

SONIA KAMIŃSKA*

PHILOSOPHER’S THEORETICAL LIFE
VS. AUTO-DEIFICATION?
POSSIBLE READINGS OF ARISTOTLE’S
“NICOMACHEAN ETHICS”, BOOK X

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In my paper, *Rational vs. Mystical Readings of Aristotle’s Nous Poietikos. Introduction to the Subject and Overview of Central Positions* I presented two possible interpretations of the notorious active intellect whose proper function still remains uncertain. These were: (a) the mystical and (b) the rational one. According to (a) *nous poietikos* does not belong to a particular

* Sonia Kamińska, Ph.D. – Jagiellonian University, Institute of Philosophy. Funding: My research (2015/19/D/HS1/00969) was financed from the assets awarded by The National Science Centre, Poland upon the decision no. DEC-2015/19/D/HS1/00969. Current project: *Mystical and rational readings of Aristotle’s psychology, and especially of nous poietikos*, National Science Centre, Poland, 2016–2019.

Address for correspondence: Jagiellonian University, Institute of Philosophy, Grodzka 52, 31-044 Kraków. E-mail: kaminska.sonia@gmail.com.

human being, but is identical with Deity or a divine sphere. Moreover, humans are capable of a sort of mystical union with it and this is how they access and emulate the Deity. According to (b) *nous poietikos* belongs to us and through its activity we can learn about the Deity and strive after it. In both (a) and (b) there is a sort of an imperative to follow what is divine, in order to lead a good life. This is why I decided to check which of these two viewpoints is more appropriate, by comparing the ways leading to such a life proposed by each of them. I decided to use the Xth book of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* as a criterion. This is where philosopher's theoretical life finds its most famous description. Let us then begin with presenting the most important fragments thereof.

(I)

If happiness is activity in accordance with virtue, it is reasonable that it should be in accordance with the highest virtue; *and this will be that of the best thing in us. Whether it be reason or something else that is this element which is thought to be our natural ruler and guide and to take thought of things noble and divine, whether it be itself also divine or only the most divine element in us, the activity of this in accordance with its proper virtue will be perfect happiness.* That this activity is contemplative we have already said. Now this would seem to be in agreement both with what we said before and with the truth. For, firstly, this activity is the best (*since not only is reason the best thing in us, but the objects of reason are the best of knowable objects*); and secondly, it is the most continuous, since we can contemplate truth more continuously than we can do anything.

(II)

But such a life would be too high for man; *for it is not in so far as he is man that he will live so, but in so far as something divine is present in him; and by so much as this is superior to our composite nature is its activity superior to that which is the exercise of the other kind of virtue. If reason is divine, then, in comparison with man, the life according to it is divine in comparison with human life.* But we must not follow those who advise us, being men, to think of human things, and, being mortal, of mortal things, *but must, so far as we can, make ourselves immortal, and strain every nerve to live in accordance with the best thing in us; for even if it be small in bulk, much more does it in power and worth surpass everything.* This would seem, too, to be each man himself, since it is the authoritative and better part of him. It would be strange, then, if

he were to choose not the life of his self but that of something else. And what we said before will apply now; that which is proper to each thing is by nature best and most pleasant for each thing; for man, therefore, the life according to reason is best and pleasantest, **since reason more than anything else is man**. This life therefore is also the happiest.

(NE, X, 7, trans. W.D. Ross, emphasis S.K.)

The standard reading of this passage goes as follows: humans become divine by exercising their reason (*nous*) and thus achieve *bios theoretikos* and through this theoretical life – *eudaimonia*, the perfect happiness. Sometimes I write *nous* (*poietikos*), as it is unclear which of the faculties Aristotle has in mind here. He speaks of reason (*nous*) in general (as described in *De Anima* 3.4), but I believe it can be reasonably assumed that he thinks of its highest active power, and this enables us to treat it as it were equivalent to *nous poietikos* as well (see *De Anima* 3.5).

Nevertheless, one needs to bear in mind that *De Anima* was most probably written later than *Nicomachean Ethics*¹ and thus proceed carefully. Below we will see that each decision as to whether to understand “the best thing in us” as (1) *nous* or as (2) *nous poietikos* has its advantages, but also comes with a price. Let me explain (1) and (2) briefly. In favor of (1) is the first quotation (I) and this is obvious: *nous* is the noblest thing and it belongs to us. Whereas (II) supports (2): human nature is composite, it consists of form and matter, reason and body, to which a third element is added, which does not belong to this nature. This one too is reason, only a divine one. No wonder, one leans towards identifying it with *nous poietikos*. But these are just conjectures.

