

God and Morality: A Philosophical History

John E. Hare

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this book is to look at the role theology, or thinking about God, has played in ethical theory within Western philosophy. I have chosen to focus on four figures, one each from the four main periods into which the teaching of Western philosophy is usually divided, namely ancient, medieval, modern, and contemporary. In this way the book is different from one of my models, C. D. Broad's *Five Types of Ethical Theory* from 1930.¹ Broad chose five figures from the modern period in Europe: Spinoza, Butler, Hume, Kant, and Sidgwick. My book is like Broad's in that I am using my chosen figures to illustrate what I see as the main options for ethical theory. But Broad was not interested in the place of theology in the philosophical systems he described. He preferred, he said, "to let sleeping gods lie." This is a strange omission in the treatment of Butler and Spinoza, and Broad found he could not sustain it in the case of Kant. In his treatment of Sidgwick, too, God creeps in at the end. I shall adopt the opposite policy of emphasizing the connection of my four authors with theism. It is just as odd to try to avoid theism in the history of Western ethics as it would be, for example, in the history of Western art and aesthetic theory.

I have chosen Aristotle, Scotus, Kant, and R. M. Hare, and I will say that these figures focus ethical theory on virtue, will, duty, and consequences respectively. By discussing a philosopher in each of the four main periods, and by giving bridge passages at the beginning of

¹ C. D. Broad, *Five Types of Ethical Theory*, London: Kegan Paul, 1930.

each chapter to get us from one figure to the next, I have approached the task of giving a complete history. But, while I have approached this task, I have produced only a preliminary framework. Building a history on this framework would be a much larger project.

My method with Aristotle and Kant will be rather different than my method with Scotus and R. M. Hare. Because Aristotle and Kant are so familiar, and there are so many introductory treatments, I will give most attention to their theological starting points and go lightly over the rest of their ethical theories. With Scotus and R. M. Hare, by contrast, I will spend more time on straight exegesis of the central texts. I have devoted a whole chapter to Scotus because of the importance I attribute within the framework to the ideas he introduces, since he is a key intermediary between Aristotle and Kant. I know that some will think that exaggerated filial piety has led me to end with my own father. But I needed (like Broad) a utilitarian and I wanted a contemporary or at least near contemporary, and one whose theory I could write about rather than his applications of the theory. What other figure is plausible, given those constraints? There is an additional benefit. As Broad found with Sidgwick, there is as yet no satisfactory treatment in English of R. M. Hare's overall moral theory, and now is a good time to attempt one.²

By focusing on four figures, rather than on four types of theory, I want to show that the differences in the actual theories of the great practitioners are more subtle than is often assumed in textbooks. The differences are real, but I want to show how intertwined they are with similarities. Usually it is more helpful to ask "What would Aristotle say?" than "What would a virtue theorist say?", or "How would Kant reply?" rather than "How would a deontologist reply?" We can hold the first kind of answer accountable to the evidence of the texts. But the jargon terms ending in "ist" are free-floating and disastrously vague.

In the closing section of each of the first four chapters I am going to look at a twentieth- or twenty-first-century successor who aban-

² There is a large secondary literature on R. M. Hare, but it is almost completely in the form of articles. *The Moral Philosophy of R. M. Hare*, New York: Peter Lang, 1997 by Patrick Adu-Amankwah is an attempt to defend intuitionism against R. M. Hare's attack. See also Oliver Hallich, *Richard Hares Moralphilosophie*, Freiburg/München: Verlag, 2000.

dons the role given to theological premises in the rest of the chapter. I have chosen Larry Arnhart, Jean-Paul Sartre, Christine Korsgaard, and Peter Singer. I am not proposing that these are the *best* current exemplars of each type of theory, but I have chosen them because they provide illuminating contrasts. I will claim that the abandonment of theism has had a damaging effect on the rest of the theory in each case. I am not trying to prove that *any* attempt to do ethical theory of these types without theism is going to fail. *If* I am right, however, about the role of theological premises in the original theories, and *if* I am right that these particular non-theist variants get into difficulties, then anyone who wants to carry on doing one of these types of theory without God will have to point to a non-theist variant that succeeds in finding a substitute for the work that God did in the original version. The section on Arnhart will be different from the others. I will use it not only to distinguish Arnhart from Aristotle, but also to criticize both of them for features they have in common.

The reader will notice that there are different conceptions of God within these four different theories. I will label these conceptions “God as magnet,” “God as lover,” “God as sovereign,” and “God as model.” In Aristotle, God “moves everything by being loved,” and in particular draws human beings towards the divine kind of life, but God does not have any active engagement with human beings. By contrast, in Scotus, God is not only the object of love, but God loves, and chooses for human beings the route by which they are to become co-lovers of God. In Kant, God is the head of the kingdom of ends, and has essential legislative, executive, and judicial roles within this kingdom. Finally, for R. M. Hare, God is the model of how ethical thought should be done, and God has, in addition, the role, as “Providence,” of securing that the world is a place in which morality makes sense.

