

God and Aristotelian Ethics

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1. Introduction

By way of introducing contemporary virtue ethics, Julia Annas writes:

Most modern forms of virtue ethics are naturalistic, and often take a form called neo-Aristotelian, harking back to the best-known naturalistic theory from antiquity, Aristotle's. When we are investigating what the good life is, these theories hold, and how living virtuously might achieve it, we are aided by investigating our human nature....

This means that they [i.e., Aristotelians] are rejecting...possible alternative approaches, [such as] to base ethical theory on a religious or metaphysical theory which gives us an alternative grounding for the virtues [i.e., a divine one].¹

I cite this passage in order to note the common view of Aristotle expressed in it—the view apparently shared by the painter Raphael in his *Scuola di Atene* in which is depicted an otherworldly Plato, at odds with a this-worldly Aristotle. Annas and other neo-Aristotelians consider Aristotle the original ethical naturalist because in the early stages of *Nicomachean Ethics* (1.6.1096a11–14)² he rejects Plato's transcendent Idea of the Good, and sug-

¹ Julia Annas, "Virtue Ethics: What Kind of Naturalism?," in *Virtue Ethics, Old and New*, ed. Stephen Mark Gardiner (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), 11–12.

² To avoid cluttering the paper with notes, throughout I will cite Aristotle's works parenthetically. The English translations are from J. Barnes, ed., *Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, 2 vols., Bollingen Series, vol. 71, no. 2 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), and the Greek texts are from the following Loeb editions: H. Rackham, trans., *Nicomachean Ethics*, Loeb Classical Library 73/Aristotle 19 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1926); H. Rackham, trans., *Athenian Constitution. Eudemian Ethics. Virtues and Vices*, Loeb Classical Library 285/Aristotle 20 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1935); Hugh Tredennick and G. Cyril Armstrong, trans., *Metaphysics: Books 10–14. Oeconomica. Magna Moralia*, Loeb Classical Library 287/Aristotle 18 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Uni-

gests instead that the good under investigation is the *human* good.³ Thus, they suppose, Aristotle was the first to show that the measuring rod for morality could be derived from the natural world *rather than* from, as in Plato, a “religious or metaphysical theory.”

Now there are numerous problems with this depiction of Aristotelian ethics, “neo-” or otherwise: for example, vagueness in the parameters of “naturalism”; anachronism, if she means to ascribe to Aristotle the purview of contemporary naturalism; and strong arguments that Aristotle grounds (portions of) his account of ethics on *his own* metaphysical theory. For the present, however, I shall focus upon a single claim I wish to dispute; namely, that Aristotle’s naturalism is a rejection of any “religious theory” underpinning ethics. It is admittedly not clear what role God might play in Aristotelian ethics. On the surface, Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* countenances God only with regards to the conclusion within his discussion of the life of contemplation, and even then only insofar as imperfect human-contemplative activity mimics the self-sufficient contemplative activity of God. In fact, God is thought not to be an important feature of Aristotle’s discussion of the nature of action and of moral excellence (*arete*, or ‘virtue’). In the first place, the demands of moral excellence seem to be precisely what obstruct unadulterated contemplative activity, and thus our kinship with God (*NE* 10.7 1177b15–1178a1). Second, he claims that the “secondary” happiness of the political life consists in actions and excellences unworthy of God, and he

versity Press, 1935); W.S. Hett, trans., *On the Soul. Parva Naturalia. On Breath*, Loeb Classical Library 288/Aristotle 8 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957).