The ideal exercise (i.e. theoretical contemplation) of the best part in us (be it intellectual soul, reason, *nous* (*poietikos*)) makes us similar to gods

¹ See the three development phases of Aristotle's psychology according to F. Nuyens (whose theory was prevailing among Aristotelian scholars for a long time. It has also received some criticism, though. See for instance A.P. Bos, *The soul and its instrumental body*, chapter II: *The modern debate on Aristotle's Psychology*). The first one is the Platonic phase (dialogue *Eudemus*): soul is an independent substance only accidentally connected with the body; phase two encompasses the years 347–335 (330): soul is connected with the body *qua* its tool, but they do not build up a substantial union (*Nicomachean Ethics*); phase three – the years 335 (330)–322: soul is the entelechy of the body (*De Anima*).

and thus worthy of their love. This statement needs to be supplemented with another quotation, this time from chapter 8 of the same book:

(III)

But that *perfect happiness is a contemplative activity* will appear from the following consideration as well. We assume the gods to be above all other beings blessed and happy; but what sort of actions must we assign to them? Acts of justice? Will not the gods seem absurd if they make contracts and return deposits, and so on? Acts of a brave man, then, confronting dangers and running risks because it is noble to do so? Or liberal acts? To whom will they give? It will be strange if they are really to have money or anything of the kind. And what would their temperate acts be? Is not such praise tasteless, since they have no bad appetites? If we were to run through them all, the circumstances of action would be found trivial and unworthy of gods. Still, everyone supposes that they live and therefore that they are active; we cannot suppose them to sleep like Endymion. Now if you take away from a living being action, and still more production, *what is left but contemplation? Therefore, the activity of God, which surpasses all others in blessedness, must be contemplative; and of human activities, therefore, that which is most akin to this must be most of the nature of happiness.*

(NE, X, 8, trans. W.D. Ross, emphasis S.K.)

I do not wish to get embroiled in theological discourse here and deliberate over Aristotle's pantheon and the nature of god(s). I believe that the gods here are a metaphor of perfection and since there is a clear passage from gods to one single God, let us from now on speak of the Deity as we know it from the *Metaphysics* (understood as a perfect act of thought, self-contained, impersonal). We should also remember that *theos* is an adjective that can be understood both as divine in the sense of divinity, and in the sense of perfection.

Overcoming Oneself and Becoming God(like)

The goal of our divine intellect consists in exercising its divinity (again, this can be emulating the Deity and/or achieving perfection). It is thus a self-contained activity. Philosopher's life is the most preferable one because it permits immortality already in the sublunary world ("it is the most

continuous, since we can contemplate truth more continuously than we can do anything”) and this is – as Aristotle stresses – the only immortality worth dreaming of and fighting for (“But we must not follow those who advise us, being men, to think of human things, and, being mortal, of mortal things, but must, so far as we can, make ourselves immortal, and strain every nerve to live in accordance with the best thing in us; for even if it be small in bulk, much more does it in power and worth surpass everything”). This is why in my paper *Rational vs. Mystical Readings of Aristotle's Nous Poietikos*... I suggested that the interpretation by Alexander of Aphrodisias was the most appropriate one as his *unio mystica* resembled the so-called immortality on earth and enabled temporal identity with the Deity and not only similarity like the rational readings do. But let us not jump to conclusions.

One must notice, that rational and mystical elements coexist in all three quotations above. Among the rational features present therein one can count: mind as the noblest element in us, intellectual activity as the goal of life and a way beyond, a need to exercise our intellectual powers, Deity understood as an act of thought, but also – personal divinity. On the other hand: mind is also divine and surpassing human nature, intellectual activity aimed at attaining the Deity can be also understood as a mystical practice that has its goal in a union with the divine sphere – and these are mystical elements beyond any doubt. I believe this short observation is enough to explain the differences between Theophrastus and Eudemus (which I described in the previous paper).

Since *nous (poietikos)* is also known as the divine seed (*theion sperma*) it should naturally develop into a divine person. But can a person be anything “more”? Can a person become Deity and transcend the “human level”? *Animal rationale* is a divine animal, since *ratio* is divine. So, the essence of humanity is striving to develop our nature. We must make a choice whether we want to be like animals or like Deity. I believe we are somehow predisposed to be the latter and more precisely to strive after being the latter (which may occur more important than the goal itself). We can get closer to Deity but we are not determined to succeed, only to try. There is “a should” but not “a must”. And this concerns both, mystical and rational readings (the first ones guarantee temporal identity and the latter ones – permanent similarity). If I were to visualize it, it would be moving up and down on a scale. But I’d rather steer away from the obvious comparison to medieval *ordo entis*. We are not moving from being a dog to being an angel, but from

our inferior self to our superior self. It is all about becoming godlike, but in a sense of becoming, so to say, superhuman. This needs a disambiguation. We become human, for the first time so to say, during our foetal life, when the foetus is equipped with intellectual soul and thus we become members of the species. This intellectual soul is a mere possibility. In *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle gives a recipe for its actualization. He says: this is how you become human in a sense that overcomes a mere membership to a species. The divine seed – properly described in *De Generatione* II 3 – has to blossom and bear fruit. There must be a sort of determination (but not determinism) in humans that drives us towards self-actualization, even if sometimes we do not succeed. This can be compared to Plato's Eros and his predisposition for striving, but without guaranteed success. Thus, I believe it is established that humans need to strive after perfection. Is any of the two models analysed in this paper appropriate?

