—he will *not* ask “why” we should be just, for example, as Glauc on and Adeimantus do in the *Republic*. In saying this, though, Aristotle provokes a reader to do just this—to ask “why” regarding moral and political questions—but only if she is paying close attention and only if she is willing to challenge Aristotle’s authority. The way the *Politics* is presented at the outset suggests the same audience. Aristotle goes out of his way to say that the *polis* is the most authoritative community, and that it is the culmination of a natural progression from household to village to fully formed city. His audience of young, politically ambitious Athenian men would have no trouble accepting this without question. If someone does look more closely at what Aristotle actually says, however, one starts to see problems: The village disappears in the formation of the city but not the household; does this mean that the household or the family is a competitor institution for providing human beings with what they need to live well? In what way is the city a “natural” entity if a human being founds it, as Aristotle goes on to say? Can we describe it as having a function in the same way as a horse or a human being? Perhaps it has *more* of a function because it is founded, and hence not entirely natural?

If we look at the *Metaphysics* we can discern a mirror image of the prejudices to which Aristotle plays in the *NE* and the *Politics*. Whereas the politically ambitious audience of the *Politics* is told that human beings are political animals, we are told in the *Metaphysics* that “All human beings by nature desire to know” (980a21)\(^{15}\)—something that would be met with deep

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\(^{15}\) Translations of the *Metaphysics* are mainly my own, but frequently agree with Joe Sachs’s (*Aristotle, Metaphysics*, trans. Joe Sachs (Santa Fe: Green Lion Press, 2002).
skepticism by men of action, especially those who have grown wary of overly inquisitive philosophers. We also learn that the useful arts are not the wisest ones, but instead, “it is likely that such people as were discovers of [ways of life rather than ways of procuring necessities] were always considered wiser, because their knowledge was not directed toward use” (981b15-20). Aristotle then examines the “accepted opinions” (hypolepsis) concerning the wise man: he knows all things as far as possible; he knows difficult things; he is able to teach; he ought to command rather than be commanded. Only hearers who were already inclined toward the philosophic life and the superiority of philosophy over politics—the rule of the wise man over the man of action—would accept these opinions. We may conclude, then, that Aristotle’s audience in the *Metaphysics* comprises convinced young philosophy students who believe unreflectively that the philosophic life is the best life—in particular that it is superior to the political life (that the wise man should rule). As I will go on to argue in the first chapter, Aristotle provokes this audience to ask why philosophy is the best pursuit, and even more basically, what it is. This provocation will necessarily be subtle because Aristotle wishes his students to figure things out for themselves.

The second book, little alpha, begins and ends with a reflection on how human beings come to know things, and so re-introduces the text once again with reference to the human desire to know. Aristotle says first that beholding the truth is both easy and difficult insofar as we know what the object is we are seeking—nature—but no one seems to be able to give an adequate and final account of it. It is, Aristotle says, as if we are,

…in the condition of the common saying, ‘who could miss the doorway?,’ in this way it would be easy, but to have the whole in a certain way, and yet be incapable of part of it,
shows what is difficult about it. But perhaps, since the difficulty is of two sorts, the cause is not in the things but in us; for in just the way that the eyes of bats are related to the light of mid-day, so also is the intellect of our soul related to those things that are by nature the most evident of all (993b4-11).

To know what something *is* is easy insofar as we begin by pointing to things; we all know what a doorway or a bat is in *this* way. In the present context, we know that we want to say something about nature—we know that there’s a doorway here somewhere—but we cannot quite seem to find it. This is because, Aristotle continues, our intellect trying to grasp the truth is akin to bats trying to see in mid-day. But is this not disheartening? Bats, by nature, are incapable of seeing well during the day; does this mean that our intellect, by nature, is incapable of fully grasping the truth we are seeking? Whether or not this is the case, our intellect being incapable of fully understanding the natures of things we see every day shows us at least the character of what we lack. Whether or not progress toward knowledge is possible, we, like bats, must begin in our dark cave, which brings us to the second quotation from the end of little alpha:

Lectures go along with habits; for in the way that we are accustomed, in that way we think it fitting for something to be said, and what departs from this does not seem the same, but through lack of acquaintance seems too obscure and alien. For what we are used to is familiar. And what great strength the customary has, the laws show, in which the mythical and childish things are of greater strength than knowing about them, because of custom. Some people do not give a favorable reception to what is said if one does not speak mathematically, others if one speaks without giving examples, and others expect one to bring in a poet as a witness (995a1-9).

As we have just seen, we blind bats must start out in our cave with what is familiar, and move from there to what is brightest and so, for us, most difficult to see. Now Aristotle discusses his own activity in this text—referring to lectures—as having different effects based on our habits and presuppositions—that is, based on what is most familiar to us. The devices he
lists—speaking mathematically, giving examples, bringing in a poet—are all ones he uses. We should pause, therefore, when he uses these devices and consider how he is leading us from what is more familiar to what is truer.

In both these places in little Alpha, Aristotle is unusually candid about his own way of writing and approaching investigation having his listeners or readers in mind. He shows that he is concerned that his audience follow him carefully, but in the way that they can—acknowledging that everyone begins at the beginning, or in our own particular dark cave. Aristotle illustrates the danger of illumination that is too abrupt in a later passage in which he discusses the problems related to thinking that knowledge is reducible to sense perception. If this were so, he says, there would be no difference between the appearance of a thing and its nature. The problem with this is that we know our senses can deceive us—different things appear differently to different people or the same person at different times. Aristotle quotes Empedocles, Democritus, and Parmenides as holding this materialist position, before turning to Anaxagoras, whose blunt remark,

to some of his friends is also remembered, that beings would be for them however they conceive them. And people also say that Homer seemed to have this opinion, because he made Hector, when he was knocked out by a blow, lie “thinking changed thoughts,” as though even those who are delirious are thinking, just not the same things. So it is clear that, if both are processes of thinking, the beings too are at the same time so and not so. And it is in this respect that what follows is most harsh: for if those who most of all have seen the truth that is accessible—and these are those who seek it most and love it most—if they have such opinions and declare these things about truth, how will this not be enough to make those who are trying to philosophize lose heart? For seeking the truth would be a wild goose chase (1009b28-1010a1).

Aristotle’s concern here is that “blunt remarks,” those that do not take into account students’ habits and opinions, can reinforce unexamined opinions in students who would
otherwise benefit from continuing their studies. In this case, Aristotle implies, we (or at least the audience Aristotle is concerned for here) tend to be knee-jerk relativists: we see that opinions differ, and we think that the truth is, therefore, relative as well. We should note, however, that Aristotle is arguing here that it is dangerous for beginning students to hear certain opinions or arguments because of the opinion these students have of their teachers. Aristotle is acknowledging, in other words, the power authority has on students, and the responsibility a teacher has to his students not to move too quickly.

In the remainder of this introduction I will explain why we should be interested in the *Metaphysics* for the sake of understanding Aristotle’s political thought, before summarizing each of the chapters that follow. It will be helpful first, however, to review the two dominant ways previous scholars have read Aristotle.

III. A

The dominant contemporary opinion is that Aristotle wrote systematically. Although this assumption stems perhaps from Thomas Aquinas, the opinion was not solidified until the nineteenth century. One of the most common questions scholars of both Plato and Aristotle have asked over the course of the last two centuries is whether we can discern the authors’ philosophical development by examining clues in the text, and thus arrange each philosopher’s works accordingly. This is especially true of Plato: beginning with Schleiermacher, many scholars divided Plato’s works into “early,” “middle,” and “late” dialogues, based on dramatic,
thematic, and philosophical differences apparent in each group. The developmental thesis is based in large part on the assumption that Plato and Aristotle each have a philosophical system, and so discrepancies in such a system can be explained in terms of the philosopher’s intellectual development. In his book on Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, Terence Irwin notes that, although the majority of Plato scholars have found it useful to trace Plato’s development, and agree to a certain extent regarding the proper chronological arrangement of the dialogues, the same cannot be said of Aristotle. Despite rejecting Werner Jaeger’s argument, however, that Aristotle initially agreed with Plato, gradually moving away from Plato later in his career, Irwin accepts a certain developmental thesis. He adopts partially Owen’s argument that Aristotle’s “earlier philosophical views are the product of his criticisms of Plato, resulting from actual debate in the Academy; further reflexion on Plato led him, in later works, to form a more sympathetic view of some of Plato’s views and doctrines,” although Irwin thinks this places too much emphasis on Aristotle’s reaction to Plato, as opposed to his own separate development as a philosopher (11-12). It is crucial for Irwin to adopt a development thesis because his central argument is that, “In the *Metaphysics*…Aristotle changes his mind” (14) on two aspects of dialectical argument, compared to what he says in his “earlier works,” such as the *Physics* and the *Topics*.

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And yet, as Irwin himself notes, there are many reasons to doubt any development thesis. Accepting what he calls a “static view” could lead to a more rigorous examination of two seemingly contradictory statements, rather than “giving up prematurely and assigning them to different stages in Aristotle’s development” (12). Irwin also notes, although not as evidence against a development thesis, that “Ancient and mediaeval students of Aristotle read his works as though the order of composition did not matter, assuming that they all expound the same system” (11). Catherine Zuckert, in her discussion of the development thesis as applied to Plato, notes this is also true of the latter (3-4). It is well documented among several ancient sources that Plato constantly refined his dialogues throughout his life—indeed, it is highly anachronistic to apply the practices of modern publishing to the ancient world. In this way, we could plausibly say the same of Aristotle: Even if what we possess are “books” in the sense that they are meant to be taken down from a shelf and read, they were in no way “published,” and so beyond revision. We should not assume, therefore, that Aristotle would refrain from revising his “earlier” works if he could.

Alasdair MacIntyre has contributed to the resurgence of what is now called “virtue ethics” primarily through his attempt to restore an Aristotelian teleological structure to our moral and political discourse. He interprets the modern project of attempting to ground morality in reason as having failed because it lacks just such a structure: “The project of providing a rational vindication of morality had decisively failed; and from henceforward the morality of our predecessor culture—and subsequently of our own—lacked any public, shared rationale or
justification” (50). MacIntyre goes on to argue that the Enlightenment project of a rational morality was bound to fail because there is a contradiction between the “predecessor culture’s” shared conceptions of moral rules on the one hand, and of human nature on the other (52). In the NE, for example, we have, according to MacIntyre, Aristotle’s classic statement of moral “precepts which enjoin the various virtues and prohibit the vices which are their counterparts [and] instruct us how to move from potentiality to act, [and] how to realize our true nature and to reach our true end” (52). The difficulty and the root of the modern problem is that the shared conception of “man-as-he-could-be-if-he-realized-his-telos” has disappeared, in favor of a conception of “untutored” human nature as it is (54-55).

MacIntyre’s prescription, then, is to find a way to reintroduce a teleological conception of human nature into our shared moral language. But MacIntyre sees a problem with this project: “the first of these concerns the way in which Aristotle’s teleology presupposes his metaphysical biology. If we reject that biology, as we must, is there any way in which that teleology can be preserved?” (162). A great deal of After Virtue is dedicated to explaining why a teleological account of human virtue is possible without Aristotle’s metaphysical biology. MacIntyre’s solution is to base teleological morality in what he calls human “practice”, which is “any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that from of activity…” (187).

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18 All references to MacIntyre are to After Virtue (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007).
19 Cf. ibid. xi, 58, 162-3, 179, 196.
In his more recent book, *Dependent Rational Animals*, as well as in the prologue to the third edition of *After Virtue*, MacIntyre admits that, “I had now learned from Aquinas that my attempt to provide an account of the human good purely in social terms, in terms of practices, traditions, and the narrative unity of human lives, was bound to be inadequate until I had provided it with a metaphysical grounding…also a biological grounding, although not an especially Aristotelian one” (xi). This move toward a more “Aristotelian” acceptance of the need for a metaphysical and biological account of human nature seems to ameliorate the starkness of the choice offered in *After Virtue* between an Aristotle grounded in rational practice and a Nietzsche grounded in the will. And yet, this dichotomy still exists, perhaps even more strongly: MacIntyre still assumes that the choice is between a strong teleological foundation for morality, on the one hand, and will on the other. Is there no third way between these two choices? MacIntyre anticipates this possibility when he says someone might retort, “the way in which you have stated the problem is misleading. Contemporary moral argument is rationally interminable, because *all* moral, indeed all evaluative, argument is and always must be rationally interminable” (11). MacIntyre confronts this charge by citing the case of Emotivism, according to which no moral disagreements can be rationally resolved because they do not have a rational basis (12-22). He sees the Emotivist charge as a serious one, but one that can be dispensed with early on (10). Is it true, though, that denying the final solubility of evaluative problems necessarily means denying the possibility of rational investigation into such problems? I suggest that the reason why MacIntyre implies it does has to do with the way he reads Aristotle. As presented above, MacIntyre understands Aristotle as attempting to include his account of human

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20 Cf. MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals* (Open Court, 2001), x, 5.
virtue (his practical works) in a larger metaphysical framework that includes an account of the place of human beings in the natural order. He speaks of Aristotle’s “moral precepts” as though they were laws, and as though Aristotle never said, “any discussion on matters of action cannot be more than an outline and is bound to lack precision…” If the only two options are rigid teleology and emotivism or decisionism, then we would indeed be faced with MacIntyre’s dilemma. But if a third option is possible, one that is more dexterous but still rationally rigorous, then we can avoid the two extremes with which MacIntyre presents us.

Furthermore, the difficulty the early MacIntyre sees with Aristotle’s “metaphysical biology”—which he does not explain in After Virtue—is only damning if we understand Aristotle as rigidly adhering to the hierarchical structure MacIntyre understands him as presenting. It is true that Aristotle says provocatively, “If, then, nature makes nothing that is incomplete or purposeless, nature must necessarily have made [all living things] for the sake of human beings.” But two chapters earlier he has contradicted this rigid conception of nature by saying, “But while nature wishes [to make good come from good and bad from bad], it is often unable to.” Nature may “wish” to make things that are complete and purposeful, but it often does not; so how could we say that all living things are for the sake of human beings, if this last conclusion relies on the premise that nature does make only complete and purposeful things?

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22 *Politics* 1256b21-23.

23 Ibid. 1255b1-4. The two statements are so close together in a part of the text that is so thematically consistent that it seems unlikely this could be a case of Aristotle changing his mind over the course of his life, or an interpolation from a commentator.

24 Michael Davis makes this point much better than I can: “The strong teleology that cuts across classes seems to have been purchase at the price of the classes that it cuts across…if the only
Given the problems (and contradictions) with this strict interpretation of Aristotle’s metaphysical biology, it seems likelier, as well as more theoretically fruitful, to take Aristotle as provoking us to ask these very questions.

Catherine Zuckert, in *Plato’s Philosophers*, while rejecting many of Irwin’s and MacIntyre’s most basic assumptions, agrees with both scholars that Aristotle is a systematic philosopher—in fact, the first and most influential one, who provides the model for later philosophy and science, to its detriment. Philosophy as portrayed by Plato in the dialogues, “is not an activity undertaken by a solitary individual in his or her study, attempting to replicate or ascend to Aristotle’s first principle of thought, thinking itself,” (1) referring both to *NE* 10.7-8 and *Metaphysics L*. This is a central difference between Plato and Aristotle, both in form and substance: “Plato did not write treatises, although commentators following Aristotle have tended to present him and his thought as if he had” (5). Zuckert is perhaps thinking of Aristotle’s complete disregard of the dramatic form when discussing Plato’s *Republic* and *Laws* in his *Politics*, an omission that is indeed striking. She goes on to explain this difference further by turning to Plato’s *Timaeus* for a source of Aristotelian contemplation versus Socratic self-examination: “Timaeus does not, therefore, like Socrates, urge his listeners to seek self-knowledge by examining their opinions to see what they truly desire. He urges them rather to

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25 The development thesis, for example; cf. 1-5. References are to Zuckert, *Plato’s Philosophers*. 
look outside themselves to the heavens to find an order they can not only comprehend but also incorporate. Later readers have tended not to notice the differences between Socratic striving and Timaean contemplation, because Plato’s student Aristotle sought to combine them” (39). Zuckert argues that many later thinkers, with the exception of Xenophon, Cicero, Machiavelli, and Rousseau (we might also add Tocqueville, Nietzsche, and Foucault), have followed Aristotle in thinking of philosophy solely along the lines of Timaean external contemplation. But “the preeminence of Socrates in the Platonic dialogues” as a model of the alternative to Timaeus, “seems to reflect Plato’s judgment that human beings must explain to themselves and seek to discover what is good for them as a precondition for knowing anything else” (480-481). She concludes the book with an assessment of what this implies for each philosopher’s epistemological hopes: “Plato did not think that mortals could give such a comprehensive account of the intelligibility of the universe, although he was also convinced that they could not cease trying. Beginning with Plato’s own student Aristotle, later philosophers thought they could” (861). The fundamental difference between Plato and Aristotle, which explains the difference in form and content of their writings, has to do with a disagreement regarding the character of philosophy and, relatedly, the ability to attain wisdom, as opposed to striving for it. For Plato, the philosopher is above all attempting to know herself, as a way of attempting to know the all things, although with the full and paradoxical awareness that this knowledge is elusive—philosophy is knowledge of ignorance. For Aristotle, philosophy is the attempt to know the order of the whole, including the human or political part of it, and this project can be
completed; i.e., wisdom, in the sense of a complete philosophical system that accounts for every aspect of the universe, is possible for a human being.\textsuperscript{26}

While I generally agree with Zuckert’s interpretation of Plato and Socrates, I must disagree with her assessment of Aristotle. If we read Aristotle as presenting a systematic account of, say, politics, we are confronted with innumerable inconsistencies, contradictions, and allusions that if pressed reveal a more complicated account than at first presents itself. This is particularly true of the very subject Zuckert discusses—the scope of philosophy and the kind of life the philosopher lives. I will return to this subject in the first chapter below, so I will only offer a brief account here. It is true that Aristotle discusses the contemplative life at the end of the \textit{Ethics} as one that is detached from human concerns, so much so that it might strike one as exceeding human capacity, “for it is not insofar as he is a human being that a person will live in this way, but insofar as there is something divine in him” (1177b28-29). It does not exceed human capacity, Aristotle goes on to say, but nevertheless it seems as divorced especially from political concerns as possible—it requires very little “external equipment,” and so is a far more self-sufficient (but also far less active) life than the political life. This entire discussion, however, is full of qualifications and contradictions, as well as appeals to what is “held” to be

\textsuperscript{26} Zuckert may be echoing Leo Strauss who says in a letter to Alexandre Kojeve, “[Aristotle, in his criticism of Plato’s \textit{Republic} in \textit{Politics} 2] refuses to treat as ironical what is meant ironically, because he believes that it is possible and necessary to write treatises and not merely Dialogues; therefore, he treats the dialogue thesis of the \textit{Republic} as a treatise thesis; undoubtedly because he believes that wisdom and not merely philosophy is available. This seems to me to be the difference between Plato and Aristotle…” Leo Strauss, \textit{On Tyranny} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 277; emphasis in the text. Then again, Strauss says elsewhere, “it is no accident that the most fundamental discussion of the \textit{Politics} includes what is almost a dialogue between the oligarch and the democrat. It is equally characteristic however that that dialogue does not occur at the beginning of the \textit{Politics.”} Leo Strauss, \textit{The City and Man} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 21.
true: “If happiness is an activity in accord with virtue…” (1177a12); “Happiness, moreover, is held to reside in leisure” (1177b4); “the activity of the intellect, because it is contemplative, seems to be superior in seriousness, to aim at no end apart from itself” (1177b20). First Aristotle says that it would be laughable to think of the gods as engaged in the sorts of activities political human beings perform, such as making contracts, or even courageous or liberal acts, but since “all people have supposed that the gods are alive” (an obviously false claim—as though there were no atheists), the only thing that remains for them to do, by a sort of process of elimination, is contemplate (1178b9-21). But then he goes on to say that the human being who contemplates, “also seems to be dearest to the gods. For if there is a certain care for human things on the part of the gods, as in fact there is held to be, it would also be reasonable for gods to delight in what is best and most akin to them—this would be intellect—and to benefit in return those who cherish this above all and honor it” (1179a23-29, emphasis added for all quotations). If the gods simply contemplate, as well as the best human beings, how could the gods benefit human beings, or even take any notice of them at all? Divine contemplation seems to be of the best things, as Aristotle says in the Metaphysics (1074b25-33), and human beings seem not to be the best things in the universe (NE, 1141a22).

This is just the barest hint of the problems that confront us when asking what Aristotle thinks the life of the philosopher actually consists in, and has led some scholars to suggest he is presenting a defanged caricature of philosophy so as to render it seemingly harmless to political practice.27 This kind of philosophy is the one made famous from the very beginning by Thales falling down a well because he was looking at the stars—the philosopher as philosopher is

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27 Cf. Tessitore ibid., 106-107; Burger ibid., 213-214.
perhaps self-destructively unconcerned with human matters. This opinion of philosophy is also what motivates Adeimantus to say to Socrates in the sixth book of the Republic that most of those who engage in philosophy too long, “become quite queer, not to say completely vicious; while the ones who seem perfectly decent, do nevertheless suffer at least one consequence of the practice you are praising—they become useless to the cities” (487b1-d5).28

It may be, however, that Aristotle is indicating negatively—through his extreme and contradictory picture of the purely contemplative philosopher—and positively, through the action of writing the NE, an alternative philosophic life. He indicates this possibility positively in the Politics as well, when he says there is a dispute between those who are serious about virtue, “as to whether the political and active way of life is choiceworthy, or rather that which is divorced from all external things—that involving some sort of contemplation, for example—which some assert is the only philosophic way of life” (1324a26-29). There may be a philosophic way of life that is not divorced from all externals—that is in some way politically or humanely engaged. Aristotle goes on to say shortly after this, “yet the active way of life is not necessarily in relation to others, as some suppose, nor those thoughts alone active that arise from activity for the sake of what results, but rather much more those that are complete in themselves, and all the sorts of studies and thoughts that are for their own sake” (1325b17-21). If we accept this possibility, however, it provides perhaps the strongest reason for turning to the Metaphysics: if the picture Aristotle paints of contemplative philosophy is intended as an interpretive challenge—that is, if Aristotle sees this as perhaps one way of doing philosophy, but, as is clear

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from his own activity, not his way—then what are we to make of the Metaphysics, which appears
to exemplify the “outward turned” form of philosophy Zuckert attributes to Aristotle? Although
I will discuss this question in the second part of the introduction below, I will say here that the
Metaphysics reveals itself, on closer examination, to be at least as zetetic and provocative as the
Ethics and Politics, and so a necessary complement to these two works, insofar as it clarifies—
precisely by complicating—the account presented there of the philosophic life.

III. B

Although the reading of Aristotle presented above has a long history, the alternative
reading has (with much variation) arguably an even longer history, and has even been the
dominant reading in certain times and places. For example, Themistius writes near the beginning
of his commentary on the Posterior Analytics that “many of the books of Aristotle appear to have
been contrived with a view to concealment”; Simplicius agrees when he says, commenting on
the Physics, “in the esoteric [treatises meant for those in the Lyceum], he deliberately introduced
obscurity, rebelling by this means those who are too easy-going, so that it might seem to them
that they had not even been written”; Alfarabi notes that “whoever inquires into Aristotle’s
sciences, peruses his books, and takes pains with them will not miss the many modes of
concealment, blinding and complicating in his approach, despite his apparent intention to explain
and clarify.”²⁹ Plutarch writes in his “Life of Alexander” that Alexander reproached Aristotle for

²⁹ Quoted in David Bolotin, An Approach to Aristotle’s Physics With Particular Attention to the
publishing his “acroatic” discourses, or those intended for his close students: “You have not acted rightly in publishing the acroatic speeches. For in what shall we surpass others, if the discourses in which we have been educated are to become common to all?” […] Aristotle, to soothe [Alexander’s] love of honor, said in defense that those discourses were ‘both published and not published.’”

Although we should be wary of taking Aristotle’s reply too literally, since Aristotle says his reply is for the sake of soothing Alexander’s love of honor, these many ancient examples suggest a long history of scholars noting a certain deliberate obscurity.

Following this ancient interpretation, Descartes says Aristotle was less candid than Plato’s Socrates in confessing his knowledge of ignorance, “and although he had been Plato’s disciple for twenty years, and possessed no principles apart from those of Plato, he completely changed the method of stating them and put them forward as true and sure, though it does not at all seem that he ever judged them to be so.” Montaigne agrees, and perhaps even strengthens the point: “[Aristotle] is the prince of the dogmatists; and yet, we learn from him that knowing much gives occasion for doubting more. One sees him often deliberately covering himself with such a thick and inextricable obscurity that one cannot pick out anything of his opinion. It is in fact a Pyrrhonism under an affirmative form.”

We may state this interpretation as follows:

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32 Montaigne, 1957, 376; *Essays*, 2.12. Montaigne continues: “Why did not only Aristotle but most philosophers affect difficulty, if not to bring out the vanity of the subject, and keep the curiosity of our mind amused by giving it fodder in gnawing on this hollow and fleshless bone?” We should note the irony of Mongaigne’s complaint: he is faulting philosophers for only faultsing things—for criticizing and giving false hope for finding truth. Should we then see this as more
Aristotle agrees with Plato that philosophy is knowledge of ignorance, and that, therefore, philosophy consists in asking questions, not finding answers. Learning, then, is a matter of becoming aware of one’s ignorance—of knowing what one does not and cannot know, and, therefore, is a quest for self-knowledge. The dialogue form, however, is too revealing of the aporetic nature of philosophy. It might be, then, that a greater challenge is necessary for the sake of education: rather than problems being presented as problems in the form of a dialogue, they must seem to have been solved, so that it is up to the student to discern what the problem or question is. In this way, Aristotle agrees with, while extending, the Platonic or Socratic assessment of the character of philosophy, as presented, for example, by Schleiermacher: Plato’s purpose is “to guide each investigation and to design it, from the very beginning, in such a way as to compel the reader either to produce inwardly, on his own, the intended thought, or to yield, in a most definite manner, to the feeling of having found nothing and understood nothing.”

of a provocation on Montaigne’s part, to force us to wonder how this “Pyrrhonism” can in fact be “affirmative”?

33 Schleiermacher 1804-1810, I, 1, pp. 15-16. Quoted in Klein’s own English translation in Jacob Klein, A Commentary on Plato’s Meno (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), 7-8n23. The remainder of Schleiermacher’s assessment is worth quoting here: “For this purpose it is required that the result of the investigation be not simply stated and put down in so many words…but that the reader’s soul be constrained to search for the result and be set on the way on which it can find what it seeks. The first is done by awakening in the soul of the reader the awareness of its own state of ignorance, an awareness so clear that the soul cannot possibly wish to remain in that state. The second is done either by weaving a riddle out of contradictions, a riddle the only possible solution of which lies in the intended thought, and by often interjecting, in a seemingly most strange and casual manner, one hint or another, which only he who is really and spontaneously engaged in searching notices and understands; or by covering the primary investigation with another one, but not as if that other one were a veil, but as if it were a naturally grown skin: this other investigation hides from the inattentive reader, and only from him, the very thing which is meant to be observed or to be found, while the attentive reader’s ability to perceive the intrinsic connection between the two investigations is sharpened and enhanced.” I suggest that Aristotle is likewise engaged in this pedagogical project, which is based on an
Despite this tradition or reading Aristotle as closer to Plato and its recent resurgence, relatively little attention has been paid to Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*. Seth Benardete, Denise Shaefer, and Michael Davis have each written penetrating essays on the first book of the *Metaphysics*. Benardete interprets the desire for knowledge for its own sake as necessarily implying self-knowledge: “a wisdom…which knows the good sought in any action or knowledge, would necessarily know why wisdom for its own sake is the good simply, for otherwise that wisdom is for its own sake would still be nothing but an opinion. Self-knowledge completes wisdom. It gives the reason for the natural desire to know…” Benardete also notes the need for philosophy to confront poetry as its main competitor. Shaefer notes “knowledge of wisdom requires knowledge of the ‘why’ of wisdom, which is wonder.” Wonder is the “key to preserving the imperfection of wisdom that is necessary not only to teaching but to philosophy…since wonder is a matter of knowing that you don’t know.” Davis agrees with both that “the question of being is inseparable from the question of philosophy,” what it is and who the philosopher is. Davis further notes the connection Aristotle makes in *Metaphysics* Lambda between thought and eros: “Aristotle makes it clear that our thinking is not separable from our interpretation of liberal education that requires self-liberation. That is, the student must be “attentive” in the sense of being actively engaged in reading and interpreting a text in order to learn. The assumption here is that learning is possible but teaching is not, if we mean by teaching a sort of “pouring in” of information. All education is self-education because true teachers must begin from knowledge of ignorance.

34 Continuing this submerged but long-standing way of reading Aristotle, several recent scholars have offered an account of Aristotle’s philosophy, particularly his practical philosophy, that they describe as “aporetic” or “zetetic” in the sense that Aristotle’s aim is to raise or provoke questions or *aporiai* rather than provide a final answer to such impasses. Stephen Salkever, Aristide Tessitore, David Bolotin, Gerald Mara, Ronna Berger, Michael Davis, and, most recently, Thomas Pangle each offer distinct and subtle readings of many parts of Aristotle’s corpus.
longing—from eros. Only the desired and intelligible move without being themselves moved.”

Each of these works, however, only touches on these themes, and only through the lens of the

first book of the *Metaphysics*. Furthermore, although each scholar notes that Aristotle is

pursuing self-knowledge in the *Metaphysics*, they do not offer a thorough-going account as to

why Aristotle appears to present systematic account of the cause of beings.\(^\text{35}\)

Most recently, Christopher Bruell has published a nearly line-by-line commentary on the

*Metaphysics*.\(^\text{36}\) Bruell is an invaluable aid in thinking through the implications of Aristotle’s

argument by noting omissions, strange turns of phrase, and other stylistic devices that might

otherwise go unnoticed. Possibly because of the commentary form, Bruell often does not pursue

lines of inquiry beyond a certain point. For example, when discussing the unmoved mover in

book Lambda, Bruell abstains from interpreting Aristotle’s depiction of this substance he calls

god, on the grounds that, “we would be even less capable of doing so than the prophet who, after

his manner, has warned us against any such attempt (Proverbs 30.1-6). Instead, we will merely

note several points that bear on the discussion hitherto” (251).

At the risk of hubris or impiety, and for other reasons I will explain below, I will not restrain myself in the way that Bruell

frequently does. Beyond this, however, Bruell does not discuss Aristotle’s audience, which is

perhaps the key to my interpretation of the *Metaphysics*. My contribution is to offer a reading of

the *Metaphysics* that ties it together as a whole, reading the work as leading its audience from a

\(^{35}\) Seth Benardete, “On Wisdom and Philosophy: The First Two Chapters of Aristotle’s

*Metaphysics A*,” in *The Argument of the Action*, ed. Ronna Burger and Michael Davis (Chicago:

University of Chicago Press, 2000) 396-406; Denise Shaeffer, “Wisdom and Wonder in


51-65.

\(^{36}\) Christopher Bruell, *Aristotle as Teacher* (South Bend: St. Augustine’s Press, 2014).
position of acceptance of philosophy’s exalted place, to perplexity as to what philosophy is and why it is the best life, and finally to a realization that examination of being must simultaneously be self-examination, based on a prudent concern with one’s own good.

IV. A

At first glance, the *Metaphysics* appears to be a work explicitly beyond the scope of politics. Aristotle describes the knowledge he is seeking as the knowledge of causes, in particular the cause of being or the question of being as being. He makes it clear that, although there are three classes of contemplative (theoretical) philosophy, physical, mathematical, and theological, “the best is the one mentioned last, for it is about the most honorable of beings” (1064a30-1064b6). The peak of the *Metaphysics* is indeed a description of the life of the highest cause of being, a substance which Aristotle calls a god (1072a19-1073a14). And Aristotle says in the *NE* that it would be strange (*atopon*) if someone supposed political things or prudence to be the highest or most serious (*spoudaiotaton*) kind of knowledge “if a human being is not the best of things in the cosmos…for there are other things whose nature is much more divine than that of a human being—to take only the most manifest example, the things of which the cosmos is composed” (1141a22-1141b3). Aristotle goes on to say in the *NE* that “wisdom, on the one hand, will not contemplate anything as a result of which a human being will be happy (since wisdom is not concerned with anything that is coming-into-being), while prudence, on the other hand, does pertain to this” (1143b17-22). Aristotle notes this difference, however, in the midst of raising several impasses or *aporiai* regarding the usefulness of both prudence and
contemplation or wisdom. He comes to the conclusion, both here and later at the end of book ten, that “wisdom produces happiness” even though contemplation that is directed toward wisdom seems to be directed toward the highest things, and so not toward politics.

And so, Aristotle’s seeming “solution” to the problem of human happiness points in the direction of the contemplative or theoretic life. This conclusion is emphasized close to the beginning of the *Metaphysics* when Aristotle hints that the possession of the knowledge of causes, or the pursuit of the question of being as being, is the way in which human beings can become good (982b29-33). Even if we accept this fairly straightforward reading of Aristotle’s *NE* and *Metaphysics*, it becomes clear how important a thorough understanding of the highest manifestation of Aristotle’s theoretical works is to understanding his practical or political works, if these works indeed point to contemplation as the best life for a human being.37

There are, however, still other reasons why it is important to understand the *Metaphysics* if we are to approach a fuller understanding of Aristotle’s political philosophy. We should note, for example, that Aristotle introduces the claim he makes about human beings not being the highest things in the cosmos with a conditional: “if a human being…” He also says it would be strange, *atopos*, not that it would be incorrect, or ignoble, or base to suppose politics to be the highest study. Ferrari suggests, in his study of Plato’s *Phaedrus*, that Plato means for us to think of Socrates as *atopos* in a particular way: he is “strange” in the sense that he must be “estranged”

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37 There is a debate in contemporary Aristotle scholarship as to whether Aristotle has an “inclusive” doctrine of happiness, that includes the exercise of both intellectual and moral virtue, or an “exclusive” one based solely on contemplation. Insofar as either interpretation is a final “doctrine”, I doubt either is a correct interpretation. But insofar as any interpretation of Aristotle’s account of happiness includes contemplation, we should look to his account of what seems to be its highest manifestation in the *Metaphysics*. 

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from the city in order to make politics the center of his study.38 Aristotle also makes it clear that Socrates “exerted himself about ethical matters and not at all about the whole of nature, but in the former sought the universal” (Metaph. 987b1-3), and was thus atopos. We might interpret this fairly straightforwardly by saying Aristotle disagrees with Socrates: for Socrates, political philosophy is the most serious endeavor, whereas for Aristotle, that cannot be the case since human beings are not the highest things in the universe. But this is not what Aristotle says, and it is not clear, to say the least, that Socrates turned to human beings because he thought they were higher than other beings. Socrates took refuge in logoi because he saw that Anaxagoras and others were not able to give a satisfying systematic account of the whole through materialist natural science, and so Socrates determined that a second sailing and a turn to speeches was necessary to continue an investigation into the whole. Aristotle may be indicating that we still must approach this investigation from the starting point of human beings: we investigate the gods and beasts by means of the question of the place of human beings; theoria of divine things may be the most honorable, but it remains a question whether they are honorable as such or because we honor them, as well as the question “what is a god?” If Aristotle implicitly raises these questions in the Metaphysics, as I will argue he does, Aristotle’s understanding of these questions is crucial to our interpretation of the Ethics and the Politics.

Even beyond the question of the place of first philosophy in Aristotle’s corpus and in his account of political philosophy, the *Metaphysics* is centrally important for understanding modern political philosophy. We can see the history of modern philosophy as a rejection of Aristotelian metaphysics—or at least the rejection of one interpretation of that metaphysics. This trajectory culminates in both strong and weak post-modern rejections of anything that smacks of “metaphysical” language at all—not just the rejection of an eternal order for practical purposes, but any talk of general ideas that are meant to apply more broadly than to very particular circumstances. Philosophy is finally replaced entirely by practical politics. This modern rejection of metaphysics, however, relies on one interpretation of metaphysics, attributed above all to Aristotle: metaphysics as final, foundational, and eternal doctrine. Put in another way, the

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39 There are a number of parallels between this narrative and Heidegger’s or Strauss’s. According to Heidegger, the original question of Being has been forgotten because its answer has increasingly been taken for granted. That is to say, the Platonic answer, that to be is to be always (being is eternal), has been so fully established that it has eventually led to its own undoing, precisely because the West has forgotten that it is a question. Heidegger’s own project was thus a destruction of the Western “tradition” that encrusted this forgotten question; only thereby can the question be asked authentically. Leo Strauss, in my reading, continues Heidegger’s project, although with several fundamental differences. Strauss sees the same problem: philosophy has been rendered impossible because we inhabit a “cave beneath the cave”, in the sense that the tradition that has grown up since Socrates prevents us, without historical studies, from even asking questions in the same way Socrates did. For Strauss, however, it is the misunderstanding of Socratic philosophy as a doctrine—what one might call Platonism, as opposed to Plato—that has led to the near-death of philosophy. Genuine philosophy is Socratic philosophy, which is knowledge of ignorance. It is my purpose in this project to examine Aristotle’s pedagogical intent through his *Metaphysics*, but a more thorough investigation of the importance of such a project would require a confrontation with Heidegger’s and Strauss’s interpretations both of Aristotle and his *Metaphysics*. Although such a project is beyond the scope of this dissertation, it would be a natural next step.
modern project is the result of a dichotomy between doctrine or an eternal order and unbounded freedom, with the latter triumphing in different ways again and again. I will argue, however, that Aristotle not only offers an alternative to these two options, but also implicitly addresses in the *Metaphysics* itself the very problem presented by this dichotomy.