³The characterization of Aristotelian ethics as a naturalist theory is explicit in Julia Annas, “Naturalism in Greek Ethics: Aristotle and After,” *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy* 4 (1988): 149–71; and in Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 9–16, 147–83, 197–205. James Lenman considers G.E.M. Anscombe, P.T. Geach, Martha Nussbaum, and Philippa Foot (in addition to the authors already cited) foremost representatives of Neo-Aristotelian ethical naturalism. See James Lenman, “The Saucer of Mud, the Kudzu Vine and the Uxorious Cheetah: Against Neo-Aristotelian Naturalism in Metaethics,” *European Journal of Analytic Philosophy* 1 (2005): 37–50; *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, s.v. “Moral Naturalism,” ed. Edward N. Zalta, Aug 7, 2006, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2013/entries/naturalism-moral>, esp. §4.1 “Neo-Aristotelian Naturalism.” However, most of the authors Lenman identifies, in fact, do not classify themselves or Aristotle as a naturalist. Finally, T.H. Irwin claims that Aristotle is a naturalist, but (contra Annas) notes that this does not preclude “reference to any immanent or transcendent God”; see T.H. Irwin, *The Development of Ethics: A Historical and Critical Study*, vol. 1, *From Socrates to the Reformation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 1–6, 140–49; for his treatment of Neo-Aristotelian naturalism, see T.H. Irwin, *The Development of Ethics: A Historical and Critical Study*, vol. 3, *From Kant to Rawls* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 869–91.

ridicules the very notion that God could perform actions since they imply deliberation about what could be otherwise. This holds all the more for the exercise of moral excellences, which implies the training of unruly passions and the development of habituated states relating to the performance of actions (*NE* 10.8 1178b8–23). All this suggests that both moral excellences and excellent actions of themselves have little to do with God or with a distinctly godlike life of the sort discussed in *Nicomachean Ethics* 10.7–8.

As a response to this typical reading, I will argue that God plays an indispensable role in Aristotelian ethics as a whole, and that some key features of Aristotelian ethics hinge upon features of his account of God. But to see why this is so, we must first see what contemplation has to do with moral excellence, for (as I shall argue) contemplation plays a mediating role in the relation between moral excellence and God. Now this will require some argumentation, since much of the neo-Aristotelian revival in recent years has neglected the intellectual excellences in general, and flatly rejected the excellence of contemplative wisdom in particular.⁴ The presupposition among neo-Aristotelians is that an Aristotelian account of moral excellence can survive—even flourish—apart from a corresponding account of intellectual excellence and of the life of contemplation. Thus, I will need to defend two component claims in turn: first, that the theoretical functioning of the intellect is important for moral excellence (§2–4); and second, that moral excellence and excellent human action of their own accord relate to God (§5).

A final preliminary point: to defend this dual thesis, I will be drawing from a few different texts in the Aristotelian corpus without thereby committing myself to any particular view of the relationship between these texts, except a general continuity of the passages that I cite. Such a move ought not to be taken as “piecing together” disparate scraps of text, but rather as the accumulation of textual data that not only supports the thesis that Aristotle really holds such a view, but also brings into relation important themes to which he turned recurrently in his works (most often, too, at the pinnacle of his treatises). That he returned to these discussions I take as indication that they are central, not peripheral, issues to the mind of Aristotle.

2. Acting for the Sake of

To understand how the theoretical functioning of intellect is important for moral excellence, we must look first to the theory of action underpinning Aristotle’s account of moral excellence. The claim of this present section is

⁴ See, for instance, Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, 218.

that the morally excellent agent acts for the sake of the *kalon* (the translation of which is addressed below), which is discerned in contemplation (*theoria*), hence the importance of contemplation for moral excellence. First, therefore, I shall situate Aristotle's explanation of how an agent perceives an object as *kalon* within his view of motivation in general, then I will discuss in greater detail the sense of the term *kalon*, and finally I will argue that the theoretical functioning of the intellect, not its practical functioning, is responsible for apprehending the *kalon*.

