

On Form and Matter: It's All Good

By: Bruce Russell

Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, as a whole, and especially Book Λ, is, as Stephen Menn writes, "always ... disappointing if it is read as a contribution to ousiology or ontology. But it is very interesting when it is read as what it is, a contribution to archeology."¹ We know from Book A that we are searching for the *arche* of the cosmos, but it is not until Λ that we indeed reach this principle. As I am endeavouring to show elsewhere,² Λ both truly belongs as the conclusion of the *Metaphysics* and proves that god (i.e. separate Entity)³ is the cause of the cosmos' being and intelligibility. From these reflections, however, naturally arises another problem: in what way does god *cause* the cosmos? In this essay I shall show, through the analogy that Aristotle himself uses as a guide – i.e. the relation, in sensible Entities, of form and matter – how god's activity, thinking thinking thinking (ἡ νόησις νοήσεως νόησις), is the cause of the being of the cosmos. With this insight of how god causes the cosmos, I shall think through Λ.10, the conclusion of the *Metaphysics*, to see what new light the relation of cause and caused provides to that difficult chapter.

Through the course of the central books of the *Metaphysics*, a troubling notion creeps up. At the end of I, this notion is explicitly laid out:

For nothing is by accident perishable. For what is accidental is capable of not being present, but perishableness is one of the attributes that belong of necessity to the things to which they belong; or else one and the same thing may be perishable and imperishable, if perishableness is capable of not belonging to it. Perishableness then must either be the essence or be present in the essence of each perishable thing. The same account holds good for imperishableness also; for both are attributes which are present of necessity. The characteristics, then, in respect of which and in direct consequence of which one thing is perishable and another imperishable, are opposite, *so that the things must be different in kind.*"⁴

¹ Stephen Menn, "The Aim and Argument of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*", (Forthcoming; Draft available online at: <http://www.philosophie.hu-berlin.de/institut/lehrbereiche/antike/mitarbeiter/menn/contents>), accessed 9 April 2013), iii.b.1, 11.

² Bruce Russell, "The Actuality of Thought is Life", (in progress).

³ For the purposes of this paper, I shall follow Joseph Owens's convention and translate 'οὐσία' as 'Entity'.

⁴ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, ed. W. Jaeger (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957), 1059a1-10: "οὐδὲν γὰρ ἐστι φθαρτὸν κατὰ συμβεβηκός: τὸ μὲν γὰρ συμβεβηκὸς ἐνδέχεται μὴ ὑπάρχειν, τὸ δὲ φθαρτὸν τῶν ἐξ ἀνάγκης ὑπαρχόντων ἐστὶν οἷς ὑπάρχει: ἢ ἔσται τὸ αὐτὸ καὶ ἐν φθαρτὸν καὶ ἀφθαρτον, εἰ ἐνδέχεται μὴ ὑπάρχειν αὐτῷ τὸ φθαρτὸν. ἢ τὴν οὐσίαν ἄρα ἢ ἐν τῇ οὐσίᾳ ἀνάγκη ὑπάρχειν τὸ φθαρτὸν ἐκάστω τῶν φθαρτῶν. ὁ δ' αὐτὸς λόγος καὶ περὶ τοῦ ἀφθάρτου: τῶν γὰρ ἐξ ἀνάγκης ὑπαρχόντων ἅμω. ἢ ἄρα καὶ καθ' ὁ πρῶτον τὸ μὲν φθαρτὸν τὸ δ' ἀφθαρτον, ἔχει ἀντίθεσιν, ὥστε ἀνάγκη γένοι ἕτερα εἶναι." (my emphasis). All translations are my own.

Even though Aristotle emphasizes from the start of the central books that we have been investigating sensible Entity for the sake of learning about non-sensible Entity, we nevertheless have arrived at an *aporia* that sensible and non-sensible Entities are essentially different, and therefore do not belong to one science to investigate, for a single science deals with contraries within one genus. We are on the precipice of the exact same problem that faced Plato. In *Parmenides*, the titular character argues that the world of sensible beings and the world of Forms may well be entirely and utterly separate, with no possible bridge between them: philosophy is thus destroyed. Plato posited a principle beyond Form and sensibles, which was comprehensive of, prior to, and therefore the ground for the unity between them; Aristotle proceeds in a different way, instead showing that sensible and non-sensible Entities are related as activity and potency.

Book Λ shows that the cosmos is a whole and that the kinds of Entity cohere as a whole, in the same manner as form and matter. The cosmos as a whole has the nature of an Entity, because separate Entity is the *cause* of the being of sensible Entities. James Doull writes, “[Aristotle thinks that] all genera are related to the prime entelechy through the same principles – form and matter or form and privation – that the variety of species in a genus, the manifold differences of individuals are all comprehended in the same relation of the unmoved mover or divine self-consciousness.”⁵ That is to say, all Entities, both sensible and non-sensible, have the same principles, i.e. *dunamis* and *energeia*; they are related analogically. Therefore god is to the cosmos as form is to matter. That the cosmos is a unity is shown by the fact that there is an order. It is the form that saves any sensible Entity from being merely a heap, but rather a unified thing. Just so, god is what causes the unity of the cosmos: “we must consider also in which of two ways the nature of the universe contains the good and the highest good, whether as something separate and by itself, or as the order of the parts. Probably in both . . . for all things are ordered to one end.”⁶ All things are ordered rather than being random, like a heap, and so the cosmos is a whole, just like a sensible Entity. Now, to understand how god is the cause and ordering principle of the cosmos, we must follow Aristotle’s example and see how form acts as the cause of a sensible Entity.