It is easier to see precisely what in Aristotle modern philosophy rejects if we look more closely at two of its relatively recent exponents, Richard Rorty and John Rawls. Kant’s separation of the noumenal from the phenomenal world Richard Rorty interprets as a compromise based on the increasing awareness of the problems inherent in positive science. Kant wanted to “consign science to the realm of second-rate truth,” but in so doing, he only repudiated the existence of a truth “out there” to a certain extent (4). More radically, Rorty seeks a “postmetaphysical culture” in which most people would be “commonsensical nonmetaphysicians” (87). Rorty explains that he means us to disentangle our political commitments to solidarity and the elimination of cruelty from metaphysical concerns about a conception of truth “out there”. He gives a history of philosophy as gradually repudiating “the idea that truth is ‘out there’…to say that truth is not out there is simply to say that where there are no sentences there is no truth, that sentences are elements of human languages, and that human languages are human creations” (4-5). Philosophers, according to this view, would not offer arguments, but would suggest new ways of thinking about something; they would offer useful metaphors for describing something. Rorty describes the limiting case of such a postmetaphysical age as “the final victory of poetry in the ancient quarrel with philosophy”

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40 All references are to Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).
insofar as it would finally reconcile one to the notion that no truth is to be found “out there,” but only in and through human creativity (40). He immediately says there probably can never be a culture that perfectly conforms to this ideal, but it is the ideal nevertheless. Furthermore, Rorty is clear that this sort of ironist political philosophy-poetry recognizes “philosophy as in the service of democratic politics—as the contribution to the attempt to achieve what Rawls calls ‘reflective equilibrium’ between our instinctive reactions to contemporary problems and the general principles on which we have been reared” (196, emphasis in the text).

Following the publication of his A Theory of Justice, John Rawls defended his conception of “justice as fairness” by claiming it is “political not metaphysical.⁴¹ Rawls means by metaphysical, “claims to universal truth, or claims about the essential nature and identity of persons” (388). Rawls makes it clear that his political conception of justice is moral, insofar as it seeks to settle fundamental questions regarding, for example, the most appropriate institutional forms of liberty and equality. He stresses that this resolution of problems will be a solution “for us” based on a political (i.e., historically and culturally contingent) conception of the person, not on a metaphysical (i.e., essential) definition of a human being. For Rawls, then, the question, “What is a human being?” is off the table for a political philosopher, because it cannot “provide a workable and shared basis for a political conception of justice in a democratic society” (393-5). Rawls points out that this attempt to secure agreement by avoiding disputed metaphysical questions is beneficial “not because these questions are unimportant or regarded with

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indifference, but because we think them too important and recognize that there is no way to resolve them politically” (394).

For Rawls and Rorty, along with many other contemporary political theorists, political philosophy is a tool for the sake of resolving political problems—this is why “metaphysical questions” are not suitable for such investigations. Rorty’s embrace of “poetry” or creativity, however, may be seen as the direct result of the modern philosophical turn away from the ancients insofar as the moderns attempt to find certainty in what human beings can make—as opposed to finding truth “out there”. Rawls and Rorty both, then, embrace a version of the same absolute freedom that Hobbes, Bacon, and Descartes propose, in opposition to the dogmatic authority of Aristotelianism. But, as I have indicated, this rejection of metaphysics-as-doctrine takes as its starting point the assumption that the only alternative to freely making truth is the dogmatic assertion of it. Aristotle offers a third alternative: the seeking of truth, in the explicit avoidance of dogma or doctrine, through discursive engagement with opinions, and through a prudent concern with one’s own good.

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42 Even if the modern philosophical project was conceived originally to relieve man’s estate, in Bacon’s words, or to render philosophy in the service of politics, this does not mean that this service was not thought ultimately to render the new politics in the service of philosophy. This is because the new politics, in prioritizing individualism and personal liberty, allows for free inquiry to a much greater degree than politics dominated by the throne and the church. Cf. Laurence Lampert, *Nietzsche and Modern Times* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).
V

In order to situation my argument in the context of the *Metaphysics* as it unfolds, as well as to illustrate why I think the *Metaphysics* can be read as a cohesive whole, contrary to what much scholarship suggests, I will offer a brief summary of Aristotle’s argument.

The *Metaphysics* comprises fourteen books of varying lengths and subject matter. Those commentators who see the *Metaphysics* as having an overarching argument have divide these books into groups based on their interpretations of what the argument is. Roughly, however, there are three parts. The first part, consisting of the first five books, introduces the subject of the inquiry, namely the science that studies beings in their capacity of being—insofar as they are. Aristotle begins (Alpha) by arguing that our desire for knowledge is part of our nature, and this desire, driven by wonder, has led human beings, once at leisure, to investigate the causes of the things we see around us. Many of the poets and philosophers who have given such accounts have concluded that form is dependent upon matter, which is constantly in flux. This explanation, however, does not adequately explain how things come into being and pass away; it does not explain nature as change from *something* into *something else*. Aristotle then cautions us (alpha) that the causes we are seeking, if they are to explain beings, cannot be indefinite, because knowledge must be of things that are definite—that have limits and that can be known in this way. There are many impasses (*aporiai*) (Beta) related to this kind of search, but such impasses are crucial, Aristotle explains, because, “those who inquire without first coming to an impasse are like people who are ignorant of which way they need to walk…” (995b35). These *aporiai* constitute many of the guiding questions of the remainder of the inquiry, at least as it unfolds in a
straightforward way. The first of these questions is whether one science comprehends the
knowledge of causes, to which Aristotle answers in the affirmative in the next book (Gamma).
He also addresses there the central problem with even beginning to inquire about causes, namely,
the law of non-contradiction. Some claim, according to Aristotle, that there are no beings, but
that things are however they appear to each human being; everything is true, and so no science is
possible. Aristotle argues against this claim by saying that if this were true, no argument would
be possible, including this very claim that beings are relative to perception. Nevertheless,
because we mean different things by the same words, Aristotle continues in the next book (Delta)
to define most of the terms he will use in the remainder of the text.

Following this preliminary set of books, Aristotle begins the argument in earnest, which
continues for the next six books and constitutes the second part. He repeats (Epsilon) that we are
searching for the causes of beings insofar as they are beings—that is, not as a natural scientist or
mathematician searches for them. This sort of inquiry is theological because, insofar as it
searches for beings-as-beings, it searches for that toward which beings look in maintaining
themselves as beings—it searches for the cause-as-end of beings as beings, which is “responsible
for what appears to us of the divine” (1026a18). Since being is meant in more than one way
(Zeta), we must say which way is primary, and it is evident that ousia or substance is primary,
because although we say a cow is spotted or standing or five years old, it is the cow that is all
these things—and this is what we mean by substance, the thing we point at when saying
something is. But while being is primarily substance, it is also form (Eta) and activity (Theta),
and so, “it is clear that substance and form are activity” (1050b2). When we talk about beings
we are talking about wholes that we apprehend (Iota), we mainly mean things that are whole
according to *logos* and thought. If we think back to Beta, we are able to address a number of them (Kappa). In particular, there seems to be more order than disorder, or the disorder seems to be dependent upon an overarching order. Since this is the case (Lambda) there must be a cause of beings as ordered wholes that actively maintain themselves, and this cause-as-end must be pure activity; as such, it is right to call it a god. One might still think that numbers can be the cause of beings (M) or forms (N) but this is unlikely if the previous argument holds. These two books form an apparent concluding third part.

There are more reasons to think the *Metaphysics* is a coherent whole, and to treat it as such, than not. I have already articulated one reason: Although it is clear that several of the books can stand alone, and so the *Metaphysics* is not as interdependent as, for example, the *NE*, someone collected these texts together, and so for this reason alone we should wonder what the plan of the whole might be. Furthermore, however, as my brief summary shows, there is an interdependency among the books that suggests an argument that builds on itself. Many of the later books explicitly refer back to previous arguments, for example the opening line of Kappa that says, “That wisdom is some sort of knowledge concerning the sources of things is clear from the first passages in which impasses were gone through about the things said by others about the sources,” which is a clear reference to Beta. The problem comes when we try to account for the last two books, Mu and Nu. Lambda seems to be the culmination of the argument insofar as Aristotle seems to have given an account of the highest, divine cause of being—the unmoved mover. Sachs suggests that these books are cautious: we might be inclined still to believe that numbers or the forms are the highest causes. Why, though, would we think this if we were not convinced? I am inclined to interpret these books as provocations: the *Metaphysics* does not end
with Lambda because Aristotle wishes us to question its finality. That this is Aristotle’s intention I will argue more at length in the third chapter. In either case, however, it is reasonable to conclude that Mu and Nu were not simply tacked on to the end. Furthermore, Julia Annas notes: “M 9 refers back to M 4 (though this is not conclusive, since the reference could be to the same material in A 6). L, which contains copious parallels and references to N…contains one reference also to M (1076a19-22)…In N ch. 2 (1090a13-15) there is a clear reference to Aristotle’s theory of mathematical objects, which is expounded in M ch. 3, and nowhere else explicitly.” For reasons of prudent textual exegesis, evidence of the coherence of the argument, and cross-referencing, it seems fair to conclude that the Metaphysics may reasonably be treated as a single text rather than a collection of disparate lectures or treatises.

VI

The outline of the Metaphysics given above does not seem to have any bearing on political questions. I will argue, however, that Aristotle is concerned with the same question that motivates his investigations in the NE and the Politics, namely the human good. Even more particularly, he is concerned with the bearing justice and beauty have on his audience’s motivations for pursuing philosophy, and whether or in what way these cloud his students’ judgment regarding what philosophy is and why it is choiceworthy. In examining these questions, I will not attempt a line-by-line commentary, but will instead draw mainly from books

Alpha, Gamma, Theta, and Lambda. I will also have recourse to passages from Aristotle’s *NE* and *Politics*, and several dialogues of Plato that serve to illustrate Aristotle’s intention.

The first chapter begins by asking what sort of investigation Aristotle is conducting. Because he is investigating the causes of beings, he must necessarily ask about the gods—what they are and what powers they have over nature and human beings. In giving an account of the gods or the divine, Aristotle is in competition with the poets, who are the traditional sources of such accounts or stories. The quarrel Aristotle initiates with Simonides, however, is only apparently a quarrel, and is in fact for the sake of introducing a problem: if chance rules human affairs, we can only know nature as chance—we cannot know natures, and philosophy would seem to be impossible. Furthermore, however, Simonides suggests in the poem from which Aristotle quotes that we should not worry so much about the human good, so long as we adhere to conventional justice and nobility. Aristotle’s subtler quarrel with Simonides and the poets in general is that they put up too rigid a barrier to philosophy by equating the honorable with the ancestral. Aristotle seeks to resituate the honorable by saying that a certain sort of knowledge of causes, that which he calls divine, is the most honorable pursuit.

In the second chapter I ask why Aristotle calls this study honorable—especially if, as he says, knowledge of causes is pursued for its own sake? The places Aristotle mentions the honorableness of first philosophy are revealing, especially when compared to his account of the great-souled human being in the *NE*, who deserves the honor due to the gods. To desire honor is to desire to be recognized as good by those who are competent to judge. But to deserve honor, according to common opinion, is to be perfectly morally virtuous. This involves, in part, not caring whether one will be rewarded with the external good of honor when performing a virtuous
act—doing something virtuous for its own sake rather than for a reward. Aristotle hints at a tension thus revealed in moral virtue, as articulated according to common opinion: on the one hand, we are due honor if we do something beautiful, that is, for its own sake; on the other hand, this beauty is in part dependent on our giving up something we hold to be good, whether our lives, fortunes, or sacred honor. Moral virtue, in order to be coherent, must be guided by a prudent consideration of one’s own good.

Chapter three returns to a consideration of the honorableness of first philosophy by looking at the divine unmoved mover that seems to be the cause of the honorableness of this pursuit. The unmoved mover moves us, however, as an erotic object. In order to see what Aristotle means by this, I turn to Diotima’s speech about eros in Plato’s *Symposium*. Aristotle has indicated in parts of the *Politics* that he has this speech in mind, and Diotima’s account bears a striking similarity to, and is almost a synthesis *avant la lettre* of, Aristotle’s account of moral virtue in the *NE* and his account of the divine unmoved mover in *Metaphysics L*. I conclude that Aristotle recognizes the necessity of something like the tension that exists in moral virtue, commonly conceived, for students just beginning to seek the knowledge of causes, because they must develop and maintain an erotic attachment to the truth—an attachment that implies they think they will merit a reward for exerting themselves in an honorable way. Once they realize this, however, they must go back and examine their motivations, asking themselves why they desired this knowledge to begin with, and whether it is good for them, as human beings, to pursue it now.

Because Aristotle seems to be concerned with happiness or the human good in the *Metaphysics*, I go on, in chapter four, to examine the places where Aristotle discusses happiness.
He uses it as a prime example of an activity. In fact, happiness is inextricably tied to what an activity is and how we come to investigate it: asking what human happiness is leads to the question of nature, which leads us to ask whether there are natures we can study, which leads us back to the question of best fulfilling our nature or good as human beings.
Chapter One

Aristotle’s Quarrel with Simonides: An Introduction to the Pedagogical Intent of the *Metaphysics*

Although Aristotle’s most obvious concern in the *Metaphysics* is to pursue what he variously calls wisdom, the knowledge of causes, the knowledge of being as substance, and theological philosophy,\(^{44}\) I will argue over the course of this dissertation that he is also concerned with the possibility of this very enterprise—with the possibility of philosophy understood as the movement from things known to us to things known in themselves (cf. 1029b4-13), which presupposes the existence of things to know—of natures. If there are no natures, then there is no human nature, and no human good or happiness understood in terms of such a nature.

In this chapter I will begin the work of showing why this is Aristotle’s concern by looking at his introduction of this problem and the questions that follow from it. Aristotle calls the sort of contemplative study in which he is engaged “theological” insofar as it studies what is “responsible for what appears to us of the divine” (1026a16 ad loc.). Aristotle gives an explicit account of the divine or the god in the twelfth book, but he begins his implicit account much earlier, beginning with the first line of the book. This account is a direct challenge to the apparent theology of the poets, and so Aristotle must repudiate this account in introducing his own. The first part of the chapter, then, looks at the first part of the first book, asking what the differences and similarities are between poetry and philosophy, according to Aristotle, especially with respect to the gods.

\(^{44}\) Cf. for example, 982a5, 982b10, 1003a24, 1028b5, and 1026a17.
An investigation of the sort Aristotle is pursuing must be fundamentally theological. Aristotle wishes to give an account of the nature of nature insofar as he wishes to account for that which is responsible for beings having natures as substances—as independent, self-sustaining things we can point at and call “human beings” or “trees.” In order for this to be possible, however, we must know that there are no gods who deceive our senses—that we can in fact move from what is more knowable to us toward what is knowable in itself. As Aristotle will put it in the section I will examine below, gods cannot be jealous or begrudge human beings. We must be able to give an account of the gods—a theology—in order to know that we can know the causes of beings. Furthermore, this account of the gods, which includes an account of why they cannot be jealous, implies an account of jealousy, a most human trait, and thus implies an account of the distinction between gods and human beings. We can only know that knowledge of causes is possible, in other words, if we can give an account of human beings and the gods.

In the second section I examine the poem Aristotle quotes as representing the poetic account, that humans are too slavish to pursue the knowledge of causes. I note that there is no mention in the poem itself of knowledge or jealous gods. I argue that Aristotle wishes to suggest that both convention and the poets as defenders of convention are stumbling blocks to philosophy. But more important than this, Simonides comes to light as holding that chance entirely dominates human affairs. If this were true, all human effort to live well would be in vain.

The third section is devoted to responding to this challenge, drawing from the *NE*. I conclude that Aristotle deliberately conflates the wise human being with the philosopher who
seeks wisdom in order to illustrate our dual nature as imperfect beings who seek perfection, and whose perfection is to be in between gods and beasts.

As a result, in the fourth section I look more closely at what Aristotle means by the god and the divine in his immediate response to Simonides. Based on this discussion and several others, it seems as though we call a cause a god, and we call it honorable so that it will be honored. This suggests that Aristotle’s calling the search for the knowledge of causes divine and most honorable is a poetic attempt to persuade his audience to follow him.

I

Shortly I will examine a poem Aristotle quotes in A.2. One reason for this move—which at first sight might seem strange—has to do with the subject matter of the book as it first appears. The Metaphysics presents itself as an account of first philosophy or an account of the first causes—prior to natural or mathematical causes—of beings as substances—as things we can point to and say “that is X.” It is “after” or prior to physics (and mathematics) because, “if there is anything that is everlasting and unmoving and separate, it is manifest that the knowledge of it belongs to a contemplative study, not, however, to natural science…nor to mathematical science, but to one prior to both” (1026a10-14, emphasis added). That is, presuming there are causes beyond those that can be attributed to matter-with-form or mathematics, the study of those causes would be prior to these other two contemplative disciplines. In the section from which I have just quoted, Aristotle goes on to say that this study (if it is possible) would be most honorable because it studies what is “responsible for what appears to us of the divine”—it is
theological philosophy (1026a16 ad loc.). Insofar as the *Metaphysics* seeks to investigate the causes of the divine, it infringes upon the realm of poetry: the poets—Homer and Hesiod in particular—are the authorities on the divine.\(^4\)\(^5\) Additionally, and perhaps more clearly, poets are diviners or mirrors of human nature: they reflect back to us our anger, fear, and love.\(^4\)\(^6\) Effective poets, then, must know both the human soul and the context in which a group of souls is shaped—the political community; they may even be the original makers of this context insofar as they tell stories about the founding of a city and the creation of the world. Poets thus set the horizons for what we ought to do and what we can know, but Aristotle, by examining nature, seeks to free himself and us from the horizons set by the poets.

In order to appreciate the more proximate reason why Aristotle brings in Simonides as a representative of the poets, it will be helpful to give a brief account of the surrounding passages and to highlight how they compare the poet and the philosopher or the wise human being. Aristotle begins the *Metaphysics* by declaring, “All human beings desire to know by nature” (980a21). This is a strange claim: surely people do not desire to know the same sorts of things—idle curiosity is not the same as desiring to know the causes or first principles of beings. We

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\(^4\) Herodotus offers an insightful and suggestive account of the origin of the Greek pantheon, whether or not he is correct. He says the original inhabitants of Greece, the Pelasgians, called the gods “*theoi*” (“gods”) because these *theoi* “had disposed” (*ti-themi*) everything in order and arranged all. A god, therefore, according to Herodotus’s etymology, would be a cause—that which orders and arranges things—and a cause would be, literally and etymologically, a god. After some time the oracle at Dodona said they should adopt the Egyptian descriptions of the individual gods; for example, whereas they had originally worshipped the sun, they would now worship Apollo. “But whence each of these gods came into existence, or whether they were for ever, and what kind of shape they had were not known until the day before yesterday, if I may use the expression; for I believe that Homer and Hesiod were four hundred years before my time—and no more than that. It is they who created for the Greeks their theogony…” Herodotus, *The History*, trans. David Grene (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), 2.52-53.

\(^5\) Cf. Plato, *Republic* 596d.
should note, however, with Denise Schaeffer, that knowing is different from learning; all human beings desire to be in a state of knowing, even if they are not willing to put in the work it takes to learn.\(^{47}\) Aristotle suggests that a sign of this desire is our love of the senses, which we love for their own sake, particularly sight because this sense “most of all makes things known to us and makes visible many differences” (980a22-27). He goes on to describe how the arts develop from sense perception—in other words, how the desire to know is transformed from being for its own sake into an instrument for something else.

The development of the arts out of a natural desire to know already potentially conflicts with at least one authoritative poetic account of the arts: According to Hesiod in his *Theogony*, Prometheus (whose name means “forethought”) stole fire, the origin of art, from Olympos and was punished by having an eagle eat out his liver each day for eternity; Herakles eventually released him, but only because it suited Zeus’s larger plan. Human beings had already possessed fire, Hesiod implies, but Zeus took it away when Prometheus attempted to trick Zeus into taking as sacrifice the lesser parts of animals, leaving the meat for human beings.\(^{48}\) Hesiod seems to say that we possess the arts only at the gods’ pleasure—we are not owed them. Our cunning or forethought conflicts with our obedience to the gods. According to Aristotle’s implicit account, human beings possess forethought as a natural result of our desire to know. If it is in our nature to desire to know, and it is on this basis that we develop the arts, this means that our ingenuity is not in itself contrary to our good, but in line with it. If there are gods who begrudge us our

\(^{47}\) Denise Schaeffer, “Wisdom and Wonder in ‘Metaphysics’ A:1-2,” *The Review of Metaphysics* 52, no. 3 (1999): 642. We should differentiate this desire, then, from the desire to *learn*, which perhaps belongs to fewer human beings.

nature as seekers of knowledge, however, then the fulfillment of our nature would not be good for us.\textsuperscript{49}

Aristotle next describes the rise of philosophy from the arts. Although the arts do ask why something is the way it is, they do not do so as a result of wonder; in order to make a chair a carpenter needs only know certain causes for the sake of building the chair—for example, why certain kinds of joints are better suited than others. Poetry may imply such a question as a result of wonder; in declaring that “First Chaos came to be, but next wide-bosomed Earth,”\textsuperscript{50} Hesiod implies that Chaos came into being \textit{ex nihilo}, and that a certain order—the Earth—came from prior disorder; but the assertion nevertheless may prompt us to ask whether or not creation \textit{ex nihilo} is possible, or the genesis of order out of disorder, or, as it will prompt Aristotle to ask, whether potency is prior to activity (cf. 1071b26 and 1072a19). Even so, these questions are incidental to the poet’s cosmological assertions, whereas they are central to philosophy. Asking why requires leisure because it is not directly connected with utility—it is not instrumental. To ask why is to wonder about causes, and this, Aristotle says, is to seek wisdom—and, he adds, for its own sake, not for any use it might bring (982b12-28).

Although Aristotle depicts a natural development of philosophy as the leisured pursuit of wisdom from the natural human desire to know and the freedom from the need to work provided by the arts and the city, this development need not be seen as inevitable. Poetry seems to be a

\textsuperscript{49} Aristotle will suggest in L.8 that those who introduced the gods in human form did so for political purposes, and did not believe they were conveying literal accounts of the gods. If so, why, then, would Hesiod want his audience to believe gods would punish human beings were we to attempt to rely on our own ingenuity? Perhaps Hesiod is hinting at the limits of human knowledge and, hence, an awareness of our permanent ignorance. We cannot know all circumstances, and so if we try to use the arts to conquer chance, we will inevitably fail.

\textsuperscript{50} Hesiod, \textit{Theogony}, 116.
more common use of leisure than philosophy. We may note, remembering that Hesiod is a cosmologist, that poets also ask “why”—that their activity is also a result of wonder. Aristotle acknowledges this in his preliminary remarks on the development of philosophy. Both the lover of wisdom and the lover of myth came into being as a result of wonder and the confrontation with impasses (*aporiai*): “…one who is at an impasse and wonders supposes himself to be ignorant (which is why the lover of myth is in some way a philosopher: for a myth is composed of wonders)” (982b18-21). The same wonder and *aporiai* prompt the likely stories that Homer and Hesiod tell about the origins of the cosmos and the investigation Aristotle is conducting here. We might say that the obvious difference is one of construction: the poets construct the world whereas Aristotle tries to discover it. But nothing prevents a poet from considering his likely stories just that, and continuing to investigate causes separately from his poetry. It may be, then, that poetry and philosophy are not as different or at odds with each other as they appear at first—or, at least, they need not be.

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51 Thomas Pangle wonders, throughout his commentary on Aristotle’s *Politics*, to what extent Aristotle is or is not at odds with the poets. He first suggests that Aristotle’s picture of the city, “and civic life, can be understood as animated by a vector of liberation, from the sort of god-forming that is rooted in the independent and pre-civic patriarchal family…this whole account…represents a demotion of the family and of the familial, paternal divinity that is the expression of the pre-civic patriarchal outlook…Aristotle’s beautifying account is a new, rationalist poetry, meant to partially eclipse—at least for a few gentlemanly readers—the traditionally pious poetry…” (Pangle, 2013, 34). For Pangle, however, Homer is also a “wise man” (36) much like Aristotle. Aristotle ultimately may concede defeat to his poetic rivals, according to Pangle (267). Agreeing on the whole with Pangle, I will argue that Aristotle engages in a kind of poetry in the *Metaphysics*, but as a necessary complement to philosophy, not as a wholesale replacement for poetry. Furthermore, as his frequent citation of poets alongside philosophers suggests, Aristotle does not apparently differentiate the best poets from philosophers, but reads them as offering an account of nature.
We should note, further, that Aristotle connects his discussion of the arts (instrumental knowledge) and wisdom (knowledge for its own sake) by talking about the wise human being, and what accepted opinion says about him. This wise human being knows all things insofar as this is possible, he knows the most difficult things, is more precise and able to teach, knows the kind of knowledge that is for its own sake, and the sort of knowledge that is more ruling, since the wise man ought to rule and not be ruled. This knowledge is free since it alone is for its own sake; and the wise human being alone is free because he alone has the ability to rule; and this ruling ability is tied to his comprehensive knowledge. But surely the poets rule to an even greater degree if they provide the horizons for praise and blame, and if they can convince people of the truth of their sayings by their knowledge of the human soul and their poetic abilities. Looking at this list of attributes, the only one that the poet and the wise man do not seem to share—or not in the same way—is the ability to teach—and this is only partly true. A poet can teach potential poets, and through his poetry he can teach many more who have no intention of being poets. But these two teachings are entirely separate from each other; the poet himself is absent from his poetry. The wise human being, on the other hand, is always present in his writing or teaching: his way of life is his subject matter.  

But Aristotle says here “wise human being,” not “philosopher.” The wise human being knows causes and can teach them, and thus his activity is teaching his listeners to be wise human beings—versions of himself. The philosopher, on the other hand, seeks the knowledge that the wise man, if he exists, possesses. Like the wise human being, he seeks it for its own sake—

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because he loves it; and like the wise human being, his way of life is his subject matter. Might the poet be to the wise human being as the lover of myth is to the philosopher? The latter two wonder about things and reach impasses, Aristotle says, as a result of which they perceive their ignorance, “so if indeed through fleeing ignorance they philosophized, it is manifest that through knowing they hunted knowledge…” (982b20-21)—both the philosopher and the myth-lover are aware of their ignorance, and through this knowledge they seek to know. The myth-lover, however, is prompted by his ignorance to pursue the wonders provided by poets, whereas the philosopher flees his ignorance through an attempt to learn—to become a wise human being. The poet and the wise human being, however, at least seem to know; here we might think of the poet and the sophist. Each might declare that the world began from chaos, for example, even if he is privately unsure that this is the case. It is possible, then, for a poet (or indeed a sophist) to be a philosopher in private, insofar as he knows the character of his ignorance and seeks to learn; but a poet cannot be a philosopher when he is being a poet, in public. Poetry is necessarily assertive, whereas philosophy is necessarily inquisitive.

This picture of the wise human being, presented in the midst of an account of the development of philosophy out of the arts, suggests a tension between two potentially divergent approaches.

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53 Aristotle also discusses myth-lovers in relation to license: “As for people who are lovers of myth and disposed to storytelling and who while away the days on whatever chance matters they happen on, we say that they are idle chatterers but not licentious” (NE 1117b34-36). The relation Aristotle suggests between the myth-lover and the philosopher is similar to the comparison Socrates and Glaucon make between the philosopher and the “lover of sights” (Republic 475d-e): Glaucon: ‘…all the lovers of sights are in my opinion what they are because they enjoy learning; and the lovers of hearing…will we say that all these men and other learners of such things and the petty arts are philosophers?’ Socrates: ‘Not at all,’ said I, ‘but they are like philosophers.’ Glaucon: ‘Who do you say are the true ones?’ Socrates: ‘The lovers of the sight of the truth.’
motivations for pursuing knowledge of causes. On the one hand, this knowledge seems to grant the wise human being freedom and power; on the other hand, the wise human being’s knowledge is the sort that is for its own sake. This picture of wisdom—that it is the source of freedom and power—is precisely the way Gorgias depicts rhetoric in Plato’s dialogue named for him; the implication is that freedom and power or domination are the greatest goods for human beings.\(^5^4\) This provides further evidence for Socrates’s argument in the Republic that the city is the greatest sophist and corruptor of potential philosophers (492a-d). As Gerald Mara points out, however, if the sophists, including Gorgias, merely teach what the city teaches, why do the many think the sophists corrupt the Athenian youth? The root of the city’s quarrel with the sophists, according to Mara, is that they expose tensions within what the city holds to be good and beautiful.\(^5^5\) Mara continues, “insofar as the city teaches the young to be both just and influential, both patriotic and self-advancing, it is at odds or in contradiction with itself.” The sophists reveal this contradiction by supporting only one half of it as choiceworthy, that the youth should advance themselves, while portraying those who would hold to the city’s definition of justice as

\(^5^4\) Cf. Plato, *Gorgias* 452d-e. Gorgias actually says that rhetoric is the greatest good for human beings because it provides them with freedom and rule over others. But this would mean that rhetoric is a means to these further ends, which would render them the greatest goods.

\(^5^5\) The word *to kalon* can be translated variously as “the beautiful,” “the noble,” or “the fair” depending on the context. I note this here because in what follows I will have recourse to Aristotle’s *NE* where the same word is more generally translated “noble.” We should remember, however, that it is one word, and as such bears all these meanings simultaneously to some degree. When something is beautiful, it appears to be something to which we should aspire, and thus could be called noble. Hegel gives us an example of the reverse relationship in his depiction of the beautiful soul. This soul is beautiful precisely because it is noble, insofar as it acts only according to conscience *qua* noble or beautiful. I will restrict myself to the word “beautiful” to avoid misunderstanding, but I always have the Greek word, and alternate meanings, in mind.
dupes. In presenting as contradictory the popular account of the wise human being, Aristotle indicates that his audience may harbor contradictory motivations for pursuing wisdom. They hold simultaneously that the wisdom they desire will grant them freedom and power, and that it is the noblest and most honorable pursuit—that it is worthwhile for its own sake.

Aristotle seems, however, to use the phrase “for its own sake” to mean two different things. When describing our love of the senses, he says they are loved for their own sake, apart from their use. “For its own sake” could, then, mean something we do because it is has its end in itself, and is thus complete—smelling a flower, for example, or seeing—rather than being for the sake of something else. But, as Nietzsche reminds us, “for its own sake” more often implies an action that is morally virtuous: “Knowledge for its own sake”—that is the last snare of morality: with that one becomes completely entangled in it once more. If we pursue knowledge because we think it is the right thing to do—because it is beautiful—we pursue it for its own sake. But if we pursue it as a complete activity that gives us pleasure in itself, regardless of how morally exalted the activity may be, we are also pursuing it for its own sake, although in a different way. I will return to this distinction in the conclusion, where I will discuss further Nietzsche’s criticism. It suffices to note for now that this dual meaning of “for its own sake” suggests that those who pursue knowledge of causes may fall prey to the same confusion that exists at the

57 On this point cf. Plato, *Republic*, 357b-d. Socrates and Glaucon see three alternatives: something may be good in itself; it may be good both in itself and for its effects; or it may be good only for its effects. This discussion in the *Republic* will prove helpful when I revisit the meaning of “for its own sake” in the conclusion.  
heart of moral virtue: that the pursuit of knowledge is neither simply for the sake of freedom and power nor for the sake of the beautiful over and above a prudent concern for one’s own good.

Even if this contradiction can be overcome—even if, that is, the philosophic life is possible and a coherent attempt to live a good life according to our nature as seekers of knowledge—Aristotle implies that this way of life that, as a result of wonder, seeks the purpose or good of each thing and its cause, allows us to fulfill our nature on our own by following our nature, obviating the need for divine guidance as the poets describe it.

II

It is in the context of his depiction of the popular account of a free and powerful wise human being that Aristotle says:

Wherefore, one might justly \(\textit{dikaios}\) believe the possession of it [knowledge of causes] as not suited to human beings: for in many ways the nature of human beings is slavish, so that, according to Simonides, ‘only a god \(\textit{theos}\) should have this honor,’ but a man \(\textit{aner}\) is not worthy of seeking anything but the kind of knowledge that accords with him. If indeed the poets are saying anything, and by nature the divine \(\textit{theion}\) is jealous, it would be likely to happen most of all in this case, and all extraordinary people would be unlucky \(982b29-983a2\).

Aristotle thus sets this picture of common opinion’s wise human being against the poetic injunction not to challenge the gods’ power, voiced here by Simonides. Again, however, knowledge seems confusingly to be both for its own sake and for the power it gives us; it is the power it gives us that renders it unjust, assuming as well that there are jealous gods. The most obvious set of questions the quotation implies has to do with the gods’ relation to philosophy.
Are there human-like gods who are capable of jealousy? What are the limits to the gods’ power? Regardless of the answers to these questions, does philosophy give us a sort of knowledge-as-power that would challenge the gods’ authority, or does it have nothing to do with power? If the gods are more powerful than we are and capable of jealousy, and if philosophy gives us a kind of power that provokes their jealousy, then philosophy would seem to be possible, but not the best life; a life devoted to pleasing such gods and gaining their mercy would be. Furthermore, if such gods are capable of miracles—i.e., if they are capable of altering nature or its preconditions—then philosophy as the study of nature would be futile; although in this case it is unclear why this would provoke the gods’ jealousy, even if it would provoke their anger insofar as it is an attempt (however impossible) to supplant them.

In order to address these questions, it will help to look at the quoted line in the context of the poem as a whole. In reading Aristotle, it is often only when looking at the original context in which a quoted poetic passage occurs that we can see clearly what Aristotle has in mind when quoting it. For example, in the *Politics*, Aristotle says that women differ from slaves by nature because nature does not economize, but produces one thing for one purpose. Barbarians violate nature by treating women in this way, and for this reason the poets say, “it is fitting for Greeks to rule barbarians” (*Politics*, 1252b1-9). The quotation Aristotle uses to support this point, however, from Euripides’ *Iphigenia in Aulis*, takes place in the context of Agamemnon’s decision to sacrifice his daughter Iphigenia to Artemis so that he can sail for Troy. One of Aristotle’s later definitions of a natural slave is a possession that is an instrument of action. Human sacrifice is a prime example of a human being using another human being as an instrument of action, precisely because she is human; it is a role that can only be filled by a
human being insofar as they are human and capable of action. In other words, Aristotle has chosen a passage from the climax of a play depicting a Greek king using his own daughter essentially as a slave to illustrate why the Greeks use women differently from slaves, and so are naturally superior to barbarians who do not. We should wonder, then, whether Aristotle thinks the poets (and Euripides in particular) actually believed the Greeks to be superior, let alone whether Aristotle himself thinks this. Following this quotation, Aristotle continues in this vein, saying that the household arose from the community of men and women and masters and slaves, and so “Hesiod’s verse is rightly spoken: ‘first a house, and a woman, and ox for ploughing’…” (Politics, 1252b10-12). The quotation from Hesiod’s Works and Days continues, “…a slave woman and not a wife, to follow the oxen as well…” In this way Aristotle subtly strengthens the point he just made in quoting from Euripides: the distinction between Greeks and barbarians is not as clear as one might imagine, at least not on the basis of the treatment of women. There are many other examples of Aristotle using poetry to complicate a point he has just made. For this reason, and in order to shed light on the questions raised, it will be useful to look at the quoted line in the context of Simonides’ poem as a whole:

59 Furthermore, in 2.11 of the Politics Aristotle compares Carthage, a barbarian city, favorably to Sparta and Crete as an example of what is held to be a good regime. Whether or not Aristotle deems Carthage to be a good regime, the fact of the comparison suggests he does not think there is a difference in kind between Greeks and barbarians.
60 Hesiod, Works and Days, 405-6.
It is truly difficult for a man to become good,
In hands, and feet, and intellect
  made square, forged without flaw;
Only a god should (echoi) have this honor;
  but it is not possible for a man not to be evil,
Knocked down by chance and at a loss;
For any man is good when he has fared well,
And evil if poorly,
And the gods love most the best ones. 62

But the saying of Pittacus does not seem to me
To be considered harmoniously, though said by a wise human being:
  it is difficult, he asserts, to be noble.
For me it suffices if one is not reckless
  and sees the justice in being useful to the city,
A sound man; and I will not
Blame him; for of idle human beings
There is an endless descent.
Truly, all things are noble, if such things
Are not mixed up with the shameful.