An important place to look for Aristotle's theory of motivation is within his principal work on the philosophy of psychology, *De Anima* (henceforth, *DA*). In *DA* 3.9–11 (432b15–434a21), Aristotle states that an animal's self-movement begins with apprehension of "the thing wanted" (*orekton*). By 'apprehension,' I mean to encapsulate Aristotle's claim that thought (*nous*) is a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for self-movement (*DA* 3.10.433a20–21), but with the stipulation that *nous* is taken broadly to encompass imagination (*phantasia*), and thus to include animals lacking *nous* in the more restricted sense of higher-level, conceptual, abstract thought. Apprehension is a necessary condition of self-movement because it is through the presentation of the object to the animal's imagination or thought as good or suitable for it that desire for it is first stirred. Now, according to Aristotle, wanting (*orexis*) may be either deliberative (*boulesis*) or else driven by hastier or baser desires for the immediate, sensible, or (merely) apparent good (what Aristotle designates with the terms *thumos* and *epithumia*). It would be appropriate, in either case, to think of "the thing wanted" as the motive of action.

In present-day philosophy, there is considerable debate over whether a motive should be counted as a belief or as a desire.⁵ It is crucial to note that the framing of the question with this dichotomy is alien to Aristotle's conception of action. For Aristotle, actions occur in the space spanning the apprehension of the thing wanted and its attainment or realization. To act from a motive is "to act for the sake of" some object cognized as suitable (*NE* 3.7 1115b20–24). The motive (if anything) is identical to the object according to the manner in which it is apprehended by the animal's psychology as wanted. Aristotle's theory, then, differs significantly from both modern viewpoints. The apprehension of the thing wanted is not (as the contemporary debate frames it) a belief about the thing wanted (e.g., the belief that I want this thing, or the belief that it "ought" to be wanted), nor is it a desire for the

⁵ For a few examples, see Derek Parfit and John Broome, "Reasons and Motivation," *Supplement to the Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 71 (1997): 99–146; Michael Smith, *The Moral Problem* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1994); Ralph Wedgwood, "The Metaethicist's Mistake," in *Philosophical Perspectives*, supplement, *Notis* 38, no. S18 (2004): S405–S426; Bernard Williams, "Internal and External Reasons," in *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

object, which is a psychological consequence of apprehending the object, not the motive itself. Many more details could be filled out—for example, what is involved in a thing's being apprehended as "suitable"—but let this sketch suffice for present. For the remainder of this paper, I will not defend the basic framework for Aristotle's action theory or my interpretation of it, but rather assume it.

In *NE* 2.3 (1104b30–35), Aristotle enumerates three classes of "objects of choice": the pleasant, the useful, and the *kalon*. Each is a manner in which an object of desire can appear good or suitable to an agent (i.e., can serve as motive). The morally excellent agent (Aristotle continues) acts for the sake of the *kalon*, and acting repetitiously for the sake of the *kalon* is what engendered his excellence in the first place—but translating *kalon* and providing a characterization of the concept associated with *kalon* is no easy task.

3. Acting for the *Kalon*

The Greek word *kalon* is a notoriously difficult term to translate adequately, and no single English word can encapsulate its full connotation. Nonetheless, three words have emerged as frontrunners in translation: 'noble,' 'fine,' and 'beautiful.' (Broadie adds a fourth, 'admirable'.⁶) To sidestep the disadvantages of each, I have left the word untranslated. But the difficulty is not merely that there is no exact correlate for *kalon* in English—there is no "exact correlate" for many of the key terms in *Nicomachean Ethics* (e.g., *eudaimonia*: 'happiness' or 'flourishing'). It is, rather, that although Aristotle identifies *kalon* as a pivotal element of his ethical framework, he nowhere investigates it directly.⁷ Therefore, noting both its importance and its ambiguity, a flurry of recent literature has taken up the task of delineating the concept of *kalon* with greater precision, often by way of describing features of *kalon* implicit in his non-ethical works (e.g., *Poetics* and *Rhetoric*), or of explicating it through associated concepts in Aristotle (e.g., "propriety," "praise," "contemplation," or "passions"), or of enumerating instances of which he predicates *kalon* (e.g., the achievements of the victors of an Olympic competition).⁸

⁶ Sarah Broadie, "Aristotle and Contemporary Ethics," in *The Blackwell Guide to Nicomachean Ethics*, ed. Richard Kraut (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 342–61.

