

Knowing in Aristotle Part 2: *Technē*, *Phronēsis*, *Sophia*, and Divine Cognitive Activities

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1. Practical Wisdom (*phronēsis*)

The first part of this article laid out Aristotle's views on non-rational cognitive states and on the first two excellences of reason, *nous* and *epistēmē*. We now come to Aristotle's two practical excellences of reason: *technē*, craft, and *phronēsis*, practical wisdom. For Aristotle, the ultimate goals of *technē* and *phronēsis* (unlike *nous*, *epistēmē*, and *sophia*), are not truth as such, but acting well (in the case of *phronēsis*) and a particular product such a shoe or a song (in the case of *technē*). Practical and productive expertise guide our actions by combining a grasp of general features with an assessment of the particular circumstances so as to reach the truth about how we should act or produce something here and now. To have the *technē* of building houses or baking cookies is to know how to reliably and excellently produce a house or a cookie, while to have *phronēsis* is to know how to discern the fine and moderate actions and act virtuously.

Although Aristotle thinks achieving *phronēsis* or a *technē* involves mastering bodies of knowledge, he is, in terms of contemporary epistemology, an anti-intellectualist. Know-how is not reducible to knowledge of propositions. Since *phronēsis* and *technē* are directed at acting in particular circumstances, they involve cognition of non-universalizable factors and also place requirements on one's character and desires, things that propositional knowledge does not provide on its own (cf. *NE* II 2, 1103b25-31). Aristotle's account of these ways of knowing has some affinity with the contemporary approach of Edward Craig (1990) and other social epistemologists who give an account of knowledge based around on what they take its social function to be: providing action guiding information and making you a reliable informant.¹ Aristotle agrees that the primary role of practical and productive knowledge is to guide action. He also takes *phronēsis* or *technē* as markers that indicate that someone is a reliable informant who can be trusted within the relevant domain.

Practical wisdom involves knowing how to both determine the virtuous and practically wise action and carry it out. *Phronēsis* is a "true state involving reason concerned with human goods" (*EN* VI 5, 1140b21-22, trans. Reeve). General knowledge of human affairs is not enough to be in such a state. Aristotle argues that actually possessing practical wisdom requires virtue (*EN* VI 12-

¹ For a discussion of contemporary approaches to know-how see Carter and Poston 2018.

13). Virtue ensures that your goals are, in fact, good. *Phronēsis* then accurately and cleverly picks out the best means to achieving them. Since its success is measured by action, which is inherently particular, *phronēsis* also requires comprehension of the relevant particulars (*EN* VI 11) so that you successfully choose the appropriate action in the particular circumstances. At an individual level this virtue is practical wisdom, but when applied to society it is political expertise (*politikē*). (*EN* I 2; *Pol* 1268b37; 1269a10; 1282b16) Aristotle thinks that the same excellence of reason is capable of determining and producing excellent action at either the individual or political level. You can use it to structure your own life goals and the actions realizing them or to structure the goals of a *polis* (city-state) and the actions and commitments it takes to realize them.

For Aristotle, there are three key differences between *technē* and *phronēsis* and theoretical excellences. First, processes for figuring out the truth play a much more central role. Practical wisdom and craft are kinds of know-how that inherently concern changeable things, making uncovering the truth more challenging. As James Allen notes (2015, 62-63), while Aristotle's *Analytics* sometimes discusses the processes of inquiry that the scientist investigating the phenomena uses (e.g. *Apr* I 27-30; *APo* I 6, 75a33-34; II 17, 99a3), it focuses on the completed science, the overall explanatory and causal structure that the science reveals. By contrast, Aristotle's account of practical wisdom focuses on how it enables us to find the truth.