Questions and Problems

Below I will give a short list of questions and problems that arise from the two interpretations in order to see which type is better suited for the true Aristotelianism, provided that we believe something like this exists. Aristotle was and is commented, interpreted, analysed, scrutinized, copied and questioned in so many ways that he can compete with Plato only and some scholars will say that the true Aristotle does not exist, that it is a mere intellectual construct and a symptom of wishful thinking. To glance over the interpretations like the Aquinas's or Brentano's is enough to see that no good can come from imposing coherence where there is none. Instead of speaking about the one and only true Aristotle, I will try to concentrate on what Aristotle would approve or disapprove of and this I will base on my knowledge of his works. Coming back to questions and problems with:

Mystical Interpretation...

1. We are not divine a priori, we have to achieve our divinity, BUT:
2. How can we strive after the Deity if our divine part responsible for action (i.e. *nous poietikos*) is taken away from us?
3. How to maintain the definition of humans as rational animals without the most honourable part?

... and Rational Interpretation

4. We are already equipped with something divine, BUT:
5. If we accept theism, then union with Deity understood as our perfection is impossible. It is rather the Deity's decision.
6. We can no longer speak of the Aristotelian "immortality in this life" and have to introduce a sort of "heaven" / "paradise", which Aristotle would not accept.

What do I have in mind when I say that we are divine a priori? (ad. 1) This shall mean that we do not have to do anything to achieve this blessed state. We are born like this. This is possible only in the rational interpretations where a personal God equips us with *nous* (*poietikos*) and humans are his children, created in the image and likeness of God (ad. 4, 5).

If we accept that the best part in us is *nous* from *De Anima* 3.4 (*nous poietikos* being its so to say latent aspect, which is sometimes actualized), then only the rational interpretations will be correct. On the other hand, if we agree that *nous poietikos* does not belong to us, but surpasses human nature and – as the divine aspect of *nous* – is separated (*choristos*²), then we are left with mystical readings. Humans have a mind, but a human one, not the divine one (only Averroes's reading is problematic in this context as he leaves us with a sensory power, not an intellectual one). This move seems to pay off, since the mystical readings seem to be more "Aristotelian" at first glance, mostly because the rational ones (besides Theophrastus) are the Christian ones and this is problematic, even if only for chronological reasons.

Again, Alexander of Aphrodisias seems to be the one who really understood Aristotle. I believe that the core of *Nicomachean Ethics* is the abovementioned imperative to overcome oneself, to become divine and immortal, but not necessarily in any eschatological or religious sense; on the contrary: as humans and in the sublunary world, as there is no other world (ad. 6). His *unio mystica* perfectly illustrates what Franz Brentano (1911) called *selige Augenblicke*, blessed moments of perfect happiness. He was right in this respect, although his interpretation (as the one of his great predecessor – Thomas Aquinas) is full of elements foreign for the ancient world-view and Aristotle would not approve of them. First of all, there is no theist God (understood as the one and only personal, creationist God) nor the other world (ad. 5, 6). We do not access the divine by its will, since Aristotle's Deity is unaware of our existence, but we do so by a temporary

² In the first case *choristos* would mean "separable".

identity with the divine act of thought (see the identity of knowing and known described in *De Anima* 3.5 and in my previous paper). Although *De Anima* alone is ambiguous, together with *Nicomachean Ethics* it speaks for the mystics, at least in this respect.

Some of the mystics, like Victor Caston, refer to the *Metaphysics* as well to prove that *nous poietikos* is identical with the Deity. He compares the list of Deity's features from the *Metaphysics* 12.9 with the description of *nous poietikos* from *De Anima* 3.5. to show that they are in fact one entity. Unfortunately, I believe this to be a dead end. I will show it by presenting the counterarguments to two of Caston's eleven points of comparison (for more see Caston, 1999). First of all, Aristotle calls Deity *timiotaton* (the best), and mind: *timioteron* (better). This suggests similarity, but not identity, which speaks against the mystics, I am afraid. Moreover, one of the many arguments on Caston's list is the cause. God is the cause of everything, whereas mind is the cause of every thought. This can be of course interpreted, so that it suits the identity thesis, but I would rather not go too far with this and settle with similarity again; being perfectly aware that similarity works for the rationalists.³

Furthermore, and this issue is really important, one has to check whether the mystical interpretations do not deprive us of our *differentia specifica* (ad. 2, 3). How can we maintain the definition of humans as an *animal rationale* without the noblest part? Caston seems to think that we are like animals, only a bit better, but fully immersed in the natural tendency to realize our native, universal goals. Alexander, what I have already mentioned in the previous paper, claims that human soul is mortal. I am not saying that what they claim is wrong. I am just wondering whether the price to pay is not too high? Many would surely say it is. But the real question is: are the minds, we are left with, capable of striving after the divine (ad. 2, 3)? To this I have no satisfactory answer.