⁷ A definition is proffered in *Rhetoric* 1.9.1366a33–34; namely, "that which is both desirable for its own sake and also worthy of praise; or that which is both good and also pleasant because it is good," but as a stand-alone the definition leaves most of the conceptual details in obscurity.

⁸ I draw here from J.J. Sanford's discussion in "Are You Man Enough? Aristotle on Courage," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 50, no. 4 (December 2010): 438–40, and n. 45 on 438–39. Sanford notes the difficulties in the English translation ('noble'

This is not the place to enter into this debate, or to undertake a full study of Aristotle's concept of *kalon*. At the same time, it is necessary to carry the argument forward so that we may acquire a notion of *kalon* more fully spelled out than at present. Thus, I propose the following as sufficient conditions (for this paper's purposes, not for the conceptual analysis in itself). To ascribe *kalon* to something is to ascribe to it not just any goodness, but goodness that is (1) really good, (2) a comparatively great good, and (3) an end. The first condition disqualifies any merely apparent good, about which an agent could err (*NE* 3.4.1113b35). The second captures Aristotle's restriction of *kalon* to goodness that stands above many lesser goods—a goodness that is marked by its grandeur (*megethos*). The third condition excludes objects chosen for their usefulness, since useful things are chosen for the sake of some end. The third condition also reflects Aristotle's insistence that *kalon* has the mark of what is "complete" (*teleias*, a variant on the same term for an 'end' or 'goal' of action).

In light of the foregoing discussion, what does it mean for an action to be done for the sake of *kalon*? The answer is that the agent sees the object of that action as *kalon*, or sees the *kalon* in that object. The description under which an agent sees the object of his action helps determine the way in which we can describe his action. An example will help. The coward sees his situation in one manner, the brave man in another. A coward in battle foresees his death under the description of "an excruciatingly painful event," whereas the courageous man foresees his death as noble and beautiful, even as intensely pleasant (*NE* 9.8 1169a17–35), however odd this last suggestion of Aristotle may seem.⁹ That is to say, the brave man sees the heroic death to be suffered as complete (*teleias*), grand (*megethos*), good and desirable in itself, pleasant on account of its goodness, and worthy of adulation—that is, under the description of those characteristics Aristotle employs elsewhere to describe the *kalon*.¹⁰ To Aristotle's mind, the framing of courage in terms of the *kalon* is an indispensable feature of his account of courage; that the courageous man chooses this death for the sake of the *kalon* sets apart his action from "counterfeits" of courage (e.g., rushing into battle under the mere impulse of

captures the connotations of grandeur and gallantry, whereas 'beautiful' captures those of aesthetic appreciation), the difficulties in comprehending Aristotle's perspective on beauty with the typical modern (subjectivist) perspective, and (in n. 45) the summary of his research on the various treatments of *kalon* in the literature.

⁹ See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 9.8.1169a18–24: "since he [the courageous man, who dies in battle,] would prefer a short period of intense pleasure to a long one of mild enjoyment, a twelvemonth of noble life to many years of humdrum existence, and one great and noble action to many trivial ones."

¹⁰ See, for instance, *Poetics* 6.1450a15–17.

anger).¹¹ It should be clear, then, that whether an agent apprehends the *kalon* will make all the difference to the performance of a morally excellent action.