Good deliberation (*euboulia*)—swiftly and surely figuring out the correct action—is what's characteristic of *phronēsis* (*NE* VI 9), not contemplating truths already discovered. Since figuring out the truth about contingents cannot be done through an invariable process, much attention needs to be given to the excellence of the process:

knowing how actions are to be done, and distributions made if they are to be just—that is a bigger task than knowing what things are healthy, since even in that case while knowing it is things such as honey, wine, hellebore, cautery, and surgery may be easy, knowing how to administer them to produce health, and to whom and when, is no less a task than being a doctor. (*NE* V 9, 1137a9–17, trans. Reeve)

Figuring out precisely how to apply the relevant expertise always takes work, even in the case of craft, but especially in the case of acting virtuously. The relevant truths are also uncovered for the sake of action, they are not to be enjoyed for their own sake. Aristotle attacks approaches to ethics that do not treat it as fundamentally practical (*NE* I 3, 1095a3-5, II 2 1103b26-29).² Truths

² Even if the citizens are practically wise and share their opinions with their rulers, they lack the sort of *phronēsis* that is specific to rule, precisely because they are not directly employing these excellences to structure their society (*Pol* III 4, 1277b25-29 cf. III 11, 1282a13-23). Aristotle allows that there is value in deliberating for friends (and, thus, perhaps, in considering case studies in order to sharpen one's practical wisdom), but only insofar as your counsel will then enable better action.

about how best to do something here and now also lack the stable explanatory structure that makes contemplating theoretical sciences so satisfying, according to Aristotle.

The next characteristic of practical excellences is lower epistemic requirements for reaching the excellent state. Carpenters only need to inquire about right angles insofar as they are useful for their work, while geometers inquire about what they are as such (*NE* I 7, 1098a26-b10). A well-constructed house requires knowing when to place materials at right angles, but it does not require a precise grasp of why right angles can provide solidity or the full range of their mathematical attributes. Sometimes an art requires grasping explanatory connections, as in the case of healing, where the doctor needs to know about human nature and grasp the causes of health and disease.³ Even here though, not all explanations are needed for the art: doctors need to know that circular wounds heal more slowly, but not why this is the case (*APo* I 13 79a13-16). Similarly, the ethicist needs to know that humans have distinct reasoning and feeling parts, but not why this is so (a matter for psychology).⁴

Finally, because *phronēsis* has action as its goal, Aristotle insists that practical wisdom involves “having the truth in agreement with the correct desire.” (*NE* VI 2, 1139a30-32). Scholars debate the degree to which a grasp on practical truth requires possessing the right desires. On some readings, we can see practical truths whether or not we are virtuous, though the right set of motivations is required for our true beliefs about what’s good to affect our actions. Michael Pakaluk offers a reading on which practical truth is simply the truth of a claim about what’s good, something that is only actionable when it matches the inclinations of the person claiming this truth. (2010, 153-155) Similarly, on Christiana Olfert’s view, practical truths “are true in Aristotle’s standard sense” but have “motivational force” insofar as they are about what’s good and are distinctly practical “insofar as they share a normative standard with [our rational] desires.” (2014, 230).

Ursula Coope, however, convincingly argues that, for Aristotle, only the virtuous can truly be practically wise because practical wisdom requires appreciating “the fineness of right action.” (2012, 161) In this sense, you only see a practical truth as what it is, namely as good, when it motivates you in the right way. Similarly, David Charles offers an account on which practical truth requires a unified state combining thought and desire: “grasping-in-the-desire-involving way” that an action is fine, that it is “simultaneously and inextricably pleasant and worthwhile.”⁵

³ *Met* A 1, See Baker forthcoming for a full discussion of the doctor’s role and knowledge.

⁴ *NE* I 7 and I 13. For discussion of how Aristotle’s psychology and ethics fit together see Shields 2015.

⁵ 2015, 92; cf. Reeve 2012, 190. There are, of course, affinities here with Elizabeth Anscombe’s reading of Aristotle on practical truth (1981, 66-77). See Pakaluk 2010, 146-149 for discussion and some objections to Anscombe.

