

# THE DIVINE IN ARISTOTLE'S ETHICS

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What role does the notion of the divine play in Aristotle's account of a good life? This is not an obvious question; god appears relatively infrequently, for example, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. But it might interest us, if only because of the perplexing appearance of the divine in Book 10 of that treatise, as that which appears to underwrite the choice of a contemplative life. The cognate question, what role does god play in Aristotle's understanding of *being*, is obvious and is more understandable, given *Metaphysics Lambda*. That question yields a variety of answers. Some interpreters see the entire *Metaphysics* as directed toward the discussion of divine being in *Lambda*. Others see *Lambda* as an addendum to the central books of the *Metaphysics*, perhaps the residuum of a youthful view outgrown in the course of Aristotle's maturation.

In fact, *Lambda*'s discussion of god perfects the analysis of substance. It does so, however, not by revealing something about substance and being that the central books do not see, but by making clear that the principle articulated in those books is divine. I think that the same is true with Aristotle's ethics: the divine is a *principle* that governs the discourse of the ethical treatises. Stewart put it nicely when he proposed to translate Aristotle's doctrine "into the language of modern philosophy, and say that Aristotle makes 'the Idea of God' the 'regulative principle' in man's life."<sup>1</sup> That neo-Kantian description ("the language of modern philosophy") may now seem quaint, but it captures Aristotle's view of god as a formal principle of our normative lives, and it does so without abandoning our commitment to read his ethics as naturalistic and human-centered.

It's reasonable not to expect the divine to appear at all in Aristotle's ethics. The concern of human agency on Aristotle's view is the human good; it is our welfare and our happiness that are the proper ends of our desire and choice. Practical agency is concerned neither with the satisfaction of some higher good nor with obedience to the will of some higher being, and happiness is subordinate to no alternative good for whose realization we are obliged to strive. And it is human deliberation, with no recourse to divinely delivered code, whose office it is to guide our action. It is therefore appropriate that we think of Aristotle's eudaimonism as naturalistic, and it is not surprising that the body of the *Ethics* does not refer to the divine. References to god in the *Ethics* would seem out of place (as the perplexing discussion in Book 10 does); they would be embarrassing, like discovering that your favorite hip uncle who regularly smokes weed also regularly attends mass or lays tefillin every morning. And so it's understandable that we either quietly ignore some parts of the text or deny that the discussion is that of the mature

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<sup>1</sup> J.A. Stewart, *Notes on the Nicomachean Ethics of Aristotle*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1892) II, 448.

Aristotle. But perhaps we can save what's true in Aristotle's invoking of the divine without reading it as intrusive.

We should begin by being clear about what god is *not*. God does not ground the notion of the good as legislator, either as source or as underwriter of moral injunction. Here Aristotle is explicit: "God" he writes "is not a ruler who issues commands, but an end in light of which practical wisdom commands."<sup>2</sup> That's not surprising; in a theory based on virtue, what's central is not the response to external command, but character, the infused skill of virtuous deliberation. Of course, even a theistic ethic might picture god as a principle of agency rather than a source of directives; in a famous Talmudic episode, a rabbi appeals for divine endorsement in a dispute, an endorsement he appears to receive, but he is then reminded that heavenly voices are not authoritative in matters of deliberation. God is pictured as pleased with this outcome, happy that his children have surpassed him; here the divine has become a principle of deliberation, the ἀρχή / of βούλησις.<sup>3</sup>

But Aristotle's view is more general; in the *Ethics*, as elsewhere, divinity is invoked to mark something as a principle on a scale of goodness, importance, beauty or power: or rather, a principle *of* that scale and therefore off or behind it. The divine is the principle of the good just as it is the principle of being and of activity. Consider how the activity of thinking comes to be called divine. In *Metaphysics* 12.9, Aristotle invokes the notion of *divine thought* but makes clear that he means not the *thinking of a god*, but *thinking as divine*, that is to say, *as the best*. The grammar of 'god thinks' is like that of Euripides' 'The mind is a god'<sup>4</sup>; read 'The mind is divine'. That's how Cicero read Euripides; in the *Tusculan Disputations* he offers this description of the soul: "therefore the soul, as I say, is divine or, as Euripides dared to say, is a god."<sup>5</sup> Similarly 'god is good' means 'virtue (like mind) is divine.' Aristotle explains the homonymy of *good* in just this way: predication that identifies something as *divine* predicates the *good* of that thing in the category that states what it is.<sup>6</sup> In all these cases, we can chart the possibility of a move from "\_\_\_\_ is a god" to "\_\_\_\_ is divine" and from that to "\_\_\_\_ is the best." Similarly, "Natalie Portman is divine" does not signify her literal apotheosis but merely her remarkable beauty: like Tennyson's description of Helen as "divinely tall, and most divinely fair" or Paul Groves' nasty little couplet in a poem called "At the Literary Party": "He's tousled, teddy bearish, and dependable/She's human. She's Divine. And she's upendable."<sup>7</sup> Aristotle notes this use only glancingly – with respect to the

<sup>2</sup> *Eudemian Ethics*, 7.15, 1249b14: οὐ γὰρ ἐπιτακτικῶς ἀρχῶν ὁ θεός, ἀλλ' οὐ ἔνεκα ἢ φρόνησις ἐπιτάττει.