Therefore I am not going to throw away my life
Searching for an impractical hope
  Which cannot come into being,
A blameless human being, we who from the broad earth
  Seize a harvest;
But if I do find one I will report to you.
But I commend and love all,
Who willingly do
Nothing shameful; and the gods
Cannot make war against necessity. 63

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62 Cf. NE 1179a22-25: “But the person who is active in accord with the intellect, who cares for this and is in the best condition regarding it, also seems to be dearest to the gods. For if there is a certain care for human things on the part of gods, as in fact there is held to be, it would also be reasonable for gods to delight in what is best and most akin to them—and this would be the intellect—and to benefit in return those who cherish this above all and honor it…” (emphasis added). Aristotle’s highly conditional claim seems to be similar to Simonides’, but even if we take it at face value, Aristotle’s claim is that we are responsible in large measure for our being favored by the gods, as opposed to being subject to chance. I will discuss this passage in more detail below.
Simonides says that it is difficult for a man (aner) to become good, by which he says he means “square” and flawless, with respect to body and intellect, and (as Aristotle quotes) only a god should (or could) have this honor—the Greek echoi is ambiguous and could sustain either of these meanings. Indeed, Simonides goes on to say, it is impossible for a man (aner) to avoid evil owing to chance, and the gods love the best ones—implying that the gods love men whom chance favors. But nevertheless Pittacus is not right in saying that it is difficult to be noble (esthos), because it suffices to avoid being reckless and to be useful to the city. For this reason Simonides will not throw away his life in a fruitless quest for a non-existent blameless human being, and he will condone all who do not willingly commit evil deeds; for even the gods cannot go against necessity.

The first and most obvious difference between what Aristotle seems to mean in quoting Simonides and what Simonides actually says in the poem regards what it means to be a good man or a good human being. Aristotle’s reason for quoting the poem in the first place was to cite one of those poets who tell us to beware challenging the gods’ power through a search for wisdom, because the gods begrudge human attempts on their power. Simonides, however, says nothing at all about knowledge or wisdom, but instead defines a perfect man as a god: a god with hands and feet and intellect, but perfect, unlike a man’s imperfect ones. In quoting a line that refers to human perfection in the original context, Aristotle implies that the possession of the wisdom he is seeking would constitute human perfection. What a man should do, Simonides

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63 The translation and any errors are my own. The text is largely extant; I consulted the Loeb, Greek Lyric III, 434-7, as well as a reconstruction of the Greek published as, “Nobody's Perfect: A New Text and Interpretation of Simonides PMG 542,” Classical Philology, Vol. 103, No. 3. (2008), pp. 237-256.
says in short, is leave perfection to the gods, try to stay out of trouble, and do one’s duty to the city. Simonides does not say it would be *unjust* for human beings to pursue perfection, whether or not this perfection consists in wisdom. Nor does he say the gods would begrudge such a pursuit. His criticism is that it is impossible for human beings to avoid the vicissitudes of fortune, which cause us to lack perfection, and so we should not pursue it—we should not worry too much about the best human life.

But if, as Simonides implies, the gods are simply perfect human beings, including not only the intellect but the body as well, then they will have bodily concerns that might well make them jealous of human attempts at perfection. The gods who attempt to control human beings would likely not favor those few extraordinary humans who are favored by luck, insofar as the latter are able to seek knowledge of causes and become free and powerful through such knowledge.

Seemingly for this reason Aristotle goes on to assert, “but it is not even possible for the god to be jealous, but according to the common saying ‘singers tell many lies’” (98a2-4). \(^{64}\) Aristotle simply asserts this impossibility here, and if we recall the reason why he raised Simonides’ objection it is not difficult to see why it is necessary for him to do so. If there were jealous gods, a certain sort of piety as fear or awe would be the way to live the best life, because such a life would depend on being in the gods’ good graces. \(^{65}\) This piety would put us in a

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\(^{64}\) Or, because *pseudontai* could be in either the middle or passive voice: “singers are deceived in many things.” If taken to be in the middle voice there is the possible implication that we are involved in the singers’ lies or their being deceived.

\(^{65}\) Aristotle suggests somewhat more explicitly in the *Politics* that this sort of piety is slavish when he says that, “all assert that the gods are under a king—because they themselves are under kings now, or were in ancient times. For human beings assimilate not only the looks of the gods
position similar to that of Cephalos at the beginning of the *Republic*, who is not particularly interested in asking what justice is—and what the best life is, which Socrates points out is the underlying question of that conversation—because he is convinced that the way to live well (or to avoid a miserable afterlife) is to pray and make sacrifices to the gods. He knows what justice is: he is an old man who espouses the oldest manifestation of justice—repaying one’s debts, the greatest debts being to the gods. Cephalos must leave the conversation in the *Republic* because in asking what justice and the best life are, Socrates must question the notion that the ancestral is good and is owed a debt, and Aristotle must do the same in seeking the ultimate causes of beings.66

This link between the openings of the *Republic* and the *Metaphysics* also suggests why Aristotle implicates the poets in leading people away from philosophy. The poets imply that the human attempt to know causes is impious and hubristic, and that the seeker will incur the wrath to themselves, but their ways of life as well” (1252b25-28). Lest we think Aristotle is distinguishing here between “kingship” and “mastery”, we should note once again the context of the quotation from Homer that he uses to justify this claim: “each acts as law to his children and wives” (cf. *Odyssey* 9.112-15). Homer is describing the Cyclopes, who eat human beings and rule their wives and children as slaves.

66 The contrast Aristotle draws here is between a life made free by inquiry and a life bound by fear of and obedience to the gods. This responds uncannily to the opposite argument implied in the beginning of the Book of Genesis (2:9), which is an even stronger version of the claim Aristotle attributes to the poets: the human attempt to gain knowledge of the best life—to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil—is hubristic; it is better to have faith that God will provide, rather than seeking to provide for oneself. Furthermore, according to Exodus, God is jealous of human attention to alternative objects of worship, and punishes those who break his commandments for generations to come (20:5). What is missing from Aristotle’s account, however, is the possibility that the gods both begrudge human autonomy and love human beings. This possibility is not restricted to the Bible. In the *Iliad*, after Agamemnon says he will take Achilles’s concubine, Briseis, Achilles becomes so angry that he decides to kill Agamemnon. Just then, “Athene descended from the sky. For Hera the goddess of the white arms sent her, who loved both men equally in her heart and cared for them” (Homer, *Iliad*, trans. Richmond Lattimore [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961], 1.184-196).
of god or fate. Philosophy seems to be at odds with poetry and with the city because, whereas
poetry upholds and defends the city’s ancestral notions of what is just, philosophy seeks to live
according to nature. This results in two broad possibilities. First, the philosophers who seek to
live according to nature could reject all justice as conventional, and so either merely instrumental
for the life according to nature or contradictory to such a life. Or second, it can lead the
philosopher to seek what is just according to nature. In either case, however, the philosopher
must at least question whether or not what the city says is just is in fact just according to the
external standard of nature. It is not impossible, however, for a philosopher to decide that
seeking knowledge of causes is so disruptive to the life of the city that he must convey the
opposite message: that human attempts at knowledge of causes will lead to ruin. In this way, it is
still possible for the poets, insofar as they imply this account of knowledge (as Hesiod seems to
imply in his Prometheus myth), to be philosophers, insofar as they privately pursue wisdom.

Aristotle defends philosophy, then, against the potential challenge from the city and the
poets that it unjustly searches for causes. But why does Aristotle put this defense in juridical
terms? If philosophy ultimately appeals to nature as a standard, it may be helpful to turn to what
Aristotle says about what is just by nature. The only time Aristotle discusses this subject at any
length is in NE 5.7. He says there that natural justice is part of political justice (1134b18). If we

67 Cf. Aristotle NE 1094b15-17, 1134b25-30; Leo Strauss, The City and Man (Chicago:
University of Chicago Press, 1953), 81-93. Strauss argues that the idea of nature came about
through a comparison of customs or “ways.” There was originally no difference between a way
and what we might call a nature: it is the way of Israelites to worship the God of Israel, just as it
is the way of trees to grow tall and the way of dogs to bark. Once it was noticed that different
groups of humans had different “ways” while nevertheless remaining human, a distinction was
made between human ways or customs and the ways or natures of natural beings, thus resulting
in the contrast between nature and convention.
look earlier in the book to see what Aristotle means by political justice we see that, “what is being sought is also the just unqualifiedly, that is, the just in the political sense. And this exists among those who share a life in common with a view to being self-sufficient, who are free and equal, either in accord with a proportion or arithmetically” (1134a25-27). Natural justice, then, would seem to be in relation to other human beings. It cannot be a relationship with a god because, as Aristotle says later on, it would be laughable to think of the gods as engaging in just acts (1178b11). There is no reason to think, however, that the natural justice that is a part of political justice is the only kind of natural justice. Aristotle suggests in the Politics that there may be one who is “incapable of sharing or who is in need of nothing through being self-sufficient [and] is no part of a city, and so is either a beast or a god” (1253a28-29). This seems to be the same “one” who is “so outstanding by his excess of virtue…that the virtue of all the others and their political capacity is not commensurable with…his alone…[and] such persons can no longer be regarded as a part of the city. For they will be done injustice if it is claimed they merit equal things in spite of being so unequal in virtue and political capacity…they themselves are law” (1284a5-13, emphasis added). The standard by which we say that they would be treated unjustly if they were bound by the city’s law cannot be political justice, which only applies to those who are free and equal, if proportionately, and which obtains in cities; it must be a kind of natural justice that exists outside the city.

These godlike beings who are a law unto themselves and, because of their perfection, should be “permanent kings in their cities” which “seems the natural course,” may be of the same kind as the wise human being discussed above. We should remember, however, that there is a distinction between such a being and imperfect mortals who merely seek the perfection
through wisdom that this being possesses. We might have thought, then, that Aristotle introduces the idea of the natural justice of seeking wisdom because it is just according to a higher standard; but because we remain imperfect even in our search for wisdom, we also remain political animals, and so are bound to political justice even as we acknowledge the possibility of natural justice that transcends the city.

Consequently, Aristotle puts the search for wisdom in juridical and, thus, political terms for four reasons. First, he wishes to remind us that in conducting this search we are necessarily calling into doubt the city’s and the poets’ authority as the final arbiters of truth and the human good. We do this by appealing to nature for a more comprehensive understanding of justice. Second, he indicates that the city attempts to do through political justice what he is attempting here, namely, to perfect human life to the degree that such a thing is possible. Third, however, he suggests that the city’s conventionality, as well as the poets’ defense of this conventionality, hampers human attempts at perfection and that philosophy provides an alternative—if such an enterprise is possible. But fourth, through reminding us that we, who are not perfect, are attempting to become perfect by means of an activity that renders questionable the bases of politics, Aristotle points out that we still must respect this necessary precondition for the philosophic way of life—especially if we remain unsure whether or not philosophy is possible.

The final aspect of Simonides’s poem to note has to do with this last observation, that Simonides calls into question the possibility and choiceworthiness of philosophy. Aristotle claims that someone might be concerned that in pursuing wisdom we would anger the gods, which, according to Simonides, are jealous. If we look again at Simonides’ poem, we see that jealousy is nowhere to be found; Aristotle introduces the idea. For Simonides, only a god should
or could have the honor of being perfect, and so human beings should not seek perfection. This is not because Simonides thinks we should fear divine retribution, however. Why does Aristotle choose such a seemingly unsuitable poem to illustrate this alternative understanding of the relation between the human good and the gods? We should note, however, that Simonides is not simply pious or an advocate of convention, and is questioning the reasonableness of conventional piety in his own way: if “the gods love the best ones,” and the best are good by chance, but “the gods cannot make war against necessity,” and we are of necessity beholden to chance, then what sense does it make to pray to the gods if their love of the best ones does not translate into divine beneficence? Aristotle’s concern, then, is not merely to juxtapose a life devoted to piety against a life devoted to philosophy. He wishes us to see in this poem that we have been assuming we know what the best life is—that it is the philosophic life—and that this life is possible. Simonides raises the third possibility that fortune reigns in human affairs, and that human effort and divine intervention cannot help us—the philosophic pursuit of the best life would be Sisyphean. Both the pious life and Simonides’s implied life of resignation to unknowable fate,

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68 Simonides’s apparent argument is, thus, similar to Meno’s “lazy argument” in Plato’s dialogue named for him, or at least the result of it. Meno repeats a sophistical paradox that says that it is impossible to seek knowledge of anything because if you know it, you have it, and so you do not need to seek it, but if you do not know it, you will not know what it is you do not know, and so will not be able to seek it. Socrates’ response is that learning is recollection: we have partial knowledge of the whole and its parts, and so we are able to seek complete knowledge. He presents a myth in order to explain how we come to know everything and so are capable of learning, following which he says, “As for the other points, at least, I wouldn’t insist very much on behalf of the argument; but that by supposing one ought to inquire into things he doesn’t know, we would be better and more manly and less lazy than if we should suppose either that it’s impossible to discover those things that we don’t know or that we ought not inquire into them—about this I certainly would do battle, if I could, both in speech and in deed” (Plato, Meno, trans. Robert C. Bartlett [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004], 80a-86c). Simonides seems
however, deny that we can through our own effort investigate what the best life is and live it. The philosophic life is only possible and best if we know there are not gods of the sort that the poets describe—gods that can deceive the senses and affect human lives for good or for ill. But it is also only possible and best if we are not entirely subject to fortune—if human effort is a factor in shaping our lives. If we do not know that philosophy itself is possible or the best way of life, and if it is a Syssiphean quest, then we should wonder at its claim to be a better way of life than that of the conventionally just human being who is “useful to the city,” or the poet, who now comes to light as potentially a more cautious version of the philosopher. We should also wonder, however, at the zeal with which some approach philosophy: are they filled with eros for wisdom, prompted by knowledge of their own ignorance? Or do they secretly hope that philosophy will grant them the freedom and power the city says they should desire? Or, alternatively, they may simply be enamored of philosophy’s loftiness, and love it because it is lofty.

III

Although we may see that the quotation from Simonides suggests the need to ask why we should pursue wisdom and whether it is a worthwhile way of life, we should also wonder what sort of knowledge Aristotle is seeking, and what his response to Simonides might be. We can gain some ground if we turn to a part of the last book of the *NE* that resembles this opening

here to be arguing for this lazy *logos* according to which we should not seek to be better than we are.
section of the *Metaphysics* closely in several respects, especially insofar as Aristotle exhorts his audience in both places not to rest satisfied with merely human concerns. He begins in *NE* 10.7:

*If* happiness is an activity in accord with virtue, it is reasonable it would accord with the most excellent virtue, and this would be the virtue belonging to what is best. So whether this is the intellect or something else that *seems* naturally to rule, to command, and to possess intelligence concerning what is noble and divine, whether it itself is in fact divine or the most divine of the things in us—the activity of this, in accord with the virtue proper to it, would be complete happiness. And that this activity is contemplative has been said (1177a12-18, emphasis added).

We should note how contingent this conclusion is. The activity of the intellect (which is contemplation) or *something else* that seems to rule and is either divine or the most divine thing in us, would be perfect or complete happiness, *if* happiness is an activity in accord with virtue. Can divinity admit of degrees? It is possible that it can, especially if we consider the distinction between a god and a *daimon*—perhaps the best and most divine thing in us is intellect, and intellect is a kind of *daimon* that we must follow in order to live well. But that wisdom rules is one of the generally accepted opinions Aristotle uses as a starting point for saying just what sort of knowledge we are seeking in the *Metaphysics*, and it seems here too that Aristotle begins with an opinion or assumption that may require further examination.

Working from this opinion that intellect is the most divine thing in us and that its activity constitutes perfect happiness, Aristotle goes on to say that it would make sense that this is what we are seeking in our investigation as to what happiness is because it is most continuous and most pleasant—or at least, *philosophy* seems to involve pleasures that are “wondrous in purity and stability, and it is reasonable that those who are knowers conduct their lives with greater pleasure than those who are seeking knowledge” (1177a20-28). Is philosophy the same as
contemplation? In the very place where Aristotle uses the pleasures associated with philosophy as evidence that contemplation is pleasant, he indicates that these are not the same thing, as we can see from the quotation above: those who are knowers would seem to be in a state toward which the philosopher is moving. Contemplation is the standard translation of the Greek *theoria*, which more literally means “beholding;” the root is the same as that of “theater.” A philosopher who seeks wisdom cannot at the same time behold it, at least as a whole. Perhaps he can glimpse parts of it; for example, it is possible to behold a completed geometry proof. But even in this case, philosophy as investigation is not the same as contemplation. That the pleasures which attend philosophy are least mixed with pain accords with Aristotle’s remedy for one who desires such pleasures, proposed in the *Politics* (1267a10-13). But does not the pleasure that attends philosophy partly depend upon the searching after knowledge? If the search itself is pleasant, the beholding would be the death of such pleasure as attends philosophy.

That contemplation is happiness also seems to be true, Aristotle says, because happiness was said to be self-sufficient. In the *Metaphysics* the kind of knowledge we are seeking is free and self-sufficient because it is for its own sake. Here too in the *Ethics*, contemplation is “cherished for its own sake,” but it is also least accompanied by the need for “external equipment” (1178a24-25), including other people, to perform its activity; i.e., one can contemplate on one’s own, so long as one’s bare necessities are met, although “it is perhaps better to have those with whom he may work” (1177a28-1177b4). Once again, Aristotle skips over a problem that would be more evident if he had made a clearer distinction between the knower and the seeker: the former does not need friends, whereas the latter does; but the latter is imperfect, even though friendship is held to be one component of happiness, while the former is
perfect. In taking contemplation to be the perfect life for a human being, we abstract from aspects of what it means to be human—particularly our incomplete nature as individuals and our need for other people. We abstract, in other words, from that which allows for the possibility of both politics and philosophy: our divination of the good and our need to seek it precisely because we lack it in its entirety.\(^{69}\)

Aristotle further alludes to this difficulty of taking contemplation to be the perfection of a human being when he says that this activity would constitute complete happiness, “provided, that is, that it goes together with a complete span of life, for there is nothing incomplete in what belongs to happiness” (1177b24-27; cf. 1098a18). What constitutes a complete span of life? Is it the three score and ten that the psalm says human beings are allotted (Psalm 90:10), and that Socrates lived—before being executed? Do we not ultimately desire immortality, a desire that expresses itself in the stories we tell—true or not—about immortal gods and an immortal soul? Aristotle seems to respond to this very question when he immediately raises a version of the Simonidean or poetic objection from *Metaphysics*: “But a life of this sort would exceed what is human. For it is not insofar as he is a human being that a person will live in this way, but insofar as there is something divine present in him…But one ought not—as some recommend—to think only about human things because one is a human being, nor only about mortal things because one is mortal, but rather to make oneself immortal, insofar as that is possible” (1177b28-30). This is very similar to Aristotle’s response to Simonides in the *Metaphysics*: we should not give up and consider it futile to search for the best life, resigning ourselves to simple, mortal

\(^{69}\) Cf. Michael Davis’ notion of human beings as exhibiting “incomplete teleology” which he argues is the basis for both politics and philosophy. Davis, *The Politics of Philosophy*, 8.
pleasures. We may add here that we cannot help but consider our lifespan and our impending mortality, which leads us to seek immortality in whatever way we can. The motivation for the contemplator of the NE and some members of Aristotle’s audience in the Metaphysics coincides: both ultimately are concerned about their mortality; against such a concern, they attempt whatever promises them freedom and power, in this case the life of the wise human being who is dear to the gods:

…the person who is active in accord with the intellect, who cares for this and is in the best condition regarding it, also seems to be dearest to the gods. For if there is a certain care for human things on the part of the gods, as in fact there is held to be, it would also be reasonable for the gods to delight in what is best and most akin to them—this would be the intellect—and to benefit in return those who cherish this above all and honor it, on the grounds that these latter are caring for what is dear to gods as well as acting correctly and nobly. And that all these things are available to the wise person is not unclear. He is dearest to the gods, therefore, and it is likely that this same person is also happiest. As a result, in this way too, the wise person would be especially happy (1179a23-32, emphasis added).

This seems to be an argument as to why the contemplator in the NE is happiest, but Aristotle chooses to phrase it using highly conditional language. It is not clear that gods care for human beings—especially our mortal concerns about our impending death and whether or not we deserve to die; this is merely held to be true. If this were true, gods might benefit those who become like them, but we do not know that it is true. Aristotle does not say this benefit would be eternal life, but given the context in which Aristotle says the contemplator wishes to become immortal in whatever way he can, this is not an unlikely possibility.

Cf. Diotima’s speech in Plato’s Symposium. It is suggested there that all eros is longing to possess the good forever. Each way eros is manifested, then—procreation, eternal glory, or philosophy—is a longing to be immortal in whatever way one can. I will discuss this speech, how it relates to the motivations of Aristotle’s audience in the Metaphysics, and its attendant problems, in chapter three.
In considering whether or not this is a likely interpretation, we should ask about the divinity of the intellect. Its divinity is ascribed to it in the context of an objection against which Aristotle immediately argues. In the last part of his argument he says, “And it would seem that each person even is this thing [i.e., intellect], if in fact it is what is authoritative and better in him…and so for a human being, this is the life that accords with the intellect, if in fact this especially is a human being. This life, therefore, is also the happiest” (1178a3-8). Note again, however, the conditional nature of this statement; it is not clear that the intellect is especially a human being. Indeed, we could well push back against this argument. Do not a person’s upbringing, the idiosyncrasies of his taste, and even (perhaps especially) his body contribute at least as much to making him “this particular human being” as his intellect? Insofar as the intellect is that part of us that is divine, it seems just as plausible to say that this is the least personal thing about us. In his Generation of Animals, Aristotle goes so far as to say, “intellect alone enters in, as an additional factor, from outside…” (736b26-27).

Aristotle immediately, if subtly, offers an alternative when he says, “but the life that accords with the other virtue [i.e., moral virtue] is happy in a secondary way. For the activities in accord with such virtue are characteristically human ones: it is in relation to one another that we do what is just, courageous, and whatever else accords with the virtues” (1178a9-12). There is something that seems to be “especially” (malista, most of all) a human being, and then there is

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71 Ronna Burger notes this problem as well, and points out that the anonymity of mind is reflected in the joke Odysseus plays on the Cyclopes Polyphemus. When Polyphemus asks who is there, Odysseus says “no one” (me tis). When Odysseus attacks him, Polyphemus shouts out to the other Cyclopes, “no one is killing me by guile.” Upon escaping, Odysseus says his heart laughed at having deceived the Cyclopes with his cunning (metis). Cf. Burger, ibid., 160-161 and 268-9n4.
something else that is “characteristically” human (*anthropikai*). There is a tension, Aristotle thus implies, between the highest we are capable of as individuals and what can be expected more generally given our needy nature. Aristotle calls contemplation divine in the passage quoted above because it is “as far superior to the composite thing as its activity is superior to the activity that accords with the other virtue,” i.e., moral virtue. Our composite nature—the fact that we have a body and that our soul is inseparable from our body—means that we are *merely* human, even though we possess intellect, and so our mere humanity must be taken into account. As Aristotle says at the outset of the *Ethics*, we are searching for the peculiarly human good and work (*ergon*), which cannot be something that belongs to more than one class of being. Just as we cannot define human beings in terms of nutrition or locomotion, neither can we define ourselves by appealing to intellect because it is too broad—gods also may have intellect just as non-human animals have locomotion. Aristotle posits the human *ergon* as “an activity of the soul in accord with *logos*, or not without *logos*” (1098a7). The possession and exercise of *logos* is not the same as intellect.

There is a problem, then, which may be stated as follows. On the one hand, the thing that seems to be the most perfect thing a particular human being can aim for is a life in accord with the best thing in us, which is intellect. But in the *Ethics* we are concerned with the happiness that the political art (*politike*) aims at (1095a15), and it would be strange to call *politike* or

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72 Aristotle argues that the soul is inseparable from the body in *On the Soul*, 413a4: “neither the soul nor certain parts of it, if it has parts, can be separated from the body; for in some cases the *entelecheia* belongs to the parts themselves.” And yet, as we have seen, the intellect is separable from the body, as he says in *Generation of Animals* 736b27: “It remains, then, that *nous* alone enters in, as an additional factor, from outside and that it alone is divine, because bodily activity has nothing whatever to do with its activity.”
phronesis the most serious study, “if a human being is not the best of things in the cosmos,” as we evidently are not (1141a22-1141b3). And yet we do possess intellect, which seems divine, and the activity of which would seem to constitute happiness, if happiness is an activity of the best thing in us according to virtue. Furthermore, “what a thing is…when its coming into being is complete is, we assert, the nature of that thing” (Politics, 1252b33-34). And the perfection of a human being is to be divine—to be a god, if a mortal god; and a god would then be an immortal human being.\(^{73}\) The only way in which we would be between gods and beasts, then, would be our mortality; otherwise we would be gods, since our perfection is to be a god, and a being’s perfection is its nature. And yet, while the perfection of a human being seems to be a god, the way in which Aristotle defines our work is an activity of the soul in accord with logos, not nous. We are political animals because we possess logos and can thereby converse about the good and bad and the just and unjust (Politics, 1253a1-18). Logos is not simply good, however; choice (proairesis) involves logos and thought, and although in our choices we seek the good, we do not always attain it (1112a16). Aristotle seems to imply, in fact, that we are capable not only of being the best of animals but also the worst of animals precisely because we possess logos. He says that without virtue we are “the most unholy and the most savage of the animals, and the worst with regard to sex and food,” by which he probably means incest or rape and cannibalism. But many other animals also practice incest and cannibalism to a far greater extent than human beings ever have. It is worse when human beings do it because it is chosen

\(^{73}\) If true simply, this would mean that Aristotle would agree with Francis Bacon: “We are agreed, my sons, that you are men. That means, as I think, that you are not animals on their hind legs, but mortal gods,” Francis Bacon, The Philosophy of Francis Bacon, trans. and ed., Benjamin Farrington (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 106.
according to logos—it is deliberate. Although we do not always use our intellect, it is impossible for us to avoid using logos, for good or ill. We are not simply mortal gods, but neither are we simply beasts, which is why we need both laws and philosophy, recognizing both as incomplete.

Another way of saying this, and to make the point somewhat clearer, is to recall that Aristotle collapses the distinction between the knower (the wise human being) and the seeker after knowledge (the philosopher) in the beginning of the Metaphysics as well as the tenth book of the NE. This is closely related to his saying in the Ethics that the most human thing is both nous and logos. We are, in other words, both complete and incomplete—we are between gods and beasts. Human beings, like all natural beings, have two sorts of “nature” that are inseparable from each other: insofar as we can call ourselves human, we have a set of basic characteristics; but these same characteristics suggest their perfection—something that might merely be approachable without being realizable. These two ways of understanding our nature—as perfected and as incomplete—act in tandem to complicate what it might mean to live a self-sufficient life. We can see these two contradictory understandings of nature as connected, however, in the philosophic life, because it most of all recognizes the character of our incompleteness and finds its fulfillment in that very incompleteness. It is not quite right, then, to say that any human being “contemplates” in the same way that a god might, any more than it is quite right to say that the perfection of a human being is to possess wisdom; each of these abstracts from essential parts of what it means to be human. Furthermore, all human thought or dianoia involves logos—it is a “thinking through” in time, which implies imperfection, and so is
not something attributable to what we call divine.\footnote{Cf. Jacob Klein, \textit{Greek Mathematical Thought and the Origin of Algebra} (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1968), 72-73, and 235n81. Klein quotes a passage from the \textit{Sophist}: “Stranger: Are not thinking and reasonable speech the same, except that the former, which takes place inside as a voiceless dialogue of the soul with itself called by us thinking? Theaetetus: Quite so.”} When Aristotle says in the \textit{Politics} there is a dispute between those who say the political and active life is best, on the one hand, and, on the other, those who favor “that which is divorced from all external things—that involving \textit{some sort} of contemplation, for example—which \textit{some assert} is the \textit{only} philosophic way of life” (1324a25-29, emphasis added), he implies a distinction among philosophic lives. This sort of contemplation, as I have noted, does indeed seem fit for a god, but not fit for a human being who has human faults and needs—or for a philosopher whose way of life is only livable when aware of these faults.

We have now a response to the superficial objection Simonides’ poem makes, namely, that we should not seek the good, or that the good is unproblematic and so we should rest satisfied with what we have. On the contrary, human beings are good-seeking animals because we possess logos, and we seek it through politics and philosophy; but precisely because we seek the good through logos, it is a problematic search, and one whose end we only see dimly. As Aristotle says in the very first line of the \textit{Ethics}, “\textit{Every techne} and every \textit{methodos} (investigation), and similarly every \textit{praxis} as well as \textit{proairesis} (choice) is believed to aim at some \textit{agathos} (good)” (1094a1-2). In other words, human activity contains within it the implication that what is being done is for the sake of something good—even if one is wrong in the assessment that the end toward which one works is good. The adherence to convention and
resignation in the face of fortune suggested by Simonides’s poem misunderstands a fundamental characteristic of human beings—that we strive for the good.

We should recall, however, that Simonides’s poem points implicitly argues that it is in the nature of things that chance rules human affairs. If this is the case, our striving for the good in every action we take is misguided; the best we can hope for is to be favored by chance or, perhaps, to live a life aware of the ineluctable role chance plays in our lives. I will return to this problem and Aristotle’s response to it in the final chapter. Now, however, it will help to gain a clearer understanding of what Aristotle means by a god and the divine, since it is this understanding that underpins his explicit repudiation of the poetic account of the gods.

IV

In his response to Simonides and the poets more generally, Aristotle merely asserts that the divine cannot be jealous. He does not defend this assertion through argument, but proceeds to argue instead that the knowledge we are seeking ought to be regarded as more honorable than anything else. Why does Aristotle assert that the divine cannot be jealous? Is “the divine” the same as “the god”? What indications does Aristotle give that he knows what either of these is? And why are we concerned with whether or not the knowledge we are seeking is “honorable?”

Apostle suggests that the god cannot be jealous because jealousy is a vice and no vice could be attributed to a god (Hippocrates G. Apostle, Aristotle’s Metaphysics [Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1966], 256). This does not explain, however, why Aristotle can be so sure that this is the character of the god. Just because we call a god that which is perfect in every way does not mean such a being exists, or that we are correct in our assessment.
We should first look at the passage more closely. Following his discussion of the implications of Simonides’s poem, Aristotle says:

But it is not even possible for the divine to be jealous, but according to the common saying ‘singers are deceived in many things,’ and one ought not hold [nomizein] anything else as more honorable than this knowledge. For the most divine [theiotate] is also the most honorable, and this knowledge by itself would be most divine in two ways. For what most of all a god [theos] would have is that among the kinds of knowledge that is divine [theia], if in fact any of them were about divine things [theion]. But this one alone happens to have both these characteristics; for the god [theos] seems to be among the causes for all things, and to be a certain source, and such knowledge a god [theos] alone, or most of all, would have (983a4-10, emphasis added).

We assume first that the most divine things are most honorable; second, knowledge is divine either if it is the possession of a god or if it is the sort of knowledge a god would have; third, in the case of this kind of knowledge it is both, because it is the knowledge of causes and god is a cause, and a god who is a cause would have this sort of knowledge. There are several things we should note about this argument. First, Aristotle exhorts us to “hold” that nothing is more honorable than this knowledge. The word he uses is derived from the same root as the word meaning “custom;” in other words, we should not know that the knowledge we are seeking is honorable and divine, but rather we should believe it as a settled conviction—a starting point, not necessarily a conclusion, remembering that we must begin with what is familiar when we are seeking the most knowable things.

Second, Aristotle makes a distinction between “god” (theos) and “divine” (theios). At first glance it seems fairly straightforward that what pertains to a god is divine—divine simply describes the god and his attributes, or something that is akin to a god. But Aristotle makes a point of not repeating Simonides’s assertion that “a god” should have this honor; rather, Aristotle
begins to talk about “the divine,” using the adjective without a noun; it is “the divine” that is not jealous. But the most jarring aspect of this distinction is that Aristotle says nothing is more honorable than “this knowledge” immediately before saying the most divine is the most honorable. One would think that the god would be the most honorable thing—and yet Aristotle carefully avoids saying this; it is the knowledge that we are calling “divine” that is most honorable.

Third, however, even this latter assertion is called into question when Aristotle says this knowledge is the sort a god would have, “if in fact any of [the kinds of knowledge] were about divine things.” How do we know that this knowledge is of divine things? Because, Aristotle continues, a god “seems to be” among the causes of things. To whom does a god seem to be a cause? Shortly after this passage, Aristotle says there are some who think those who “gave the first accounts of the gods,” agreed with Thales that water is the primary cause of beings, because they,

made Ocean and Tethys the fathers of what comes into being, and made water the object by which one swears, called Styx by the poets; for what is oldest is most honored, and that by which one swears is the most honored thing (983b30-984a1).

One of those ancient theologoi who said this, at least, is Homer. In placing Homer next to Thales, Aristotle insinuates once again that there is little difference between the best poets and philosophers insofar as both seek knowledge of nature. Aristotle suggests strongly that we interpret Homer as giving an account of nature in agreement with Thales, which he expressed by

“making” Ocean and Tethys the parents of what comes into being. Rather than calling a god a cause, then, Homer is calling a cause a god.

There is further evidence that Aristotle is indicating that we tend to call a cause a god—that a god is a cause in this sense. In the Politics he speculates less subtly regarding this tendency for human beings to make non-human things into reflections of themselves—in that case, that we make gods live under a king (Politics 1252b25-28). He goes so far as to say that this tendency results in our thinking the gods look like us as well. Perhaps Aristotle is going even further here: When we think of ultimate causes we tend to think of these causes as possessing intellect, reason, and hence choice, as human beings do, and so we call these causes gods, by which we mean perfect human beings.

Aristotle returns to this possibility in the twelfth book of the Metaphysics following his account of the unmoved mover and the fifty-five (or forty-seven) additional eternal unmoved movers of the heavenly spheres. He says there is a mythos handed down from earliest times that these movers are gods, and that, the divine encompasses the whole of nature. The rest was presently imported in mythical guise for the persuasion of the many and into the laws for expediency and use; for the myths say the gods are of human form or like some of the other animals…If one were to take only the first of these things, separating it out, that they thought the primary

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77 Aristotle makes a joke here that is even stranger, and funnier, than it at first appears. He seems to have made a mistake in calculating fifty-five heavenly spheres, and a student has corrected him, saying there are actually forty-seven. Aristotle’s response is, “So let the number of spheres be so many, so that it is reasonable to assume that the number of ousiai which are motionless sources is also that many (for let the number that is necessary be left for more relentless people to say).” The Metaphysics itself is seemingly as relentless an account of causes as one could possibly imagine—and he is perhaps indicating that such precision is not required in the case of unmoved movers because such movers perform a rhetorical or mythical purpose. I will return to this question in the next chapter.
independent things were gods, one would regard this as having been said by divine inspiration (1074b1-6). 

The gods of human and animal form, then are those that are used for political purposes. But even the original gods, we can see, are simply names for the causes that the ancients divined. If we recall Herodotus’s speculative etymology and history of the Greek pantheon, we can see how closely it adheres to Aristotle’s account. The first Greeks called natural causes “gods” or theioi because they “had disposed” (ti-themì) of all things. The gods in human form were only later introduced at the recommendation of the oracle at Dodona, and their origins were only explained by Hesiod and Homer. One can imagine many political uses for gods with human or animal form, but the one Aristotle suggests in citing Homer’s making an oath by Styx, discussed above, is that Homer wishes to reinforce the conventional tendency to equate the honorable and the ancient.

Homer, Aristotle hints, unlike Thales, paid attention to what people honor, namely age, and conformed his poetry to this common opinion, weaving his opinions about nature into it. As we have seen, Aristotle also is careful to frame his investigation in terms of what people honor, namely the divine; but there is no mention of age in the passage containing Aristotle’s defense of the divinity and honorableness of his study. In fact, as we have seen, Aristotle’s dismissal of Simonides and the poets suggests just the opposite—that age as something honored above all else must be abandoned.