For Aristotle, people who know how to eat temperately or act courageously, but who have interfering desires do not properly possess practical wisdom, precisely because they will not successfully employ their supposed knowledge. Attaining the truth in practical matters involves actually doing the right action. While Aristotle thinks that Socrates went too far in equating the virtues with knowledge, he agrees that there is a kind of practical wisdom we can attain which eliminates any possible gaps between our knowledge and our action. (*NE* VI 12-13; VII 1-3). Aristotle defines *phronēsis* so as to guarantee that its possessor will always act on it. As well as right desires, practical wisdom requires knowing the circumstances, leading Aristotle to emphasize the importance of experience (*empeiria*) (VI 7, 1141b15-23; VI 8, 1142a12-32). Without appropriate discernment as to how the particulars of a given circumstance relate to the universal goals of ethical action, the goodness aimed at cannot be achieved.⁶

2. Craft knowledge (*technē*)

Technē is also a practical excellence, but of a significantly different and more limited kind. To have such an excellence is to be an expert in an art or craft, where crafts are differentiated and defined by their *erga*, their works or products. Aristotle defines *technē* as “a state involving true reason concerned with production.” (1140a20-21, trans. Reeve) Crafts are concerned with things “whose starting-point is in the producer” (1140a13, trans. Reeve), as opposed to natural things which “have their starting-point within themselves.” (*NE* VI 4, 1140a14-15, trans. Reeve) Living things, the elements, and elemental compounds come to be according to their own internal principles. In art, by contrast, the producer uses craft knowledge to form materials which are suitable for the product but lack an inherent direction towards that product. Since the matter of a craft lacks this inherent direction, artisans must deliberate about how best to achieve the form their craft aims at, given the matter and tools available to them. Experience can teach us in many cases, but unfamiliar or difficult circumstances require a greater know-how and grasp of the principles of one’s art.⁷ Crafts are subdivided by their *erga*. Shoemaking is a different craft than cloak-making because its work is different (a shoe vs. a cloak) and so the know-how involved is

⁶ Aristotle is not entirely explicit, but *Met A* 1 suggests that the same is true of *technē*. In *NE* VI 11, he describes this discernment as involving a sort of practical *nous*. Contra Cooper 1975, 64-71 and Reeve 2012, 168-171, however, this is not a grasp of ethical first principles, but a grasp of grasp of the particular circumstances we need to carry out virtuous action successfully (cf. Broadie 1991, 200 and 254-256 and Gauthier and Jolif, 537) The practically wise not only see the particular right thing to do in a circumstance, they will see the fine and noble action as the action with the right connection to what is good as such, with the right connection to universal ethical claims. I agree with Broadie and Gauthier and Jolif that this only counts *nous* in an extended sense, because it is not concerned with a universal grasp of a form as such. It does, however, grasp the universal as found in the particular, making it importantly different from mere experience or perception.

⁷ *Met A* 1; see section 4 for further discussion.

measured by a different standard, even if there are some similarities in the knowledge involved.⁸ The product need not be something material or external to the activities of the craft. For example, Aristotle thinks that the expertise involved in persuading an audience is a type of *technē* (*Rhet* I 1-2), while lyre-playing is a craft whose product is its activity: ordered sounds (e.g. *NE* I 7, 1098a6-13).

While practical wisdom and craft both deal with contingent matters and involve bringing things about through human action, the excellence of *technē* is more limited and involves a space between knowledge and production that, as we saw, is not present for *phronēsis*. Nevertheless, *technē* is not value-neutral. While the knowledge doctors have enables them to sicken someone more effectively than people without such knowledge, Aristotle does not think that healing and sickening count equally as uses of the medical art (*Met* Θ 2). As Samuel Baker argues, because this art's goal is health, someone using knowledge of health to produce sickness is not acting as a doctor, properly speaking.⁹ In this way, Aristotle's view of crafts is thoroughly normative. However, for Aristotle, the craft does not, on its own, determine whether and how it should be applied. Sometimes one craft is subordinate to another whose goal (*telos*) is more ultimate. Bridle-making, for instance, is subordinate to horsemanship, so whether and how the art of bridle-making is exercised demands on the needs of horse riders (*NE* I 1). More generally, having a *technē* does not guarantee that you know how and when to use it so as to best serve your ultimate ends. The controlling factor, Aristotle says, is "desire [*orexis*] or deliberate choice [*prohaeresis*]" (*Met* Θ 5, 1048a11-12) At an individual level, only *phronēsis* guarantees that this desire or deliberate choice will be correct. At a societal level, Aristotle thinks that rulers should regulate and guide the practice of crafts for the overall good of society. (*Pol* III 4, 1277a30-1277b7; VII 12)