<sup>3</sup> *Babylonian Talmud*, Tractate *Baba Metzia* 59b.

<sup>4</sup> Euripides, Richard Kannicht, *Tragicorum Graecorum Fragmenta*, 5.2, 988: fr. 1018: ὁ νοῦς γὰρ ἡμῶν ἐστὶν ἐν ἐκάστῳ θεός.

<sup>5</sup> *Tusculan Disputations* I.26.65: "ergo animus, ut ego dico, divinus est, ut Euripides audet dicere, deus est."

<sup>6</sup> *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1.6, 1096a20ff.

<sup>7</sup> Paul Groves, *Qwerty* (Seren, 2008).

Lacedaemonians: “σεῖος ἀνὴρ φασιν: that man is divine, they say”<sup>8</sup> – but it is in Greek, as it is in English, a general if somewhat extravagant use.

In the *Ethics* the divine is a principle not simply of the good, but specifically of *human* good. How should we understand this? How does god operate as a ‘regulative principle’ for human life? These remarks are meant to offer a quite general view of what I take to be several respects in which the divine might be thought to figure in Aristotle’s account of what it is for us to live happy lives.

First there is the formal and abstract sense I’ve just noted; the divine is a principle of good in general. This is the least remarkable feature of how the divine is woven into the discourse of the *Ethics*, analogous to Homer’s ability to speak of a θεῖον ποτόν, a divine Pinot Noir as it were, in relation to oenological rather than human virtues.

The second feature, specifically related to the *Ethics*, is the respect in which the divine is the principle of what enables us to affect our lives and world by desires and plans. God as the principle of νοῦς informs our capacity for deliberation and agency, our ability to recognize our desires and think about them and to think about and choose what to do, and consequently our ability to shape and be shaped by our virtues. These capacities constitute the ability at once to make our lives and to make our lives in the space of normativity that ethical thinking invokes.

Third, the divine is a figure for a mode of well-being that cannot be explained simply as the result of virtuous action: the principle, as I will suggest, of lives that are *blessed*. Similarly, the divine is the site of a power not ours that determines whether our actions become what we want them to be; the gods rule the vagaries of moral luck, a moral luck which reveals itself in the always unexpected fall of tragedy. The most comprehensive and pervasive sense of what is divine about a human life, finally, is that god is the principle of our awareness, the consciousness of our goods that happiness requires.

The overall argument of the first two features can be presented quite schematically. God is everywhere the principle of the good. Here in addition god is the principle of reason, and it is reason that shapes our attainment of the virtues and that enables us to exercise them in the business of living; when that works, what is often achieved is happiness. Happiness is the right English for εὐδαιμονία given the fact that in *happiness*, as in *luck*, a semantic leaning toward the good is concealed: *lucky* implies *good luck*, as *happy* does *good hap*. That’s the εὖ in εὐδαιμονία. Human efforts are directed toward achieving happiness through well-thought-out choice; the capacity comes from god, but the activity is ours, which is why happiness is deserving of praise.

Note the force of what I’ve just said: ‘what is *often* achieved is happiness.’ In this qualification, we can recognize the space between virtue and success. That space may be closed by a cosmic grant, by what Plato refers to as θεῖα μοῖρα or divine dispensation: a gift of the god that later traditions called *grace*. Or it may not be closed;

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<sup>8</sup> *Nicomachean Ethics*, 7.1. 1145a30.

god is often figured as the source of both fortune and tragic misfortune. First note the divine as the site of the distinction between our being εὐδαίμων – happy – and our being μακάριον – blessed. Some scholars have argued that happiness and blessedness are functionally equivalent for Aristotle. Were this true, the space to which I referred would be simply a space between virtue and happiness, where lives characterized by happiness could be indistinguishably referred to by the pair of terms ‘happy’ and ‘blessed’; we would be concerned simply with the frailty of goodness as a guarantor of well-being. I’m unconvinced by that view; it seems to me there’s a difference not merely between our being happy and the gods being blessed, but also between our being happy and *our* being blessed.

To be blessed – μακάριον – is to be marked by success that comes from some invulnerability; for the gods, it is to be free from the dangers of mortality and fortune. Humans then come to be called blessed whose lives analogously are (at least partially) immune to certain vulnerabilities: people blessed with good fortune or large fortunes, with a cheery disposition or longevity or good looks, or simply with the good luck that leads to the consistently successful outcome of their projects, by which I mean not merely their financial or political or erotic projects, but their moral projects as well.