4. Apprehending the *Kalon*

The question remains: How does one come to apprehend the *kalon*? How does one come to learn which final end is the correct final one? After all, “Will not the knowledge of it...have a great influence on life?” (NE 1.2 1094a22). According to Aristotle, we can look to the morally excellent agent (the *spoudaios*) in order to gain knowledge of this end, because (to extend the well-known archery metaphor Aristotle introduces in the opening lines of *Nicomachean Ethics*) this *spoudaios* has such an “eye” by which to see the right target (NE 3.4.1113a23–31). Since he acts for the sake of the *kalon*, he must be capable of perceiving the *kalon* in a course of action, and that the *spoudaios* possesses such an “eye” for seeing the end allows him to serve as a model (*kanon kai metron*) for good and noble actions (NE 3.4.1113a32–33). Now the *kalon* is not evident to everyone, (e.g., to the coward described above). What, then, enables the *spoudaios* to see the *kalon*? What is the “eye” he possesses? One might suggest that *phronesis* (practical wisdom) serves this function because Aristotle claims that the *phronimos* (the practically wise person) deliberates well about “what sorts of thing conduce to the good life in general” (NE 6.5.1140a28). But this cannot be right since, on Aristotle’s conception, *phronesis* deals with the things leading up to the end, not the end itself (NE 3.5.1113b3–5; 6.5.1140a24–1140b30); rather, he continues, it is moral excellence (in the above case, courage) that “makes the aim right” (6.12.1144a7–8).

This last claim could be understood in two ways. On one interpretation, the state of moral excellence directly supplies unique epistemic access to the truth about the end. M. F. Burnyeat interprets Aristotle in this manner when he claims that “practice [of moral virtue] has cognitive powers, in that it is the way we learn what is noble [*kalon*] and just.”¹² But if Burnyeat means that the state of moral excellence itself is the “eye,” then the interpretation is problematic. From our earlier discussion, we know that the *spoudaios* first acts for the sake of the *kalon*, and in doing so repetitiously develops the corresponding state (*hexis*) of moral excellence. But if the development of moral virtue requires the repeated performance of *kalon* actions (it does), and if *kalon* actions are those done for the sake of *kalon* (they are), then Burnyeat’s reasoning begins to look circular: one needs to act for the *kalon* in order to

¹¹ See Sanford’s discussion of “courage’s counterfeits” in “Are You Man Enough?” 434–37.

¹² See M.F. Burnyeat, “Aristotle on Learning to Be Good,” in *Essays on Aristotle’s Ethics*, ed. A.O. Rorty (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 73.

see the *kalon*, which is in turn requisite for acting for the *kalon*. Now Burnyeat is correct that during one's moral education one is first compelled by one's educator to do morally excellent actions and only later does one see the *kalon* for oneself—in *that* sense, the habituation stemming from moral education paves the way for apprehending the *kalon*. Nonetheless, to clear obstacles to one's perception of the *kalon* does not amount to the ascription of "cognitive powers" of intuiting the *kalon*.

There is another argument against Burnyeat's ascription of "cognitive powers" to moral excellence. Proper moral education presumes the moral educator's ability to grasp the good for man correctly, apart from which he will not be able to instill truly good habits in a child. What explains the educator's grasp of the *kalon*? If we say it is the *educator's* good habits developed throughout *his* childhood, then we either push the "explanation" back a step *ad infinitum*, or else come to a stopping point, at which point we will need to account for the ability to perceive the *kalon*. Thus, Aristotle's claim that moral excellence "makes the aim correct" should be understood as stating that habituation is a prerequisite to the exercise of a distinct perceptual activity. To borrow a note from Plato (*Rep.* 518b–d), moral education orients the soul in the right way, but it does not generate the "eye."

My novel suggestion is that the theoretical functioning of the intellect is the "eye," and so responsible for the perception of the end at which the excellent agent subsequently ordains his actions by means of *phronesis*. This suggestion may seem implausible, in part, because Aristotle makes much of the distinction between theoretical intellect and practical intellect in *Nicomachean Ethics* 6.1 (1139a5–15), and between the intellectual excellences of theoretical wisdom (*sophia*) and practical wisdom (*phronesis*). On this distinction, the latter is concerned with what is variable (actions and situations), and the former with what is constant (scientific knowledge). This might in turn lead us to conclude that the theoretical functioning of the intellect has little to do with *phronesis* and moral excellence.