3. Theoretical Excellences of Reason Are Good Simply Speaking, Practical Excellences are Good In a Way

As we have seen, in *NE* VI Aristotle contrasts *technē* and *phronēsis* with *epistēmē*. Yet in several passages he treats them as types of *epistēmē*.¹⁰ They, like the theoretical sciences

⁸ There may also be a difference between *technai* such as medicine that aim at a goal (human health) that is natural and has an essence in the proper sense and *technai* such as housebuilding or shoemaking that produce artifacts which are not natural and seem to lack essences in the proper sense (cf. *Met*. Z 4)

⁹ For further discussion see Baker forthcoming.

¹⁰ *Met* Θ 2 describes them as the productive sciences (*hai poiētikai epistēmai*, 1046a36-b4) and suggests that they involve an account (*logos*; 1046b4-7), i.e. an account of what their product is (*Met* Z.7, 1032a32-b6). *Met* E 1-2 suggests that practical and productive sciences, like theoretical ones, have starting-points and causes and cover some type of being. (1025b3-8) cf. *Met* E.2, 1027a20-24; *NE* VI 10, 1142b34-1143a4; *APo* I 1, 77b18-24; I 12, 77a38-41; I 13,

Aristotle recognizes, are excellent cognitive states which involve systematically getting to the truth in the given domain. Aristotle's own examples of demonstration even seem to suggest practical sciences may use demonstration or deduction just as theoretical sciences do.¹¹ Productive and practical knowledge are clearly distinct from mere opinion or experience, but do they share a genus with Aristotle's theoretical sciences or are they fundamentally different sorts of cognitive states?

Hendrik Lorenz and Benjamin Morison think we should be guided by the sharp contrast Aristotle draws in *NE* VI 1. According to them, practical and productive excellences, unlike theoretical ones, do not involve grasping essences or employing the devices of deductive logic. Instead, they only require reliably tracking which processes produce the desired results, without making any claims about causes or essences.¹² Lorenz and Morison's interpretation undercuts Aristotle's claim that these states are excellences of reason and ignores important similarities between practical and theoretical knowledge.

In *Met* A 1, Aristotle contrasts experienced people "who do not know the why" with craftspeople who "know the why, that is, the cause." (981a28-29, trans. Reeve) The "architectonic practitioners" know "the causes of the things they produce" and have "the account themselves" so that they are able to teach what they know. (981a30-b8) Even in the practical and productive domains, Aristotle clearly holds that we become better practitioners by grasping accounts and knowledge of causes. How does this help? Craft experts characteristically produce a fine product even in challenging conditions, precisely because they do not merely rely on past experience but have a modally sensitive understanding of how to make their product and can use that understanding to modify their actions and processes to produce the best result in any given condition. This is implicit in Aristotle's contrast with manual workers who just know how to do things in set ways (981b1-3). Experience only allows one to act well in similar conditions to those encountered before. For Aristotle, both *technē* and *phronēsis* go further because they allow you to face unfamiliar conditions well, by drawing on your understanding of the goal of the art and the full variety of appropriate means.

Indeed, Aristotle insists that each *technē* requires grasping the account of what is produced (*Met.* Θ 2, 1046b4-7) or the form of the product (*Met.* Z 7, 1032a32-b6). Medicine and

79a13-16; I 32, 88b10-13. Thanks to Jacob Rosen for tracking all these down as part of his comments in response to a talk by Simona Aimar and Carla Pavese at the Princeton Classical Philosophy Conference, December 2018.

¹¹ *APr* I 30, 46a17-24; *APo* II 11, 94a36-b3; II 12, 95b31-5. Again, thanks to Rosen for the references. For discussion see Moss 2014.