I have started the consideration of each of the four thinkers with a section on an early work. The reader will notice that, with the exception of Scotus, the place of God is treated more boldly in each of the early works than in the later work by the same author. We might draw two different lessons from this. Perhaps the later work shows greater wisdom, and we should learn to be modest about our abilities to speak about the relation of God and ethics. Or perhaps the philosophers lost their nerve as they got older, and the discipline of philosophy itself should be rebuked for undermining their native enthusiasm for talking about God.

I have tried to give a concrete shape to the history told in the first two chapters, using two of Raphael's frescoes in the Vatican, *The School of Athens* and the *Disputa*.³ No artist, as far as I know, has given us images that would do comparable work for the modern and contemporary periods, and this is itself an interesting fact, requiring explanation. Raphael's project is an illuminating example of one way of thinking about the history of philosophy, a way that is characteristic of the history briefly described in the first part of the third chapter.

The four types of ethical theory that I have distinguished are more different from each other in their non-theistic forms than in their theistic forms. This is what we would expect if we see the history as an abstraction in two stages. The first stage abstracts one part of God's relation to us as especially important for morality. The second stage (historically within the last two centuries) removes that part of God's role in the theory as well. For example, a theory can focus on God's commandments, and use them to structure the moral life, or it can focus on God's love, transcending the commandments, and on our freedom to respond to this love, or it can focus on the character that God wants us to have and the virtues that constitute that character. When the theist premises in the original versions of each type of theory are dropped, this has effects on the rest of the theory (though different effects on the different theories). The non-theist versions end up more different from each other than the theist versions, because there is an intelligible unity between God attracting us, God loving us, God expressing the divine will in commands, and God coordinating through Providence our various routes to happiness. Abandoning the theism abandons also the ground of this unity.

In order to give substance to this claim, I have ended the book with a chapter that is different in form from the rest. It is an attempt to give a systematic theory that relies centrally on theological premises and that combines elements drawn from the four preceding chapters. I am not claiming that this is the only way to combine elements from these four types of theory successfully. I offer the theory as a *model* in one of the senses used in the philosophy of science. The billiard-ball model of the theory of gases, for example, is called a model

³ I thank the Press for agreeing to pictures in a philosophy book, which adds an expense to publication that is not usually necessary.

because it adds to the theory significant surplus meaning (in this case, by a positive analogy) which has explanatory power, but which is not yet firmly established in preference to other possible models.

The book was originally planned as a member of a series of introductory textbooks edited by Keith Yandell. The manuscript grew, however, beyond the permitted confines of the series, and the publisher very graciously allowed me to proceed with an independent volume. The result is no longer an introductory text, if that means a *first* book in philosophy that happens to deal with the history of ethics. The book is, rather, an intervention into the study of this history, trying to correct the prevailing omission in the secondary literature of the theological context in which the various types of ethical theory originally made sense. Nonetheless, I have tried to give an account of the ethical theory of each of my four main authors in a way that does not presuppose previous acquaintance with them. This is because the basic terms of the theories cannot be given in a neutral way, as though the theology was the frosting on an independently existing cake. Having said that, however, the importance of the theology to the rest of the theory comes in degrees, and readers will observe that the degree is higher in Scotus and lower in R. M. Hare than in either Aristotle or Kant. The book is offered as perhaps a *third* book in philosophy, neither baby food nor titillating for the epicure (though the footnotes try to accommodate a more exacting taste).

I am very grateful to the many people who have read or commented on drafts of various chapters, especially Christopher Beeley, Matthew Walker, Marian Weekly, Catherine Hare (senior), A. W. Price, Thomas Carson, Matthew Benton, the members of the Theology Seminar at Yale, the two anonymous readers appointed by the Press, and Felicity Marsh (my editor at Blackwell Publishing) and especially Benjamin Lipscomb who have given helpful advice on every page.



Raphael, *Scuola di Atene* (*The School of Athens*), fresco, c.1508–11. Rome, Vatican, Stanza della Segnatura. Photo akg-images/Erich Lessing.

Chapter 1

ARISTOTLE

The School of Athens

Aristotle was Plato's student for twenty years. The relation between these two philosophers has been constantly interesting to later thinkers, even though no word of Plato's on the subject has survived, and Aristotle is surprisingly reticent about it. One depiction of the relation is by Raphael in a sixteenth-century fresco in the Stanza della Segnatura in the Vatican, which has been called since the eighteenth century *The School of Athens*. The cycle of frescoes in the room, which was the pope's personal library, is often said to be Raphael's greatest work. *The School of Athens* depicts a gathering of the most prominent thinkers of classical antiquity arranged in small groups that in turn make up a large circle, like the circle of the stars in classical astronomy. Their conversation is taking place inside a magnificent domed Renaissance church or temple, which is open at the back to the blue sky beyond. The perspective of the painting comes to a vanishing point between Plato and Aristotle (just to the right of Plato's left hand), and they are the only figures outlined against the sky. Plato is an old man with long white hair and beard, and Aristotle is young, with his brown hair and beard trimmed. Each is holding in his left hand a book, Plato the *Timaeus* (which describes the causal influence of the eternal Forms) and Aristotle the *Nicomachean Ethics* (which describes the best life here on earth for human beings). With the index finger of his right hand Plato is pointing up to heaven, and his right arm and the book he holds in his left hand are both

vertical. Aristotle spreads out his right hand, gesturing inwards toward the center, and this arm and the book he holds in his left hand are both horizontal. To Plato's right are two major groups, one organized around Socrates who is energetically enumerating points on his fingers,¹ and below him another group around Pythagoras, who is writing his system of the numerical proportions to be found in musical intervals – apparently copying them from a diagram on a slate held by a youth or angel.