These are gifts of the gods. We should not understand the well-being that results from them as though it were roughly equivalent to happiness, only higher on some scale of achievement. It may be true, indeed it is true, that virtue does not guarantee happiness, but it is all that we have with which to cultivate happiness. Some who fail or are anxious about their success may feel inclined to turn to god, thinking that there is a well-being more readily available to those who do so or who recognize that about us which is divine. But it is still *virtue* that (if we are lucky) can lead to whatever happiness is available to us as humans.

So it is not as though there were a scale of human success in the achievement of happiness ranging from bestial to vicious to incontinent to continent to virtuous and finally to blessed. For success in achieving happiness, only virtue and vice count. Continence, meanwhile, (ἐγκράτεια) is not a stage below virtue, but a way to exhibit virtue contrasting with σωφροσύνη on the one hand and ἀκρασία on the other, as incontinence (ἀκρασία) is a way to go wrong contrasting with ἐγκράτεια and ἀκολασία.

But the greatest infelicity of this scheme is the placement of the extremes, bestial and blessed. For Aristotle these extremes are not in the spectrum of happiness at all, but outside it, though in different ways. Bestiality is not a bad way of being human; to be bestial is to be subhuman. Blessedness, correspondingly, is not a supreme example of human well-being. The blessed are blessed with something: stunning looks or a strong constitution, natural equanimity or a lightning wit. The only appropriate virtue in relation to such blessing is gratitude, a gratitude appropriately directed to the divine.

The divine figures as well in the economy of a deeper fortune (and misfortune) that concerns not simply the uncertainty of εὐδαιμονία as the realization of virtuous action but the uncertainty of virtuous action as the realization of proper deliberation. In a sense, this concern is situated outside the *Ethics*; its provenance lies in the world of

tragedy and therefore in the *Poetics*. I'll explain what I mean by something of an excursus into the theory of tragedy, in particular in its relation to *action*.

Actions are individuated in a variety of ways; that is to say, a particular grouping of my bodily motions may be thought of as any one of a number of actions that I am performing. At one level, this multiplicity follows simply from a general ontological multiplicity central to Aristotle's thought: an individual may be introduced under a plurality of descriptions, each of which determines one of a plurality of different *beings*. One and the same individual may be at once a book, a collection of pages, some paper, my beloved copy of Keats, and a blue thing. The complex behavior someone is engaged in at a particular moment may be throwing dirt on a corpse, burying her brother, committing an act of treason, or signing her own death warrant.<sup>9</sup> This ambiguity of action – what one scholar has called 'the doubleness of the deed'<sup>10</sup> – lies at the heart of the theory of 'tragic conflict', a theory of tragedy that takes as its paradigmatic plays those in which the protagonist's performance of an action under one description entails her choice of it as well under other applicable descriptions. The *Antigone* may be a paradigmatic tragedy on this reading.

But the ambiguity that interests Aristotle in the *Poetics* is not lateral, between coextensive and equally applicable descriptions, but categorical, between fundamentally different modes of capturing and individuating actions. On the one hand, an action is the object of the intention of an agent: what we do is what we are about and take ourselves to be doing. On the other hand we live in the world; *what we do* is *what emerges as the result* of our intentional activity. Tragedy reveals the ever-present possibility of fracture between these two aspects of action by figuring the rift between actions as expressions of an agent's character and actions as events in an objective world outside the control of such agents, actions with lives of their own that transcend the intentions of their authors.

The *Poetics* attends to the pathology of action, the ways in which our deliberations and choices may ultimately prove feckless. Acting out of good character, we may, like Oedipus at some crossroad or other, spell our doom by killing a man we mistakenly take to be a brigand but whom the gods know to be our father. The fears occasioned by this possibility may be subtle, but they are in many ways our deepest fears. Good character and deliberation cannot guarantee our happiness because actions good from our point of view as agent may be revealed as bad in the world in which they are enacted. And we are responsible for these actions even though they are not our fault.

The *Poetics* is thus a sequel to the *Ethics*, a sequel that reveals the terrifying frailty of virtue and the vulnerability of the happiness that, correctly and for all the right reasons, we aim at in cultivating virtue. The fear and pity that tragedy occasions concern our vulnerability, born in the recognition that ordinary good character and ordinary good

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<sup>9</sup> Recall how this point is mined by G.E.M. Anscombe with respect to someone's exercising his arm, pumping water, poisoning the household, or beginning the revolution: *Intention*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958).

<sup>10</sup> Albin Lesky, "Decision and Responsibility in the Tragedy of Aeschylus", *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 86 (1966) 78-86.

deliberation can lead not simply to disastrous *consequences* but to disastrous *actions*. The refractoriness to human agency woven into the very fabric of action reveals the depth of our inability as agents to forestall disaster, to guarantee happiness even when we correctly attempt to found it in the cultivation of virtue.