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78 Aristotle is strikingly frank here in admitting that he does not believe in the city’s gods—in other words, that he is subject to one of the same charges for which Socrates was executed. Perhaps because this admission follows his account of the unmoved mover that is a god he is not as concerned, at least, about being labeled an atheist.
This rejection of age as the most honorable thing is highlighted once again by a change Aristotle makes between the quotation itself and his discussion of it. Simonides says “only a god should have this honor” of being flawless, whether or not this is by means of knowledge. The word Simonides uses for “honor” is geras, which literally means a “gift of honor,” usually for something won in battle or the honors due to the dead. Based on its etymology, however, it means a reward due to one’s elders, as is evident from the root the word shares with geron, which means an old person. The latter word also has a political meaning of “elder” or chief.\(^7^9\) When Aristotle goes on to assert that “one ought not regard anything else as more honorable than this knowledge,” he uses the comparative form of the word timios, which means honored or worthy. This is the word the root of which Socrates uses for the regime he calls honor-loving or timocratic (Republic, 547b-550b), and Aristotle uses when he says honor is said to be the greatest of external goods, because it is that which we assign to the gods (NE 1123b18-21). Although the two words are roughly synonyms, Aristotle’s shying away from the ancestral implications of the first word is telling.

If we return to the passage following the quotation from Simonides, we see that Aristotle’s assertion that the divine cannot be jealous is jarring because it is what we might call a “poetic” move in the context of a philosophical investigation. That is to say, Aristotle seems to be combining Thales’s attempt to give an account the first causes of species with Homer’s attempt to heed what is honorable. Aristotle must shift the focus, however, from honoring the

ancestral and the conventional to honoring the “divine” and equating the knowledge of causes with the divine, thus rendering it the most honorable pursuit.

If we recall what we have found so far, however, we can see a potential problem with this poetic move. Aristotle introduces Simonides’s objection to pursuing human perfection to call into question the possibility of philosophy and its superiority to the other two immediate alternatives, a conventional life and the life of a poet. Aristotle is also concerned that his students may be embarking on this search for knowledge under false pretenses: they may desire knowledge for the sake of freedom and power, or they may desire it “for its own sake”—because they think it is “high,” i.e., beautiful or honorable; in either case they may still be under the sway of common opinions about wisdom, and desire it as an instrument for their own earthly power or as a sacrifice that the gods will reward. Now we see that Aristotle is attempting to combine an element of poetry—acknowledging that people are attracted to what is honorable—with investigating causes. The result is that, while Aristotle is concerned his students are pursuing knowledge merely because they think it is honorable, he is at the same time persuading them to follow him in his investigation by saying that this knowledge is most honorable. In the next chapter, therefore, I will investigate this apparent contradiction by looking more closely at the places where Aristotle calls his investigation honorable, and comparing these statements to his account of honor in the NE.
Chapter Two

Honor in the *Metaphysics*

In the previous chapter I examined a quotation Aristotle uses at the outset of the *Metaphysics* to stand for the poetic objection to the search for wisdom. This poetic objection amounts to an accusation of hubris against the philosopher, both with respect to the gods and the city. Aristotle responds that the search for wisdom is not only not hubristic, it is the most honorable endeavor one can undertake because it is the search for the knowledge of the divine and the knowledge that a god would have. In this way, Aristotle seems to suggest, the search for wisdom is pious—if we can take piety to mean honoring the divine—and it is a sort of piety that replaces honoring the ancestral—an object of honor Aristotle explicitly attributes to Homer, and implicitly to poets in general. Aristotle thus seems to be setting up an alternative divine object of piety or honor for his audience.

The difficulty with this interpretation is that it seems to contradict another of Aristotle’s aims in quoting Simonides, which is to show his readers that they may be subject to a contradiction in their motivation for pursuing wisdom, between a desire for freedom and power, and an unexamined notion that wisdom is an honorable or beautiful pursuit. Why would Aristotle try simultaneously to promote and quash honorableness as the reason for seeking wisdom? In this chapter I will examine this question by looking closely at what Aristotle says about the honorable character of first philosophy.
Although Aristotle makes it clear that he considers the gods of which the poets speak—the gods that have the form of human beings or other animals—to be mythical expressions of causes, we should hold open the possibility, until alternative evidence presents itself, that Aristotle is serious when he calls the unmoved mover a god. Nevertheless, whether or not Aristotle holds up the unmoved mover as a god because it is or for some other reason, pursuing wisdom because it is the study of god and, therefore, honorable, is not the same as pursuing it out of love of the truth or because one is fleeing ignorance—pursuing it out of a prudent concern for one’s own good. Piety, in other words, even pious devotion to an existent god, is separate from philosophy, understood as quest for the truth, because piety requires conviction, whereas philosophy requires the questioning of one’s conviction. To put this in Aristotle’s own terms, we cannot accept the poetic stance that defends the ancestral—and, hence, the ancestral gods—as the most honorable things if we are to seek what is in truth or by nature the most honorable thing. But we cannot know that something is the most honorable thing before we have found it. And yet, that is precisely what Aristotle asks us to do in considering the divine knowledge of first philosophy most honorable.

I. A

Let us begin by looking more closely at a few of the passages in the *Metaphysics* where Aristotle refers to the honorable character of first philosophy. I began to examine this question

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81 I have already noted in the previous chapter that Aristotle says the *knowledge* of the divine is the most honorable thing, not the god itself.
in the previous chapter, and noted that Aristotle shifts the object of honor from the ancestral to the most divine knowledge. The first mention of honor, however, occurs just before the discussion just mentioned, and in the midst of Aristotle’s account of the development of philosophy out of the senses and the arts. He says “we suppose” that knowing and understanding are more a part of art than of experience, and so “we take” those who possess an art to be wiser than those who merely have experience. This is because, Aristotle continues, artisans know the cause, whereas those with experience do not. Artisans, then, have a certain sort of knowledge of the “why” in addition to the “what.” For example, a master builder knows that bricks should be staggered when building a wall because that way the wall will be stronger. A laborer knows what bricks are and a wall and mortar, and he also must have some manual knowledge of how much mortar to use, etc.; but he need not know why the wall should be constructed in this way. For this reason, Aristotle says, “we also opine (nomizomen) that the master craftsmen in each kind of work are more honorable (timioteros) and know more than the manual laborers, and are also wiser, because they know the causes of the things they do” (981b1).

Aristotle is beginning with what “we suppose” or “opine” according to the nomos—according to custom—in order to reveal something about both wisdom and honor. We hold a master craftsman to be more honorable than a laborer because he has some knowledge of causes, and this knowledge comprehends the activity of the laborer. It seems to be the comprehensiveness of causal knowledge that is the source of its being honored. Just as the craftsman is more honored than the laborer because he knows why we should build a wall in a certain way, the general who orders the wall to be built around the city would be more honored still, and the statesman more honored than he because each has increasingly comprehensive
knowledge of the end for the sake of which the wall is being built: defense, in the general’s case, and the good of the city or the common good in the statesman’s case. We are led from the example of the master craftsman, then, to Aristotle’s provisional conclusion in the *NE* that the human good,

*might be held* to belong to the most authoritative and most architectonic one, and such *appears* to be the political art...[because we see] that even the most honored capacities—for example, generalship, household management, rhetoric—fall under the political art. Because it makes use of the remaining sciences and, further, because it legislates what one ought to do and what to abstain from, its end would encompass those of the others, with the result that this would be the human good” (*NE* 1094b2-7, emphasis added).

Although Aristotle radically alters this account of the human good in the course of the *NE*, concluding, as we have noted, that contemplation constitutes human happiness\(^2\) (an alteration that is perhaps prefigured here in Aristotle’s qualified language), the phrasing he uses is helpful: the political art appears to be the “most authoritative” and “most architectonic” art. What is honored is that which the city honors, in all its authority and apparent comprehensiveness, primarily because the honored arts are useful to the city. Aristotle seems to be suggesting, however, that there may be a more natural basis for honor that is not based on utility but instead on the comprehensiveness of knowledge of causes—a basis that we divine when we honor an artisan with more knowledge of causes than his workers. Why, though, do we need to be concerned with honor at all if we are searching for causes without the aim of using them for political purposes? Put another way, if we call the knowledge we are seeking divine and most comprehensive, why do we then need to go further and say it is most honorable as well?

\(^2\) Although even this turns out to be problematic, as discussed in chapter one.
I. B

One possible answer is illuminated by the next two mentions of honor, which follow Aristotle’s discussion of Simonides’s poem and his comparison of Homer and Thales on first causes, respectively, which I discuss in the first chapter. As mentioned, Aristotle seems to be providing us with an alternative object of honor—divine causal knowledge—to the one the city gives us and that seems to be supported by Homer and Simonides—the ancient or ancestral. The question remains, however, why this object of honor is necessary as honorable, and so I will now turn to his fourth mention, which occurs in the first chapter of the sixth book, Epsilon.

This book is a turning point in the *Metaphysics* and begins its central argument. Hitherto Aristotle has introduced his subject by arguing several points: the accounts of the materialist philosophers and poets who have sought wisdom are inadequate; an account of causes can only be of finite causes; such an account must confront a number of impasses that suggest it cannot be subsumed under one science; nevertheless, first philosophy is one science, and it must conform to the law of non-contradiction; words may mean many things at once, and in order to begin we must be clear regarding the multiple meanings of our terms.\(^\text{83}\) Now, in the sixth book, Aristotle reintroduces his subject by saying that we are searching for the sources and causes of beings only insofar as they are beings (1025b1-2).\(^\text{84}\) All sciences and arts—anything that thinks through a subject—draws “a line around some particular being and some particular class of things,” and

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\(^{83}\) This is a brief summary of the first five books of the *Metaphysics*. See my introduction for an overview that is somewhat more developed.

\(^{84}\) Aristotle makes it even clearer that this is a new beginning by nearly repeating the opening few lines of the fourth book: “There is a kind of knowledge that contemplates what is insofar as it is…” (1003a21-32).
just studies that. A carpenter studies house-building, for example, but he does this on the assumption that he knows what a house is, and that it exists. The sort of knowledge that Aristotle is pursuing, on the contrary, asks just these questions: what being is and whether it exists, since “it belongs to the same act of thinking to make clear both what something is and whether it is” (1025b17-18).

At this point knowledge of beings as beings seems highly “democratic,” insofar as we seem to be searching for the whatness and whetherness of any thing—we are searching for that which bestows upon things their “thinghood,” as Joe Sachs renders Aristotle’s term ousia. Immediately from this point, however, Aristotle ascends from democracy to aristocracy or monarchy. There are three sorts of contemplative philosophy (philosophia theoretike), he says, natural, mathematical, and theological, and this last one is most honorable because it studies the divine (1026a21). Does first philosophy study the cause of the being of the many beings that we can point to, or does it study the highest singular being that is “everlasting and motionless and separate?” (1026a11). This question is closely related to the question of the honorableness of this study, and so we should look closely at Aristotle’s argument in this short book.

Following his argument that the sort of knowledge we are seeking pertains to all beings insofar as they are, Aristotle says that the study of nature is one of the sciences that separates off a part of being, taking its being for granted—in this case, all things that have the source of motion in themselves insofar as they do so (plants, animals, and the cosmos). But natural science is a sort of thinking that is neither productive nor practical. This is because the sort of thinking that has to do with production has its starting point in the producer; that is, the
beginning of house building lies in the house builder. And the sort of thinking having to do
with practice or action finds its beginnings in choice. Natural science, however, begins in natural
phenomena themselves, particularly in the form (cf. Physics, 192b12-15 and 193b3-5).
Therefore, Aristotle claims, natural science is a contemplative study, “if all thinking tends toward
action, production, or contemplation” (1025b25, emphasis added).

Does Aristotle imply by his qualifying “if” that there may be other kinds of thinking
besides these three? Throughout the NE Aristotle implies that acting, making, and contemplating
are the three modes belonging to human beings. But in a passage in the NE that strikingly
parallels this one in the Metaphysics as well as what immediately follows, Aristotle again raises
the question of whether the list is exhaustive. We suppose the gods to be especially happy, he
says, but it would be ridiculous to imagine them being active in the sense of making choices as
humans do—whether to sign a contract or not, for example—but we also think they are alive.
“So for one who is living, when his acting is taken away, and, still more, his making
something, what remains except contemplation? As a result, the activity of the god, because it
is superior in blessedness, would be contemplative” (NE 1178b8-23). As I argue in the first
chapter, however, Aristotle blurs the distinction between the knower and the seeker after
knowledge in both the NE and the Metaphysics. One who contemplates literally “beholds” the

85 This is true even if arts are not “creative” strictly speaking (i.e., they do not make things ex
nihilo) because they depend on nature for their existence. For example, a chair is restricted in its
materials, size, and shape to the prior natural existence of the human beings who are going to sit
in it. In is way, “all art and education wish to supply the element that is lacking in nature”
(Politics, 1337a2). Nevertheless, the artisan, in producing something, imitates nature and the
perfection implied in a natural being, and is himself the origin of the artifact’s coming-into-
being.
86 That the god might make the world is rejected without argument. Lest we think Aristotle had
no notion of a creator god, cf. Plato’s Republic 597b-c.
truth, he does not seek it. We could perhaps say that the philosopher seeks to behold the truth, and that his quest is contemplative in this way. The distinction between contemplative thought on the one hand and active and productive thought on the other, however, seems contrary to Aristotle’s own activity. If philosophy seeks to contemplate something, what else is Aristotle seeking to contemplate when he studies choice in the *NE* or regimes in the *Politics* but actions?\(^8^7\) We might say that the philosopher uses production and action as means for his own end of knowledge. Does political philosophy, then, belong with natural science, mathematics, and theology or first philosophy?

Aristotle says that there is a kind of knowledge (*episteme*) that pertains to nature, and this is what the natural scientist contemplates or seeks. Aristotle offers an argument as to why natural science is contemplative, even if he does not provide an alternative sort of study besides the three mentioned (action, production, and contemplation). It is contemplative, “but of the sort of being that moves”—offered as a qualification or reason for our doubting that natural science is in fact contemplative.\(^8^8\) It also studies those substances that are “for the most part” not

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\(^8^7\) Although Aristotle rarely uses the word “philosophy” in the *NE*, he implies he is approaching his subject as a philosopher at *NE* 1096a15, 1096b31, and especially 1152b1: “Contemplating what concerns pleasure and pain belongs to he who philosophizes about the political art. For he is the architect of the end with a view to which we speak of each thing as being bad or good in an unqualified sense.”

\(^8^8\) Cf. Edward Halper, *One and Many in Aristotle’s Metaphysics* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1989), 5: “Aristotle’s point is that even though its objects are in motion, physics seeks to know their formulae [or accounts—*logoi*]. The assumption is that a theoretical science treats formulae and definitions, in contrast with practical and productive sciences which treat, respectively, actions and objects of art.” Halper offers a helpfully straightforward reading of Aristotle’s argument here; but he leaves out Aristotle’s further implication that a theoretical science seems not to seek accounts and definitions of just anything (especially *not* of regimes, for example), but specifically of things that either are everlasting, motionless, or separate, or some combination of the three.
separate—i.e., not able to be pointed out as separately existing things, responsible for their own activity. This is because natural science studies living things, that are separate, but it also studies parts of living things like hearts and lungs, or rocks and water and other things that are not separate; only the cosmos that non-living things are a part of is itself a separate thing. 89 Natural science, though, does look for definitions and asks what things are, but insofar as they are combinations of form and matter—the natural scientist looks at flesh and bone, not the soft and the hard. “That, then, the study of nature is contemplative from these things…” (1025b27-1026a7). A “contemplative study,” then, seems to be one that seeks to define what something is, but, Aristotle insinuates, that it studies what is in motion takes away from the purity of natural science’s contemplative status, as well as the fact that much (but not all) that it studies is not separate. Mathematics, likewise, is compromised because, although what it studies is unmoved and everlasting, mathematical objects are not separate because they are not self-subsisting, and rely on the prior existence of natural, separate things. 90

There are three attributes, then, of the objects of contemplative studies: everlastingness, motionlessness, and separability. And Aristotle implies that these attributes define contemplative study even beyond asking what something is when he says, “if there is anything that is everlasting and motionless and separate, it is obvious that the knowledge of it belongs to a

89 Cf. Joe Sachs, “An Outline of the Argument of Aristotle’s Metaphysics,” St. John’s Review 32, no. 3 (1981): 42-43: “Which is the aberration, life or non-life? For Aristotle the choice need not be made, since the distinction between the two forms of being only results from a confusion. Flesh, blood, bone, and hair would seem inorganic and inanimate if they were not organized into and animated as, say, a cat. But earth, air, fire, and water, all of it, is always organized into and animate as the cosmos.” The student of nature studies flesh, blood, and bone as well as fire and water, all of which are not separate in themselves, but are parts of wholes that are separate.

90 Aristotle makes this argument in Metaphysics M.2.
contemplative study, though surely not to the study of nature, nor to mathematics, but to one that precedes them both” (1026a10-12). It can only follow that the study of something possessing these three attributes is contemplative if these are the criteria for contemplative study. Political philosophy, then, would seem not to belong to the category of contemplative studies because it studies things that are neither everlasting nor motionless nor separate. This would seem to be confirmed by Aristotle’s insistence in the *NE* that wisdom (*sophia*) is the knowledge of “the most honorable matters that has, as it were, its capstone”—i.e., that is complete—whereas “it is strange (*atopos*) if someone supposes the political art or prudence to be most serious if a human being is not the best thing in the cosmos” (1141a20-22). Aristotle goes on characteristically to contrast the wise—Thales and Anaxagoras, for example—with the prudent, since we see the wise not investigating the human goods, and prudence is concerned with the human good (1141b3-10). And yet, as we see from the *NE*, Aristotle seems to contradict this both through his own activity in the *NE* and Politics, and when he says, “Contemplating what concerns pleasure and pain belongs to he who philosophizes about the political art” (*NE* 1152b1). This apparent contradiction alerts us once again to the hypothetical nature both of Aristotle’s list of human activities and of the existence of this object that possesses these three attributes. Why are these three the criteria for a study being considered contemplative? Why not Aristotle’s earlier implication that a study is contemplative if it asks what something is—if one seeks to know as a result of wonder and the realization of one’s ignorance?

Aristotle hints at the answer when he continues, saying,

…while it is necessary that all causes be everlasting (*aidia*), these are so most of all, for they are the cause of what *appears* to us of the divine. Therefore there would be three
sorts of contemplative philosophy, the mathematical, the natural, and the theological (for it is not hard to see that if the divine is present anywhere, it is present in a nature of this kind), and that the most honorable (timiotatos) study must be about the most honorable class of things. The contemplative studies, then, are more worthy of choice than the other kinds of knowledge, and this one is worthier of choice than are the other contemplative studies. (1026a18-23, emphasis added).

Eternity, motionlessness, and separability are the attributes of the causes of what appears to be divine—this is why Aristotle has chosen them. The study of them would then be better characterized as apparent theology, until it reaches its goal of demonstrating the existence and divine nature of the causes it seeks. Another sort of study might ask what is the cause of these causes making the divine appear—that is, why the divine appears to us in causes—which would require the study of the human soul, and, perhaps, what Aristotle calls at the end of the NE, “the philosophy concerning human affairs” (1181b15).

We can find further evidence that this is what Aristotle has in mind if we ask why all causes must be everlasting, and these “most of all.” Aristotle explains in book Delta that all causes (aitia) are sources (arche), and we mean as many things by one as by the other (1013a17). In general, a source is “the first thing from which something is or comes to be or is known” (1013a19), and so “nature is a source, as are elements, thinking, choice, substance, and that for the sake of which” (1013a20-21). Each of the four causes Aristotle describes—the matter from which something is made; the source of its motion; the form that the matter takes; and the purpose or function of the thing—is also a source or origin. We may understand Aristotle to mean “everlasting” (aidios) in terms of the etymology of the word, which is derived from “always” (aei).91 It is always and everywhere the case that perceptible beings come into being.

91 Cf. Liddell and Scott, Greek-English Lexicon, 9th ed., s.v. “aidios.”
from matter and form, that they have a source of motion, and that they have a function. This is an understanding of causality that appears to be necessary for the study of nature—in order for there to be beings for the natural scientist to study, their causes must be everlastingly consistent—a cat must always be born to a cat.

It is odd, then, that Aristotle should say the cause that we are studying is everlasting “most of all;” surely something is either everlasting or it is not. Aristotle explains that these causes are “most of all” everlasting because they are the cause for what “appears to us of the divine.” The study of everlasting, motionless, and separate causes is theological contemplative philosophy because, “it is not hard to see that if the divine is present anywhere, it is present in a nature of this kind.” The superlative, and superfluous, everlastingness of these sorts of causes is due to their divinity, which is only apparent and based on a hypothetical.

And these causes are most honorable for this reason as well, which is the root of our taking the study of them to be the most honorable study. Aristotle points to what he is doing in the next line, quoted above: theological philosophy is the most choiceworthy sort of knowledge as a result of its being the most honorable one, since it studies what appears to us of the divine. Aristotle’s concern is with our choice of study. If we are drawn to study physics or mathematics, Aristotle seems to say, we should be even more drawn to theology, if our attraction to the former two has to do with their proximity to what is enduring. It is the eternal that draws us to study causes; but, Aristotle seems also to be suggesting, it is also their increasing proximity to the divine, and so the honorable. Once again we see an apparent contradiction in Aristotle’s presentation: on the one hand, he alerts us that we may be drawn to studying causes because they
fulfill a hidden desire for the eternal or the “high”; on the other hand, he encourages this motivation.

By alerting us to the eternal and divine as the true reasons for our being attracted to the study of causes, Aristotle also encourages us to ask how we can know that causes are eternal, knowable, and absolute, as is evident in the remainder of Epsilon. He does this first by raising the aporia implied at the outset of Epsilon and noted above: is first philosophy the “democratic” science of all beings insofar as they are, or is it the “aristocratic” science of the one highest being that is eternal, motionless, and separate? Aristotle repeats his hypothetical: if there is such a thing that is eternal, motionless, and separate, first philosophy will study this, “and it is universal in just that way, because it is first” (1026a24-31). What Aristotle seems to mean is the same as what he says earlier in Gamma: “Being is meant in more than one way, but pointing toward one (pros hen) meaning and some one nature rather than ambiguously” (1003a32). Just as each particular horse points toward the species horse that simultaneously subsumes them all and is an implicitly perfect horse, and just as all particular horses fall short, more or less, of the perfect horse that is implied in their all being called horses, so all separate beings imply a perfect being that is eternal, motionless, and separate, and compared to which each separate substance falls short. The difficulty with this is that it is merely hypothetical so far; Aristotle will attempt to prove the existence of such a being and its character in Lambda, and I will return to this below. For now, however, we are left with an unsettling possibility: if complete science requires absolute knowledge of the existence of the perfect being that all imperfect beings imply, then even natural science and mathematics cannot be certain of their knowledge without first
philosophy as their grounding; without the knowledge of the eternal, motionless, and separate
being that all beings seem to imply, even natural science will only be hypothetical.  

92 Aristotle’s more sustained discussion of how we know the first principles (archai) may be
found in his Posterior Analytics. “We assert that we do at any rate obtain knowledge by
demonstration. By demonstration I mean a syllogism which produces
knowledge...demonstrative knowledge must proceed from premises which are true, primary,
immediate, better known than, prior to, and causative of the conclusion” (71b16-23). But how
do we know with certainty the principles from which demonstration proceeds? Aristotle gives
two accounts. In the first he says that we come to the principles by way of sense-perception,
which we share with all animals. In an account reminiscent of the first chapter of the
Metaphysics, Aristotle says sense-perception gives rise to memory, which gives rise to
experience, “and experience, that is the universal when established as a whole in the soul—the
one that corresponds to the many, the unity that is identically present in them all—provides the
starting point of art and science...” In other words, we come to know the first principles through
induction, and ultimately by means of sense-perception: “although it is the particular that we
perceive, the act of perception involves the universal, e.g., ‘man,’ not ‘a man, Callias.’ Then
other ‘halts’ occur among these universals until the indivisible genera or universals are
established. E.g., a particular species of animal leads to the genus ‘animal,’ and so on. Clearly
then it must be by induction that we acquire knowledge of first principles...” (99b30-100b4).

But then immediately Aristotle offers another, far more opaque and even contradictory
account of how we acquire first principles: “…first principles are more knowable than
demonstrations, and all science [episteme] involves reason. It follows that there can be no
science of the first principles; and since nothing can be more infallible than knowledge except
intellect, it must be intellect that apprehends the first principles” (100b5-12). Do we gain
awareness of first principles through induction, which seems to be dependent on the sense
perception that all animals share, or do we possess certainty of first principles by means of
intellect? Or is intellect the same thing as induction? This latter seems impossible, if induction is
merely a development out of sense perception, and if intellect is divine (although Aristotle does
not say it is here; but cf. NE 1177b27 and Generation of Animals 736b28). It is perhaps telling
that Aristotle argues we gain first principles through induction, whereas he merely asserts
that we gain first principles through intellect (also cf. NE 6.6 where Aristotle asserts the same).
If the principles upon which demonstrative science is based are merely hypothetical, arrived at
by induction from the senses, then demonstrative science will not be known absolutely, without
the need for further investigation; if the principles are known immediately by divine intellect,
however, then the science that proceeds from these will be knowable absolutely.

Nevertheless, both these ways of apprehending first principles—induction and direct
apprehension via the intellect—are monologic; i.e., we could achieve them sitting alone in a
chair. Aristotle’s demonstration of the law of non-contradiction in Metaphysics Gamma,
however, is necessarily dialogic. If the truth is perfectly relative to each observer, there can be
no agreed-upon terms to serve as the basis for a conversation, and so the one arguing that truth is

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Furthermore, Aristotle indicates the precariousness of knowledge in the two chapters that follow by drawing a distinction among what exists always, for the most part, or incidentally—i.e., as a result of chance. It is the existence of chance characteristics or events that disrupts our ability to have complete knowledge of causes—to have a complete science of being. He says it is necessary, as a result of our saying that there is a primary meaning of being from which other meanings derive, that we say there is no contemplative study of what is incidental. Aristotle gives several strange examples, however, of what he means by “incidental.” He says first that a house builder does not make all the incidental things that go along with building a house, but he does not say what he means besides that these are indefinite (1026b8). Does he mean the house builder as house builder does not deal with whether a kitchen will have an oven on this or that side of the room? This appears to be a kind of indefiniteness involved in building, and yet the house builder must make a decision one way or another. Halper notes that Aristotle’s following two examples are at least as curious, i.e., that it is incidental to a triangle that it contains two right angles and that it is incidental to “Coriscus” that he is musical. Is it not always the case that triangles have angles equal to two right angles, and so seemingly not incidental? And Aristotle himself seems to contradict the second example in book Gamma when he says, “it belongs to the philosopher to be capable of considering all things. For if it does not belong to the philosopher, who will it be who examines whether Socrates and Socrates sitting down are the same…” (1004b1-2). In Epsilon it seems to belong to the sophist to examine such things: “Plato’s relative will be unable to speak (1006a12-29). Apparently, then, first principles do require demonstration, with the aid of dialectic or conversation among several people, although this demonstration is tentative, thus rendering conclusions based on it tentative as well.

93 Cf. Halper, ibid. 8-9.
assignment of sophistry to what concerns nonbeing was in a certain way not bad. For arguments of the sophists are, one might say, most of all about what is incidental: whether musical and literate are different or the same, and whether musical Coriscus is the same as Corsicus…” (1026b15-18).

Perhaps, however, it is intentional that Aristotle speaks of the philosopher in contradistinction to the sophist in Gamma and the theologian in contradistinction to the sophist in Epsilon. The philosopher, more specifically, examines the incidental insofar as he examines the sophist, who is the incidental personified: “those who engage in dialectic and the sophists slip into the same outward appearance as the philosopher. For sophistry is wisdom in appearance only, while dialectic discourses about everything…for sophistry and dialectic turn themselves to the same class of things as philosophy, but it differs from one of them in the way its power is turned, and from the other in the choice of a way of life it makes; dialectic is tentative about those things that philosophy seeks to know, and sophistry is a seeming without a being” (1004b19-26, emphasis added). The very definition of a sophist is one who is concerned merely with appearing to be wise; whereas the philosopher does not care at all about this appearance, but wishes to be wise. The theologian, insofar as he achieves knowledge, has no place for the incidental, which is the realm of seeming, just as the sophist’s very being is to seem to be the wise man.94 The philosopher, however, insofar as he seeks knowledge, studies the incidental as

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94 Cf. Plato, *Sophist* 268b-c. In this dialogue the sophist is the key to the paradox of how falsehood is possible. Surely something either is or is not, and if it is not, it does not exist; therefore, everything exists, and there are no falsehoods. The result would be the seemingly absurd conclusion that lying is impossible as well as mistakes in perception; everything would be purely subjective. If what “is not” is instead “other than” something, then things can exist while not being what they appear to be. All things would this be related to each other insofar as they
incidental as well as things that are always and for the most part. We should note in passing, however, that the philosopher’s study of the incidental, insofar as it culminates in the study of his doppelganger the sophist, is at the same time an attempt at self-knowledge. Denise Schaeffer argues it is no mistake that Aristotle says here in his description of what the philosopher studies, that he studies Socrates.95

“Since,” Aristotle continues, “not all things are or happen necessarily and always, but most things are and happen for the most part, it is necessary that there be incidental being” (1027a10-11). Furthermore, “it is clear that there is no knowledge of what is incidental, since all knowledge is of what is so always or for the most part—for how else will anyone learn or teach?” (1027a20-22). It seems that science is possible on the basis of what is for the most part true, even if there is nothing that is always or eternally true.96 The incidental or chance depends for its existence on beings that are for the most part, not on beings that are always (1027a8-11), and Aristotle even calls into question the existence of beings that are always (1027a19).97 In the end, therefore, Aristotle seems to be indicating the possibility of some kind of knowledge that is

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95 Cf. Metaphysics 1004b2-3 and Shaeffer, ibid. 649-650: “Only philosophy investigates whether ‘Socrates and Socrates sitting are the same.’ Aristotle’s choice of example in stating the task of philosophy: only the philosopher investigates Socrates. Philosophy investigates the philosopher. That is, the philosopher investigates himself.”
96 But Aristotle says in the NE, “we all suppose that what we know scientifically does not admit of being otherwise…therefore what is knowable scientifically exists of necessity. Therefore it is eternal…” (1039b20-23, emphasis added). Who “we” are who suppose this is, however, Aristotle does not say.
not complete, or else a movement toward knowledge that recognizes its incompleteness, insofar
as this partial knowledge is only of things that are for the most part and are subject to chance,
thus always requiring further revision or qualification. This is juxtaposed with a kind of
knowledge that would be complete, but depends on there being things that are always true, and,
furthermore, on the existence of a primary being that is eternal, motionless, and separate, as we
noted before. The approach to knowledge implied in philosophy is then contrasted with the
complete knowledge possessed by the theologian. It is the latter knowledge that Aristotle calls
“most honorable;” he does not describe what the philosopher does, in the section of Gamma
quoted above, as honorable, but rather as a way of life that uses dialectic and that turns its power
in the opposite direction of the sophist.\footnote{“…sophistry and dialectic turn themselves to the same class of things as philosophy, but it
differs from one of them in the way its power is turned, and from the other in the choice of a way
of life it makes; dialectic is tentative about those things that philosophy seeks to know, and
sophistry is a seeming with out a being” (1004b22-26). If the sophist studies the incidental, then
the philosopher would seem to study the essential; but the philosopher also studies the sophist,
and so attempts to know himself by means of the incidental—i.e., by means of the other to which
he is opposed. We should remember here the distinction between the wise human being—who
would more properly be the sophist’s other—and the philosopher. The language of “turning”
(tropos) is highly reminiscent of Socrates’s depiction of the turning around (periakteon) of the
soul from becoming toward being, that is indicative of philosophical education (Republic 518c).
Although Aristotle does not use the same word, his combination of the language of turning with
devotion to a way of life that is in contrast to the sophist suggests an agreement with Plato’s
Socrates that there is a distinction in kind, not degree, between the life turned toward knowing
and the other lives.

It seems, then, that the honorable character of the knowledge of causes is connected with
the expectation that these causes be completely knowable and absolute: that they (whether one or
more than one) be eternal, motionless, and separate. That these are the criteria for the highest
kind of absolute knowledge stems from what appears to us of the divine: that the divine is
something eternal, motionless, and separate. In order to see what the desire for honor or for the honorable implies, it will help to turn to Aristotle’s discussion of the subject in the *NE*.

II

As noted briefly above, Aristotle’s first mention of honor in the *NE* is in the context of his saying that one might believe the highest human good to belong to what appears to be the most authoritative and architectonic science, art, or capacity, namely, the political art. This is partly because the “most honored capacities,” such as generalship, household management, and rhetoric, “fall under the political art” (1094a26-1094b4). As suggested before, it seems to be the city that decides what is honorable and what is not, based on what it can make use of—what is honorable is what is for the sake of the city (cf. 1094b5). Almost immediately, though, Aristotle says the political art examines “the beautiful things and the just things,” which vary to such an extent that some hold they only exist by convention and not by nature (1094b15-17). Aristotle goes on to say there are three prominent ways of life that each imply an answer to the question of the human good: the pleasure-loving, the political, and the contemplative lives (1095b19), to which he adds a fourth, the moneymaking (1095a6). Here he says the “refined and active” choose honor, “for this is pretty much the end of the political life.” Is honor as an end the same as the just and the beautiful? Are these for the sake of honor, or alternatively, as Aristotle will argue later, must moral virtue—the end of which is the beautiful (1115b13, )—be for its own sake (1105a33)? Toward the end of the *NE*, Aristotle offers a brief summary of the book as a whole up to that point in order to prepare the way for his argument that the contemplative life is
happiest. At the end of this summary he says, “…the activities choiceworthy in themselves are those from which nothing beyond the activity itself is sought; the actions that accord with virtue are held to be of this sort, for the doing of beautiful and serious things is held to be among the things choiceworthy for their own sake” (1076b7-8). In this way, Aristotle brings together moral virtue as something pursued for its own sake and for the sake of the beautiful: according to common opinion—what is held to be true—a beautiful action is one that is done for its own sake. If so, moral virtue cannot be for the sake of honor, because then it will lose the beauty that defines it.

This argument surrounding the first mention of honor in the first book, although preliminary, suggests succinctly what Aristotle later implies about the character of moral virtue and honor. Honor, Aristotle says, seems a superficial possibility for the human good, because it depends on other people’s praise and blame, whereas “we divine that the good is something of one’s own and not easily taken away.” But, “people seem to pursue honor so that they may be convinced that they themselves are good; at any rate, they seek to be honored by the prudent…for their virtue” (1095b23-30). Those who pursue the active political life, Aristotle says, pursue it because their sense of their own worth is dependent upon the judgment of others—with the caveat that this judgment should be true, of course. Those who are capable of judging truly who are virtuous—the prudent—would seem also to be capable of judging their own virtue, and so would not need others’ recognition—and would, therefore, not need to engage
in politics in the normal sense. If the prudent are those who know the human good, then the prudent would be the wise human beings.\(^99\)

Aristotle’s account of the moral virtues divides roughly in two parts, the first culminating in great-souledness, and the second culminating in justice—each of which is said in its own way to subsume all moral virtue.\(^100\) Despite Aristotle having said in the place just examined that honor seems to be a superficial criterion for judging the best human life, it serves as just such a criterion for the great-souled human being:

Worth is spoken of in relation to external goods, and we would posit as the greatest of these that which we assign to the gods, that at which people of worth aim, and that which

\(^99\) Again, remembering that there may be no wise human beings, but merely philosophers who seek wisdom. On the other hand, Leo Strauss argues, according to Xenophon, “The desire for praise and admiration as distinguished from and divorced from the desire for love is the natural foundation for the predominance of the desire for one’s own perfection” (Leo Strauss, \textit{On Tyranny} [Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2000], 90). That is, the philosopher’s desire to be honored by competent judges implies he is concerned with his own perfection or good, and not merely with others’ love of him regardless of his virtue. Does this imply that Xenophon (and perhaps Strauss) disagree with Aristotle, according to my reading? Not necessarily, if we note that the desire for praise and admiration is the “natural foundation” for the desire for one’s perfection. Later Strauss says, “Xenophon indicates in the \textit{Hiero} that the motivation of the philosophic life is the desire for being honored or admired by a small minority, and ultimately the desire for ‘self-admiration,’ whereas the motivation of the political life is the desire for love, i.e., for being loved by human beings irrespective of their qualities” (196-197). The end goal of the philosopher, according to Strauss and Xenophon, is to be able to assess one’s own virtue—to be prudent: “this self-admiration or self-satisfaction does not have to be confirmed by the admiration of others in order to be reasonable” (204). This is because the philosopher, through conversing with others, can test himself and see if others are able to give a coherent account of their lives. If they are not, as they were not for Socrates, then he is confirmed in his self-assessment. This self-assessment, however, is necessarily dialogic, even if it does not require others’ praise and blame. It also does not require the philosopher to be a wise human being, except insofar as wisdom consists in recognizing what one does not know. At the end of this chapter and in the next I will make a related point: that the desire for honor, or a commitment to the beautiful as beautiful, rather than good, is necessary at the beginning of the philosophic life, before self-assessment is possible.