¹² 5-8. Indeed, Lorenz and Morison claim that knowing the essence of humanity or any other essences that might seem to be ethically relevant contributes nothing to your practical wisdom. (33)

house-building are both crafts for Aristotle precisely insofar as there is an account of the form of house and the form of health that then enables the doctor and the housebuilder to produce this form in the appropriate material in the right way. James Allen argues that the process of inquiry in these productive excellences is analogous to scientific inquiry, aiming at real understanding of why something is to-be-done. (2015, 54-67) Similarly, Jessica Moss insists that the practically wise person will be able to “give or grasp a complex account,” that is “explanatory” of why an action is the fine one, much as the scientist can give an explanatory account of why an attribute necessarily belongs to a given natural kind. (2014, 213) The goal of the reasoning employed by the practically wise “is not to grasp merely *that* something is to-be-done but also, by seeing how it promotes one’s goal, *why*.” (Ibid., 216) As Allen puts it, practical wisdom aims at the “performance of what we may call the reasoned deed.” (2015, 54; cf. 62-64)

While this brings Aristotle’s practical excellences closer to his theoretical ones, the practical excellences are still concerned with things that can be other than they are and where the correct approach depends on the current conditions. By contrast, for Aristotle scientific demonstrations are not just true, they need to be necessarily true, as they concern explanatory connections that must hold. (*APo* I 3, I 33) You might think, however, that this just makes the practical excellences like natural science, knowledge of the world of changeable being. Many of the demonstrations Aristotle appeals to in this domain hold only for the most part.¹³

While natural philosophy involves claims that are true “for the most part,” the status of these claims is not the same as those of practical wisdom and craft. The claims of natural science are always true, absent preventing conditions. Aristotle clearly thinks they are more universal and necessary than practical and productive kinds of knowledge. In *NE* VI 1, Aristotle claims that theoretical sciences are different from practical and productive knowledge because they concern “beings whose starting points do not admit of being otherwise.” (1139a5-7, trans. Reeve) Aristotle clearly frames this description to include natural philosophy within the realm of *epistēmē*, while excluding practical and productive knowledge. Its starting points, the essences of natural things, do not admit of being otherwise. The forms of natural things are invariable and determinate even if the interference of other causes affects their coming-to-be and activities.

The forms aimed at by practical and productive sciences are less determinate and more variable. Aristotle repeatedly insists that ethics cannot achieve the precision of a theoretical

¹³ Embryological development, nutritive activities, and perception do not operate invariably but are also subject to disruption and change. Even the *APo* itself gives several examples of demonstrations of this kind (e.g. *Post. An.* II.16, 98b36-38 on broad-leafed trees shedding their leaves and II.15, 98a31-32 on the Nile flowing more abundantly at the end of the lunar month) But Aristotle still insists clearly that there is a genuine science of nature (e.g. *Phys.* I 1, I 9; *Met E* 1-2).

science, given its subject matter (*NE* I 3; I 7). In theoretical sciences (including natural philosophy) what is sought is always “logically” (*logikos*) a formal cause (*APo* II 11, 94a20-b12; *Met* Z 17, 1041a27-30), even if understanding this formal cause involves other causes. The inquiry is always directed at grasping an unchanging form. By contrast, as Jessica Moss notes, in practical and productive inquiries the goal that is sought is always a final cause, something for the sake of which a process will be undertaken. (2014, 216) At all levels below the ultimate practical goal, however, what this practical or productive *telos* is and how it should be achieved is somewhat indeterminate and subject to change.