Raphael is giving us a traditional picture not just of the physical appearance of each of these philosophers (mostly imaginary) but of “the intention of his soul.” For Plato the Forms are *beyond* us; our eternal souls get glimpses of them in our bodily lives through disciplined contemplation. For Aristotle the forms are *in* the substances we experience, and our task is to make sense of this experience. There is disagreement here, and indeed Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics* rejects Plato's account of the Form of the Good, and says that if you have to choose between your friends and the truth, you should choose the truth. But to stop with the disagreement in the fresco, it turns out, is both bad art history and bad history of philosophy. The overall impression we get from the painting is not one of tension but harmony. The vanishing point of the perspective is *between* the two central figures. Raphael has set them up this way to suggest that they are collaborating with each other, each emphasizing a complementary and necessary part of the whole truth.² It is as though they are together generating the forces (upward and inward) that keep the whole circle of thinkers rotating in their prescribed orbits.

Raphael's fresco is an expression of synthesis. He is drawing on a program laid down for him, perhaps by Egidio da Viterbo, who was a prominent orator at the papal court where the frescoes were

¹ “He holds his fore-finger of his left hand between [the fore-finger] and the thumb of his right, and seems as if he was saying, You grant me this and this,” quoted anonymously in Roger Jones and Nicholas Penny, *Raphael*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983, 77.

² This is a comment about the whole room that Raphael painted, not just about *The School of Athens*. On the opposite wall is a fresco traditionally called the *Disputa*. The figures to the right and left of the altar in this fresco are mirroring the same strong vertical and horizontal gestures made by Plato and Aristotle. But the mystery of the sacrament is revealed to the whole group, despite their disagreements.

commissioned.³ Egidio undertook to recast the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard, a twelfth-century textbook of theology that had received numerous commentaries over the previous three hundred years, a period dominated by the recovery of Aristotle in Europe. Egidio wanted to recast the *Sentences* “according to the mind of Plato,” reconciling Plato and Aristotle in the way suggested by the great Italian Renaissance philosopher Marsilio Ficino. Egidio’s guiding principle was that “the highest human good is to be found in that other life which is joined to God and sees the divine essence; but here we pursue the greatest good that can be granted humanity on earth: that we be joined to God as completely as possible if we are joined in mind, in will, in contemplation, and in love.” The application of this principle to Plato and Aristotle is that

these great Princes can be reconciled, if we postulate that things have a dual nature, one which is free from matter and one which is embedded in matter . . . Plato follows the former and Aristotle the latter, and because of this (in fact) these great leaders of Philosophy hardly dissent from one another. If we seem to be making this up, listen to the Philosophers themselves.

Egidio goes on to quote Plato from the *Timaeus* where he teaches

that human-kind has the two natures, and we know one of these (natures) by means of the senses, the other by means of reason. Also, in the same book he teaches that each part of us does not occur in isolation; rather, each nature cares for the other nature. Aristotle, in the tenth book of his *Ethics*, calls humanity Understanding. Thus you may know that each Philosopher feels the same way, however much it seems to you that they are not saying the same thing.

Why should Egidio think that this passage from the tenth book of the *Ethics* makes his point? It is because he knows, and he expects his audience to know, that by “understanding” (in Greek, *nous*)

³ See Ingrid D. Rowland, “The Intellectual Background of the School of Athens,” in *Raphael’s “School of Athens,”* ed. Marcia Hall, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, 131–70. She adds the parentheses in the following quotations.

Aristotle is referring to that part of us by which we contemplate God. We will come back to this.

If the influence of Egidio is indeed to be found in the fresco, his program gives us a complex relationship between the two “princes of philosophy,” a difference of emphasis but an underlying unity. The present chapter is not really about Raphael, but about Aristotle. But I am going to suggest that this account of the continuity between Plato and Aristotle is essentially correct. Aristotle’s thought, especially his thought about ethics, is as much vertical as it is horizontal when he gets to his conclusion, although the vertical theme is less conspicuous on his route to that conclusion. But before discussing Aristotle, I want to go back to Plato’s predecessors, Socrates and Pythagoras. Where does the vertical theme in Plato come from? We tend to think of Plato as dependent on Socrates to the same degree as Aristotle on Plato, but Pythagoras is historically just as important in Plato’s development. Raphael may be signaling this by the placement of the figures, with Pythagoras on the diagonal that leads from Plato to Archytas of Tarentum, the old man copying from Pythagoras in the corner, who was Plato’s teacher and a Pythagorean.