\(^100\) Cf. 1123b29-1124a4 and 1129b27-30.
is the prize conferred on the most beautiful people. Honor is such a thing, since it is
indeed the greatest of external goods. The great-souled man, then, is concerned with
honor…for they deem themselves worthy of honor most of all, in accord with their worth
(1123b18-24).

Great-souledness, Aristotle continues, “seems to be like a kind of ornament (cosmos) of
the virtues, for it makes them greater and does not arise without them” (1124a1). The great-
souled person is worthy of the highest honor because he is perfectly morally virtuous. A crack in
this mirror of the great-souled person appears, however, when Aristotle says this person will feel
pleasure in a measured way from the honors he receives insofar as he receives what is
appropriate to his virtue, “or even less—for there could be no honor worthy of complete virtue,
but he will nevertheless accept it inasmuch as they have nothing greater to assign him” (1124a6-
9). The great-souled person, since he is like a god in being worthy of the highest honors, will
never in fact receive them, perhaps because they could only be bestowed by someone equally
worthy of honor.\footnote{Nietzsche shows how much he agrees with Aristotle’s comparison of the
great-souled man with a god in \textit{Genealogy of Morals}, 2.19, which could almost be a commentary
on this chapter of the \textit{NE}, especially if we consider the great-souled man as founder: “Within
the original tribal community—we are speaking of primeval times—the living generation always
recognized a juridical duty toward earlier generations, and especially toward the earliest which
founded the tribe…The conviction that reigns that it is only through the sacrifices and
accomplishments of the ancestors that the tribe \textit{exists}—and that one has to \textit{pay them back}
with sacrifices and accomplishments: one thus recognizes a \textit{debt} that constantly grows greater…
What can one give them in return? If one imagines this rude kind of logic carried to its end, then
the ancestors of the \textit{most powerful} tribes are bound eventually to grow to monstrous dimensions…
in the end the ancestor must necessarily be transfigured into a \textit{god}. Perhaps this is even the
origin of gods…” (emphasis in the text).}
worthy of a reward, i.e., something good (in this case honor); and justice is concerned with apportioning goods according to what is owed.\textsuperscript{102} The great-souled person, paradoxically, however, does not hold honor to be something very great, nor does he hold life as such to be: “he will hazard great dangers, and when he does so, he throws away his life, on the grounds that living is not worthwhile in all ways” (1124a17 and 1124b8). The great-souled person, then, seems to be perfectly virtuous because he truly acts out of the beauty of the action—he is willing to sacrifice his life, fortune, and sacred honor for the sake of his fellows, his fatherland, and, ultimately, for the sake of the beautiful (cf. 1169a15-25)—crucially, without the expectation of reward. It is the very absence of his concern for reward that makes him great-souled and worthy of the highest honor.

But immediately after saying this, Aristotle says, “He is also the sort to benefit others but is ashamed to receive a benefaction; for the former is a mark of one who is superior, the latter of one who is inferior” (1024b10, emphasis added). The great-souled person does potentially feel shame, therefore, specifically with respect to his being “marked” by superiority or inferiority. One gets the sense that were an equally honorable human being to honor him, according to what he deserves, he would be ashamed lest people think the one giving the honor were superior. In his discussion of shame, Aristotle is careful to say that shame is not a virtue because it seems more like a passion than a characteristic (\textit{hexis}), and “is defined, at any rate, as a certain fear of disrepute” (1128b10-12). This is, we should note, precisely the circumstance in which the great-

\textsuperscript{102} Cf. especially \textit{Politics} 3.12: “Justice is held by all to be a certain equality, and up to a certain point they agree with the discourses based on philosophy in which ethics has been discussed [perhaps \textit{NE} 5.6]; for they assert that justice is a certain thing for certain persons, and should be equal for equal persons. But equality in what sort of things and inequality in what sort of things—this should not be overlooked. For this involves a question, and political philosophy.”
souled person feels shame—the possible loss of the basis of the honor that defines him. Furthermore, Aristotle continues, shame “turns out to resemble the fear of terrible things, for those who feel shame blush and those who fear death turn pale. Both, then, appear in some way to be bodily…” (1128b14-15). There is a connection between fear of death and fear of a loss of one’s reputation—but what is this? Preliminarily we may note that the great-souled person is willing to die for a beautiful action; it is perhaps such beauty that takes the sting out of death because it justifies death—it gives us something for which to die. But the great-souled person is wholly devoted to the beautiful—to the action done for its own sake—to such an extent that all external goods are worthless in comparison. In this discussion of shame, consequently, Aristotle draws a distinction between human beings who appear to be morally virtuous because they are motivated by shame, and those that are truly morally virtuous because they act out of a *hexis* or steadfast characteristic of their soul, and so act virtuously for its own sake—i.e., for the sake of the beautiful. If one acts out of shame, one acts because one thinks one will obtain something good or avoid something bad for oneself—namely praise or blame from others. The morally virtuous person, however, is defined as the one who sacrifices his own good for the sake of the beautiful.

But, as I have noted, the great-souled person is apparently capable of shame, suggesting the basis of his assessment of the worth of beautiful actions is the opinions others have of them, and, therefore, the honor he will deserve in pursuing such beauty. Is Aristotle calling into

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103 This is one indication that Aristotle agrees with Diotima’s account of eros in Plato’s *Symposium*, which I will discuss in the next chapter. All beautiful deeds, insofar as they are done out of love of the beautiful, are in fact motivated by our desire not to die, and to deserve to have our beautiful deeds rewarded with immortality. This requires the belief that justice is ultimately fulfilled, and beautiful deeds are duly rewarded.
question his own account of moral virtue as distinguished from virtue-as-sense-of-shame? We can see this possibility more clearly if we turn to a passage later in the NE where Aristotle more explicitly discusses the paradox inherent in a single-minded commitment to the beautiful as the end of moral virtue. In his discussion of friendship, Aristotle says there is an *aporia* as to whether one should love oneself or another, i.e., a friend, most of all (1168a29). When we chastise those who only look to their own interest, what we really mean are those “who allot to themselves the greater share of money, honors, and bodily pleasures” (1168b15). But “if someone should always take seriously that he himself do what is just, or moderate, or whatever else accords with the virtues, and, in general, if he should secure what is beautiful for himself;” as the great-souled person does to the highest degree, “no one would say that he is a ‘self-lover’ or even blame him. But this sort of person would seem to be *more* of a self-lover,” because he grants to himself more of what is truly beautiful, *that is*, good (1168b25-30)—equating the beautiful with the good, as something that is good *for us*. Aristotle barely hints at the problem, but it is nonetheless there:

It is true, in the case of the serious person, that he does many things for the sake of both his friends and his fatherland, and even dies for them if need be: he will give up money, honors, and, in general, the goods that are fought for, thereby securing for himself what is beautiful. He would choose to feel pleasure intensely for a short time over feeling it mildly for a long one, to live nobly for one year over living in a haphazard way for many years, and to do one great and beautiful action over many small ones…But it is possible too that he forgo, in favor of his friend, the performance of certain [beautiful] actions, and that it is more beautiful for him thus to become the cause of his friend’s actions than to perform those actions himself (1169a18-34).

This is a perfect depiction of the great-souled person, who sacrifices everything for the sake of the beautiful—even his own honor. But Aristotle is revealing here a tension at the heart
of moral virtue: We think moral virtue consists both in giving up the highest goods and in appropriating the highest goods for oneself. For example, a soldier who dies for his country seems to be more virtuous than a mercenary, or a person who returns a wallet without the expectation of reward seems to be more virtuous than someone who is hoping for one, because the former does not expect to be rewarded while the latter does. In both the cases, the soldier’s and the good Samaritan’s virtue consists in part in the sacrifice of something held to be good: in the one case of his life, and in the other the contents of the wallet; but this self-sacrifice is for the sake of a higher reward—the beautiful action itself, which is performed for its own sake.

The paradox consists in the following: does this not mean, as Aristotle says here, that the most beautiful deed would be not to do a beautiful deed so that someone else could do it instead—to let someone else die for their country and instead enjoy the lesser good of a long life with one’s family? Ronna Burger notes this as well, saying, “In his [the self-loving great-souled person’s] greed for the most selfless action, he is prepared not only to give up his life, if necessary, but even to relinquish the performance of such a beautiful deed if he finds it more beautiful to be the cause of his friend performing it! The image of the beautiful self-lover stepping aside so his friend can have the glory of sacrificing himself is one of the more comic moments in the Ethics or, perhaps, tragicomic ones.” It is not simply a matter of sacrificing lower goods for higher goods, which we are calling beautiful and for their own sake. Part of the problem is that the very thing that makes an action beautiful is that we are sacrificing a good for

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104 And, as Aristotle notes in his discussion of the soldier’s sacrifice (1117b7-20), the more the soldier gives up—i.e., the more his life is not mere life but a rich and flourishing life—the more beautiful his sacrifice seems.

105 Burger, ibid., 176.
its sake—this is why Aristotle says it would be more beautiful for someone to step aside and let his friend do something beautiful. Instead, Aristotle means for us to see that the self-sacrificial aspect of beautiful actions is in permanent tension with beautiful actions seen as the highest goods—as the soldier example illustrates. If dying for one’s country is beautiful because one gives up a good—one’s life, fortune, and sacred honor—does this not mean that giving up this apparently higher good—dying for one’s country—is still more beautiful? Herein lies the problem. We should note, however, that the cause of the tension is the need for beautiful actions to sacrifice a lower good for the sake of an apparent higher good. If we ask what is truly good for a human being, and we structure our lives based on this question, no sacrifice of goods is necessary, at least *qua* sacrifice—as though to demonstrate the beauty of our actions and their honorableness. The tension remains, however, if we consider that a soldier who fights and dies out of a prudent consideration of what is truly good for him seems much less virtuous than one who tearfully leaves his family but knows he must do his duty.

This argument will perhaps be more plausible if we remember that Aristotle never says the human good or happiness are moral virtue, but merely that the human good is “in accord with virtue” (Cf. 1098a16 and 1177a12)—and even this claim is both hypothetical and based on common opinions. Furthermore, Aristotle says later in book ten that the happiness associated with moral virtue is secondary because it depends on other people, especially their opinions, (1178a11) and even seems in some cases to result from the body (1178a16).⁰⁶ But above all

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⁰⁶ In this assessment of moral virtue Aristotle seems to agree with Socrates in Plato’s *Republic* when he says, “the other virtues of the soul, as they are called, are probably somewhat close to those of the body. For they are really not there beforehand and are later produced by habits and exercises” (518d-e). David Leibowitz notes, furthermore, that Socrates hints at the same
Aristotle hints at this conclusion in his discussion of courage, with which he chooses to begin his account of the moral virtues. We are looking at the moral virtues, we should recall, because we are concerned with the human good or happiness, and this was said to be an activity of the soul in accord with virtue (1098a15). In Aristotle’s conclusion to his discussion of courage, however, he illustrates the same confusion noted above when he says that the soldier who faces death will be happier the closer he is to being perfectly courageous, even though he will be “pained at the prospect of death. For to this sort of person, living is especially worthwhile, and he is deprived of the greatest goods knowingly—and this is a painful thing. Yet he is not less courageous for that, but perhaps even more so, because he chooses what is beautiful in war instead of these” (1117b9-15). Happiness is said to be the complete human good; and yet the soldier is happy precisely because he gives up the greatest goods. But, as we have learned, he does not give them up if he is consistent in his belief that his beautiful, courageous act is in fact the greatest good. But further, if he were to realize this, he would not be courageous because, as Aristotle notes here, his courage depends, in part, on his sacrifice of the greatest goods. It is only when the confusion at the heart of moral virtue in his speech in Plato’s Apology: “Socrates points to this confusion by saying, on the one hand, that he reproaches the Athenians because they care less for virtue than they do for goods like money (29d-30a), and on the other, that he exhorts them to virtue by saying: ‘Not from money comes virtue, but from virtue comes money and all of the other good things for human beings’ (30a-b). Astonishingly, and almost in the same breath, he says that men should care above all for virtue, and for virtue for the sake of the good things it brings…Even if the best human life consisted entirely in beautiful pursuits…even so there would be no devotion. For it would still make all the difference in the world whether we cared for the beautiful chiefly for the sake of the beautiful (which is what devotion requires) or chiefly for the sake of our own happiness (which Socrates implies is true). Needless to say, we cannot do both at once. But if men are never truly devoted, they never meet the condition of deserving rewards as they understand that condition. At the core of our attachment to virtue as something ‘beautiful and good’ is a confusion—fostered by ‘the law’—about what we care for most (the beautiful or our own happiness).” (David Liebowitz, The Ironic Defense of Socrates [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010], 179, emphasis in the text.)
courageous solider simultaneously thinks that his life, his family, and bodily pleasures are great goods—and so a worthy sacrifice—and that they are not the greatest goods—that death in battle is better—that he is most completely morally virtuous, according to common opinion, because he has sacrificed his own good for the sake of the beautiful.

Even if, therefore, the great-souled person never felt ashamed in the face of being beholden to someone, and thus having his status called into question, his motivation would still be problematically “moral” in only appearing to lack consideration of one’s own good as a motivation. Additionally, however, it is perhaps telling that Aristotle mentions no individual human beings as exemplars of great-souledness in his discussion in the *NE*, only gods and peoples or cities (1124b16-18). In the *Posterior Analytics*, Aristotle gives us a slightly different take on the great-souled person, this time illustrating his account with particular cases. He discusses great-souledness as an example of how to define something, saying we should look at particular members of the species in question and try to say what the common attributes are. It may be, however, that a species called by the same name admits of two or more kinds. In the case of great-souledness, Aristotle first gives Alcibiades, Achilles, and Ajax as examples, saying their common characteristic is “intolerance of dishonor; for this made the first go to war, roused the wrath of the second, and drove the third to commit suicide.” But then Aristotle gives two more examples of great-souled men, Socrates and Lysander, to whom this characteristic does not apply. In Socrates’ case especially, we might think that the opposite applies, insofar as he does not care at all about being honored. What Aristotle says, however, is that their common characteristic is “being unaffected by good and bad fortune.” He continues, “Now I take these

107 Cf. Burger, ibid. 252n37.
two and consider what there is in common between indifference to fortune and intolerance of dishonor; and if there is nothing, there must be two kinds of great-souledness” (97b14-28). Aristotle does not say he has found two kinds, although he implies it. The distinction does not seem to be along the explicit lines he has articulated, however, but rather between those great-souled men who care about being honored and those (or that one) who do not—in this case, Socrates.

Comparing this account of great-souledness to the one in the NE, we can see how strange the latter is, if we take seriously the claim that the great-souled person does not care about honor; every example of such a man suggests he cares very much about his honor. We might say, then, that according to Aristotle’s more complete account, while moral virtue is generally explicitly or implicitly motivated by shame and a desire for honor or reputation, it points toward a perfect embodiment of moral virtue in which all actions are entirely motivated by the beautiful; but this motivation, as we have seen, contains a tension insofar as one still wishes to appropriate what one believes is truly good—the beautiful—for oneself, and thus undermines one important criterion of moral virtue, namely, the sacrifice of one’s own good. The way out of this paradox—if there is one—seems to be to subject moral virtue to the guidance of prudence, because “virtue in the authoritative sense does not arise in the absence of prudence” (1144b18). The prudent human being seems, “to be able to deliberate nobly about things good and advantageous for himself...As a result, prudence is necessarily a characteristic accompanied by reason, in possession of the truth, and bound up with action pertaining to the human goods” (1140a25-26 and 1140b20-22). Moral virtue aims at the beautiful as its end in explicit contradistinction to one’s own good, and in so doing contradicts itself. We learn here, however,
that it is only when considering the human good that the moral virtues are complete. As noted at the outset of this discussion of honor in the NE, Aristotle hints at this conclusion in the first book when he says that the honor politically active men aim at requires the approval of the prudent, who would themselves require no such recognition (1095b25-28).

It seems, then, that although moral virtue, in being for the sake of the beautiful, points toward a great-souled person all of whose actions are purely for this end, no morally virtuous person who is simply morally virtuous can escape the dependence of moral virtue on the opinions of others. This seems only to be true, however, if moral virtue is “citizen” virtue—i.e., if virtue is reducible to shame before the city’s blame and beauty is reducible to the honor or praise the city bestows. The only way for this not to be the case, however, is for honor, i.e., others’ recognition of one’s worth, not to be a consideration at all, because one is able to judge for oneself whether or not one is virtuous. The honorableness of first philosophy, then, is only relevant if we are pursuing this knowledge out of a sense of beauty or self-sacrifice; i.e., if we think by devoting our lives to philosophy we will merit the highest honor, due to a god, or if we are seeking the approval of those who truly know the human good—i.e., the prudent. If we pursue wisdom simply out of love, however, and out of a prudent regard for our own good, the honor we do or do not receive is irrelevant.

I have indicated above that Aristotle’s calling first philosophy honorable may be for the sake of alerting his readers to their confused motivations for pursuing the philosophic life. We should remember, however, that the honorableness of the knowledge they are seeking depends on first philosophy being theological—it depends on the highest cause being a god. In order to provide a more complete account of Aristotle’s pedagogical intent, and to investigate further why
this sort of knowledge is most worthy of honor and is divine, I will turn in the next chapter to Aristotle’s discussion of the eternal, unmoved, separate mover that he calls a god.
Eros for the Unmoved Mover: Love of the Beautiful or Love of the Good?

In the previous chapter I examined Aristotle’s account of honor in the *NE* and how it relates to moral virtue pursued for its own sake, that is, for the sake of the beautiful, in order to illuminate why Aristotle calls first philosophy the most honorable study. I concluded that, according to Aristotle, there is a tension at the heart of moral virtue that is not guided by the question of the best life—by a prudent concern for the human good. According to common opinion, actions are morally virtuous when they are done without the expectation of reward; but this implies that one is sacrificing something that is truly good, although for a higher good—namely the beautiful action itself. The tension consists in the fact, however, that part of what makes an action beautiful is giving up something good for that action. This means that if we give up an even better good—the beautiful action itself—this will be even more morally virtuous. Consequently, it would apparently be more morally virtuous to give up one’s chance to die for one’s country so that someone else could sacrifice her life. Sacrifice of a good, then, cannot sensibly be a necessary component of the human good, at least *qua* sacrifice—allowing that prudence may require one to give up lesser or immediate goods for a larger or long-term end. Insofar as the beautiful consists, according to common opinion, in the sacrifice of the good for the beautiful, however, Aristotle in effect points out that we mistakenly assume the sacrificial aspect of the beautiful to be a necessary part of the good, which is not necessarily the case.
In the first part of this chapter I will examine Aristotle’s account of the divine unmoved mover in order to see why it seems to be a beautiful end, worth pursuing for its own sake as honorable. In so doing, I will note Aristotle’s description of this unmoved mover as an erotic object. In the second part I will turn to Aristotle’s Politics and Plato’s Symposium to examine why Aristotle says the unmoved mover causes motion as an erotic object, which will ultimately shed further light on the motivations of Aristotle’s audience in pursuing first philosophy.

According to Aristotle’s account in book Epsilon, the unmoved mover must exist and have its divine character in order for us to be certain that other beings exist as separate substances. When we look at each particular natural thing that exists—each horse, for example—we somehow know, even without articulating the fact, that they share certain characteristics, which we could go on to list. When we say a horse is sick or dies prematurely or was malformed by a genetic mutation, we imply that it falls short of the idea of a horse that all horses somehow approach—this is the nature of a horse, which is also its completion or perfection (teleion). In this way, the perfection of a horse is a cause of the existence of particular horses; it is a cause insofar as all horses “want” or “strive” to be perfect horses through their activity as being-horses. And in an analogous way, all particular beings point toward something that exists—whose activity is pure activity. For this reason, as Joe Sachs explains, “Being as being is not the lowest common denominator of all that is, universal because nothing lacks it, but
the highest, divine, kind of being, universal because everything else depends on it for its being.”

How do we know, however, that the unmoved mover exists? Up to book Lambda, where Aristotle begins his explicit discussion of the unmoved mover, he has repeatedly indicated that we do not know whether or not such an entity exists. This is perfectly consistent with the manner of Aristotle’s argument: the unmoved mover requires proof, which Aristotle will provide later, but for the time being he shows us what would be necessary for us to possess certain knowledge of causes, which is the end of first philosophy. At the same time, however, Aristotle prepares us to scrutinize this proof when he highlights the fact that we do not yet know if there is such an eternal, motionless, and separate being.

When Aristotle finally begins his discussion of the unmoved mover, he merely posits it: the divine unmoved mover is what we need to know in order to know beings beyond further questioning. It will help to go through Aristotle’s argument. Whereas Aristotle has said in book Kappa that there is a sort of knowledge that is different from natural science and mathematics, and that he will “try to show” (1064a34) that there exists a separate and motionless substance, he now says, “one must say” that it is necessary for there to be some everlasting motionless

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108 Joe Sachs note in Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. Joe Sachs (Santa Fe: Green Lion Press, 2002), 111n5. Also cf. ibid. 53n2: “…being as such belongs only to the highest kind of being. Only it could have the attribute of being in its own right, rather than incidentally or derivatively.”

109 1026a17, 1064a34.

110 Aristotle leaves out “eternal” in this apparent restatement or summary of his argument in Epsilon regarding how first philosophy differs from natural science and mathematics.

111 The word is *lekteon*, which is the emphatic verbal adjective form of the word meaning “to speak.” It has the same root as *logos*, and so a variety of meanings may be implied. According to Liddell and Scott, however, the verb form almost always simply means “to say” or “to assert” rather than to argue, give an account, or reason, as *logos* does.
Aristotle has indicated earlier that it would be “strange” (atopon) for there not to be a substance of this sort, because “it seems” (eoike) that there is one, and because “the most refined” (chariestaton) human beings have sought such a substance; for how else would there be order? (1060a20-27). In this place, then, Aristotle bases the existence of the unmoved mover on the opinion of “the refined,” a group he distinguishes from “the wise” in the NE and for whose opinions he indicates there he has limited respect. This link between the opinions of the refined and the existence of the unmoved mover should give us pause, except that Aristotle justifies it by pointing to the order we see in nature. We should observe, however, that he asks this as a question: if there is no being that is responsible for the orderly motion of the planets and the fact that only dogs are born to dogs and humans to humans, how else do we explain these things?

In Lambda, however, he says we must say it is necessary for there to be such a substance. This is because, Aristotle explains, we must be able to account for motion and time,

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112 Christopher Bruell (ibid., p. 250) points to this distinction.
113 Cf. NE 1095a19-22, 1095b22-1096a5; Aristotle at first distinguishes the refined from “the many” but then subtly groups them together when he distinguishes the many from the wise. Also cf. Stephen Salkever, “Whose Prayer? The Best Regime of Book 7 and the Lessons of Aristotle’s Politics,” Political Theory, 35, no. 1 (2007): 40: “in Book 1 [of the NE], 1095b, the belief that honor is the highest good is attributed to the refined people rather than to the many, who care only for pleasure. Later in the NE, however, Aristotle defends pleasure as an essential element of human happiness or flourishing (eudaimonia; 7.13), and identifies the love of honor with "the many."” (Cf. NE 8.8, 1159a11-12).
114 Bruell (ibid., 250-251) indicates, as I have, that according to Aristotle, “it is upon a principle of this sort [i.e., that the unmoved mover exists] that heaven (or the perceptible whole) and nature depend” (1072b13-14). The implication is that philosophy as the study of nature depends on the existence of such a substance. Bruell goes on to say, however, “we will depart so far from his injunction” that one must say that it is necessary for there to be an unmoved mover, “as to refrain from adding to [his remarks], as elliptical as they are. We would be even less capable of doing so than the prophet who, after his manner, has warned us against any such attempt
which are eternal, and so must have an eternal mover. Furthermore, this mover must not only be capable of moving things, its whole substance—its very being—must be activity, i.e., it must be always the same and, while motionless itself, it must be active in causing the motion of the cosmos; otherwise motion and time would not be eternal, “since what has being in potency admits of not being” (1071b3-20).

There is an impasse, however, that proves to be the crux of the problem of the divine unmoved mover. It might seem that potency (dynamis) takes precedence over activity (energeia) because not everything is always active, even though everything that is is capable (i.e., has the potency) of being active (1071b24). Aristotle has explained earlier that the material that underlies each thing is pure potency; when a tree rots and is eaten by termites, the material goes from one active state—a tree—to another—a termite—because the underlying material is itself potency, ready to be stamped with one form or another (cf. L.2 as a whole). Form, on the other hand, is itself activity, because it is that which causes a thing to keep being that thing (1050b2)—

(Proverbs 30.1-6).” He means us to take this, I believe, as an admission of humility before Aristotle’s superior genius. But if one looks at the verses from Proverbs he cites, we can discern Bruell’s likelier, and helpful, interpretation. Agur is speaking to God, and says he is surely too stupid to be human, for he lacks human understanding. He has no knowledge of the heavens, winds, waters, or earth, and asks the name of the one who does. He ends by saying, “Every word of God proves true; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him. Do not add to his words, or else he will rebuke you, and you will be found a liar.” In saying he will not add to Aristotle’s words, Bruell equates Aristotle with God. But Agur’s warning is against the very attempt that Aristotle is making—to attempt to know what God knows but has not revealed to human beings; i.e., to “add to his words.” Bruell seems playfully to be suggesting that the only reason not to follow Aristotle and attempt to explain why he merely asserts there to be an unmoved mover, is if we take him simply as authoritative, as though he were a god handing us the revealed truth. We may thus see Aristotle’s god-like declaration as a provocation to question him, rather than to obey him, remembering that he is not a god.

115 Aristotle elaborates the necessity of an unmoved mover in book 8 of his Physics, which he roughly summarizes here in Metaphysics L.6.
the form of a tree is that which maintains it as a tree. We may restate the impasse, then, in the following terms: the possible forms that matter can take are more numerous than the actual forms they do take, and so the primary phenomenon would seem to be potency (or matter) rather than activity (or form). For this reason, we might even think that material causes form—that the forms of horses, trees, and human beings we see are epiphenomenal to the deeper cause of matter in motion or atoms colliding in a void. The problem with this, Aristotle continues, is that it once again fails to account for the phenomenon of constant motion: “surely if this were so, there would be no beings at all, since it is possible to be capable of being and not be” (1071b25). That is to say, we must be able to account for the fact that matter is grouped into different forms— why are there planets and cows and human beings, rather than just a heap of formless matter?

Aristotle further illustrates this impasse by saying that the theologians and the physicists, who generate all things out of night and who say “all things were together,” respectively, face the same impossibility, “for material itself, at any rate, will not set itself in motion, but a craftsman will cause it to…” (1071b28-30). The theologian in question is Hesiod, and the quotation from his *Theogony* runs as follows: “First of all there came Chaos…From Chaos was born Erebos, the dark, and black Night, and from Night again Aither and Day…” (116-125). We might read this as saying, metaphorically, that disorder (chaos) leads to ignorance (night), which then leads to knowledge (aither and day). This implies that what we call knowledge is in fact mere opinion built on the deepest ignorance, which is a permanent and complete ignorance, rather than a spur to seek (true) knowledge—all things come from night, and so the quest for knowledge is futile

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116 Why does Aristotle mistakenly say that Hesiod claims all things come from night, rather than chaos? This is especially strange when we consider that Aristotle correctly quotes this same passage earlier in the text (984b28).
because there is no knowledge. If potency were to take precedence over activity, Aristotle is saying, knowledge would ultimately be not only impossible to possess, but impossible to pursue, because there would be no object of knowledge—there would be no substances that actively maintain themselves such that we can know them. There would only be matter in motion, onto which we project form as a construct of the human mind. The other quotation either comes from Anaxagoras or Empedocles,\textsuperscript{117} and, Aristotle suggests, implies the same thing, namely, the impossibility of philosophy understood as certain knowledge of the causes of beings, because it does not explain how beings will become differentiated into separate substances.

Part of the difficulty, however, is that Anaxagoras et al. do have a way of accounting for the way in which potency takes precedence over activity, while allowing for the differentiation of species, as Aristotle acknowledges immediately:

Now to suppose that potency takes precedence over activity is in a sense right but in a sense not right (and in what sense has been said); and Anaxagoras testifies that activity takes precedence (since intellect is an activity), as does Empedocles with love and strife…therefore there was not chaos or night for an infinite time, but the same things have always been so, either in a cycle or in some other way, if activity takes precedence over potency. (1072a3-9).

\textsuperscript{117}Aristotle refers to the same doctrine at 1069b22, where he equates it with those of Empedocles, Anaximander, and Democritus (as well as his own doctrine of matter and form). I follow Sachs in reading “all things together” as an alternate rendering of Anaxagoras’ “one”. Tredennick and Armstrong in the Loeb read the passage as attributing the doctrine to Empedocles. The doctrines of the physiologists, at this point in the text, are deliberately conflated. It is helpful to recall the \textit{Theaetetus} and \textit{Sophist}: both together suggest that the seemingly opposite doctrines of Parmenides (who spoke of all as one) and Protagoras (who thought there was no “one” because man is the measure of all things) end in the same result, namely, that falsehood is impossible, and so all opinions are equally true—philosophy as investigation of what is true is impossible because there is nothing between ignorance and knowledge. This assumes, of course, that by “man is the measure” Protagoras meant each man, rather than mankind and his intellect together with logos.
As Aristotle implies here, the way in which potency takes precedence over activity is in time (cf. also Theta 1049b12ff). That is to say, for example, a human being is a substance that is at work maintaining its nature, but he came into being out of prior material that was only potentially a human being (the food he ate, his parents’ egg and sperm). By invoking Anaxagoras’s idea that intellect is the cause of all things, but that this intellect is posterior in time, Aristotle seems to imply that Anaxagoras means the human intellect is the cause of all things. Earlier in Lambda Aristotle even suggests his partial agreement with Anaxagoras:

“…everything comes into being from what is, though from what is potentially but is not at work. And this is Anaxagoras’s ‘one,’ since it is better than ‘everything together,’” and it is also the ‘mixture’ spoken of by Empedocles and Anaximander, and what Democritus is talking about, but for us it is ‘all things were in potency, but not at work” (1069b20-25). He even more strongly suggests such possible agreement when he says in the quotation just above that Anaxagoras’s interpretation of a human active intellect as the cause of beings implies, “therefore there was not chaos or night for an infinite time, but the same things have always been so…” (1072a8). Even the eternity of beings that are always the same is compatible with their only truly existing as a result of the human mind grasping them. As David Bolotin reminds us, priority and causality are not restricted to time, but may also be in terms of knowledge. The account given by the physicists and the poets, as Aristotle implies here, is that human intellect is required for beings to exist in the fullest sense of being true: “For you are not pale because we think truly that you are

[118] David Bolotin, An Approach to Aristotle’s Physics (New York: SUNY Press, 1998), 41, 50n23. Bolotin continues: “In the light of this need for mind if there is to be being in the fullest sense, one can also interpret the claim that mind would be a prior cause of this whole, even on the hypothesis that it first came to be from chance, as a claim that what is responsible for the completeness of this world is a more important cause than that of its mere beginnings.”
pale, but rather it is because you are pale that we who say so speak the truth” (1051b8). It is not that the poets and the physicists necessarily think that the human mind constructs the world; rather, the human mind is necessary in order for the world truly to be.\textsuperscript{119}

Given that Aristotle’s own account of the priority of activity to potency and being as truth seems to be compatible with this alternative account of the order we see in the cosmos, why does Aristotle only hint at this alternative—more explicitly accusing his adversaries of a kind of relativism—and why does he go on to argue for a divine unmoved mover as the cause of being as substance? One reason may be seen if we look at what Aristotle says earlier about Anaxagoras in particular, but by implication the very same poets and physiologists who say that all comes from night and all was together. These same physiologists, he says, assume “that knowledge is sense perception,” which led Anaxagoras to remark bluntly “to some of his friends…that beings would be for them however they conceive them,” and so implied that the search for the cause of beings is futile. Aristotle compares this remark to Homer’s making Hector, “when he was knocked out

\textsuperscript{119} Further evidence that Aristotle has this possibility in mind—even if he does not adopt it as his own—may be found by comparing two sections of the \textit{Metaphysics}: “Since being as the true and nonbeing as the false concern combining and separating, and the whole topic concerns the division of a pair of contradictories…since the false and the true are not in things…but in thinking…both being as what is incidental and being as what is true must be set aside. For the cause of the one is indeterminate and of the other is some attribute of thinking” (1027b18-1028a3). “…being and not being are meant in one sense by reference to the various ways of attributing being, and in another by reference to the potency or activity of these or their opposites, but the most governing sense is the true or the false, and…this as applied to particular things depends on combining and separating, in such a way that one who thinks that what is separated is separated and what is combined is combined thinks truly…” (1051a34-1051b6). Bruell (ibid., 250) notes the same possibility: “There is indeed a sense in which man could be understood to be the single highest cause of all things and their moving cause…And one could even claim some Anaxagorean support for the suggestion that it is the mind whose home is man which is the first moving cause, insofar as it is responsible for the articulation presupposed by all perceptible change.”

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by a blow, like ‘thinking changed thoughts,’ as though even those who are delirious are thinking, just not the same things.” The result of either a poet or a philosopher (if there is even a difference between the two) saying that the search for knowledge is futile is “most harsh: for if those who most of all have seen the truth that is accessible—and these are those who seek it and love\textsuperscript{120} it most—if they have such opinions and declare these things about truth, how will this not be enough to make those who are trying to philosophize lose heart (\textit{athumesai})? For seeking the truth would be a wild goose chase” (100912-1010a1). To say the human mind is the organizing principle of the cosmos is not the same as to say beings are simply subjective and vary depending on who sees them; the one allows for philosophy of a certain sort, while the other does not, because the one allows for a stable account of nature (if not absolute, unchanging natures) while the other does not. But for “those who are trying to philosophize,” perhaps those who are just starting out, such a subtlety may prove too much. Aristotle’s suppression of the alternative reading of the physiological-poetic account of the cosmos seems to be for pedagogical purposes—to prevent his readers from losing heart.

Following his brief account of the reasons why there must be a first cause of motion that is activity rather than potency, Aristotle says, “But since it is possible for it to be this way [i.e., for activity to take precedence over potency], and if it is not this way things will come from night

\textsuperscript{120}This statement applies to all those Aristotle has mentioned, including Homer. This is perhaps the strongest evidence that, despite appearances, Aristotle does not draw a sharp distinction between poets and philosophers; or, rather, the best poets are philosophers, according to Aristotle, if a philosopher is one who has seen the truth that is accessible, and seeks and loves the truth. Aristotle would thus agree with Plato’s Socrates in the tenth book of the \textit{Republic}—both insofar as he sees a need to play at quarreling with the poets, but also insofar as he does not see such a great disagreement in fact. Cf. Timothy Burns, “Philosophy and Poetry: A New Look at an Old Quarrel,” \textit{APSR} 109, no. 2 (2015):326-338.
and from ‘all things together’ and from not-being, these questions could be resolved” (1072a19-21, emphasis added). This statement immediately precedes Aristotle’s description of the life of the divine unmoved mover. Does Aristotle simply invent a god who is a cause in order to prevent us from despairing at ever finding knowledge and giving up on the philosophic life? I propose that he does not, but neither is this god what it at first appears to be. It is in fact the highest object of eros in disguise. Following his assertion that the unmoved cause of motion must be activity and not potency, Aristotle says, “what is desired (orektos) and what is thought (noeton) cause motion in that way: not being in motion, they cause motion…what is yearned for is what seems beautiful, while what is wished for primarily is what is beautiful; but we desire something because of the way it seems, rather than its seeming so because we desire it…” (1072a25-28). This god is the object of desire (orektos), and thought (noeton), and we desire it because it seems beautiful. “And,” Aristotle concludes, “it causes motion in the manner of something loved (eromenon), and by means of what is moved moves other things” (1072a25-1072b4). The word used for “something loved” here means something loved erotically. This god, then, is a partial response to the first line of the Metaphysics: all human beings by nature desire to know, but, more specifically, erotic desire for knowledge is for the most beautiful knowledge. As Sachs notes, however, Aristotle describes the beautiful as the ultimate object of moral virtue in the NE (1115b13), in contradistinction to the good.\(^{121}\) The best life, however, is supposed to be the good life, even if (or because) it is in accord with moral virtue (cf. NE 1098a16-18; 1077a15-18). Aristotle seems to suggest, then, that this god is yearned for, wished for, and erotically loved because it is beautiful, not because it is good. This is because this

beautiful object of knowledge is that which would answer, once and for all, the fundamental question of what it is for something to be; it would also definitively resolve the question of whether or not philosophy as the pursuit of certainty regarding causes is possible, while at the same time completing philosophy and transforming it into wisdom. Even more importantly for our purposes, however, by depicting the divine unmoved mover as beautiful and the object of moral virtue, Aristotle may be warning us, his audience, that our erotic attachment to this beautiful object indicates we harbor the same confusion discussed above that lies at the heart of moral virtue that is not guided by prudence—i.e., that is not guided by a consideration for the best life, but is instead motivated by the assumption that by pursuing the beautiful one will merit the good.