To diminish the implausibility of my suggestion, we should consider what Aristotle's theory of action implies about the relationship between apprehending the *kalon* and acting for the *kalon*. Recall that *nous* (taken broadly) is a necessary condition for self-movement and action because *nous* apprehends the object of desire (in a rational agent, the object of choice). The different objects of choice are candidates for the goal of one's actions, and the "eye" is supposed to discriminate correctly between them. The adjudication between ends, then, and the choice of the right end hinges upon ascertaining the true character of *kalon* (*NE* 6.5.1140b16–19; 1.3.1094b29); faulty apprehension will undermine the performance of excellent actions. Further, as we saw above, the task of apprehending the end, the *kalon*, cannot be the work of *phronesis*. Thus, although Aristotle claims in *NE* 2.4 (1105a18–1105b17)

that knowledge (*eidōs*) is the least important of the requirements for moral excellence, and while he is adamant that the cultivation of *nōus* into scientific knowledge (*epistēmē*) is unimportant for *phronēsis* (NE 6.7.1141b2–7), acting for the sake of the *kalon* requires apprehension of the *kalon*.

We should look, then, to some of Aristotle's claims concerning apprehending actions, objects, or situations as *kalon*. In these cases, he suggests that the *kalon* is the object of contemplation (*theoria*). In §3, I mentioned Aristotle's claim that the victors of an Olympic competition achieve "noble [*kalon*] and good things." In this setting, the audience consists of "contemplators" (in fact, the word for spectating a sporting event is from the same root as *theoria*), and what they "contemplate" is an instantiation of *kalon* manifested in the magnificence and excellence of the competitors' actions. On Aristotle's view, one can catch a "glimpse" of *kalon* in the performance of actions—in the Olympic Games, on the battlefield, and in political life—but more properly in purely contemplative activity. In his account of contemplation (NE 10.7), Aristotle suggests that this activity takes "thought of things noble [*kalon*] and divine" (1177a12–18); that it is "the pleasantest of excellent activities," which for Aristotle implies a correlating superlative goodness of the activity's object (1177a23–25); that "unleisurely" excellent practical activities are desirable not for their own sakes, but for the sake of "leisurely" contemplative ones (1177b16–17); that it "seems both to be superior in worth and to aim at no end beyond itself" (1177b18–20); that even though a life consisting solely in contemplative activity is impossible for us, we should strive for it as much as possible (1177b27–33); and that we should live and conduct our actions in accordance with it (1177b34–35).

Now since the object of contemplation is the *kalon*, and the *kalon* is characteristically highly good and desirable, desire for the *kalon* follows naturally from contemplating the *kalon*. This is true so long as we follow the model of Aristotle's action theory, on which desire arises from apprehension of a thing as good or suitable. Furthermore, this desire for the *kalon* is precisely what we mean by acting for the sake of *kalon*, which is characteristic of the morally excellent agent. When these pieces are fitted together, we arrive at the following conclusion: insofar as the morally excellent agent acts for the sake of the *kalon*, excellent practicality will depend upon some contemplation of *kalon*, which is the work of theoretical—not practical—intellect. And that is the first thesis I set out to prove.

A final comment: My first thesis was that the correctness of the morally excellent agent's aim depends upon grasp of the *kalon* in contemplation. Aristotle also believes it is possible for someone to be led to perform good or excellent actions without this knowledge of the end. Moral education and political legislation are both examples of this. In both cases, however, moral excellence still depends upon the grasp of the *kalon* because the moral ed-

ucator or the legislator grasps the end rightly through knowledge. Aristotle states this explicitly in the transition between *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics*: “And surely he who wants to make men, whether many or few, better by his care must try to become capable of legislating...if anyone can do it, it is the man who knows [*eidotos*], just as in medicine...” (NE 10.9.1180b24–29). The parallel between politics and medicine here is significant: in both cases, the majority of people will defer to the informed judgment of the expert on human good and human health, respectively, who has knowledge of the standard. In any case, to do excellent actions *as* the excellent agent would is to do them for the sake of *kalon*, so to develop full-blooded excellence—to “own” one’s excellence—will require first-hand grasp of the *kalon*.¹³

5. God, the Object of Desire

I have attempted above to show why some grasp of the *kalon* by the theoretical intellect is significant for moral excellence. Now I turn to the second thesis: the relation of moral excellence and morally excellent actions to God. As I stated above, contemplation serves a mediating function between moral excellence and God. I will now argue that this relation of dependency connects morally excellent action to God because (1) God is himself superlatively *kalon*, and (2) Aristotle suggests that God serves as the best standard (*horos*) for the direction of human action. These two claims about God appear more explicitly outside the *Ethics*. First, then, I will summarize the view of God within these passages, and then I will argue that the role of God in *Nicomachean Ethics* is best understood in light of these accompanying texts.