Avicenna, on the other hand, while describing the typically human soul, steers towards something that could be easily labelled "rational" (or at least "mixed"). Namely, he comes up with a cogito, very much alike the one by St. Augustine (although there was probably no conscious inspiration). This all seems to tip the scales in favour of the rationalists. And they seem to be inspired not by *De Anima* or *Nicomachean Ethics*, but by the early

³ My full discussion with Caston can be found in: Kamińska (2014a).

dialogue *Eudemus (or On the Soul)*, that was written by Aristotle still in his Platonic phase, when he believed (surprisingly, very much alike Avicenna) that the soul was connected to the body only accidentally. But there are two problems with this conjecture. Namely, the dialogue was lost and survived only in fragments. Moreover, the rationalists in question do not refer to it explicitly; they speak of *De Anima*.

All this enhances my belief that it is worthwhile to ask about the “owner” of *nous poietikos* first, rather than about its function or ontological status. If we are the owners, then *nous poietikos* is no doubt a human power and its role is to actualize the potentialities of the lower faculty. For instance, Franz Brentano calls it “moving our thoughts from potentiality to actuality”. These do not have to be particular acts of thought, though. It can be a possibility of thinking in general, raised to a higher level. But, if God/Deity is the “owner”, then we must assume identity, since Deity is perfect and thus single. If there is identity, *nous poietikos* does nothing, as Caston puts it, since no activity (beyond being the act of thought) is worthy of the Deity. Hence, we have to think of it as of an object of our striving.

Conclusions

All this is, no doubt, complicated and I cannot say which solution is objectively better, as they both have their pros and cons. If I had to decide now, however, only for myself, then I would make immortality the ultimate criterion and bet on the mystics. Aristotle did not believe in individual immortality (endorsed by the rationalists), but in the immortality of the species (in biological terms). This, together with the non-theist account of the Deity, makes the mystical interpretations the most appropriate ones. Whereas the Christian ones, despite being prevailing in our Western culture are sometimes an “abuse” of Aristotle or – broadly speaking – the ancient world-view. And although the vision of having individual immortal soul, that unites with God after our bodily death and retains its personality, is nice and comforting, it is very far from Aristotle (a contradictory view can be found in Conway, 2000). Moreover, Thomism, for instance, has this advantage over almost every reading of the Stagiritic that it is very coherent and fixes all the “holes” in Aristotle. This is, I believe, one of the main reasons (besides the religious motivation) why Franz Brentano endorsed it. He claimed coherence to be the

most important feature of a good interpretation. He was very much against incorporating foreign views or leaving some of the questions unanswered (which is what many of the scholars are forced to do while working on ancient thinkers). But it is here, where I believe he made a mistake. First of all, Thomism does incorporate heterogenic views into Aristotelianism, creationism being the most vivid example of not only foreign, but also contradictory views. Second of all, Brentano embarked on a breakneck project of introducing an agreement between Theophrastus and Eudemus. However, instead of simply noticing, that there are both rational and mystical elements in Aristotle, he tried to show that Eudemus meant something else and thus bring him nearer Theophrastus (whom he obviously preferred), and on this basis, he built his Christian interpretation. And this is what led him astray. But this is a subject for a whole different paper.

For now (and apart from my personal preference), let us accept a peaceful coexistence of rational and mystical elements in Aristotle. I believe there is nothing wrong with this. This lack of conclusion should not be treated as a failure here, since it is based on the epistemic evidence that does not yield an unambiguous answer. Moreover, it gives more food for thought than choosing a single solution would ever do.

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Summary

This is a continuation of “Rational vs. Mystical Readings of Aristotle’s *Nous Poietikos*. Introduction to the Subject and Overview of Central Positions” where I gave a synopsis of the readings of *nous poietikos*. I ordered them by introducing a division into “mystical” and “rational”. The mystical ones are rooted in a view that *nous poietikos* does not belong to particular human beings, but is identical with Deity/divine sphere. According to the rational readings *nous poietikos* is our cognitive tool and through its activity we can learn about the Deity and emulate it. In this paper, I aim to check which of these models is better suited for Aristotle, in other words: would Aristotle approve of any of them? By comparing the ways of life appointed by them I wish to put theory into practice. In order to solve a mystery from *De Anima*, I refer to *Nicomachean Ethics*.