In order to understand further why Aristotle depicts the unmoved mover as an erotic and beautiful object, and in order to see the connection between erotic attachment and moral virtue, it will help to examine the few places where Aristotle discusses this subject. These places, as we will see, point us in the direction of Plato’s Symposium, which I will subsequently discuss.

II. A

Aristotle rarely discusses eros—a notable absence considering the important role eros plays in Plato’s writings,¹²² but also by its presence in such a prominent place in the Metaphysics. One of the few places where Aristotle does discuss eros in any detail is in his

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¹²² Most obviously in the Symposium, as I will discuss below, but also as the motive for both the philosopher and the tyrant in the Republic (and, hence, for all human beings, in a more or less sublimated form), and the one thing in which Socrates is expert, besides knowing his ignorance.
discussion of friendship in books eight and nine of the NE. The bulk of his account, however, ranges from slightly derogatory to outright comedic. Aristotle gives us a hint as to what he might mean, however, when he provides the following depiction of erotic love:

Goodwill seems, therefore, to be the beginning of friendship, just as the pleasure stemming from sight (opsos) is the beginning of erotic love. For no one falls in love who is not first pleased by someone’s appearance (idea)—though a person who delights in another’s looks (eidei) does not for all that fall in love, except whenever he also yearns for the person who is absent and desires his presence (1167a3-8).

If we take this depiction of eros and attempt to apply it literally to Aristotle’s account of the unmoved mover, several questions arise. If the unmoved mover moves first some things and then, through them, other things in this way, as a literal cause of the motion of the heavenly sphere, for example, how are we to understand this heavenly sphere as finding pleasure in the sight of the unmoved mover? If, on the other hand, we interpret the unmoved mover as the final cause of the being and hence the knowability of substances, as Aristotle seems to indicate at the end of Lambda (Metaph. 1076a4-6), how are we to understand these substances as “yearning” (pothe) for the being that is the cause of their own being—a being which, on this account, is absent? As indicated in the previous section, the metaphor begins to make more sense if we think of the unmoved mover as something absent that moves us in this way, particularly if we remember that Aristotle begins the Metaphysics with an appeal to the love we have of our senses, especially sight. It is sight in particular that draws us by nature toward knowing (980a21-24).

We might say, tentatively, that Aristotle provides his readers with a beautiful but absent object of erotic love in the form of the unmoved mover—absent because merely stipulated as necessary for complete knowledge. Such a poetic stipulation might be necessary for bolstering the courage
of young philosophers to continue their studies without becoming disillusioned by the absence of such a clearly defined answer.\textsuperscript{123}

Even if this is a more adequate understanding of why Aristotle uses \textit{eros} in his discussion of the unmoved mover, we are left to wonder what the next stage is, once this beautiful object of \textit{eros} is unmasked as a propaedeutic. Is a philosopher only concerned with knowing beautiful things? The young Socrates in the \textit{Parmenides} thinks there are only forms of beautiful things, and not of hair, mud, or dirt, because, according to Parmenides, “you are still young…and philosophy has not yet grabbed you as it will, in my opinion. Then you will dishonor none of these things…”\textsuperscript{124} Aristotle seems to agree with Parmenides when he says, in the \textit{Parts of Animals}, that, although knowledge of eternal things would bring more pleasure than knowledge of plants and animals, “just as the pleasure of a fleeting and partial glimpse of those whom we love (\textit{eromenon}) is greater than an accurate view of other things,” nevertheless, we can know plants and animals better, and so “our knowledge of them has the advantage over the other.”

This is especially true because, “for the student who is naturally of a philosophic spirit and can

\textsuperscript{123} In this Aristotle may fit Nietzsche’s depiction of certain philosophers: “A confidential question: Even the claim that they possessed wisdom, which has been made here and there on earth by philosophers, the maddest and most immodest of all claims—has it not always been to date, in India as well as in Greece, \textit{a screen above all}? At times perhaps a screen chosen with pedagogical intent, which hallows so many lies; one has a tender regard for those still in the process of becoming, of growing—for disciples, who must often be defended against themselves by means of faith in a person (by means of an error)” (Nietzsche, \textit{Gay Science}, trans. Walter Kaufmann, [New York: Vintage Books, 1974], 359, emphasis in the text). Aristotle’s concern for his disciples may be seen in the section, quoted above, where he chastises Anaxagoras for speaking too bluntly (1009b27). David Bolotin (ibid., 152-153) suggests similarly that Aristotle’s contradictions in the \textit{Physics} are both for the sake of redeeming the possibility of natural science, but also for pointing the way toward political philosophy as necessary for understanding nature.

\textsuperscript{124} Plato, \textit{Parmenides}, 130c-e.
discern the causes of things, nature which fashioned them provides pleasures which cannot be measured.” As a way of further illustrating this, Aristotle recounts the story of some visitors who called on Heraclitus and hesitated when they saw him warming his hands at the fire. Heraclitus said, “Come in; don’t be afraid; there are gods even here.”

It seems, then, that philosophy can do without the beautiful, even if it needs it at the outset, as both the Parmenides and Aristotle’s positing of a beautiful god in the Metaphysics suggest. Does the philosopher need eros, though? Once again, we must ask what eros is, according to Aristotle, in order to address this question. Michael Davis suggests that Aristotle’s more thoroughgoing, although submerged, account of eros may be found in book five of his Politics. This book, which examines the destruction and preservation of regimes, is more particularly about the sources of factional conflict (stasis) and revolution (metabole). As Davis notes, however, these words can also be translated as “rest” and “motion.” We may thus read Aristotle’s own account of his investigation in book 5 as saying, “Since we are investigating the things from which both rest and motion affecting regimes arise, one must first grasp their principles and causes in a general way” (Politics 1302a17-19). “The principles and causes of rest and motion,” however, is precisely Aristotle’s definition of nature (cf. Physics, 192b21-23 and Metaph. 1025b19-21). He is investigating, then, the nature of the regime and its movement. The general cause of revolutions, Aristotle says, is a sense of injustice, which is also the cause of regimes arising in the first place (cf. 1301a27-29 and 1302a24-31). Human beings fight with one another for profit and honor, he continues, but “not in order to acquire them for themselves, as

125 Aristotle, Parts of Animals, 644b30-645a24.
126 Cf. Davis ibid., 87-99.
was said earlier, but because they see others aggrandizing themselves,” i.e., because they perceive an injustice. Aristotle goes on to list other causes (hubris, fear, preeminence, contempt, disproportionate growth, electioneering, underestimation, dissimilarity, and “small things”), but they all reduce to a sense of injustice.

As Davis notes, however, Aristotle’s examples in this book are curiously and consistently sexual. It is the perceived injustice surrounding erotic desire, Aristotle seems to say, that is the first cause of the foundation and destruction of regimes. In contrast to Politics book 3, where Aristotle defines democracy and oligarchy in terms of positive definitions of justice according to each (cf. 3.9), these regimes in book 5 are, “negatively determined” as a result of perceived injustice. This implies that all politics is a reaction to some threat, and so, Davis suggests, “the question is, ‘What is the threat?’ The answer has something to do with human sexuality in its connection with our awareness of our own partiality.”

We are partial because we need the city; as Aristotle says earlier in the Politics, “one who is incapable of sharing or who is in need of nothing through being self-sufficient is no part of a city, and so is either a beast or a god” (1253a28-29). In particular, the city promises to be a whole that is greater than its parts; it promises to complete us by providing us with an end that is beyond the individual, as Aristotle implies when he says “the city is thus prior by nature to the household and to each of us. For the whole must of necessity be prior to the part” as a body is prior to a foot or a hand (1253a20-22). As Aristotle argues later on, however, (when seeming to argue against Socrates in the Republic) cities are not wholes like bodies (1261a17) because they are made up of a diverse multitude. On

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127 Davis, ibid., 89-90.
128 Davis, ibid., 92.
the one hand, then, we want the city to be an organic whole of which we can be a part insofar as it would complete us and give us a clear purpose; and on the other we recognize how monstrously inhuman this would be, because destructive of our particularity. More precisely, we seek to be complete through political participation—complete in the sense of engaging in our best natural activity—but also recognize that we can never be complete in this way. Aristotle recognizes, however, that this depiction of political participation also applies to *eros*:

> …we suppose affection (*philia*) to be the greatest of good things for cities, for in this way they would least of all engage in factional conflict (*stasis*); and Socrates praises above all the city’s being one, which is held to be, and which he asserts to be, the work of affection—just as in the discourses on love [i.e., Plato’s *Symposium*] we know that Aristophanes speaks of lovers who from an excess of affection (*philia*) ‘desire to grow together,’ the two of them becoming one (Politics 1262b8-13).

Aristotle does not say *eros* here, but *philia*, even though, we may assume, he knows very well that Aristophanes’s speech, as well as the whole discussion in the *Symposium*, concerns *eros*, not *philia*. In replacing *eros* with *philia*, Aristotle perhaps means to indicate that politics would be a solution to the problem we face in erotic longing if friendship were the same as *eros*—but it is not. The city is an imperfect stand-in for *eros* because it holds out the hope for wholeness that *eros* desires. In this way, however, the city competes with *eros* for citizens’ loyalty. The result of an erotic city would perhaps be something like a single organism along the lines of Aristophanes’s conjoined lovers—a monstrosity Aristotle rejects as impossible earlier in this same discussion, as noted above. Apparently, according to Aristotle, the city itself cannot be an object of erotic desire—perhaps an indication that the city is not as natural as Aristotle would
otherwise have us believe. Because Aristotle points us toward Plato’s Symposium as a way of understanding eros, I will now turn to that dialogue for further illumination.

II. B

Although there are seven speeches on eros in the Symposium, I will restrict myself to Aristophanes’s and Socrates’s speeches, partly because these are the ones to which Aristotle points us, but also because they are the most helpful regarding the connection between eros and philosophy.

The core of Aristophanes’s speech has to do with eros as a means of healing, or at least mitigating, human unhappiness. Aristophanes begins by pointing out eros’s power (dynamis, 189c), saying that if human beings had realized just how powerful eros is, they would have made the greatest sacrifices to him—the implication being that human beings ultimately worship power. It is only through eros that we are able to deal with a sickness we have, unhappiness, the nature of which he goes on to describe in the following terms. He says that there were originally three sexes, male, female, and androgynous, each with a whole round body resulting from their origins in the sun, earth, and moon respectively. Through thinking proud thoughts and awareness of their strength, they attempted to assault the Olympian gods. As punishment, Zeus

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129 Leo Strauss argues Diotima indicates in her speech in the Symposium that, “There is no eros for the polis and, hence, not for moral virtue and political prudence. For moral virtue and political prudence depend essentially on the polis, and the polis is not natural. It is constituted by an arbitrary selection from the natural whole, the human species, toward which eros is directed—procreation” (Leo Strauss, On Plato’s Symposium [Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2001], 242).
cut humans in two. But because they so desired to grow together into their other half, these half-humans spent all their time trying to fuse back together and began to die off. Because the gods require humans’ sacrifices, they could not let them die off, so Zeus turned their sex organs toward the front, arranging it so that they could reproduce in this way instead of in the ground like cicadas as they had before, “so that in embracing, if a man meets with a woman, they might generate and the race continue; and if male meets with male, there might at least be satiety in their being together” (191c).

We should note, however, that while Zeus gave humans the ability to procreate or satisfy their erotic longing to be together by turning their genitals toward each other, he did not give them this desire as such. This desire, Aristophanes says, is “inborn in themselves, Eros for one another—Eros, the bringer-together of their ancient nature, who tries to make one out of two and to heal their human nature” (191c). As Leo Strauss points out, this means that eros is fundamentally rebellious against the Olympian gods—it is impious, at least vis-à-vis the Olympian gods, according to Aristophanes, insofar as it is the desire to restore our original nature in which we could challenge these gods. Less mythologically, this means that eros is in tension with the law; it is a desire for a kind of state of nature prior to the advent of civilizing law. For this reason, Aristophanes goes on to say, the manliest men who love other men enter politics: ironically, it is in the polis that we come closest to achieving this original power, and expressing our desire for honor (192a), even though the eros that allows politically-inclined men to do this is anti-political, insofar as it is a desire for power that must transcend the established law.

\textsuperscript{130} Cf. Strauss, ibid., 127.
But eros so imagined becomes something that is not a part of human nature, but is rather a means to attaining this nature, and, once reached, would become superfluous, as Aristophanes admits at the outset (189d). The desire for power is fundamental, not eros, which is a desire for the state of nature in which we can fully exercise that power. That eros is not simply sexual desire is illustrated, Aristophanes continues, by every pair of lovers. If one were to ask them what they want from each other, “no one would be of the opinion that it was sexual intercourse that was wanted, as though it were for this reason—of all things—that each so enjoys being with the other in great earnestness; but the soul of each plainly wants something else” (192b). The object of erotic desire is to be one or whole, and “the cause of this is that this was our ancient nature and we were wholes. So love is the name for the desire and pursuit of the whole” (193a). Eros is a constant reminder of our pride and the injustice we perpetrated against the gods (193a); nevertheless, “in the future he [Eros] offers the greatest hopes, while we offer piety to the gods, to restore us to our ancient nature by his healing making us blessed and happy” (193d). We must “piously” hope for the restoration of our original nature through Eros—so that we can once again be in a position to be impious toward the Olympian gods. This is why we must be pious toward eros, according to Aristophanes, not necessarily (or only superficially) toward the Olympian gods. Such an end is impossible, however: we might achieve such wholeness temporarily in sexual embrace, or in political participation, or perhaps in poetic activity that consists of whole actions,\textsuperscript{131} but we will never again achieve our full nature as offspring of our original divine parents.

\textsuperscript{131} Cf. Aristotle, \textit{Poetics} 1450b.
We can all recognize to some extent the illness Aristophanes diagnoses—that we are somehow not quite at home in the world, and the closest thing to home many of us find is a lover, but that this homelessness can be helped by other attempts at making a whole—through politics or poetry. What is less clear is what he means by our original state of wholeness. We should remember that Aristophanes began by saying eros is a helper of human beings with an illness, the healing of which would lead to the greatest human happiness (189d); there is no indication that eros in fact heals the illness. This illness, as we said, seems to be the insufficiency that necessitates both the city and the family. But according to Aristophanes’s myth, this insufficiency is ultimately the result of our desire for power or our proud thoughts that lead us to think that we deserve more than our share. We desire to dominate each other, but we also need each other to live; it is thus only through weakness that we are forced to channel this desire through eros for another, however beautiful this love might appear. Our original state, which is also our natural state, is one of thoroughgoing desire for domination—a desire that has no apparent end.\(^{132}\) Aristophanes’s account of eros reflects this when he says eros “is the name for the desire and pursuit of the whole” (193a)—not to know the whole but, presumably, to possess it.

In his speech, Socrates argues, on the contrary, that eros is not “of a half or of a whole—unless, comrade, that half or whole can be presumed to be really good” (205e). What Aristophanes had left out of his account is the observation that even the most perfect tyrant does

\(^{132}\) In this way Aristophanes seems to agree with Hobbes insofar as it is the prior human tendency to take from others—whether because of pride or because we desire the goods others have—that forces us to accept the social contract. This is because outside the city in the state of nature (i.e., according to nature) we would kill each other for goods and for honor, or preemptively to avoid being killed for these reasons.
not desire domination simply; desire for power is for the sake of something we hold to be
good—pleasure, honor, knowledge—and ultimately for the sake of happiness. Despite
Aristophanes’s depiction of eros as the longing for a state of nature prior to the city—prior to the
law embodied in the Olympian gods—when we were free of the law and able to exert our
dominance, Aristophanes’s eros shares something fundamental with the city, namely, love of
one’s own rather than desire for the good, as Socrates’s objection to Aristophanes’s speech
makes clear. Erotic love of another is “unconditional”—i.e., regardless of whether or not our
beloved is good. Patriotism is the same: the patriot loves his country because it is his, he belongs
there, regardless of what regime is in power or what the regime has done. As we will see,
Socrates’s account of eros is far more radical because he depicts it as being of what is good for
us, rather than of what is beautiful or what is an extension of ourselves, i.e., our own. In so
doing, he allows for the possibility of philosophic eros, something that is implicitly impossible in
Aristophanes’s account.

Before turning to Socrates’s speech, we should note first that he mostly speaks through
Diotima, a foreign woman who, he says, taught him about erotics (201d), and his younger self—
whose responses are not necessarily those the older Socrates would give. Why does he do this?
Socrates says that when “the stranger” quizzed him, he “came pretty near, in speaking to her, to
saying the same sort of things that Agathon said to me now—that Eros was a great god, and was

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133 On this point cf. Strauss, ibid. 147: “Aristophanes will prove to have said ultimately that love is essentially love of one’s own.”
the love of beautiful things” (201e). It seems, then, that Socrates wants us to follow Diotima’s refutation of his younger self, as well as the responses he gave then, trying afterward to discern what responses he would give now. We first learn from Diotima that eros is not a god because all gods are happy and beautiful insofar as they possess the good and the beautiful things, whereas eros is desire for the good and the beautiful things out of a lack of these (202c-d). Eros, then, is the desire for happiness; but happiness is the end of all human desire; therefore, Diotima implies, eros is the root of all human actions insofar as actions aim at the beautiful and the good or happiness. If this is true, then Socrates’s knowledge of “erotics” would in fact be knowledge of all human desire—knowledge of the human soul or what he calls in Plato’s Apology, “human wisdom.”

We next learn that eros is a daemon because it is in between mortal and immortal. But it is in between in the sense of “interpreting and ferrying to gods things from human beings” and vice versa, “requests and sacrifices of human beings, the orders and exchanges-for-sacrifices of gods…so that the whole itself has been bound together by it. Through this proceeds all divination…” (202e). It is the result of eros, then, that we have awareness of the gods—i.e., it is

\[134\] Cf. especially 196b-197c, where Agathon concludes saying, “Thus Eros, in my opinion, Phaedrus, stands first, because he is the fairest and the best, and, after this, he is the cause for everyone else of the same sort of fair and good things.”


\[136\] Cf. Plato, Apology, 20d-e: “Now perhaps I will seem to some of you to be joking. Know well, however, that I will tell you the whole truth. For I, men of Athens, have gotten this name [of one who claims to teach virtue] through nothing but a certain wisdom. Just what sort of wisdom is this? That which is perhaps human wisdom, for probably I really am wise in this.” It seems, at this point in Diotima’s speech, as though Socrates’s knowledge of erotics is one and the same with his human wisdom, because both are equivalent to knowledge of human desire.
through our *desire* to be happy and beautiful that “occurs the whole intercourse and conversation of gods with human beings while they are awake and asleep” (203a). Could Diotima be implying that the gods are a result of erotic desire for the beautiful and the good? Diotima also suggests here, however, that philosophy results from *eros*, insofar as *eros* binds the whole together—*eros* would in this sense be the cause of the whole being a whole, bound together; but it is also the cause of “divination,” which is how Socrates often describes our ability to recognize something (justice, a tree, a human being) without being able to give a full account of its nature.\(^{137}\)

But Diotima seems particularly interested in *eros* as intermediary between the divine and the human, and she goes on to give an account of his genealogy that seems to support this. *Eros*, she says, is the child of *Poverty* (*penia*) and *Resource* (*poros*); his mother, then, is not a god since, she and Socrates have agreed, a god is happy and beautiful, lacking nothing. Because of her *aporia* (resourcelessness), *Poverty* contrived to sleep with *Resource* while he was drunk, and thereby conceived *eros* (203b). As a result of his parents’ natures, *eros*, “is always poor; and he is far from being tender and beautiful, as the many believe, but is tough, squalid, shoeless, and homeless…he has the nature of his mother, always dwelling in neediness. But in accordance with his father he plots to trap the beautiful and the good, and is courageous, stout, keen, a skilled hunter, always weaving devices, desirous of practical wisdom (*phronesis*) and inventive, philosophizing through all his life, a skilled magician, druggist, and sophist” (203d-e).

But if we note the account of *eros’s* conception Diotima has just given, it is not “in accordance with his father” that he plots to trap the beautiful and the good (i.e., a god), but in

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\(^{137}\) For example, cf. Plato, *Republic* 505e, 506a, 516d

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accordance with his mother, who actually succeeded in seducing his father. It seems as though eros did not need his father in order to acquire the attributes Diotima lists. Diotima goes on to say that eros’s nature is neither mortal nor immortal, because “sometimes on the same day he flourishes and lives whenever he has resources; and sometimes he dies, but gets to live again through the nature of his father…Eros is never either without resources nor wealthy, but is in between wisdom and lack of understanding” (203e-204a). Again, however, it is eros’s mother whose nature eros seems to be exhibiting when he becomes resourceful. If we look again at the story of eros’s conception, in fact, we can see that it is precisely in her resourcelessness—through her aporia—that she is resourceful in capturing the beautiful and good god Resource. In fact, as Diotima goes on to make clear, Poverty cannot be entirely without resource in the same way that one who is wholly ignorant cannot philosophize, “for it is precisely this that makes lack of understanding so difficult—that if a man is not beautiful and good, nor intelligent, he has the opinion that that is sufficient for him”—an opinion Poverty did not share when she trapped Resource. Poverty’s and Eros’s resourcelessness is their resource—eros is in between wisdom and ignorance because he has knowledge of his own ignorance, which is itself the means for generating further resources in his philosophizing. In this way, eros is homeless, but not along the lines of the illness Aristophanes describes in his speech. Socrates’s philosophic eros is not for the sake of pure domination without end, but is instead a way of being at home in one’s homelessness—of finding resource in resourcelessness. What this implies for eros’s genealogy,

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138 This description of eros bears a striking and comical resemblance to Socrates, who shows up to this dinner party, “freshly bathed and wearing fancy slippers, which was not Socrates’ usual way…” (174a). In the Theaetetus (149a) Socrates describes himself as a midwife, possessing his mother’s art; perhaps eros and his avatar Socrates are each purely their mothers’ sons.
139 I owe this insight to Leo Strauss, On Plato’s Symposium, 194.
however, is that he is not necessarily his father’s son—eros does not require the divine; there is resourcefulness even among resourceless mortals. This resourcefulness, however, although produced through *aporia*, requires pursuit of the beautiful and the good—which must include the beings we call gods who are perfectly beautiful and good.

We should recall that according to Diotima’s initial account, eros is of the beautiful and the good, therefore of happiness, and so is the root of all human desire and action. Following her account of eros’s genealogy, however, she describes eros as merely the love of the beautiful, which prompts the young Socrates to say, “All right, stranger, what you say is beautiful. If Eros is of this sort, of what use is he for human beings?” (204c). Socrates is concerned with the useful-as-good and wonders why we would pursue something simply because it is beautiful if it is not also useful. Diotima responds by asking what the lover of beautiful things loves, to which Socrates responds, “that they be his” (204d). Socrates is unable to say what in particular the lover will possess if he has the beautiful things—and so Diotima changes the question: “Well, what if someone changed his query and used the good instead of the beautiful?” (204e). Why can Socrates not account for why someone would love the beautiful? The perplexity, we should note, is the same as the one discussed in the previous chapter in the context of Aristotle’s *NE*. According to Aristotle, moral virtue is for the sake of the beautiful, which means that one is ultimately willing to sacrifice one’s own good for the sake of the beautiful. But, Aristotle concludes, this only makes sense if one holds the beautiful to be good—the soldier rushing into battle or the political prisoner on a hunger strike sacrifices his life because he believes that the beautiful action is good *for him*, and he apportions more of what is truly good for himself. But in so doing, he undermines the necessarily self-sacrificial character of moral virtue. Similarly,
Socrates cannot answer Diotima because he cannot see why someone would pursue the beautiful unless it was at the same time good-as-useful.

Once this change is made, Socrates repeats what Diotima made clear at the beginning; that eros is the desire for happiness, happiness being the highest good—which is not necessarily beautiful. Diotima then introduces a further qualification: we not only desire the good—i.e., happiness; we desire to possess the good always, i.e., to be immortal. It is at this point that Diotima attacks Aristophanes’s account directly, saying,

…there is a certain account according to which those who seek their own halves are lovers. But my speech denies that eros is of a half or of a whole—unless, comrade, that half or whole can be presumed to be really good; for human beings are willing to have their own feet and hands cut off, if their opinion is that their own are no good. For I suspect that each does not cleave to his own (unless one calls the good one’s own and belonging to oneself, and the bad alien to oneself) since there is nothing that human beings love other than the good (205d-206a).

On Diotima’s understanding, then, Aristophanes equates eros with the love of one’s own—ultimately with the love of oneself, but, by extension, with the love of a lover who is an extension of oneself, and the love of polis that fulfills one’s desire to be whole or be at home. On the contrary, however, eros is not simply love of one’s own but love of the good—and ultimately desire for happiness—according to Diotima, What seems strange about this account, however, is that many in fact do “call the good one’s own and belonging to oneself, and the bad alien to oneself”—the patriot, for example, who sides with his country because it is his own, right or wrong. It is also the definition of justice Polemarchos gives, with Socrates’s help, in the first book of the Republic (332d), doing good to friends and harm to enemies. The problem with that account that Socrates gradually brings out is the same as the problem here: an account of
patriotic justice requires that we know who our friends are—i.e., who deserving human beings are—and what the human good is that they deserve. A love of “one’s own,” pursued to the end of its implications, leads to a desire for the human good and the need to know the human good. Most important, however, we can see in Diotima’s account the distinction between a love of one’s own and a love of the good. To desire to possess the good for oneself is to love oneself, as Aristotle also admits in NE 9.8, examined in the previous chapter. But the love of oneself and of one’s own without regard for whether or not one is pursuing what is truly good is a separate matter, and this is the distinction between Diotima’s and Aristophanes’s accounts of eros. For Aristophanes eros is the sublimated desire for power, regardless of what the power is for the sake of, i.e., abstracted from the good; for Diotima, eros is desire to possess the human good or happiness always.

But what is the connection to the beautiful, which Diotima left behind when Socrates could not answer her? Diotima returns to this question by saying, cryptically, the erotic pursuit of the good is, “bringing to birth in beauty both in terms of the body and in terms of the soul” (206b). She explains this by saying that all human beings conceive in terms of the body and the soul, but they are only capable of giving birth in beauty. Eros, then, is not of the beautiful, but is “of engendering and bringing to birth in the beautiful” (206e). The beautiful is not the end but the means for the end that eros actually pursues, and this end is procreation. We had been thinking of eros as the desire to possess the human good always, but now Diotima extends eros to all living things. This is because procreation provides the means for immortality, or at least as close a simulacrum as mortals can achieve. We can see this in the “disposition of all beasts” who are, “all ill and of an erotic disposition…and they are ready to fight to the finish, the
weakest against the strongest, for the sake of those they have generated, and to die on their behalf...One might suppose that human beings do this from calculation; but as for the beasts, what is the cause of their erotic disposition's being of this sort?” (207a-c). This should make us pause: has Diotima changed her mind about eros being for the sake of the good rather than one’s own? It now seems that erotic mortals desire immortality in the form of their own offspring, regardless of whether or not those offspring are good. Diotima continues this line of thought saying, “in the eros of the beasts, in terms of the same argument as that concerning men, the mortal nature seeks as far as possible to be forever and immortal” (207d). Immortality cannot be the good simply, because it does not distinguish between better and worse lives. It looks much more like a desire for power, along Aristophanes’s lines, divorced from consideration for the good.

We can gain a clearer picture of what Diotima has in mind if we continue. She says next that the only way to understand those human beings who love honor is along these lines, because, “you would be amazed at their irrationality unless you understand what I have said and reflect how uncanny their disposition is made by their love of renown, ‘and their setting up immortal fame for eternity,’ and for the sake of fame even more than for their children, they are ready to run all risks, to exhaust their money, to toil at every sort of toil, and to die” (208c-d).

All heroic deeds, seemingly done for the sake of the beautiful, are in fact done for out of the hope that they will grant the actor immortal fame. We can now see somewhat more clearly how Diotima’s argument that eros is for immortality squares with her previous argument that eros is for the good. Love of one’s own—whether one’s offspring or one’s lover or one’s comrades in arms—is a manifestation for love of the good, according to Diotima, but a confused love of the
good that stops at mere life. Life itself, Diotima implies, is good, but if we realized that all the actions that spring from erotic longing for the good imply a distinction between mere preservation of life and living well, we would ask what it means to live well—what the human good is, just as Socrates suggests we must do in the section of the Republic cited above, if we are to move from an account of justice as helping one’s friends and harming one’s enemies to what this implies—knowledge of the human good. All living things possess eros, but ordinarily this eros manifests itself as the indefinite continuation of life simply construed, which we might say is simply a desire for power; what Diotima adds to this account, once again, is the end for the sake of which that power is sought, namely, the good, and this is ultimately what eros desires.

That all beautiful action is ultimately for the sake of honor and immortal fame, however, is not immediately clear, to say the least. The three examples Diotima gives are Alcestis dying for Admetus, Achilles dying for Patroclus, and Codrus, who sacrificed himself to preserve Athens. Earlier in the Symposium, Phaedrus gives Alcestis as an example of the virtue that eros inspires, saying,

lovers are the only ones who are willing to die for the sake of another; and that is not only true of real men but of women as well. Alcestis…alone was willing do die on behalf of her husband…Her performance of this deed was thought to be so beautiful in the opinion not only of human beings but of the gods as well that, although there have been many who have accomplished many beautiful deeds, the gods have given to only a select number of them the guerdon of sending up their souls again from Hades, and hers they did send up in admiring delight at her deed. So gods, too, hold in particular esteem the zeal and virtue that pertain to love” (179b-d).

We can see Diotima’s account prefigured in Phaedrus’s speech: Alcestis died for the sake of her husband, but in so doing she acquired immortality as a reward from the gods. As Mark Lutz observes in reference to these two passages, “While one could object to Diotima that
beautiful virtue is choiceworthy for its own sake and should be pursued without regard for fame, one must also concede that we are deeply distressed at the thought that someone might die for the sake of virtue without being remembered or memorialized in any way.” But, as we learned from Aristotle’s account of the great souled person, these two ends are incompatible: beautiful actions are beautiful because they sacrifice one’s own greatest good for the sake of another; and yet, if we hope we will gain an even greater good by performing them, namely immortal life, then we are not in fact performing a beautiful deed, and we will thus not deserve immortality.

Diotima goes on to say that poets and all craftsmen are the procreators of “prudence and the rest of virtue” in the souls of those who are capable of more than bodily procreation in the form of children. “By far the greatest and most beautiful part of prudence,” she continues, “is the arranging and ordering of the affairs of cities and households. Its name is moderation and justice.” These human beings are those who were impregnated by Homer, Hesiod, and the other “good poets,” whose offspring “are in their own right immortal, [and] they supply the poets with immortal fame and memory” (208e-209d). Statesmen as well, such as Lycurgus and Solon, leave behind similar offspring for the sake of immortal fame. All poetry and political activity, then, is driven by the erotic desire for immortality; but, again, as the absence of “the good” in this part of Diotima’s speech indicates, they mistake both mere continuation of life and the beautiful for the human good.

It looks, furthermore, like the philosopher is the most mistaken of all in pursuing the beautiful as such and forgetting the good. Diotima next says she will try to initiate the young Socrates into the “perfect revelations” for which the previous erotic account is a means. Her

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140 Lutz, ibid., 101.
account is of an ascent through beauty from loving one beautiful body to all beautiful bodies, to the superior beauty of the soul, then of pursuits and laws, and of sciences, and finally, with a permanent turn to the vast open sea of the beautiful, behold it and give birth—in ungrudging philosophy—to many beautiful and magnificent speeches and thoughts; until, there strengthened and increased, he may discern a certain single philosophical science, which has as its object the following sort of beauty...[This one] shall suddenly glimpse something wonderfully beautiful in its nature...that is, first of all, always being and neither coming to be nor perishing, nor increasing nor passing away...[and is] imagined...as it is alone by itself and with itself, always being of a single form; while all other beautiful things that share in it do so in such a way that while it neither becomes anything more or less, nor is affected at all, the rest do come to be and perish...It is at this place in life, in beholding the beautiful itself...that it is worth living...Don’t you realize...once he has given birth to and cherished true virtue, it lies within him to become dear to god and, if it is possible for any human being, to become immortal as well? (210a-212a, emphasis added).

This sort of philosophy is the philosophical equivalent of the beautiful that motivates the great-souled person, insofar as it pursues knowledge of the beautiful because it is beautiful—but ultimately, as Diotima says in this passage, the philosopher hopes to become dear to god, who will then grant him immortality. How can we understand this? Surely Diotima does not mean that everyone who does something morally virtuous—i.e., for the sake of the beautiful or beautiful—thinks that a god will grant him immortality. If we recall Aristotle’s account of the great-souled person, however, we can see that something like this must be the case. The morally virtuous person conflates the beautiful and the good; but this only makes sense if a beautiful action, which deserves to be rewarded, will in fact be rewarded. If we believe the world is just, and that those who sacrifice themselves for another or for the greater good will in fact be justly rewarded for this action, this is tantamount to believing that a god will grant them immortality—
defining a god, in this case, as that one who is able to overcome all obstacles in giving each his
due.

If we look more closely at Diotima’s depiction of the “single philosophical science,” we
may also recognize in the quotation above a summary of the unmoved mover Aristotle describes
in *Metaphysics* L.7. First, this science has as its object a certain sort of beauty; the one who is
trained perfectly in erotics will suddenly glimpse this wonderfully beautiful thing, which is,
Diotima repeats, the end of all the philosopher’s previous labors. This beautiful thing is always
being and never becoming or perishing; it is not beautiful relative to anything but absolutely; it
shares nothing of bodily form, and it is not a speech or sort of knowledge, and is not in
something, but is alone by itself. This is, Diotima concludes, what makes life worth living for a
human being.

Aristotle describes the divine unmoved mover in the following terms:

…it causes motion in the manner of something loved (*eromenon*)…it is something that
has being necessarily, and inasmuch as it is by necessity it is beautiful and in that way a
source…the course of its life is of such a kind as the best we have for a short time. This
is because it is always the same way (which for us is impossible), and because its activity
is also pleasure (which is what makes being awake, perceiving, and thinking the most
pleasant things, while hopes and memories are pleasant on account of these). And
thinking that is just thinking by itself is a thinking of what is best just as itself, and
especially so with what is so most of all. But by partaking in what it thinks, the intellect
thinks itself, for it becomes what it thinks by touching and contemplating it, so that the
intellect and what it thinks are the same thing…it is the activity rather than the receptivity
the intellect has that seems divine, and its contemplation is pleasantest and best. So if the
god is always in this good condition that we are sometimes in, that is to be wondered at;
and if it is in it to a greater degree than we are, that is to be wondered at still more. And
this is the way it is. But life belongs to it too, for the activity of intellect is life, and that
being is activity, and its activity is in itself the best life and is everlasting. And we say
that it is a god who everlastingly lives the best life (1072b4-29).
I began this chapter by noting that the unmoved mover moves things as a beautiful object of eros, but here we can see other similarities to Diotima’s depiction of her “single philosophical science” as well. In both cases, the object of our investigation is perfectly beautiful; it is always being and never becoming or perishing; it is separate, alone by itself; it is not at all bodily or material; and the thought of it is what constitutes the best life for a human being. Aristotle implies the latter when he says that the life of the unmoved mover is thinking, and that it must be thinking of the best thing, which is itself, i.e., its own thinking. Our thinking of it, therefore, would be the best life we are capable of, if only for a short time.