No god, to be sure, appears, in any simple sense, to rescue us from this disaster nor, for that matter, to rescue tragedies' protagonists from their disasters, except perhaps in Euripides' fantasies, and about these Aristotle is quite uneasy. But the tragedians' clear sense that the gods oversee the tragic unfolding of events onstage is, I think, shared by Aristotle, though nowhere made explicit: the sense that the divine, not in any malicious fashion but in its role as figuring *what is* despite our energetic agency, is often the matrix of catastrophe. This means simply that the divine may be thought to mark for Aristotle, as it did for the tragedians, the *uncertainty* rather than the *force* of virtue, the *fugitive* rather than the *available* face of happiness. In this sense, Euripides' fantasies remind us that these matters, like matters of moral luck generally, are, as we say, in the hands of the gods.

Finally, the divine governs our lives as lives of awareness, lives in which we are able to be *conscious* of our goods and happiness. The fact that happiness without consciousness is no happiness at all can be seen in several arguments of Book 9 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, and it's made clear in Book 10. The concern of that book with human lives lived in the exercise of divine θεωρία is not a concern with the superiority of a contemplative to a political life, or with whether it's better to be a Ph.D. than to be a C.E.O. It is rather a concern with the fundamental desirability of human *awareness*, formally thematized as divine thought. Here, as throughout Aristotle, θεωρία signifies the active exercise of conscious mind. In the religious mythology that informs *Metaphysics Lambda* and *de Anima* 3, as here in *Nicomachean Ethics* 10, that exercise is figured as the occupation of a god. But Aristotle makes clear elsewhere that human life in the fullest sense – τὸ ζῆν τὸ κατ' ἐνέργειαν καὶ ὡς τέλος – consists in the active exercise of awareness and knowledge – τὸ αἰσθάνεσθαι καὶ τὸ γνωρίζειν.<sup>11</sup> This activity may, as *Lambda* imagines of god, occur purely, with reference to no particular object; but in *our* lives awareness is woven into the fabric of our practical activities, and the happiness of a human life is inextricably bound up with that awareness. Note then two characteristics of our lives that are human expressions of divine νοῦς: 1) our capacity to *lead* and not simply to *live* lives, to act, that is, in the space of normativity, and 2) our capacity to live in the *awareness* of our lives, to live lives which, if they are happy lives, can be conscious of being happy.

Here are two final thoughts about the divine that may or may not be Aristotle's, but which I would like to think would occasion his approval. The first concerns the question: thinking about the role not so much of the divine as of our attention to the divine, what might our religious lives have to do with our well-being? Perhaps the good of piety can be compared to the good of friendship. We sometimes think that to justify our sense of friendship as a human good, we need to show that having friends is a condition of a happy life. But Aristotle takes having friends simply to be a good for

<sup>11</sup> *Eudemian Ethics*, 7.12, 1244b23-24.

human beings. (Not, interestingly, for the gods; just as they are immune from death, so they are from loneliness, above the requirements of sodality and friendship and love.) But the reason that we want friends, Aristotle argues, is simply because friends are good for humans to have; they enrich our lives in ways that Aristotle elucidates. A life with friends is a better life than one without. It's not that friends are necessary to happiness; it's simply that even those who are happy want friends.

So it is, I would suggest, with our lives in relation to god. It's not that our lives cannot be lived virtuously without attention to the divine. There are perfectly decent lives that make no reference to god; some of our *best* friends are atheists. But to some of us, a life that includes the gratitude, worship and sanctification that comes through recognizing and invoking the divine is a richer and happier life, just as a life of erotic or culinary or aesthetic grace is.

The second thought arises from a remark I made a moment ago that for Aristotle the gods are not in need of friends. When I think of that, I think of the Homeric realization that the immortal gods – who, precisely because they are immune to the sorrows of death, live at ease (θεοὶ ῥεῖα ζῶοντες)<sup>12</sup> – live lives that are somehow not serious and therefore somehow not real options for us. Of course we still envy them their immortality; it isn't as though death is no sorrow. It's better, as Achilles laments to Odysseus, to be the lowest laborer above ground than to be king of all the strengthless dead. But in the face of this, mortality remains Odysseus' choice. And finally the hero of the day is that very bandy-legged Odysseus. He is, to be sure, god-like Odysseus (Ὀδυσσεὺς θεῖος), but above all he is human Odysseus, the god-like hero whose final choice is a *human* life: mortal Penelope and Ithaca over immortal Calypso and Ogygia. It is such a life that Aristotle offers us as the goal of our efforts and hopes: a wise, thoughtful, aware, deliberative, finite and if we are lucky, blessed life: a divinely human life.

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<sup>12</sup> *Iliad* 6.138.