For example, the goal of housebuilding is a house, something whose form is a structure providing shelter. Yet this account is not as determinate as the definitions of natural forms and so the ways to realize it and what it involves are not as universal or necessary. When camping in the wild, you may only need shelter for the night and so require only a structure that keeps the rain out for a single evening. A permanent dwelling, by contrast, will need to stably provide shelter from the full range of elements to which its location is exposed. In this sense, while the starting point of house-building is always the form of house, this form is not unchanging and fully determinate, but varies depending on circumstances. In natural sciences, by contrast, we are observing the way in which the natures of the things themselves internally direct the natural substance towards its goals. This process can be interrupted or affected either by other natural beings or by deficiencies in the matter. Nevertheless, the nature itself unfolds itself in a certain definite way to achieve its form unless impeded. On Aristotle’s account of generation, there are motions present in the seed from the parents which are already directing it towards its ultimate end as the essence or nature which it is.¹⁴

Moreover, on Aristotle’s view, most kinds of practical and productive expertise fall underneath others, which affects how they pursue their goals (*NE* I 1). Politicians who need to entertain guests require a different and more elaborate form of house than private citizens. How much food I should eat depends not just on facts about the general form of health, but on my level of exertion and the sorts of physical activity required by my higher goals (*NE* II 6). Natural essences are not subordinate to other essences or goals in the way that crafts are. Each natural form orders its own development and actions without any inherent consideration of the goals of other forms. For Aristotle, the coordination or competition between various natural substances is emergent. In productive and practical cases, by contrast, certain orders of subordination are built into the expertise themselves. Part of what it is to make bridles is to be doing something that is

¹⁴ See Gelber forthcoming for discussion.

subordinate to the needs and goals of horsemanship and will alter its practices and goals in accord with what the higher expertise demands (*NE* I 1). In this way, natural science concerns unchanging and invariable essences, while practical and productive expertises do not.

Perception and practical and productive knowledge all bring us into contact with reality. Aristotle also recognizes practical and productive knowledge as excellences. However, he thinks they are less excellent and less true than the theoretical excellences of reason in two ways. First, the kinds of truth that they grasp are imperfect. They deal with how contingent things are right now, for the sake of enabling action. They do not and cannot offer comprehensive and lasting explanations of the way things are universally. Aristotle also takes on board aspects of the critique of practical knowledge made by his predecessors. Knowledge about such contingent matters cannot be entirely precise (*NE* I 3 and I 7) and will involve employing opinion (*doxa*) (*NE* VI 1), something theoretical excellences avoid. Practical excellences are also limited insofar as they are excellent states for humans, not simply speaking. They are good for us, given the kind of creatures we are, beings that need to act practically and make various kinds of things to live and to live well. Intelligent beings without such limitations and needs do not require such capacities (*NE* X 8).

Theoretical excellences of reason, by contrast, are good simply speaking. They deal with reality as it is, not insofar as it is connected to human interests or restricted by our perspective and cognitive limitations. Even though, for Aristotle, both practical and theoretical ways of knowing can be excellent, there is a fundamental divide between them. Our excellent theoretical activities are where we come closest to the perfect intellectual activity of Aristotle's God, the way of being and living that, for Aristotle, is not only best, but also the standard and goal for all other beings and activities (*Cael* II 12; *Met* Λ 7, 9-10).

4. Wisdom (*sophia*) and Divine Cognition

This leads us to the greatest of Aristotle's five excellence of human reason, *sophia*, wisdom. In *NE* VI, Aristotle defines *sophia* as having *nous* plus *epistēmē* (understanding plus scientific knowledge) about the "most estimable things (*tōn timiōtatōn*)." (1141a17-18, trans. Reeve) Since *sophia* turns out to be a combination of *nous* and *epistēmē* (albeit restricted to a certain domain), why does Aristotle treat it as a distinct excellence of reason? The fact that it considers the highest or best things, "the most worthy of honor by nature" (1141b2-3) may not seem a sufficient basis for distinguishing it as an entirely different kind of epistemic state. To take an analogy, even if circles are, as Aristotle thinks, the most perfect geometrical figure, knowledge of them is just one branch of the whole science of geometry.