Plato’s interest in the Forms can certainly be traced back to Socrates’ questions to his carefully selected interlocutors, for example “What is holiness?” to Euthyphro the seer, and “What is bravery?” to Laches the general. Plato records how in each case the conversational partner, who was supposed to be an expert, finds himself unable to give Socrates the definition he was looking for, and the dialogues end in failure despite Socrates’ conversational brilliance and passion. For example, Euthyphro tries to answer that the holy is what all the gods love. But Socrates asks, “Is the holy holy because the gods love it, or do they love it because it is holy?” Socrates makes it clear that he thinks the latter, and so Euthyphro has not told him what *makes* something holy. I will return to this question in the final chapter. Aristotle tells us that Plato developed his Forms as an answer to the Socratic quest for definitions. What makes something holy is the pure Form of the Holy existing independently of our world in the eternal world of the Forms that we see clearly when our souls are separated from our bodies at death. In the *Republic*, Plato gives us a hierarchy. At the top is the Form of the Good, a Form that gives being and intelligibility to all the other Forms. Then come the other Forms that are, Plato says, “really

real.” And finally there are material copies of the Forms, which “roll around between being and not being.” In Plato’s *Symposium* he gives the role of the Form of the Good to the Form of the Beautiful. The Greek word *kalon* that I have translated “beautiful” has a range of meanings that no single English word captures. It can mean “noble” or “fine,” and is often linked by Aristotle with “good” and with “divine.” As we shall see, he makes “noble” the final criterion for actions or activities in accordance with virtue (*arête*, which can also be translated “excellence”).

Plato was influenced in the theory of Forms not only by Socrates, however, but by also by Pythagoras. We can see this influence in Plato’s doctrine of the immortality of the soul that contemplates the Forms, and in the account in the *Timaeus* of the harmonic proportions of the world-soul and the individual soul, taken from the very diagram that is held in front of Pythagoras in the fresco. At the end of his last work, *Laws*, Plato says that belief in God comes from two sources: the ever-flowing being of the inner life of the soul, and the sight of the eternal order of the stars.⁴ In his fresco, Raphael is emphasizing this side of Plato by putting the *Timaeus* in his hand, and making Pythagoras so conspicuous in the overall structure. Pythagoras gave an analogy for his low view of matter, and Plato picks it up in the *Republic*. There are three types of people who go to the Olympic Games; the athletes go to compete, the businessmen go to make money, and the spectators go to watch. In the twenty-first century we tend to rank these in descending order; the athletes have the greatest honor and the spectators the least. In the Pythagorean analogy, the order is reversed. The most honorable (the noblest, the most *kalon*) form of life is to contemplate with the mind alone, in the middle is the life of business and “affairs,” and the least honorable is the man whose life is devoted to the body.

Behind Pythagoras is the line of Pre-Socratics, going back to the emergence of philosophy out of myth in the seventh century. This emergence was sometimes seen in the twentieth century as a precursor of the victory of science over religion amongst the academic elite from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. But this is

⁴ Immanuel Kant ends his *Critique of Practical Reason* in a similar way: “Two things fill the spirit with ever fresh and increasing wonder and awe, the more often and the more persistently they are reflected upon, the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me” (5: 161).

anachronism. The Pre-Socratics did indeed find new explanations of the physical world that replaced the vivid narratives of gods and goddesses and their dealings with each other and with human beings that can be found in Homer and Hesiod. Aristotle, in looking back at his predecessors, describes Thales, Anaximenes, and Heraclitus as identifying the original principle of all things in water, air, and fire respectively. But the Pre-Socratics were not abandoning religion. Their explanations can better be seen as strongly motivated by the religious desire to keep the divine free of unworthy human accretion, and they all thought of the origin of things as divine. When Heraclitus said that fire does and does not consent to be called "Zeus," he was still full of reverence for the force that controls through its various transformations the pattern of the cosmos; but he did not want to associate this force with the rape of Ganymede and Semele or with blood-sacrifices to appease the god's jealousy of his prerogatives. (Heraclitus, with the face of Michelangelo, is probably the brooding figure in Raphael's fresco in the foreground, his left elbow on a marble block.) Xenophanes pointed out that the Thracian gods have blue eyes and red hair and the gods of the Ethiopians have snub noses and black skin, but he revered the one god "who, effortlessly, wields all things by the thought of his mind." Parmenides (in the fresco on the diagonal between Plato and Pythagoras) claimed to have been instructed by a goddess that all things are one. A strong sense of the divine can be found in all the Pre-Socratic philosophers. Even Epicurus, the atomist, (who may be the figure at the bottom left with a wreath) held that the gods exist, though they have no relation to our lives except to be entertained by us. And Protagoras, the sophist, claimed that he was not in a position to know either the *manner* in which the gods are or are not (another translation is "that they are or are not") or what they are like in *appearance*. But Plato presents him as telling the story that all humans have been given by the gods the gifts of respect and justice, so as to make possible the founding of cities; this is *why* each human is able to be, as Protagoras says, "the measure of all things."