In both places, however, there are hints that these accounts are more problematic than they at first appear. As Seth Benardete points out, Diotima says the beautiful is “imagined” as being “alone by itself and with itself, always being of a single form,” other beautiful things sharing in it (210a-b).\footnote{Cf. Seth Benardete, \textit{The Argument of the Action}, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2000), 183.} Aristotle, similarly, says a beautiful thing moves us because it “seems” to be beautiful—we are moved, at least at first, by the appearance of things. Aristotle echoes this in the \textit{NE} when he says “the pleasure stemming from sight is the beginning of erotic love” (1167a4). It seems that, with all forms of eros, the beginning differs from the end. Love for another person begins with attraction to beauty, but deepens with knowledge of the person—or else such knowledge causes eros to cease. In either case, the knowledge of the person is different from her outward appearance; our attraction to the unmoved mover must differ from knowledge of it. Aristotle seems to indicate that eros of the beautiful is necessary at the
beginning of philosophical investigation, but that its character changes, just as love of a human being changes, with familiarity and deeper investigation.

Another indication that this is also the intention of Diotima’s speech in the Symposium is that such a beholding of beauty itself eliminates eros: the philosopher has achieved what he set out to achieve. This philosophical science of beauty, the beholding of which Diotima says alone makes life worth living (211d), eliminates the sort of eros that also alone makes life worth living insofar as it allows us to be at home in our homelessness. If eros is ultimately of the good and only preliminarily of the beautiful (205e), then we are left with the implicit argument that eros must remain grounded in what is truly good for human beings—i.e., what will contribute to the best life (204e).

Besides the ones already mentioned, questions and problems regarding Aristotle’s unmoved mover cannot help but proliferate: How can something be alive but unmoving? The unmoved mover’s life is both thought thinking itself and pleasure, it is not merely pleasant—does this mean that pleasure is the good? If this mover causes motion for an infinite time (as Aristotle says it does—1073a8), how can we know it or anything about it, since we cannot know infinite things (cf. 994b10-31)? Perhaps this is why, even after Aristotle’s apparent demonstration of the nature and existence of the unmoved mover, we still, “wonder at” its being in the good condition we only sometimes live—“For everyone begins…from wondering whether things are as they seem…” (983a13).

Furthermore, Aristotle has left us to wonder how the unmoved mover is a source or beginning (arche) insofar as it is by necessity and beautiful, and as such a source is that upon which, “the cosmos and nature depend” (1072b11-15). Sachs explains this claim by saying,
“The cosmos depends on it as its motionless source of motion, but nature depends on it as the source of unity in everything that is whole, namely the animals and plants. It is only an object of thought that can cause motion without being moved, but it is only an act of thinking that can cause the highest kind of unity.” Sachs has neglected to mention, however, that an object of eros can also cause motion in this way, as Aristotle makes clear. Whose thought and whose eros, however, is it that is both moved and causes unity? Is it necessarily an eternal, motionless, and separate god? Immediately following his description of this god, Aristotle hints provocatively that it need not be, when he says the following:

And those who assume, as do the Pythagoreans and Speusippus, that what is most beautiful and best is not present in the source of anything, since, while the sources of plants and animals are responsible for them, what is beautiful and complete is in the effects that come from them, do not think rightly. For the seed comes from other, earlier, complete beings, and what is first is not the seed but the complete being, just as one would say that a human being precedes the germinal fluid… (1072b31-1073a2).

The objection from the Pythagoreans and Speusippus may only be that the beautiful and the good follow the origin in time—something with which Aristotle has said repeatedly he agrees (cf. 1049b12ff; 1072a4-10). The germinal fluid—i.e., the material or potential human being—certainly does precede the adult human being in time. But Aristotle takes them to mean that material or potency always and in every way precedes the completed good and beautiful whole. Why could the Pythagoreans and Speusippus not have in mind, for example, that human eros for knowledge and human thought, are the origins on which the cosmos and nature depend—not in time, but in being, insofar as a being is an object of knowledge (993b20-31)?
I have proposed so far that, in saying that beings are attracted to the unmoved mover as an erotic object of thought, Aristotle wishes his audience to examine their own philosophic eros to determine whether they are motivated by a prudent consideration for their own happiness, informed by study of the species-level human good, or they are drawn to first philosophy because they think it is the most honorable and beautiful pursuit—something that will render them deserving of the gods’ favor and, ultimately, immortality. When we examine Aristotle’s account of the unmoved mover, then, we can see that Aristotle’s ultimate concern is with human happiness, as has been evident all along. Aristotle’s apparent quarrel with the poets began by asking whether or not it is just for human beings to pursue wisdom, and his account of this pursuit as theological suggested his students are concerned that this study be most honorable or beautiful. These two subjects—the just and the beautiful—are at the core of Aristotle’s investigation into human happiness in the *NE*. For this reason, in the next chapter, I will examine Aristotle’s explicit mentions of happiness in the *Metaphysics*. These will prove to illuminate the question just raised, whether the Pythagoreans, Speusippus, and others could possibly be right in thinking that material precedes activity, something that will bear heavily on the possibility of human happiness.
Chapter Four

Happiness in Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*

In the previous chapters I have argued that Aristotle is concerned in the *Metaphysics* with whether or not his audience is pursuing knowledge of causes with a clear notion of its object and why it is a choiceworthy endeavor. As such, he is concerned with the just and the beautiful. As outlined in the first chapter, he is concerned with the just insofar as he wishes his audience to be aware they are challenging the poetic and necessarily political notion of the ancestral as good, as well as the poetic account of the human search for wisdom and self-sufficiency as hubristic. If there are gods who can be jealous of human wisdom, their power to affect the living and the dead calls into question both philosophy as a worthwhile way of life and, if these gods can affect nature itself, the possibility of philosophy insofar as it studies nature or the first causes of natural phenomena. And Aristotle is concerned with the beautiful, outlined in the second and third chapters, insofar as he suggests our desire for knowledge, in its manifestation as philosophic eros for the beautiful, may mask a desire to deserve the rewards only a god can give us—ultimately, immortality.

These two concerns—the just and the beautiful—Aristotle says in his *NE*, are the central concerns of the political art (1.3 1094b15). Aristotle opens the *NE*, however, by saying that every art, inquiry, action, and choice is held to aim at some good (*agathos*; 1.1 1094a1-2). And, he goes on to say, most people “pretty much agree” that the highest good is happiness. We have four terms—the just, the beautiful, the good, and happiness—the relation among which is not
immediately clear. These terms, however, are not interchangeable, even though at first glance Aristotle seems to use them interchangeably in the \textit{NE}. If Aristotle is concerned in the \textit{Metaphysics} with the just and the beautiful, does this mean he is also concerned with the human good? Or is he concerned with happiness—if these are the same or different? Aristotle mentions happiness three times in the \textit{Metaphysics}, using it as an example of activity (\textit{energeia}). In order to investigate further how the \textit{Metaphysics} relates to the human good or happiness, I will look closely at these three places. I will then give an overview of Aristotle’s discussion of happiness in the \textit{NE} in order to begin to understand how his account of happiness in the \textit{Metaphysics} relates to his concern with the just and the beautiful in that text. I will conclude that the question of happiness or the human good is the grounding question both of political philosophy and first philosophy. This is because the human good, in order to be comprehensible and realizable, depends on the existence of human nature. Human nature, in turn, relies on activity being prior to potency—it relies on the existence of a nature that we can fulfill.

I. A

Aristotle first mentions happiness in \textit{Metaphysics} a.2. He says it is surely clear that causes cannot be indefinite, whether we mean this in terms of matter (e.g., our flesh comes from what we eat, which comes from the sun, etc.), or the source of motion (we come from our parents, who come from their parents, on down the line), or the end of an action, and Aristotle gives the following example: “walking for the sake of health, this for the sake of happiness, happiness for the sake of something else” (994a1-11). Happiness, Aristotle implies, is the end of
all action, and must be lest causes be indefinite. Here as elsewhere\textsuperscript{142} Aristotle is concerned with the problem of the indefinite (\textit{to apeiron}). He goes on to say that happiness is an end in a way similar to what it means for something to be. If there is no primary thing that \textit{is}, or if there is no best life that is the end of all human action, then all beings and all actions will be “in-between” being and non-being, or happiness and misery, which would imply, “if there is no first thing, there is no cause at all” (a.2 994a19). Aristotle gives two examples: both a learner and a boy are becoming a knower and a man, and so these are their ends and define their being. The problem with an indefinite succession of causes, Aristotle continues, is that “those who make there be an indefinite are unaware that they abolish the nature of the good,” and “no one would make an effort to do anything if he were not going to come to a limit” (a.2 994a10-15). Aristotle links, therefore, the ontological claim that there are indefinitely many causes with the practical problem of happiness as the end of human action: if we think there is no point to any movement in nature, including our own actions, what is the point of “making an effort” at all? Furthermore, Aristotle goes on to say, those who posit indefinitely many causes will destroy intelligence (\textit{nous}) because intelligence always acts for the sake of an end, which is a finite limit. Finally, the defenders of the indefinite abolish knowledge because, “surely also if the kinds of causes were indefinite in number, neither would there be any knowing for that reason; for we suppose that we know something when we are acquainted with its causes, but what is indefinite by addition is not possible to go all the way through in a finite time” (a.2 994b28-31).

This account implies several things. Without a limit to causes, Aristotle argues, it would make no sense to say that a learner progresses toward knowledge, that a boy grows up to be a

\textsuperscript{142} Cf. \textit{Physics} 1.4, 3.4-7; \textit{Metaph.} B.4, Th.6, K.10, L.7, M.8; \textit{NE} 1.2.
man, that human action or intelligence has any point, or that we can know anything at all. These ends, however, are not of the same sort: happiness, Aristotle implies here, is the correct understanding of the good, and it is somehow the ultimate end of chosen human action (even if, as Aristotle says in the NE,\textsuperscript{143} happiness itself is wished for, not chosen); but we do not choose to do the things that result in our growth into adult human beings, it just happens. Aristotle thus presents us with two different examples of what seem to be the same kind of end—which is a kind of cause he calls “that for the sake of which” or the good—which is the completion of everything that is coming into being (cf. A.3 983a32-33. Through their differences, however, these two examples illustrate a larger question. “Completion” (teleion) might mean the completion of natural growth, and so the completed state would require simply the minimum class characteristics to be called that completed state; in this case, any adult male is called a man. Completion can also mean “perfection,” which is clearer in the example of knowledge: a master craftsman has more perfect knowledge than his apprentice. But knowledge of a craft seems somewhat like growth into an adult: there is a point at which one is able to perform the actions for the sake of which the growth or learning took place.\textsuperscript{144} Learning about causes, however, seems to be different insofar as it never reaches a level of sufficient knowledge, as Aristotle acknowledges: “And in fact, the thing that has been sought both anciently and now, and always, and is always a source of impasses, ‘what is being?’, is just this: what is substance?...So too for

\textsuperscript{143} 1111b29.

\textsuperscript{144} Although even this is not necessarily true. Every violin maker worthy of the name can make adequate violins, but he is not thereby the equal of Stradivarius, whereas every adult male human being \textit{qua} an adult male is equal (even if—and here is the problem—some live up to what it means to be human [if not male] more than others). Furthermore, as noted already, proficiency in an art results from chosen actions, whereas growth does not.
us, most of all and first of all and, one might say, solely, it is necessary to study what this kind of being is” (Z.1 1028b3-8). In other words, the question of substance that concerns Aristotle in the *Metaphysics* is a permanent question—one that is always with us, and that acts as a vanishing end to knowledge. Is happiness an end like this, or like growth, or something else? The problem Aristotle highlights that happiness seems to solve is the presence of indefinite desires that would seem to make all action meaningless without it. It is the same problem implied in Aristotle’s quotation from Simonides’s poem in Book A that I discuss in chapter one: why should we pursue knowledge if we know that we will never reach its completion—i.e., if we have knowledge of our permanent ignorance, because we are ultimately ruled by chance? If the human good or that which perfects human beings is knowledge of causes, but this knowledge is only approachable and not fully comprehensible, does this mean happiness is unattainable? Aristotle ends this chapter on a similarly melancholy note: “we think that we know something when we are acquainted with its causes, but what is indefinite by addition is not possible to go all the way through in a finite time” (a.2 994b27-31). Perhaps we cannot have complete knowledge of anything because of our finite lives.

I. B

Aristotle’s second and third mentions of happiness occur close to each other, in the sixth and eighth chapters of book Theta. In this book Aristotle discusses the relationship between potency (*dynamis*—capacity/power) and activity (*energeia*—actuality/being-at-work). It will help to lay out briefly his argument in the first five chapters to provide the context for his two
mentions of happiness. Potency and activity, Aristotle says, most properly are spoken of in reference to motion, although this is not the sense that is “most useful for what we now wish” (Th.1 1046a1). This is an example of Aristotle starting with what is most known or familiar to “us” and moving to the “more known.”\textsuperscript{145} What this other sort of potency is Aristotle does not immediately say, although he will return to it in chapter six in the first section under scrutiny.

Potencies are present in things with and without souls, Aristotle continues, and among the former both in general and in the part that has \textit{logos}. The arts and productive knowledge are potencies because they cause change. These rational potencies can produce contrary effects, whereas irrational potencies only have one effect. For example, a doctor can both heal and harm because he has the technical knowledge of how the body works, whereas a billiard ball hitting another one can only cause it to move when struck, and heat can only make something hot.

Socrates uses the same example of a doctor in the first book of the \textit{Republic} to illustrate a similar point. He asks whether a doctor would be just as good at getting away with producing disease as he is at curing it (333e6). If so, he continues, this means that the just man, if he is clever at guarding money, can also steal it, if for the sake of benefiting friends and harming enemies (334b2). Polemarchos, with whom Socrates is speaking in this part of the dialogue, is understandably perplexed. Socrates goes on to ask whether he means by friends those who actually are good, or those who merely seem good. In so doing, he points to a possible way forward: if justice means giving people what they are owed, it entails knowing the good, i.e., the

\textsuperscript{145} Cf. \textit{Metaphysics} Z.3 1029b4-5: “For learning happens in this way in all areas, by what is less knowable by nature, toward what is more knowable.” And \textit{NE} 1.4 1095b2-5: “One must begin from what is known, but this has a twofold meaning: there are things known to us, on the one hand, and things known simply, on the other. Perhaps it is necessary for us, at least, to begin from the things known to us.”
best life and using it as a standard. But what is revealed in this comparison of justice to the arts is that the arts as arts are morally neutral unless they are guided by justice. Justice is revealed to be the art of arts—that art that shows the end toward which the other arts ought to be directed.\textsuperscript{146}

Aristotle is clearer about this point in the \textit{NE}. The arts are like the moral virtues because both require habituation, Aristotle says. But an excellent artisan is such because of his products, and so primarily because of his technical knowledge of his craft—a doctor, in order to be good, must know how to produce a healthy human being from a sick one, regardless of his own moral virtues or vices. Moral virtue, on the other hand, requires not only that a particular action be the sort of action a morally virtuous person would choose to do, but also that the person acts knowingly, chooses the action for its own sake, and acts out of a steady, unwavering state.

“But,” Aristotle continues, “these criteria are irrelevant when it comes to possessing the arts—except for the knowledge involved. But when it comes to the virtues, knowledge has no, or little, force, whereas the other two criteria amount to not a small part of, but rather the whole, affair…” (\textit{NE} 2.4 1105a26-1105b4). Arts are not internally relativistic, as Socrates seems to imply in the passage just quoted—an excellent doctor is one who does what a doctor does and does it well—namely, he cures his patients and does not make them ill. But a good doctor does not have to be a just or courageous or moderate human being. This is because the end of his art and all others is technical knowledge so as to produce a product, whereas the end of moral virtue is virtuous.

\textsuperscript{146} On this point cf. Allen Bloom, “Interpretive Essay,” in Plato, \textit{The Republic}, trans. Allen Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1968), 322. “There are master arts which rule whole groups of ministerial arts and are necessary to them. These are what Aristotle calls architectonic arts…Similarly, justice must be a master art, ruling the arts which produce partial goods so as to serve the whole good. In other words, justice must be knowledge of that good which none of the other arts knows but which each presupposes.” 158
action chosen for its own sake. A doctor may loathe his profession, taking no pleasure in it, and choose to come to work merely for his income, but he can still be a good doctor. But a courageous human being is only courageous, according to common opinion, if he acts for its own sake—i.e., if he finds pleasure\textsuperscript{147} in his courageous actions—and requires very little knowledge of what courage is and why it is good to be courageous.\textsuperscript{148}

In the sections of the Republic and the NE just examined, the distinction between the arts and the moral virtues raises a question: is there something that can combine the excellence of the arts (knowledge) with the pleasure found in moral virtue? And in both places the answer seems to be something like the philosophic life,\textsuperscript{149} which is devoted to pursuing knowledge and taking pleasure in it. As noted in my previous two chapters, the tension inherent in moral virtue pursued for its own sake suggests that moral virtue needs to be guided by the question of the best life for a human being. Aristotle calls to mind these two passages from the NE and the Republic and their implications when, in Metaphysics Th.2, he discusses the nature of the arts, which are capable of producing contrary effects. This is especially evident when he goes on to say that the arts are the sort of potency that is capable of doing something well, and the potency of “merely doing or suffering it follows along” (1046b27-28). In other words, the arts indicate the possibility of excellence not only in knowing how to produce a certain outcome (i.e., potency of

\textsuperscript{147}Cf. NE 1104b5-13.
\textsuperscript{148}As Aristotle says earlier in the NE, “Hence he who will listen adequately to the beautiful things and the just things, and to the political things generally, must be brought up beautifully by means of habituation. For the ‘that’ is a principle, and if this should be sufficiently apparent, there will be no need to ask the ‘why’ in addition…” (1.4 1095b4-7).
\textsuperscript{149}Or contemplation, as Aristotle concludes in NE 10.6-8. As explored in the first chapter, however, Aristotle draws a distinction between philosophy and contemplation. I will return to this point below.
motion, which Aristotle is concerned with here), but also relate to the other sort of potency that concerns Aristotle even more: the excellence of the relation of activity to material, or, to put it more simply, knowledge of the good, and in particular (as the example of the arts indicates) knowledge of the best life for a human being.

I. C

This familiar way of understanding potency, as the cause of motion toward what is held to be good, in the case of souls possessing reason (human beings), is important in this context because Aristotle goes on to discuss a group of people, the Megarians, who deny the difference between potency and activity. They say that something is potential only when it is active—e.g., a doctor is only a doctor when he is actually curing a patient, or a house builder when he is actually building a house. As Aristotle points out, it is not difficult to see the absurd consequences that result. Aristotle’s pointing this out, however, serves to highlight for the reader just how absurd this position is. Practically speaking, it would mean that any learning, however trivial, is impossible; a carpenter could not have an apprentice because such an apprentice would be a potential carpenter, and only a carpenter is a carpenter. Aristotle hints at the underlying reason for his introducing the Megarians’ objection when he says, “there will not be anything cold or hot or sweet or perceptible in any way when it is not being perceived, so that these people will turn out to be stating the Protagorean claim” (Th.3 1047a8). The claim to which Aristotle refers is most likely Protagoras’s pronouncement that “human being is the measure of all things,
of the beings that are that they are, and of the beings that are not, that they are not.” As discussed in chapter two, this claim need not be reduced to pure subjective relativism—i.e., to the claim that each particular human being is the measure of all things. Nor does it imply necessarily that, even if the human species can agree on what it perceives, our species character distorts reality such that we do not know that what we perceive is in fact the truth. Protagoras may mean that the human intellect, and the categories inherent in our intellect, are part of being—that anthropos is the measure of all things because it is our categories of thought grant things their being- hood.

The Megarians, in denying the distinction between potency and activity, according to Aristotle, “abolish both motion and becoming” and so “it is no small thing they are seeking to abolish.” The no small thing they abolish seems to be nature, as we learn later in Th.8: “nature too is in the same general class as potency, since it is a source of motion, though not in something else but in a thing itself as itself” (1049b8-10).151 Nature is in a sense “the coming into being of things that are born…but in a sense it means the first thing present in a growing thing from which it grows” (Metaph. D.4 1014b17). All knowledge, moreover, is “of what is so always or for the most part—for how else will anyone learn or teach?” (Metaph. E.2 1027a20).

The very possibility of philosophy as knowledge of fixed or semi-fixed natures rests on the distinction Aristotle is making between potency and activity, and the priority of activity to

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potency, because such a distinction and order of priority is implied in the word “nature”—whether it is something that holds always or for the most part.\footnote{Cf. \textit{NE} 5.7. Brull concludes that Aristotle ultimately rejects the Megarian or Protagorean thesis out of “a manly insistence on the significance, in its own way timeless or universal, of what is manifest to us—to an unwillingness, to begin with, in the face of the thought of an absence of order of perhaps limitless duration, to be so overwhelmed as to refuse to the here and now, to what is around us, to the order in which we live and move, its undeniable evidence” (ibid. 195). I will return to this possibility below, especially its relation to Socrates’s insistence, in the \textit{Meno}, that we must bravely continue to fight against those who say learning is impossible (\textit{Meno}, 86b-c).}

Th.6 begins with Aristotle saying that he gave an account of potency with respect to motion (\textit{kinesis}) for the sake of better understanding the other way we speak about it, because it is this way into which we are primarily inquiring, as he mentioned in Th.1 1046a1. This other meaning has to do with what activity really is, and it is here that Aristotle uses happiness as an example. Aristotle implies that activity cannot be defined strictly speaking when he says it is not necessary to look for a definition of everything (1048a38), but we can understand what it is by means of analogy, and by contrast to what it is not. Activity is opposed to the potency we speak of when we say that a figure is in a block of wood ready to be carved, or a half-pound of cheese is in the twenty pound round, or someone who is capable of contemplating when he is not. Also, the one actually building, as opposed to the one who can build, the awake to the asleep, “and what is perfected to what is incomplete” (1048b1-4) are analogous examples of activity. These are merely analogies, though: some of the examples have to do with potency with respect to motion, which is the better known “to us,” whereas others have to do with the relation of substance to material, which is, Aristotle reveals explicitly here, the sort of potency that interests us most in this investigation (1048b7-9).
In order to understand this relationship, Aristotle makes a seeming distinction between two kinds of action (*praxis*). The first sort has its end outside of itself, and so is a motion (*kinesis*) that must stop at some point: we diet for the sake of losing weight, for example, but then we stop. This action is not even properly called an action, however, because it does not contain its end, whereas the other sort does. This other sort that is more truly an action is always complete or at an end at any point in its activity: when we are seeing we are just simply seeing, and sight simultaneously reaches its end in its very action. The same is true, Aristotle says, of contemplation, but not of learning, because we eventually stop learning when we have learned something. But living well and being happy are activities because they are for their own sake and reach their completion in their very activity.

We should remember, however, that Aristotle has said it is not necessary to define activity, but merely to understand it by means of analogy. Which of the examples just given are closest to the core meaning, and what aspects do not hold up to the comparison? The activity of a living thing is perhaps closest to what Aristotle has in mind by activity: a horse is a substance (*ousia*) that has certain attributes, and it is actively staying a horse even if those attributes change. In this sense, the work of a substance maintaining its substance is more complete than any action it could do. As Aristotle explains in the *Politics*, “what each thing is—for example a

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153 Aristotle insists on this point here: an action is only truly an action when it has its end within itself. This is perhaps the reason why, in the *Politics*, Aristotle can say, “…the active way of life is not necessarily in relation to others, as some suppose, nor those thoughts alone active that arise from activity for the sake of what results, but rather much more those that are complete in themselves, and the sorts of studies and thoughts that are for their own sake” (1325b17-21). Political action, which seems so much more active than philosophical reflection, is for the sake of something outside itself, whereas thought may be for its own sake, and hence even more active than politics.
human being, a horse, or a household—when its coming into being is complete is, we assert, the nature of that thing” (1.2 1252b32-34). Here in the Metaphysics, Aristotle seems to mean the same thing roughly by activity: it is the complete work of a living thing, primarily, to be itself.

As this example from the Politics suggests, however, there is a problem with this structure if we try to apply it to human beings. Whereas a horse can somewhat unproblematically reach an approximation of its perfection on its own as a result of natural growth, the same cannot be said of human beings. There is for us a distinction between mere life and living well, which is precisely the distinction Aristotle deliberately fails to make at this point in the Metaphysics when he mentions living, living well, and being happy all in the same breath. Aristotle had already hinted at this problem in Th.2 when he mentioned that within the arts there is a primary end, which is the good of whatever the art works on (the health of the body in the case of medicine): the work of human beings is a question that cannot be answered strictly in terms of the arts, because they seem to be amoral, or the moral virtues, according to common opinion, because people think they do not require knowledge, and a question implies the seeking of knowledge (asking “why”). Instead, the arts imply knowledge of a good that subsumes all arts and directs them, and moral virtue also implies the question of the best life; both, then, require the guidance of a prudent consideration of what is best according to human nature. We can now see why Aristotle criticizes the Megarian/Protagorean position that equates activity and potency and makes man the measure of all things: If there is no distinction between activity and potency, there is neither nature (because no becoming a something out of something else, temporarily or otherwise), nor philosophy (as the study of nature), nor the distinction between life and non-life (because living things are most of all those things that are actively at work staying themselves),
and, finally, no distinction between living and living well. Why, though, are the Megarians simply wrong? Is it because, if they are right, we destroy the phenomenon of happiness? The Megarians could simply respond that happiness—and philosophy—are impossible illusions. Furthermore, however, there is the possibility already mentioned—that the Protagorian/Megarian thesis that *anthropos* is the measure of all things may mean, simply, that being requires human intellect—which would render philosophy possible, even if it denies the existence of a divine unmoved mover that is eternal, motionless, and separate—at least straightforwardly interpreted.

I. D

Possibly for this reason, Aristotle returns once again to the Megarian thesis just before his third and final mention of happiness. He says at the beginning of Th.8 that it is clear activity takes precedence over potency, whether we are talking about motion or substance. And also in speech it is prior, in the sense that the house-building activity must exist in order for the power of house-building to exist. But in time there is a way in which potency is prior, insofar as material (which is only potentially something) is temporally prior to activity. For example, the sperm and egg that go into making a human being, as well as the food the mother eats, etc. are prior in time to the infant, which is also a potential adult that is prior in time to the completely grown adult. But, Aristotle continues, there are prior substances that are active, in this case the mother and the father, out of which the later active substance is generated (the offspring). Aristotle now explains that this is why the Megarians seem to have a point: if one learns to do something, to play a harp, for example, “there arises the sophistical objection that someone who does not have
knowledge would be doing the things that the knowledge is about, since the one learning does not have knowledge” (1049b4-36). That is, it seems as though the potency (the process of becoming a harpist) and the activity (being a harpist) must coincide, and so learning would be impossible.

Aristotle is articulating a version of the same sophistical objection to the possibility of learning that Meno articulates in his eponymous Platonic dialogue, and that Socrates rephrases as follows: “Do you see how eristic is this argument you’re spinning, that it isn’t possible for a human being to seek out either what he knows or what he doesn’t know? For that which he knows he wouldn’t seek out—he knows it, and such a person has no need of a search—nor what he doesn’t know, for he doesn’t even know what he will seek out” (80e). Socrates’s response is to say that the soul is immortal and has learned all things; it is thus able to recall these things and so re-learn them. Perhaps the most obvious problem with this explanation (and evidence for why Socrates himself does not really believe it) is that it simply pushes the question of how we learn things back a step: if the question is, how does the soul learn things, and the answer is, it has already learned them because it is immortal, Socrates is simply saying that the soul learns things because it learns them. The question remains—for the one seriously proposing the sophistical objection—how does one move from opinion to knowledge in the first place if one does not know whether or not there are beings to know—i.e., if there is no nature? Socrates’s more complete response begins when he says that nature as a whole is akin, which means that when someone recollects one thing its connection to the whole provides a means for recollecting other things, “if he is courageous and doesn’t grow weary in the search” (81d). It is not

sufficient, in other words, that all natures are connected to each other in the “whole,” it is necessary in addition that “One shouldn’t be persuaded by that eristic account, for it would make us lazy, and it is pleasant to hear for those human beings who are soft. This account, by contrast, makes us active and ready to search. Trusting it to be true, I’m willing to inquire together with you, into what virtue is” (81e). What results from this is that the claim that learning is recollection is a likely story for the sake of persuading us not to give up the search for knowledge.

The crucial point, however, is that the alternative—the sophistic eristic that follows from the Megarian/Protagorian thesis—seems, at least at first, an equally likely story. As Socrates says later in the dialogue, “as for the other points, at least, I wouldn’t insist very much on behalf of the argument; but that by supposing one ought to inquire into things he doesn’t know, we would be better and more manly and less lazy than if we should suppose either that it’s impossible to discover those things that we don’t know or that we ought not inquire into them—about this I certainly would do battle, if I could, both in speech and in deed” (86b-c). Are there reasons for doubting the sophistic claim that we cannot know we are learning? Socrates gives one possible reason in the Phaedo: when a sophist presents arguments that refute each other, a student is likely to think that nothing is stable or sound and that learning is impossible—he becomes a misologist; but in fact such a misologist is “only too pleased to push the blame off himself and onto the logoi…Instead let’s far rather admit that we’re not yet sound but must act like men and put our hearts into being sound” (90d-e). There is at least no more reason for believing we cannot learn—for believing beings are not how we apprehend them and are all in
flux—than there is for believing learning is possible; and, furthermore, it seems reasonable to assume the latter until there is a preponderance of evidence for the former.

Aristotle indicates that he agrees with Socrates’s assessment of the problem when he goes on to say, “but since something of what comes into being has always already come into being, and in general something of what is in motion has always already been moved (which is made clear in the writings about motion), presumably the one who is learning must also already have something of knowledge” (Metaph. Th.6 1049b37-1050a3). As Aristotle explains more explicitly in the Physics (to which he refers in this passage), “there is not a coming to be of one who understands, though the one in question was not able to use his knowledge and to act according to it before, so too, being relieved of the tumult, and thought having come to rest and being settled, the power for the use of that knowledge was present” (7.3 247b6-9). In other words, learning is like recollecting insofar as we come to know something already present in us—since we and our intellect are part of the whole—by putting to rest some unrest that blocked this knowledge; the problem lies in us, not in the whole we are trying to know.\footnote{Joe Sachs points to this passage in Metaphysics 178n13.} That Aristotle agrees also with Socrates’s stance that we must confront the Megarian/Protagorean objection with censure is evident from his discussion of relativism and the law of contradiction in Gamma. Those who deny the law are akin to a plant insofar as they conceive nothing (1008b12); and Anaxagoras, who, when speaking among friends, seemed to advocate relativism, threatens to make those who are trying to philosophize lose heart (1009b27-1010a1).

In all these cases, however, the rhetorical nature of the problem should make us wary. Why do both Socrates and Aristotle seem to say it is simply more courageous and less lazy, as

\footnote{Joe Sachs points to this passage in Metaphysics 178n13.}
well as more likely to promote the cause of philosophy, to say that there is nature, learning is possible, and there is a distinction between potency and activity? A philosophical sort of courage—one that takes its bearings from a prudent concern that we must look for the best life if we find we cannot give an account of it—would look something like this, i.e., the insistence that we must continue our search in the face of *aporia*. But does this courage not presuppose we know that philosophy is possible—which is the very thing the Megarians/Protagorians at least seem to be denying? As both Socrates and Aristotle indicate, there seems to be no solid reason *for* philosophy, even if there are reasons *against* the alternative misology or sophistry. Perhaps we can say, tentatively, that both Socrates and Aristotle wish us to see these as two possibilities in order that we hold them in tension with each other: we in fact *do not* know that philosophy is the best way of life or that it is possible; but we also do not know that it is impossible; it is therefore a permanent question that characterizes our knowledge of ignorance. But we *know* that there are these two possibilities, and we also know that those who promote the impossibility of living well and of philosophy often have ulterior motives. The sophistical alternative is further called into question by this very knowledge: we at least have knowledge of the nature of our ignorance.

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156 Whereas courage according to common opinion is the ability to face death, as the most fearful thing, courage in the philosophical sense, then, would be the ability to face *aporia* as a kind of death. Cf. Joshua Mitchell, *Plato’s Fable* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 23n9: “Only by facing the death of what is purportedly known can there be the knowing of ignorance, if you will, that is philosophy. ‘The one aim of those who practice philosophy in the proper manner,’ Socrates says [in the *Phaedo*, 64a], ‘is to practice death and dying.’”

157 In saying this I am partly agreeing with Bruell’s conclusion, mentioned above, that Aristotle opposes the Megarian thesis out of “a manly insistence on the significance, in its own way timeless or universal, of what is manifest to us” (Bruell, Ibid.). But if this were the whole story it would mean that philosophy and the distinction between living and living well—as well as the
Aristotle’s return to the Megarian thesis and his discussion of recollection serve as a prelude to his third and final mention of happiness. He repeats in this context what he said earlier in his second mention of happiness (Th.6 1048b19ff). In all motion (*kinesis*) the activity is in the thing moved: the activity of building is ultimately in the house that is produced. But there are some things that have no work besides their activity, such as seeing, contemplating, living, “and hence happiness too, since it is a certain sort of life.” As a result, for these sorts of activities that are for their own sake and have their ends within themselves, “substance and form are activity” (Th.8 1050a25-1050b2). That is to say, the activity of the soul, for example, which is living, is its substance and its form: if we can point to a soul, or an ensouled thing, what we mean when we point to this thing is that it is living—its activity (living) is its very being, its substance. Similarly, if a life is happy, its activity, which is a certain way of life, is the very thing that we mean when we point to a happy human being and say, “she is happy.”

Once again, however, Aristotle’s examples are telling: all four have to do with the soul, and even if one (contemplation) could be attributed to a god, the only soul that exhibits them all is human. Given this observation, these examples call out for some kind of order or hierarchy: even if seeing is for its own sake, is it not also for the sake of contemplation, especially given that “contemplation” (*theoria*) literally means “beholding”? This recalls the opening lines of the *Metaphysics*: all human beings desire to know, and evidence of this is the delight we find in the very existence of nature—is based on “a manly insistence”—which comes very close to agreeing with Nietzsche’s argument that the will to power is at the root of all philosophy, in particular the existence of and appeal to nature (cf. *Beyond Good and Evil*, book 1, aphorism 9). I do not think, however, that we need to go this far in Nietzsche’s direction; we can merely say that both Socrates’s and Aristotle’s conclusions about nature are drawn in the midst of an awareness that they are permanently tentative, based on our inability to know with certainty either that there is or that there is not nature.
senses, especially in sight (A.1 980a21-24). Sight also seems to be for the sake of life, or at least animal life: if we say that the life of an animal, say a horse, is somehow complete in its own activity, this must include everything that belongs to a completed horse, including sight.\footnote{This is not to say that a blind horse (or any other animal) is not a horse, but merely to admit that it is lacking in what it would need in order to live up to the complete nature of a horse—understanding \textit{teleion} as “perfected”.}

Furthermore, we cannot help but connect contemplation with happiness, as Aristotle does in the \textit{NE}: is contemplation a separate activity from happiness, as Aristotle seems to imply here (unless his language is redundant), or does it, as the activity of the intellect, “constitute the complete happiness of a human being” (\textit{NE} 10.7 1177b25)\footnote{In the place where Aristotle says this he is careful to put the claim in highly conditional language, suggesting that there is more to the story. I will return to this question below.}?

The overarching point seems to be that happiness is the \textit{telos} and activity \textit{par excellence}:\footnote{I suggested before that life is the best example of what Aristotle means by \textit{energeia}, and in the context of his discussion in Theta it is. But happiness is the beginning and the end of an account of \textit{energeia}.} without happiness as an end, there are indefinitely many meaningless actions; if there is no end to action, there is no effort, intellect, or knowledge, because these require an end; but an end is most of all the activity of a substance; if there is to be such an activity, however, there must be a distinction between activity and potency, and, hence, there must be nature; the Megarians/Protagorians seem to deny that there is a distinction between activity and potency, and so deny the possibility of nature, learning, and the distinction between living and living well or happiness; the only way happiness is possible and science or philosophy is possible is if this sophistic thesis is false; we do not know that it is false, but we also do not know that it is not
false. It is the question of the best life—the possibility of happiness—that leads to the question of the existence of nature; and it is this latter question that leads back to the first.

Following this look at Aristotle’s three mentions of happiness in the *Metaphysics* and their contexts, we can see that he is further elaborating the same problem he highlights when he asks, in the first book, whether it is just for human beings to seek the knowledge of causes, and when he suggests that the beautiful object of our erotic desire to know will not satisfy this longing; namely, he is concerned with the possibility of philosophy and, therewith, the question of the human good or happiness. I turn now to Aristotle’s explicit discussions of happiness in the *NE* to ask what is the relation between happiness presented there and in the *Metaphysics*. A better understanding of this relationship will help in giving an account of how the beautiful, the just, and happiness relate to each other in the *Metaphysics* and the question of the possibility of philosophy that is at its core. In giving an account of Aristotle’s pedagogical motives in the *Metaphysics*, however, as well as, relatedly, the central role the question of happiness plays in the question of being as substance, we can gain a deeper awareness of what is at stake in the *NE*.