To some extent, Aristotle discusses *sophia* because it is, in the ancient Greek context, recognized as one of the best epistemic states. Aristotle needs to discuss it and explain which knowledge is worthy of the name wisdom. Thus *NE* VI 7 is focused on two negative claims about *sophia*: it is not practical and its objects are not human things, but higher and more divine things. Aristotle rejects the anthropocentric approach on which the wise person is someone who knows about humanity and human limitations and lives accordingly.¹⁵ Instead, in *Met* A 1-2, we find that wisdom is knowledge of the highest and most universal causes, the substances that are the principles of everything else. In knowing these most divine and universal causes we know everything that falls under them: to understand the divine being is also to understand the universe which depends on the God and is ordered to the God as an army to its general (Λ 10). In this way, *sophia* turns out to be a special epistemic state, one that carries with it comprehensive knowledge of the universe through grasping the ultimate divine principle. Because of its universality, it is suitably characterized as different in kind from the other kinds of scientific knowledge and understanding.

Sophia is the best cognitive state humans can attain, but Aristotle argues that there are eternal divine beings whose substance is actively understanding (*noein*; Λ 7, 9).¹⁶ Their activity is always the same, always complete, and fully self-reflective and aware.¹⁷ While Aristotle uses the language of *nous* about the divine, this does not mean that our *nous* is equivalent to divine *nous*. Even when active, human *nous* grasps a series of different essences. Divine *nous*, in contrast, is its own object, always the self-same understanding.¹⁸ Some think this limits the knowledge that

¹⁵ At the same time, Aristotle does not specify which things are the highest and who knows them, presumably because this is a question for first philosophy, not ethics. We cannot give a satisfactory account of *sophia* on the basis of the *NE* precisely because the perspective of ethics on this question is negative and dialectic.

¹⁶ Cf. *Phys* VIII 8. It would be ridiculous to imagine the gods justly exchanging goods or courageously facing danger, but they are alive and active, so the only fitting activity that can be ascribed to them is contemplative (*theoretikē*) (*NE* X 8, 1178b8-23).

¹⁷ Aristotle seems to prefer *nous* as it implies a simple activity of grasping (cf. *Met* Θ 10), without the structure of *epistēmē*, with its deductive complexity. *Nous* also gives the idea of comprehending something as a whole, as what a thing is, with nothing added or subtracted, which makes it the best available term for Aristotle. This also goes back to Anaxagoras's insistence on *nous* as the ultimate principle (cf. Xenophanes and earlier influences), something picked up in Plato's *Phaedo* and *Timaeus*. In *Met* A 2 the divine is described as having *epistēmē* or *sophia*, fully possessing the sort of wisdom that the philosopher seeks. However, in *Met* Λ the divine cognitive activity is described as *nous* and Aristotle does not use these other cognitive terms. W. D. Ross (1924) plausibly suggests that the use of *epistēmē* in A 2 is an unrefined reputable opinion that needs further qualification, especially when we are distinguishing *epistēmē* and *nous*.

¹⁸ Contra Judson 2019 who takes divine *nous* to think a variety of essences (327-329); Menn ms., like me, holds that the divine understanding cannot admit any sort of plurality, since it cannot be composed (443 and 459, n. 35). Michael Frede (1996), Jonathan Lear (1988, 298), Myles Burnyeat (2008), who hold versions of the variety of essences view, take divine cognitive activities to be synonymous and univocal with the best human ones. Cohoe 2020 argues that there are good reasons to think that divine *nous* is different in kind from the human state that shares this name.

Aristotle's divine beings have, since they do not grasp other forms as such.¹⁹ But this gets things backwards. It is because our human forms are limited and imperfect that we need to cognize other forms in order to grasp more of reality. Aristotle's God, as the first and most universal cause of the universe, perfectly understands all other essences in understanding what the God Itself Is, as the essence from which all other things come (Λ 9). Aristotle's most perfect cognitive activity is about itself, but includes everything else.²⁰

¹⁹ E.g. Ross 1924, I, cxli-cxliii; Modrak 1987, 228-33; Brunschwig 2000; Judson takes the divine knowledge to be of a number of essences. Menn 2012 also agrees that the divine understanding cannot admit any sort of plurality, since it cannot be composed (443 and 459, n. 35).

²⁰ These issues are discussed extensively in the later Aristotelian tradition, including Alexander of Aphrodisias, Ibn Sīna, Moses Maimonides, Thomas Aquinas, and many others.

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