The *Protrepticus*

Aristotle was born in 384 BCE in Macedonia, a kingdom north of the Greek city states, where his father was physician to the king.

When Aristotle was 18, his father sent him to Athens for his education, and Aristotle apprenticed himself to Plato in the Academy. He stayed there for twenty years, until Plato died and there was a dispute about who should take over the leadership. Speusippus (Plato's nephew) won, and Aristotle lost. He went to the other side of the Aegean Sea to stay with a friend and former student Hermias, who was the local ruler. Hermias was treacherously captured by the Persians and tortured for information about his secret treaties with King Philip of Macedon. He steadfastly preserved silence and was finally crucified. Given a final wish before he died, he said, "Tell my friends and companions that I have done nothing weak or unworthy of philosophy." Aristotle wrote a hymn to virtue for his friend, which begins by stressing the immortal and noble fruit of mortal toil:

Virtue, much toiled for by the race of mortals,
 Noblest quarry in life,
 For your form, maiden,
 To die is an enviable fate in Greece,
 And to endure violent untiring labours.
 Such is the fruit you cast into the mind,
 Immortal, better than gold
 And parents and the soft rays of sleep.⁵

After his friend's death he was invited back to Macedonia, and appointed tutor to the king's son, Alexander. Aristotle translated at least part of Homer's *Iliad* into Macedonian for him, and instructed him in the kingly virtues. When Alexander (the Great) grew up, he went on to conquer the whole known world of his time, including Athens. Aristotle, in the mean time, had returned to Athens and established his own school, the Lyceum. In 323 he left the city, "lest she should sin against philosophy twice." The Athenians had already killed Socrates, and Aristotle was afraid that because of his association with Alexander they would kill him as well. He died the

⁵ *Poems* F675 R(3). I have substituted the first line for the translation "Excellence, greatly striven for by mankind." Unless otherwise specified, I am using the translation in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984. "Crisp" refers to the translation of *Nicomachean Ethics* by Roger Crisp, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. (NE)

following year. We tend to think of him as a philosopher, but in fact he did groundbreaking work in all the known disciplines of his time except mathematics. He warns us against trying to take ethics in the direction of mathematics, and he probably has in mind Speusippus, who (like the Pythagoreans) had tendencies in just that direction.

I am going to start with an early work of Aristotle, in order to stress the vertical theme that is prominent there and that I want to trace throughout his ethical writing. Raphael's fresco portrayed Aristotle gesturing inwards towards the center, rather than upwards towards the heavens. Stopping with this contrast to Plato has become a commonplace in the comparison of the two philosophers, and we need to get beyond it.

While Plato was still alive and still Aristotle's teacher, Aristotle wrote a work called *Protrepticus*, or "Exhortation to Philosophy," which we have only in fragments.⁶ He writes to encourage others to embark on the way of life that he has found at the Academy, and the work is full of passion. He writes out of conviction that this is the best kind of life a human being can live, since it is the activity of the best and most characteristic part of us, our mind or *nous*. He says "Therefore all who can should practice philosophy; for this is either the perfect life or of all single things most truly the cause of it for souls."⁷

Aristotle has a three-part hierarchy of functions. Humans have plant-like functions, such as reproduction, and animal-like functions, such as perception. But there is also our *nous*, and to the extent that we live by this part of ourselves and separate its activity from those of our other parts, we are living the highest and noblest kind of human life, which is the most godlike. How do we achieve this kind of separation? Aristotle says that the key is what we think

⁶ The relation of the *Protrepticus* to Aristotle's later work is a matter of dispute. Werner Jaeger, *Aristotle: Fundamentals of the History of His Development* [1923], trans. Richard Robinson, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962, argued that it belonged to an early Platonic phase that was later outgrown and retracted. There is an excellent reconstruction of the text in D. S. Hutchinson and Monte Ransome Johnson, "Authenticating Aristotle's *Protrepticus*," *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 29 (2005), 193–294.

⁷ B 96.

about. The mind is operating at its highest level when it is thinking about the highest objects. In contemplating what is eternal and divine, our mind becomes godlike, or divine. While there are important ways in which Aristotle's fully developed moral theory diverges from the *Protrepticus*, this thought survives.

The interpreter of Aristotle has to make a choice. Is "God" to be written with a capital letter, or should we write "god" or "the god" in lower case? The problem with writing "God" is that it suggests to the reader that Aristotle is talking about the same being that the great monotheist religions have talked about for thousands of years. Aristotle's god is in many ways very unlike this being, not acting in the world, and in fact not acting at all, but only thinking.⁸ In the surviving fragments of the *Protrepticus* we are not given much detail about the god's thought. But in the *Metaphysics* Aristotle argues that for the god, as for us, the key to the status of this thinking is the status of its object; since the god is the highest object, the only appropriate object for the god's thought is the god. The god is therefore "thought thinking itself." This god does move or change things, but not by taking any action; rather, the god moves everything "by being loved."⁹ The god is what everything else is trying to be like, to the degree that it is naturally fitted for that god-likeness. I said in the Introduction that I would use the image of "God as magnet" to sum up the role that the god plays in Aristotle's ethical theory. The image is actually used by Plato (at *Ion* 536a), and not by Aristotle, but it fits Aristotle's account. Plato compares the drawing power of "the deity" to a magnet transmitting magnetic force through a chain of iron rings. I am usually going to use "God" with a capital "G" in what follows, because I want to point to the continuity of the vertical theme in the philosophers who are the subject of this book.