The first text is *Metaphysics* 12.7 (1072a19–1073a13), where Aristotle characterizes objects of desire (*orekton*) in general as unmoved movers (*Met.* 12.7.1072a26–27). The point is more pedestrian than it sounds. Marketers presume that their advertised product will not spring off the shelf into your shopping cart, but rather (they hope) will set your legs in motion toward itself—their product moves without being moved! As the passage continues, Aristotle dubs the object of lower appetite (*epithumia*) the “apparent (*phainom-*

¹³ An important and understudied resource, on this point, is Aristotle’s *Protrepticus* (in fragments). If my interpretation of *Nicomachean Ethics* is correct, then Aristotle has not shifted positions drastically between these two works, wherein he argues, “This knowledge is indeed contemplative, but it enables us to frame all our practice in accordance with it. For as sight makes and shapes nothing...yet enables us to act as it directs and gives us the greatest assistance toward action..., so it is clear that, though knowledge is contemplative, yet we do innumerable things in accordance with it” (Aristotle, *Protrepticus*, frag. B51, in vol. 2 of *Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. J. Barnes [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984], 2410).

enon) *kalon*,” and the object of deliberative desire (*bouleuton*) the “real *kalon* (*bouleuton de proton to on kalon*)” (*Met.* 12.7.1072a27–28). Then, he states in no uncertain terms that God moves the whole cosmos in this fashion: he produces motion by being loved and desired (*kinei de hos eromenon*), or “moving without being moved” (1072b3).¹⁴ In our case, he moves us because we engage in thought (*nous* in its narrower sense), which “deals with that which is best in itself” (1072b18), and desire for God springs from this thinking, which Aristotle characterizes as a contemplative activity (1072b24). Thus, Aristotle concludes, “the act of contemplation is what is most pleasant and best” (1072b24), since it not only mimics God’s activity, but also concerns God directly as its object. This suggests straightforwardly that both God and his activity (1072b27) will be really (not merely apparently) *kalon*, and so the object of deliberative desire.

Let us turn now to the second text, a selection from *Eudemian Ethics* (*EE*), which I quote in full:

So it is with the theoretic faculty [*theoretikon*]; for god is not an imperative ruler [*epitaktikos archon*], but is the end with a view to which wisdom [*phronesis*] issues its commands [*bou heneka he phronesis epitattei*]. . . . What choice, then, or possession of the natural goods—whether bodily goods, wealth, friends, or other things—will most produce the contemplation of god [*theou theorian*] is best [*malista*]; this is the noblest standard [*ho boros kallistos*], but any that through deficiency or excess hinders one from the contemplation and service [*therapeuein*] of god is bad; this a man possesses in his soul, and this is the best standard for the soul [*boutos tes psuches boros aristos*]. . . . (*EE* 7.15 [8] 1249a21–1249b22)

There are a few observations to make about this passage. First, contemplation is the standard used to measure other goods. Aristotle means here not only a standard for external goods (bodily goods, wealth, etc.), but for actions as well; God is “that for the sake of which” (*bou heneka*) practical wisdom gives its orders. While morally excellent actions are chosen for their own sakes, it is because they bear the mark of the *kalon* that they are intrinsically desirable, and the *kalon* (I am arguing) is discerned in contemplation. Second, in the same passage (not quoted), Aristotle draws an analogy between health as the standard for a physician’s conduct and the contemplation of God as the standard for the exercise of morally excellent actions. The point of the