II. A

As I indicated at the opening of this chapter, the *NE*, despite appearances, is only an investigation of happiness if happiness turns out to be the same as the human good; it is the good that is Aristotle’s primary object. Every art and inquiry, Aristotle tells us, as well as every action and choice “is believed (*dokein*) to aim at some good” (*NE* 1.1 1094a1-2). But there seem to be different ends at which things aim. This claim alone would seem to point to the obvious
conflicts that exist among ends: among human beings, a life devoted to “inquiry” (*methodos*) might very well conflict with a life devoted to action, as it did in Socrates’s trial and execution. Among living things more broadly, the activity of a lion clearly conflicts with the activity of a gazelle. But instead of noting this, Aristotle goes on to say that there are some ends that are activities (*energeiai*) and there are others that are works (*erga*), and that in the latter case, the works are naturally better than the activities that go into producing them. Put more simply, as Aristotle does in the section of *Metaphysics* Theta just discussed, whereas seeing, contemplating, living, and being happy are all for their own sakes, dieting or learning are not—they are for separate ends. Aristotle does not rank order these two kinds of activities here (as he does in the *Metaphysics*), but in pointing them out, he prods us to wonder about them, as well as the simpler understanding of conflicting ends or goods just mentioned.

Aristotle’s overt goal in the opening chapters of the *NE* seems to be, then, to build a hierarchy of ends, with special emphasis on the arts (*technai*), in order to indicate the existence of an overarching or “architectonic” art for the sake of which all other arts are performed. From the very beginning, however, Aristotle complicates this picture. There are many ends of the actions, arts, and sciences, Aristotle tells us, but arts seem to group themselves under broader “capacities” (*dynameis*); for example, bridlemaking is for the sake of horsemanship, which is for the sake of generalship. As this example indicates, however, an art, such as horsemanship, need not be for the sake of a higher art or capacity; one could enjoy riding for its own sake, as many of Aristotle’s gentlemanly auditors or readers surely did and do. If there is some seeming architectonic end, it need not be the only one or even the best one by nature.

And it is crucial that we see the conditional nature of this possibility:
If, therefore, there is some end of our actions that we wish for on account of itself, the rest being things we wish for on account of this end, and if we do not choose all things on account of something else—for in this way the process will go on indefinitely such that the longing involved is empty and pointless—clearly this would be the good, that is, the best (1.2 1094a18-22, emphasis added).

We do not know that there is one end of all actions, but even if there is, it is something to be wished for (boulomai), and wishes, Aristotle makes clear later in book three, may be for impossible things (such as immortality—cf. NE 3.2 1111b20-24). Furthermore, Aristotle limits himself here to actions, leaving aside arts, inquiries, and choices.

In the quotation above, Aristotle raises the problem of the indefinite, which he also raises in his first mention of happiness in the *Metaphysics* a.2. In the latter place, Aristotle uses happiness to make a larger argument about the nature of the good and human action: if there is no ultimate end to human action, there would be no point in making an effort to do anything. Those who say that happiness consists in the satisfaction of desire after desire abolish the reason for all action. Why, though, must there be one end and not several? Why, for example, could

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161 Hobbes might appear to make this argument when he says, “...the felicity of this life consisteth not in the repose of a mind satisfied. For there is no such Finis ultimus (utmost aim) nor Summum Bonum (greatest good) as is spoken of in the books of the old moral philosophers. Nor can a man any more live, whose desires are at an end, than he whose senses and imaginations are at a stand. Felicity is a continual progress of the desire, from one object to another, the attaining of the former being still but the way to the latter. The cause whereof is that the object of man’s desire is not to enjoy only once, and for one instant of time, but to assure forever the way of his future desire” (Leviathan, chapter xi). Hobbes seems to be attacking just this argument that Aristotle is making in *Metaph.* a.2 and *NE* 1.2, especially when he says that we cannot live if our desires are met; life, for Hobbes, seems almost synonymous with desire. But this is not what Aristotle means (as Hobbes probably is aware); rather, our continual desires have to be in the service of something beyond themselves. And this is true for Hobbes as well, whatever he may seem to imply to the contrary: our actions and desires are either for the sake of avoiding violent death, or they are for the sake of our own conception of living well, which
not some people lead a life devoted to politics or moral virtue, while others devote themselves to the philosophic life? These could co-exist as separate ends that fulfill the need to have an end motivating our actions, while being entirely separate.

The reason at first seems to have to do with the work (*ergon*) of a human being. “Perhaps,” Aristotle says, we could say what happiness and the best life were, “if the work of the human being should be grasped” (*NE* 1.7 1097b25). Aristotle reminds us that in certain activities, like aulos playing and sculpting, the good lies in the work, and it might be the same for human beings if there is a certain work that belongs to us. Similarly, just as there “appears to be” a work of the eye, hand, and foot, might there not be a work for a human being? These are strange examples, however. Firstly, as noted above, Aristotle begins the *NE* by noting that some activities are for their own sakes, while others have their ends in their works. Even if a sculptor or an aulos player enjoys his activity for its own sake, he is not a good sculptor or aulos player unless his sculpture is good or he plays well: the work, which lies outside the activity itself, is higher than the activity. Is there something that a human being produces outside himself that we could take as her work and highest end? There are also problems with Aristotle’s other examples: an eye, hand, and foot are parts of a whole; what is the whole to which a human being is a part? Perhaps a city? At the very least, the problem is that we are all human beings, and so several ends would inevitably suggest a hierarchy; one end would be more human than another, and even for the sake of the other.

Hobbes acknowledges (cf. chapters xv, xvii, and xxx). Even if we are just atoms in a void, Hobbes must agree with Aristotle at least to the extent that human beings only act because they have a goal in mind, i.e., a *telos*, that extends beyond the action itself, however low, relative, or provisional that goal might be.
Aristotle appears to indicate that individual human beings are to cities like feet are to bodies and, therefore, the end of the city does constitute our architectonic end: “But it [the human good] might be held to belong to the most authoritative and most architectonic one [science, art, or capacity], and such appears to be the political art” (1094a27-28, emphasis added; cf. Politics 1282b16). Once again, however, both here and in his discussion of the human work, Aristotle is careful to make it clear this is what some people believe to be true, not necessarily what he judges to be the case. And in both places Aristotle goes on to complicate this possibility. The political art appears to be architectonic because “it ordains what sciences there must be in cities and what kinds each person in turn must learn and up to what point” (1094a28-1094b2). In other words, much as generalship uses horsemanship to its own end (whereas horsemanship could be for its own sake), the city uses science for its own ends, but science might have other ends outside its instrumentality. It is also telling that Aristotle says the end of the city is not only most architectonic but most “authoritative” (kyriotatos—related to lordship); an addition that suggests the city forces itself into the position as the ruling end. Aristotle further suggests this when he says immediately following, “to secure and preserve the good of the city appears to be something greater and more complete: the good of the individual by himself is certainly desirable enough, but that of a nation and of cities is nobler and more divine” (1094b7-11, emphasis added)—i.e., not necessarily better.

Similarly, in NE 1.7, after ruling out mere life and sense perception as the work of human beings because they also belong to plants or animals or both, Aristotle concludes:

…there remains a certain active life of that which possesses reason; and what possesses reason includes what is obedient to reason, on the one hand, and what possesses it and
thinks, on the other…And if the work of a human being is an activity of soul in accord with reason, or not without reason, and we assert that the work of a given person is the same in kind as that of a serious person…but if this is so...if this is so, then the human good becomes an activity of soul in accord with virtue, and if there are several virtues, then in accord with the best and most complete one” (1097b33-1098a18, emphasis added).

Even though Aristotle finally condenses his highly qualified definition of the human work and good into an apparently coherent and single account, there are in fact two alternatives lurking in the background. That which seems to define human beings and sets us apart from other animals is our possession of speech or reason; but work is active, and so what seems to be most human is an active life of that part of us that possesses reason. But, Aristotle continues, there is a part that possess reason and thinks, and also a part that merely follows reason’s commands. This suggests the broadly human work we are looking for must include both these parts, and so it is properly described as an activity of the soul in accord with reason, or not without reason. There remains, however, the distinction between these two parts, a distinction Aristotle also indicates when he says politics dictates which sciences should be in cities and who should study them: does action rule thought, or does thought rule action? Or is thought inseparable from action?

Continuing with his investigation into the human good according to generally held opinions, Aristotle says the political art and all action aims at an end the name of which “is pretty much agreed on by most people; for both the many and the refined say it is happiness…but as for what happiness is, they disagree, and the many do not give a response similar to that of the wise. The former respond that it is something obvious and manifest, such as pleasure or wealth or honor” (NE 1.4 1095a14-23). Happiness, in other words, is not necessarily the same thing as the
good, but it may be. In any event, “the wise” disagree with “the many,” who include the “refined” in this case, although Aristotle does not say what the wise think the good is.\textsuperscript{162} What this means in effect is that the good we are seeking might not turn out to be what most people think happiness is.\textsuperscript{163}

According to appearances, Aristotle continues, the best end is something complete and sought for its own sake, and “happiness above all seems to be of this character” (1097a28-1097b1). Furthermore, again according to what is believed to be true, the complete good is self-sufficient and in need of nothing in addition, and we suppose happiness to be of this sort (1097b8-17). Happiness must also be in a complete life (1098a19), and we suppose it cannot be simply due to chance or to the gods, because “to entrust the greatest and noblest thing to chance would be excessively discordant” (1099b24). Furthermore, the fortunes of one’s descendants are thought to contribute to the happiness or misery of the dead because to think otherwise “appears to be excessively opposed to what is dear and contrary to the opinions held;” nevertheless, “it seems…even if anything at all does get through to them [the dead], whether good or its contrary, it is something faint and small, either simply so or to them” (1101a23-1101b3). We can see something impossible in all these criteria: human beings are not self-sufficient, as Aristotle indicates by mentioning that human beings are political by nature; a complete life is not defined, but suggests the desire for immortality, as I discuss in chapter one; this same desire for immortality, or at least the shadow that death casts over the possibility of happiness, is indicated

\textsuperscript{162} On this point cf. Ronna Burger, \textit{Aristotle’s Dialogue with Socrates}, 22.
insofar as the possibility of a conscious, individuated afterlife is accepted merely because to think otherwise would oppose what is “dear” and be contrary to opinions.

Despite these problems, Aristotle concludes the first book of the *NE* with his definition of happiness derived from common opinion: “…happiness is a certain activity of soul in accord with complete virtue,” and so what virtue is must come next in the investigation. Aristotle rarely mentions happiness again in the *NE* until he reaches the last book, and so I will turn now to his discussion there.

II. B

Aristotle reaches the zenith of his argument concerning happiness in *NE* 10.6-8 where he argues that the life devoted to contemplation constitutes the happiest and best life for a human being. I have already touched on this subject in the first chapter, but I wish to return to it here now that I have looked at Aristotle’s account of the just, the beautiful, and happiness in the *Metaphysics*. Aristotle reminds us of what common opinion says happiness must be: it is self-sufficient, chosen for its own sake, and is an activity of the soul in accord with virtue. It cannot consist in play, however, if we consider it the sort of entertainment a tyrant seeks, because people ruin themselves in search of this sort of pleasure. As evidence, Aristotle cites an example reminiscent of Socrates’s argument for the purity of the pleasure associated with philosophy as compared with the honor- and gain-loving souls: “…if they, who have not tasted pure and liberal
pleasure, seek refuge in the bodily pleasures, one should not on this account suppose that such pleasures are the more choiceworthy ones. For children too suppose that what is honored among themselves is most excellent” (1076b1-25). Happiness cannot consist in mere enjoyment; play seems to resemble relaxation, Aristotle says, and this is for the sake of activity. Furthermore, serious things are better than those that prompt laughter.

We should note in passing, however, that philosophers have been accused of all these things, especially Socrates: Plato’s Callicles calls him corrupt, ridiculous, idle, childish, and in need of a beating. Furthermore, Aristotle’s distinction between seriousness and play is reminiscent of another Platonic distinction the Athenian Stranger makes in the Laws: “Of course, the affairs of human beings are not worthy of great seriousness; yet it is necessary to be serious about them” (803b). Nowadays, the Stranger continues, serious things are thought to be for the sake of playful things, just as war is held to be for the sake of peace; but for us, education is the most serious thing, which is wholly lacking in war. The implication is that we think war is a serious thing, but it lacks both play and education; education is the most serious thing, but people should spend their lives for the most, “playing certain games—sacrificing, singing, and dancing” (803e). The Stranger makes a distinction between playful or unserious things that nevertheless need to be taken seriously—including war and sacrificing to the gods—and the most serious thing, which is education, and which, not incidentally, includes inquiry into the nature of god (cf.

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164 Cf. Plato, Republic, 582a.
165 Cf. Plato, Gorgias, 484c-486d: “For philosophy, to be sure, Socrates, is a graceful thing, if someone engages in it in due measure at the proper age; but if he fritters his time away in it further than is needed, it is the corruption of human beings…whenever, therefore, they enter into some private or political action, they become ridiculous…whenever I see an older man still philosophizing and not released from it, this man, Socrates, surely seems to me to need a beating.”
This parallel, as well as the one suggested by the typical reaction to the philosopher exemplified in the *Gorgias*, prompts one to ask what is playful and what is serious, if these are the two alternatives. Might Aristotle be suggesting, via this parallel, that his account of moral virtue is seemingly so serious because it must be taken seriously, even if it does not deserve to be, from the vantage point of contemplation? This conclusion would seem to harmonize with what follows, in which Aristotle argues for the superiority of contemplation to moral virtue. But if Aristotle intends this parallel, he implicitly goes further: moral virtue is not only second in rank to contemplation; it is as distant from it as play is from seriousness.

Aristotle’s argument, however, is curiously tentative. If we accept the common opinion that happiness must be in accord with virtue, it reasonably follows that it would be in accord with the best virtue belonging to the best part of us. “So whether this is the intellect or something else that seems naturally to rule, to command, and to possess intelligence concerning what is noble and divine, whether it itself is in fact divine or the most divine of the things in us—the activity of this, in accord with the virtue proper to it, would be complete happiness. And that this activity is contemplative has been said” (1177a12-18). In order for contemplation to be complete happiness, the intellect, of which it is the activity, must naturally rule, command, and possess intelligence concerning the beautiful and the divine. Does the intellect possess such intelligence? I have suggested in the previous chapters that it does not, according to Aristotle; the erotic longing of the philosopher wishes for something like knowledge of a beautiful god, which Aristotle provides an image of in *Metaphysics* L. But knowledge of this god is ultimately lacking, and the existence of nature is hypothetical, not known absolutely, and so the possibility of philosophy as well as the distinction between living and living well, as became clear in the
account of happiness in *Metaphysics* a and Th. In the remainder of this chapter I will see if we can learn something about Aristotle’s account of happiness-as-contemplation in *NE* 10 when taking these observations into account.

Aristotle continues his argument by saying that contemplation is the “most powerful” (*kratiste*) activity, as well as the most continuous and most pleasant. It is also self-sufficient, chosen for its own sake, and active when at leisure. Aristotle then repeats that contemplation would constitute complete happiness for a human being, “provided, that is, that it goes together with a complete span of life” (1177a19-1177b26; cf. 1098a19). As already discussed, this poses a grave problem for the possibility of complete happiness: it seems to require immortality, which Aristotle admits is impossible (cf. 1111b23). Nevertheless, Aristotle continues, one should not limit oneself to human things because one is human, but should “make oneself immortal, insofar as that is possible”—but is this possible to any degree? Aristotle continues his account saying that the intellect is both the most divine thing in us—making a point to distinguish it from what is human in us—and that it is the most human thing, “if in fact this especially is a human being” (1178a3-8). What we desire in making contemplation happiness is to remain human beings while also being gods—to be relieved of all external equipment, and to be immortal, but still to have friends. Above all, Aristotle concludes, the one who thinks happiness is “coextensive with contemplation” secretly (or openly) assumes he is deserving of the gods’ grace and so, implicitly, immortality: “But the person who is active in accord with the intellect…also *seems* to be dearest to the gods. For *if* there is a certain care for human things on the part of the gods, as in fact there is *held* to be, it would also be reasonable for the gods to delight in what is best and most akin to
them—this would be the intellect—and to benefit in return those who cherish this above all and honor it” (1179a23-29).

As we saw in our reading of *Metaphysics* L, Aristotle is concerned that his audience of convinced philosophy students recognize the dangers inherent in their zeal, namely, that they will too eagerly accept as true an account that fulfills their deepest longings for a beautiful answer to the question of being—even while he acknowledges the necessity for this zeal, which must begin with an erotic attachment to the beautiful. This search, Aristotle argues at the outset of the *Metaphysics*, is not unjust for human beings, despite our slavish natures. We see here the connection between these two arguments, in happiness as contemplation: we not only should question our attachment to the beautiful, but also why it is we think philosophy is just: could it be that we think we will be deserve to be rewarded by the gods if we devote our lives to this most beautiful cause? If so, we are not genuinely devoting our lives to it; we are hoping to use philosophical inquiry as a means to an end. We can see this similarly in Aristotle’s account of the unmoved mover in the *Metaphysics*, when he says, “its life is of such a kind as the best we have for a short time.” He then goes on to describe its life in the same terms he uses to describe the contemplative life in the *NE*: it is always the same; it is immortal, it is pure thinking, thinking, on thinking; and its activity—i.e., its very substance—is pleasure (*Metaph. L* 1072b13-30). This god is what common opinion has in mind when it thinks of happiness, combined with what a zealous philosopher thinks: contemplation, immortality, self-sufficiency, and pleasure in one life.

Contemplation, as Aristotle describes it in *NE* 10, cannot live up to what we hope for when we talk about happiness, but neither is it philosophy, at least as described. We can see
from Aristotle’s account of happiness in the *Metaphysics*, as it relates to activity and potency, that happiness serves as a *question* that motivates philosophy, insofar as happiness requires the distinction between living and living well, and the existence of nature. But Aristotle suggests that these are open questions, even if agrees with Socrates in finding more reasons for nature than for the apparent relativism of the Megarians/Protagorians and other sophists. Furthermore, however, if the Megarian/Protagorian thesis that Aristotle suppresses is more plausible—that *anthropos* is the measure of all things because the species’s intellect and its categories is required, along with *logos*, for the being of all things—then human nature would be the one thing ultimately knowable, whether or not other things are; in order to know that man is the measure of all things, we have to know man. More than this, however, happiness seems to be the most vexing, but also grounding, question: there do seem to be better and worse lives, and if this is the case, human nature would seem to have some substance that separates it from other substances. The question of the *NE*, then, suggests that the question of the *Metaphysics*—what is being as substance—is in fact possible, and that the philosophic life is possible. But the *Metaphysics* implicitly reminds us that this is still an open question.
Conclusion

I

While Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* is an attempt to know the causes of beings in their beinghood—insofar as they are beings—it is not a straightforward attempt. This is because, as I have striven to show, Aristotle wishes us to see that our desire for knowledge that is absolute threatens to cloud our judgment regarding the limited, tentative, and hypothetical knowledge that may be possible. This knowledge, Aristotle suggests, consists in discussing alternative possibilities with friends—it is necessarily dialogic. Aristotle’s proposal—that nature and natures exist because activity is prior to potency, and knowledge based on the existence of an eternal, motionless, and separate unmoved mover is possible—is only one possibility, among the others toward which he points us. Simonides and other poets may be right in arguing that, while there is a nature and necessity to which even the gods, if there are any, are beholden, we cannot know this nature beyond knowing that chance rules all things. The physicists, including Anaxagoras and Protagoras, offer another possibility when they say that intellect is the cause of being and that *anthropos* is the measure of all things: human intellect and its categories is necessary for being; there would be no beings without human beings. Although Aristotle does genuinely argue against these alternatives, he also presents them for our consideration in such a way as to suggest his conclusion is not final, but must be constantly subjected to further investigation. Aristotle suggests this insofar as he overstates his case: he presents the divine unmoved mover as the seemingly perfect answer to our philosophical desires. Not only does Aristotle want us to submit
his argument to scrutiny in order to see why he himself may not have been entirely persuaded by it; he also wants us to examine our own motivation for pursuing first philosophy in order to see if it fulfills our desire for a way of life that is both noble and good. Ultimately, Aristotle agrees with Socrates in Plato’s *Apology* when he says he knows of nothing both noble and good; that the philosophic life in pursuit of knowledge of causes cannot fulfill what we most deeply desire, and so consists ultimately in reconciliation to the insufficiency of such a life, even if it is more sufficient than the alternatives—philosophy is knowledge that we can never have complete knowledge of ourselves or of causes.

In closing, I will offer a summary of my argument that leads to a question: if philosophy is knowledge of ignorance, according to Aristotle, is it still the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake—and in what way, if so? And, furthermore, how might Aristotle respond to Nietzsche’s criticism that the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake entangles us in the snare of morality?

This is an apt question with which to conclude because I began by reflecting on the first line of the *Metaphysics*, and what it means to desire to know for its own sake. We have this desire, according to Aristotle, by nature, and the love we have of the senses for their own sake is a sign of this. But if we fulfill our nature by seeking knowledge, does this not mean we risk angering the gods the poets say begrudge such attempts? For this reason, any attempt to know causes, if, as Aristotle indicates, it is simultaneously an attempt to live well through one’s own efforts, must also be theological, insofar as it must account for why any gods there are will not begrudge human beings. We must also, however, be aware of our reasons for pursuing such knowledge—is it for its own sake in the same way that doing a good deed or fulfilling our duty are for their own sake, because a good deed is its own reward? Or is it for its own sake because
in pursuing wisdom we are perfecting our nature? Are these two possibilities the same or different?

One reason to think they are different is that Aristotle calls first philosophy the most honorable study; why should we be concerned with whether or not something is honorable if we are pursuing it for its own sake? One reason to think this is that the desire for honor is connected with the desire for the good for oneself—but the good as judged by a prudent judge; if one were able to judge for oneself, one would not need an outside judge, and so would be unconcerned with honor. Aristotle says as much in his account of honor in the NE, where he depicts the great-souled human being as most worthy of honor because he is perfectly morally virtuous, according to common opinion’s assessment of what moral virtue requires, insofar as he is unconcerned with any reward outside his decent acts themselves, including the honor he is due thereby. As Aristotle goes on to show, however, if a morally virtuous act, which is one done for its own sake and is called beautiful, requires the sacrifice of one’s own good for the higher good of the act itself, the sacrifice of this higher good would surely be even more beautiful and morally virtuous, according to the common opinion regarding moral virtue. This common opinion, insofar as it includes self-sacrifice as necessary for moral virtue in itself, undercuts itself. Moral virtue must be guided by a prudent concern for one’s own good.

The honorableness of first philosophy is tied to its theological subject matter. I note, however, that Aristotle overstates his case for the divine unmoved mover, and deliberately distorts the alternative accounts given by his predecessors. This is for the sake of giving heart to his students, who might otherwise fall prey to the misological eristic of the sophists. Besides the form of the argument itself, the greatest evidence for this is Aristotle’s calling the divine
unmoved mover an erotic object. Turning to Diotima’s speech in Plato’s *Symposium*, and Aristophanes’s speech to which it is in part a response, I conclude that there is broad agreement between Aristotle, in his account of the tension at the heart of moral virtue, and Diotima’s account of eros. Eros is ultimately the desire for the good, but it seems to be the desire for the beautiful. All human action, insofar as it is the desire for the good or to be happy, is erotic for this reason. This desire is to have the good as one’s own forever—to be happy and immortal. Performing a beautiful act for its own sake—Diotima gives as examples Alcestis dying for Admetus or Achilles for Patroclus—only makes sense if it is ultimately done prudently, for our own good. In this case, we hope to gain the gods’ favor for our beautiful deeds. Even if we do not have this literally in mind, when we do something morally virtuous, giving up our own good for the sake of the beautiful deed itself, we think it is worthy of a reward—we think justice should be fulfilled. The only reason we would actually sacrifice a lower good for a higher one is if we think justice actually is fulfilled and we will gain in some way from the morally virtuous act, according both to Diotima and Aristotle. Both agree, furthermore, that beginning philosophers are subject to this confusion: they may be pursuing wisdom, as Socrates says he did when he spoke to Diotima, because it is beautiful—i.e., because it is self-sacrificial, rather than good as prudent.

If this is the case, and Aristotle means to alert us to this possibility by saying the unmoved mover is an erotic object, then he is concerned with happiness or the human good in the *Metaphysics*, as we can also see insofar as he is concerned with the justice and beauty of the pursuit of wisdom—the just and the beautiful being the concerns of the political art, according to the *NE*. If we look at the places in the *Metaphysics* where Aristotle mentions happiness, we can
see that the question of human happiness is both the beginning and the end of the question that seems to be at the heart of the text, namely, the priority of activity to potency. Activity must be prior to potency if there are to be natures to study, including human nature, and there must be human nature if there is to be an activity that conforms to such a nature, which is happiness. We do not know absolutely, in the end, that there is such a nature, however, given the apparent plausibility of the alternative accounts, especially that of Protagoras that *anthropos* is the measure of all things. If this means, however, that being and *anthropos* are inextricably tied together—that the human mind is necessary for the being of things—then human nature and its perfection are inextricably tied to the knowledge of beings according to Protagoras’s account as well. Self-knowledge and the knowledge of causes are one and the same.

II

Aristotle, then, seems to be setting up a pedagogically helpful tension in his presentation of the argument in the *Metaphysics*. On the one hand, he overstates the case for how final his account is, in order to provide his students with what seems to be an answer so that they will not despair. On the other hand he provides clues in this very presentation that, although this eros for the beautiful must be fed at the beginning, it is ultimately necessary that it fall away if students are to recognize their true motivations in pursuing such knowledge. Aristotle is, then, concerned with self-knowledge in the *Metaphysics*. This is not only a secondary concern to the main one of seeking knowledge of causes; as we have seen, knowledge of the human good is inextricably tied to the question of being or the question of whether activity is prior to potency—whether there is
a human nature to study. Knowing ourselves and our own good are ultimately the only reasonable motives for pursuing such knowledge, insofar as we are attempting to perfect ourselves as seekers of knowledge by nature.

It would seem that one of Aristotle’s greatest opponents in his quest for knowledge for its own sake is Friedrich Nietzsche. In order to gain a clearer sense of what is at the heart of Aristotle’s intention in the *Metaphysics* it will help to look at the ways in which Nietzsche does and does not agree with Aristotle.

Aristotle’s account seems to be undeniably teleological: what it means to say that activity is prior to potency or that there are natures is that this activity or nature is the end or telos that defines the species. For Nietzsche, the “doctrines of sovereign becoming, of the fluidity of all concepts, types and species, of the lack of any cardinal distinction between man and animal,” are “true but deadly.”¹⁶⁶ The will to power is Nietzsche’s anti-teleological telos:

Suppose, finally, we succeeded in explaining our entire instinctive life as the development and ramification of one basic form of the will—namely, of the will to power, as my proposition has it; suppose all organic functions could be traced back to this will to power and one could also find in it the solution of the problem of procreation and nourishment—it is one problem—then one would have gained the right to determine all efficient force univocally as will to power. The world viewed from the inside, the world defined and determined according to its “intelligible character”—it would be “will to power” and nothing else.—¹⁶⁷

There is something in Nietzsche’s argument that life is will to power that is akin to Aristophanes’s account of eros in the *Symposium*: eros is the desire for our original nature, which is defined by our desire to dominate—by our will to power. Furthermore, this will to power and

¹⁶⁷ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 36.
its success is the measure of any good there is for Nietzsche; one’s own is the good (contrary to Socrates, Diotima, and Aristotle) if one’s will to power succeeds. And yet, for Nietzsche, “The question is to what extent [a judgment, true or false] is life-promoting, life-preserving, species-preserving, perhaps even species-cultivating.” For there to be the cultivation of a species, there must be a species, and it must have an end toward which cultivation can aim—what we might call a good according to the species. The problem, according to Nietzsche, is that philosophers hitherto have not been honest enough about what their true motivations are, namely, the will to power: “Philosophy is this tyrannical drive itself, the most spiritual will to power, to the ‘creation of the world,’ to the causa prima.”

What, however, does this most spiritual will to power look like? Nietzsche says, “Gradually it has become clear to me what every great philosophy so far has been: namely, the personal confession of its author and a kind of involuntary and unconscious memoir; also that the moral (or immoral) intentions in every philosophy constituted the real germ of life from which the whole plant had grown.” It is not simply that all philosophy is autobiographical for Nietzsche; rather, all philosophy implies an interpretation of morality. Accordingly, Nietzsche continues, “I do not believe that a ‘drive to knowledge’ is the father of philosophy; but rather that another drive has, here as elsewhere, employed understanding (and misunderstanding) as a mere instrument”—that drive being, ultimately, the will to power. It would seem, then, that no one would be further from Aristotle than Nietzsche in his interpretation of what philosophy is for the sake of.

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168 Nietzsche, ibid., 4.
169 Nietzsche, ibid., 9.
170 Nietzsche, ibid., 6.
If we look more closely, however, we can see some common ground. In the central part of *Beyond Good and Evil*, in a chapter called “Epigrams and Interludes,” Nietzsche offers a number of short aphorisms that only apparently connect to one another. There is a connection, however, among the first few that bears directly on our subject. Nietzsche begins by saying, “Whoever is a teacher through and through takes all things seriously only in relation to his students—even himself.”\(^{171}\) As I have argued, Aristotle’s seriousness throughout the *Metaphysics*—the apparent finality of his account—is for the sake of his students. The knowledge he is pursuing is for the sake of his students—his pursuing it “for its own sake” is for the sake of his students. Nietzsche continues in the next aphorism, “‘Knowledge for its own sake’—that is the last snare of morality: with that one becomes completely entangled once more.”\(^ {172}\) Knowledge for its own sake in the morally virtuous sense is a necessary pedagogical starting point; Aristotle’s students must see this knowledge as the beautiful end of human life that is worthwhile for its own sake and is its own reward. But in this pursuit, Aristotle prods them to see that they do not realize they are merely pursuing this knowledge because they think they should, or they have been told they should. Knowledge for its own sake can also mean knowledge for the sake of a prudent concern for one’s own good or pursuit of perfection. Knowledge for its own sake in this sense ends up being self-knowledge, as knowledge of one’s own good.\(^ {173}\) Nietzsche continues: “The attraction of knowledge would be small if one did not

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\(^{171}\) Nietzsche, ibid., 63.

\(^{172}\) Nietzsche, ibid., 64.

\(^{173}\) Cf. Leo Strauss, *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 181: “The opening aphorism [of Nietzsche’s chapter, ‘Epigrams and Interludes’] draws our attention to the paramountcy of being oneself, of being for oneself, of ‘preserving’ oneself (cf. aph. 41). Accordingly knowledge cannot be, or cannot be good, for its own sake; it
have to overcome so much shame on the way.” This also agrees with Aristotle’s intention in the *Metaphysics*: he wishes to use the “shame” his students feel—their unexamined assumption that philosophy is the best and most beautiful way of life because knowledge is for its own sake—to keep them going in their studies. As they continue, however, he wants them to see that the prudent human being who seeks what is good for him cannot rely on the judgment of those she holds to be competent judges—she must overcome her shame so that the honorableness or beauty of the knowledge is not her motivating factor, but rather her own good, so far as she can achieve it. It is not merely the absence of shame that leads to self-knowledge, but the overcoming of this shame.

III

If, however, self-knowledge, as knowledge of one’s own good, is the end toward which Aristotle is pointing us in his *Metaphysics*, this end seems to be structured according to our nature as beings that desire to know. As I suggest in my last chapter, however, complete knowledge seems to be elusive, according to Aristotle’s account: this is in part because we are mortal, but it is also because we lack the grounding that would be necessary for such complete knowledge—namely, we do not know that activity is prior to potency. The philosophic life, which is the life that attempts to know itself as a desirer of knowledge, is always incomplete; we can never fully know ourselves because we can never have complete knowledge of causes. The

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174 Nietzsche, ibid., 65.
closest we can get is the continuous quest for this knowledge, motivated by an awareness of what we lack:

…there is no one who does not obviously take care about some things and not about others; therefore, as it seems, everyone conceives things to be simply a certain way, if not about everything, at least about what is better and worse. And if they do so not knowing but having opinion, one ought to be much more concerned about the truth, just as one who is sick ought to be more concerned about health than one who is healthy. For one who has an opinion, as compared with the one who has knowledge, is not disposed in a healthy way toward truth (Metaphysics, 1008b25-32).

What we gain from reading the Metaphysics that we do not—or not as well—from reading the NE and the Politics is a clearer picture of our nature as incomplete beings. Not only this; we see what we would need in order to be complete: we would need knowledge of a god that orders the world in the way that we think it may be ordered, and we would need the knowledge this god possesses. Tocqueville is particularly helpful in this regard. For Tocqueville, “God has no need of general ideas” because He sees everything at a glance. If, however, “human intelligence tried to examine and judge all the particular cases that came his way individually he would soon be lost in a wilderness of detail…”\textsuperscript{175} The unity that a god, such as the one Aristotle posits in the Metaphysics, can bestow upon being is one that is capable of combining particularity with universality: “Men think that the greatness of the idea of unity lies in means. God sees it in the end. It is for this reason that the idea of greatness leads to a thousand mean actions. To force all men to march in step toward the same goal—that is a human idea. To encourage endless variety of actions but to bring them about so that in a thousand different ways all tend toward the fulfillment of one great design—that is a God-given

idea.” We would only possess self-knowledge if we possessed the sort of knowledge a god could have—one that knows all in its particularity and unity. This is what we desire when we desire to know, and it is what we desire when we construct a city that attempts to order all things for the sake of living well.

I have discussed at some length already the reasons why Aristotle’s account of contemplation as constituting the best human life in the *NE* and *Politics* is inadequate. Even without reading the *Metaphysics*, we can see that the contemplative life of the solitary, friendless contemplator, who seems like the god of the *Metaphysics*, is not human, and does not live the sort of philosophic life Aristotle himself seems to live—one that requires conversation. Ronna Burger argues, for example, that the dichotomy Aristotle presents in NE 10 of the solitary contemplator and the active political agent “seems to exclude the very possibility of a life devoted to theoretical reflection on the question of the human good; it has no place for philosophy understood in such a way that political philosophy is its ‘eccentric core.’” The latter is a quotation from Leo Strauss, the full text of which says, “Philosophy examines opinions, especially the most authoritative opinions of the city. In subjecting the most authoritative opinions to examination, it denies their authoritativeness and transcends the city. Its transcendence of the city discloses the limitations of the city….The city thus comes to life as a special kind of part: while being the obstacle to philosophy, it alone makes philosophy possible….Political philosophy is the eccentric core of philosophy.” What Burger and Strauss seem to mean by this is that, insofar as we must begin, according to Socrates, Plato, and

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176 Tocqueville, ibid., 734.
177 Burger, ibid., 214.
Aristotle, with things “known to us,” i.e., with common opinions, we must begin with what we learn in the city—as conditioned by politics—and ascend to things known in themselves: “the [activity] of [contemplation]…is not solitary or disinterested contemplation of the cosmic whole. Its subject matter is the human things…and its way of proceeding, in the absence of perfect wisdom, is an ascent from opinion through the examination of perfect wisdom.”179

My reading of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* suggests that this interpretation is incomplete. If we restrict our reading to the *NE* and *Politics*, we risk thinking that all philosophy begins from and returns to politics. On the contrary, the following seems to be a truer picture of what Aristotle intends to be the trajectory of his audience’s education: We begin from what we believe to be beautiful and just, and ascend to the belief that the contemplative life is best. We may, however, remain skeptical, given the problematic nature of this life; nevertheless, we take heart in Aristotle’s depiction of the answer to our erotic longing: the divine unmoved mover. On closer inspection, however, we realize that the unmoved mover is a mirror in which we see reflected our own desires for complete knowledge of causes. This leads us back to the *NE* especially in an attempt to understand why we desire this knowledge for its own sake—for its beauty—rather than for the sake of our happiness. This leads us once again to reread the *Metaphysics* from the beginning in a renewed search not merely for a clearer picture of the human things, but also in order to continue our search, never to be completed, for the conflicting accounts of the causes of beings. The *NE, Politics, and Metaphysics* mutually support each other in a virtuous circle through which we simultaneously can seek self-knowledge and knowledge of causes.

179 Burger, ibid. 214.
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