⁸ There are traces in his later writing of a more traditional view: "If the gods pay some attention to human beings, as they seem to . . . it is reasonable for them to benefit most [those most like themselves]" (*NE* X, 8, 1179a25ff.). If this benefiting is done by divine action, the view is not consistent with 1178b21, which says about the divine life, "If someone is alive, and action is excluded, what is left but contemplation?" See Richard Bodéüs, *Theology of the Living Immortals*, Albany: SUNY Press, 2000, for the suggestion that these are not merely "traces."

⁹ *Metaphysics* XII, 7, 1072b3.

But I do not want to deny that there is a huge difference between Aristotle's views and the views of God in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam (which also differ on this within and between themselves in various ways). We will see in the following chapters some attempts at synthesis with Aristotle, but no orthodox theologian of any of these faiths would deny that God acts in the world.

On the view given in the passage I quoted from the *Protrepticus*, we humans are naturally fitted to be like God through contemplation. Aristotle returns to the analogy Pythagoras gave of the three types of life: "For as we travel to Olympia for the sake of the spectacle itself, even if nothing more were to follow from it (for the contemplation itself is worth more than much money) . . . so too the contemplation of the whole is to be honoured above all things that are thought useful."¹⁰ In the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle puts the point in terms of three different ideals of the good life, or of happiness. Some people think this is the life of physical pleasure, and they are encouraged in this by the lives of the rich and glamorous who seem to specialize in the pursuit of extravagant sensory indulgence. Some people think the political life is the best. Aristotle agrees that it is more godlike to achieve good for one's city-state (in Greek, *polis*) than for oneself as an individual, and that full practical wisdom is only displayed in running the *polis*. But he concludes the work by pointing to a third life that is still nobler, and still closer to the divine, namely the life focused on contemplation. In the *Protrepticus* this is what he is exhorting his readers to undertake. Indeed, throughout his ethical writing, Aristotle sees his task as recommending this kind of life. One way to imagine this is to go back to the myth at the end of Plato's *Republic* in which people who are between lives choose which life to enter when they are reincarnated. Aristotle's advice would be appropriate for those making such a choice.

The vertical theme remains in his mature ethical writing. It is conspicuous at the end of the *Eudemian Ethics*:

To conclude: whatever choice or possession of natural goods – health and strength, wealth, friends, and the like – will most conduce to the contemplation of God is best: this is the noblest criterion. But any standard of living which either through excess or defect hinders the

¹⁰ B 44, but I have substituted "contemplation" for Barnes's second "spectacle," and I have substituted "the whole" for "the universe."

service and contemplation of God is bad. This is how it is for the soul, and this is the best criterion for the soul, to be as little as possible aware of the irrational part of the soul as such.¹¹

This doctrine is consistent with the *Protrepticus*, which compares the soul's conjunction with the body to a form of punishment used by the Etruscans, who chained dead bodies face to face with the living, fitting part to part. The *Nicomachean Ethics* also concludes with contemplation (in Book X, Chapter 7, in Crisp's translation):

If happiness is activity in accordance with virtue, it is reasonable to expect that it is in accordance with the highest virtue, and this will be the virtue of the best element. Whether this best element is *nous*, or something else we think naturally rules and guides us and has insight into matters noble and divine, and whether it is divine or just the most divine element within us, its activity, in accordance with its proper virtue will be complete happiness. That this activity is that of contemplation we have already said.

But this conclusion is in tension with the first book of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, and in the fifth section of this chapter, "Heading toward the Good," I will return to this tension and discuss whether it can be resolved.

If the best activity is contemplation of God and whatever else is most noble, where does that leave virtues like justice and moderation and courage and generosity? In the *Protrepticus* Aristotle says

But it is clear that to the philosopher alone among practitioners belong laws that are stable and actions that are right and noble. For he alone lives by looking at nature and the divine. Like a good

¹¹ We do not know in what order the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Eudemian Ethics* were written, and the relationship is complicated by the fact that they share three books (in the *Nicomachean Ethics* books five, six, and seven, and in the *Eudemian Ethics* books four, five, and six). These books probably belong originally with the *Eudemian Ethics*, but we do not know for sure. We also do not know whether the remaining parts of the *Nicomachean Ethics* originally belonged together. See Sir Anthony Kenny, *The Aristotelian Ethics*, Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1978 and Kenny, *Aristotle on the Perfect Life*, Clarendon Press; Oxford, 1992.