¹⁴The cosmological scope of this statement should not distract us. If anyone worries that it relies too heavily upon Ptolemaic cosmology to be taken seriously, then the broader claim is best bracketed for the present. In any case, the relation of human action to God seems unaffected by this worry. The description of God as supremely *kalon* does not hinge exclusively upon the cosmology.

analogy appears to be that contemplation is “action-guiding,” which supports my thesis that God will prove to be important for the exercise of moral excellence. Third, the notions of acting for *kalon*, acting for contemplation, contemplating God, and acting on account of finding God highly good and desirable all converge in this passage. The standard is “noblest” because it involves the final end of practical wisdom’s commands, which is the highest good, which (it turns out) is God himself. In Aristotle’s mind, each notion is bound inextricably to the others.

These passages shed light on the ethical framework put forward in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. The distinction in *Metaphysics* between “apparent *kalon*” and “real *kalon*” recalls the distinction Aristotle draws in *Nicomachean Ethics* (NE 3.4.1113a15–23) between the “apparent good” of pleasure and the “true good,” which the *spoudaios* perceives as *kalon*. In *Metaphysics*, however, he links acting for the sake of the *kalon* more directly with desire for God as supremely *kalon*. It also suggests that *thought of* the highest object produces *desire for* that object, both of which are identified with God. The passage from *Eudemian Ethics* reinforces even more explicitly Aristotle’s belief that God is the end of morally excellent action (“the end with a view to which *phronesis* issues its commands”), not only the object of contemplation. Of course, in the foregoing discussion, the division between object of contemplation and object of excellent action begins to fade away: both are the *kalon*, and God is most *kalon*.

In light of these texts, the following picture emerges: since (a) the *spoudaios* has the wisdom to see the *kalon* for the sake of which his excellent actions are performed; (b) God is described as that for the sake of which *phronesis* issues actions; and (c) the contemplation of God is called the *kallistos* standard for the soul; then the *spoudaios*, in contemplating God, not only measures his actions by the contemplation of God, but also aims at God as that which is desired above all. The moral excellences, then, are in pursuit of the *kalon*, and their movement terminates in the *kallistos*, which is contemplation of God. Thus the object of both kinds of excellence is identical, insofar as contemplation represents the temporary completion of the pursuit of *kalon*, the activity of contemplating God.

This last claim can be extended. In *De Anima* (3.7.430b35), Aristotle argues that the actualization of the intellect involves becoming identical with the object known; the intellect that knows and the object known are one and the same. In a similar fashion, the contemplator at the close of *Nicomachean Ethics* achieves unity with the thing contemplated, to which moral excellence has oriented him. This is in keeping with Aristotle’s claims in that section of the work; namely, that we should strive as much as possible to share in God’s own life and happiness (10.7.1177b30–35; 10.8.1178b 8–23). Therefore, it

would not be too far a stretch to suggest further that Aristotle conceives contemplation as involving a quasi-union with God (albeit impermanent).

6. Conclusion

I began by considering the role an object of desire plays in Aristotle's theory of action and motivation. I proceeded to isolate the unique features of *kalon* as an object of desire. Then, I turned to a common interpretation of *Nicomachean Ethics*, on which the significance of the theoretical functioning of the intellect for moral excellence is denied, and I proffered an alternative (contrary) thesis. Finally, I compiled what I took to be texts reflecting Aristotle's account of God, and I attempted to link this account with the discussion of *kalon* in the context of action theory and his account of moral excellence. While many questions no doubt remain, in this paper I hope to have elucidated to some degree the relation of Aristotle's account of both moral and intellectual excellence to his account of God, and to have made more plausible the case for far greater amenability between God and Aristotelian ethics.¹⁵

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¹⁵ I wish to thank John M. Rist, Michael Krom, John F. Crosby, J.J. Sanford, Nathan Cornwell, Mark Erste, Jr., Jamie Cassata, and Jonathan Buttaci for their helpful and critical feedback on the ideas presented in this paper.