helmsman he moors his life to that which is eternal and unchanging, drops his anchor there, and lives in accordance with himself. This knowledge is indeed contemplative, but it enables us to frame all our practice in accordance with it.¹²

Aristotle adds that contemplation helps with action in the same way that sight helps with motion, since animals move towards or away from what they see. In the same way we “choose some things and avoid others” in the light of the knowledge given us by contemplation. Another metaphor he uses more than once in the *Protrepticus* is that contemplation gives us a “boundary marker” of what is good, by reference to which the statesman determines what is just, what is good, and what is expedient.¹³ Aristotle does not tell us just how the statesman or the person of courage or moderation makes these connections, and the *Protrepticus* does not contain the contrast developed in the *Nicomachean Ethics* between theoretical and practical wisdom. But he does say that because we share in *nous* (which alone of our possessions seems to be immortal and divine)

our life, however wretched and difficult by nature, is yet so delightfully arranged that a human seems [a] god in comparison with all other creatures. “For *nous* is the god in us” – whether it was Hermotimus or Anaxagoras who said so – and “mortal life contains a portion of some god.” We ought, therefore, either to philosophize or to say farewell to life and depart hence, since all other things seem to be great nonsense and folly.¹⁴

Frequently the term Aristotle uses to express the special status of the activity of *nous* in our lives is “honorable” (in Greek, *timios*), in the same way the divine is honorable, and we will return to the connotations of this word (unfamiliar in English) in the following section.

Aristotle’s repeated mention of the divine, which I have called his vertical theme, has been troublesome to some of his twentieth-century interpreters. There has been a shift in scholarship towards

¹² B 49–51, but I have substituted “in accordance with himself” for “his own master.” The hymn to virtue written for Hermias, which I quoted at the beginning of this section, gives the same flavor.

¹³ B 38 and B 47.

¹⁴ B 108–9.

what I will call the horizontal, and this has accompanied the shift away from theism in the belief systems of many professional philosophers. Unfortunately Aristotle gets tentative when he starts talking about God. A good example is the passage I quoted from the end of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, which describes *nous*, as “being either itself divine or the most divine element in us.” We want to know which. Is *nous* divine, and does this mean it comes into humans, as Aristotle elsewhere says, “from outside” and perhaps leaves them at death to continue its own immortal life?¹⁵ Or is it just part of us, mortal like the rest of us, but *like* God in its activity? We never get a satisfactory or complete answer from Aristotle to these questions. And there are two attitudes we can take to this. If we find ourselves sympathetic to the attempt to understand the divine, and we realize how extremely hard it is to be clear about these topics, we will be patient with Aristotle and value the picture he gives us, even if it is indistinct. On the other hand, if we find the whole topic of the divine irritating, we will leave those parts of Aristotle as unfruitful problems and construct an interpretation of his thought that gives them as little room as we decently can. We will consign Aristotle’s views on this topic to a category together with his views on women and slaves, or his views on spontaneous generation or the four (or five) basic elements of matter, and try to find a way to rescue what is still valuable in his theory. For example, Martha Nussbaum in *The Fragility of Goodness* says that what she calls the “Platonic step” of privileging the life of contemplation by linking it with the divine is taken “only once, in a passage that does not fit with its context and that is in flat contradiction with several important positions and arguments of the EN taken as a whole.”¹⁶ The one passage is the conclusion of the whole work, quoted by Egidio da Viterbo as I mentioned, and she proposes excluding it as “inserted in [its] present position by someone else.” Another example is Larry Arnhart’s book *Darwinian Natural Right*, which is the topic of the final section of this chapter. But we should note that the Greek words *theos* (“god”) and *theios* (“divine” or

¹⁵ *De Generatione* II, 3, 736b28: “It remains for the *nous* alone to enter from outside and alone to be divine, for no bodily activity has any connection with the activity of *nous*.” *De Anima* III, 5, 429b22: “When separated [active *nous*] is just what it is, and this alone is immortal and eternal.”

¹⁶ Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986, 373–7.

“godlike”) occur in the *Nicomachean Ethics* roughly twice as often as the words *eudaimonia* (“happiness”) and *eudaimon* (“happy”). This is a startling statistic, when we consider that Aristotle considers happiness the goal of our lives. I will try to justify in what follows the claim that the divine is not only frequently mentioned, but does important philosophical work.

God and *Nous* in *Nicomachean Ethics* Book I

Chapter six

In this section I will discuss three passages from the first book of the *Nicomachean Ethics* that help us see the role that Aristotle gives to the divine. I will start with the passage that is most directly concerned with his relation to Plato. In Chapter 6 of Book I Aristotle attacks the Platonist view of the good. This is a hard chapter, because Aristotle makes use of a large number of arguments that he states in shorthand, as it were. He himself was part of the discussion of these arguments within the Academy, and he expects his audience to be familiar with them. Alas, we are not, and we often have to guess what he means. The second argument in the chapter against a separate Form of the Good goes as follows:

Good is spoken of in as many ways as being is spoken of. For it is spoken of in [the category of] substance as god and *nous*; in quality, as the virtues; in quantity, as the measured amount; in relative, as the useful; in time, as the opportune moment; in place as the [right] situation. Hence it is clear that the good cannot be some common [nature of good things] that is universal and single; for if it were, it would be spoken of in only one of the categories, not in them all.¹⁷

¹⁷ I am quoting, with a couple of alterations, Sarah Broadie’s translation in S. Broadie, *Ethics with Aristotle*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991. She translates *nous* as “intelligence,” but I will stick with *nous*, and she translates *ti* as “what-it-is” rather than “substance.” Normally Aristotle talks not of “God” but of “divine” (the adjective) when attributing divinity to humans. Perhaps he wanted a noun here, because he was talking about the category of substance. But the translation is disputable. It would be possible to take the phrase “is spoken of in [the category of] substance as God

What is Aristotle's doctrine here? How is an analysis of goodness in terms of *categories* supposed to work? I will start with a brief account of Aristotle's view of substance and the other categories, and then come back to this passage in I, 6.¹⁸ Aristotle thinks of

and *nous*" to mean "is spoken of in the category of substance, as *for example* God and *nous*," and (independently) to suppose that Aristotle is not talking about the God in us, but God as the unmoved mover. But Sarah Broadie's way of taking the passage as referring to God as itself the good in (human) substance has advantages. The cases Aristotle mentions in the other categories do not seem like examples at all, as though there could be lots of other examples that Aristotle could have given instead; rather, they seem like names for the value predication itself. So in the category of quantity, Aristotle gives "the right amount," in the category of time "the right moment" and so on. The right or opportune moment is not an example of goodness predicated in the category of time, but just what goodness predicated in the category of time *is*; similarly with "the right amount" and "the right place." It is worth mentioning that the parallel passage in the *Eudemian Ethics* uses mostly the goods predicated in the various categories (though it puts God and *nous* in the reverse order), without using "as" at all (*Eudemian Ethics* I, 8, 1217b27ff.). Another possibility is to read the passage as Sir David Ross does, translating, "For it is predicated both in the category of substance, as *of* God and *of* reason, and in quality, i.e. *of* the virtues." He takes God and *nous* not as examples of the goodness being predicated in the category of substance, but as examples of substances of which goodness is predicated, and the virtues are the qualities of which goodness is predicated, and so on. But again Aristotle does not seem to be using the cases in the other categories, such as "right amount" and "right time" as cases of things of which goodness is predicated. For the goodness is, so to speak, already there.

¹⁸ I am relying on the account of the central books of the *Metaphysics* given in my dissertation, "Aristotle's Theories of Essence," Princeton, 1975, and John E. Hare "Aristotle and the Definition of Natural Things," *Phronesis* 24 (1979), 168–79. But I subsequently discovered a more compelling account of the same sort of view in Montgomery Furth, *Substance, Form and Psyche: An Aristotelean Metaphysics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988. Furth illuminates the difference between Aristotle's accounts in the *Categories* and in the *Metaphysics* by saying that the former is synchronic and the latter diachronic, and therefore cognizant of matter and form.

substance as the fundamental kind of being on which all other kinds of being depend. In the work called *Categories* he says that Socrates is a substance in the *primary* sense. If he is pale (an item in the category of quality) after being indoors in the winter, the existence or being of his paleness depends on the existence of Socrates, and Socrates's existence does not depend on the existence of his paleness. The same is true if he is fat (an item in the category of quantity) or is in the market (an item in the category of place). In the *Metaphysics*, by contrast, Aristotle stresses the role of substance as the cause that underlies and explains change, and he describes two fundamental ingredients in causation: form and matter. Form is the internal organizing activity of a thing that gives that thing unity through change. Matter is what form organizes. (This account does not, however, split Socrates in the way Plato splits up animals into body and soul, which can be separated at death.) Socrates is in these terms a substance in a *secondary* sense, a complex in which the matter is potentially just what the form is actually.

Aristotle's form/matter analysis goes through a number of different levels. If we consider a living substance, say a hedgehog, we can analyze it into its form and its matter. Its form is its characteristic hedgehog-type activity, and Aristotle says its soul is its capacity for this activity. Its matter is the flesh and bones that are organized in this activity. We can then take, say, the bones, and see that each bone can be analyzed into bony stuff (the matter) and its organizing activity for doing the kind of things a bone does (the form). And the bony stuff can in turn be analyzed into some more primitive stuff and its organizing activity. The process of development in the animal is the reverse of this process of analysis by the scientist, and can best be understood as a direction toward form. The more primitive kinds of matter are changed from simple to compound, and from inorganic to organic (though Aristotle does not have these concepts), by the imposition of form at different stages, until we have something that is ready to be a mature hedgehog. When this happens, the matter has been all used up, so to speak. There is nothing left for it to become in the direction of substance. There is still potential for change (the hedgehog can roll up in the face of an enemy, for example a car). But the only remaining change in *substance* is regressive. The hedgehog can decay, if squashed, into flesh and bones, and the bones into bony stuff, and eventually (if it is not eaten first) into inorganic stuff, ready for the process to begin all over again.