In sensible Entities, form, through its activity, is the cause of the being of an Entity. In Z.17, Aristotle writes: “but it would seem that this ‘other’ [i.e. form] is something, and not an element, and that it is the cause which makes this flesh and that a syllable. And similarly in all other cases. And this is the substance of each thing (for this is the primary cause of its being).”⁷ In natural sensible Entities, form is entirely the cause

⁵ James Doull, “Tragedy, Comedy, and Philosophy in Antiquity”, in *Philosophy and Freedom*, eds. D. Peddle and N. Robertson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 45.

⁶ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1075a12-20: “ἐπισκεπτόν δὲ καὶ ποτέρως ἔχει ἢ τοῦ ὅλου φύσις τὸ ἀγαθὸν καὶ τὸ ἄριστον, πότερον κειχωρισμένον τι καὶ αὐτὸ καθ’ αὐτό, ἢ τὴν τάξιν. ἢ ἀμφοτέρως . . . πρὸς μὲν γὰρ ἐν ἅπαντα συντέτακται.”

⁷ *Ibid.*, 1041b25-8: “δόξειε δ’ ἂν εἶναι τι τοῦτο [i.e. τὸ εἶδος] καὶ οὐ στοιχεῖον, καὶ αἰτιόν γε τοῦ εἶναι τοδι μὲν σάρκα τοδι δὲ συλλαβὴν: ὁμοίως δὲ καὶ ἐπὶ τῶν ἄλλων. οὐσία δὲ ἐκάστου μὲν τοῦτο (τοῦτο γὰρ αἰτιον πρῶτον τοῦ εἶναι).”

of the Entity. Form provides the shape as formal cause; it is what makes the matter into the given thing as efficient cause; and it is the end for which the thing strives as final cause. Matter strives after form as its efficient, final, and formal causes; it tries to take on the nature of form as much as possible.⁸ Form is the cause of sensible Entity through *energeia*: “obviously, therefore, the substance (i.e. form) is actuality.”⁹ Matter is purely potential; the activity of form that is what moves it from potentiality into actuality: “further, matter exists in a potential state, just because it may come to its form; and when it exists *actually*, then it is in its form.”¹⁰ Form, through its *energeia*, is what makes the potential matter into actual Entity, and this Entity yearns for the form and desires to be as similar to it as its nature will allow, to overcome the separation from the form. We must look to see if we can see these same principles in god and the cosmos.

Equally, god is the cause of sensible Entities through its *energeia*. Book Λ clearly establishes that god is the *arche* of the cosmos. Sensible Entities are of the nature of potency: they change, passing from one thing into another, and even the celestial bodies, which never pass away, still suffer spatial motion; for “nature also is in the same genus as potency.”¹¹ And while nature is the potency that is acted upon, god is the *energeia* that quickens the potency: “It is something which moves without being moved, being eternal, Entity, and actuality.”¹² Furthermore, sensible Entities desire and strive after god as a final cause, and from it they receive their being, as much as they are able:

The fulfillment of the whole heaven, the fulfillment which includes all time and infinity, is ‘duration’ – a name based on the fact that it *is always* – duration immortal and divine. From it derive the being and life which other things, some more or less articulately but others feebly, enjoy.¹³

Not only is god the efficient cause of the cosmos, but it is also the final and formal causes. This is no different from the relation of form to matter in a sensible Entity: just as form acts in sensible Entities, so too does god act in the cosmos as cause: “on such a

⁸ This point is important, in that sensible Entities strive to be as much like the divine as possible.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 1050b1-2: “ὥστε φανερόν ὅτι ἡ οὐσία καὶ τὸ εἶδος ἐνέργειά ἐστιν.”

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 1050a15-16: “ἔτι ἡ ὕλη ἔστι δυνάμει ὅτι ἔλθοι ἂν εἰς τὸ εἶδος: ὅταν δὲ γε ἐνεργείᾳ ᾗ, τότε ἐν τῷ εἶδει ἐστίν.”

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 1049b10: “ἡ φύσις ἐν ταύτῳ γὰρ γένοι τῇ δυνάμει.”

¹² *Ibid.*, 1072a25: “ἔστι τι ὃ οὐ κινούμενον κινεῖ, αἰδῖον καὶ οὐσία καὶ ἐνέργεια οὐσα.”

¹³ Aristotle, *De Caelo*, ed. D.J. Allen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1936), 279a25-30: “κατὰ τὸν αὐτὸν δὲ λόγον καὶ τὸ τοῦ παντὸς οὐρανοῦ τέλος καὶ τὸν πάντα χρόνον καὶ τὴν ἀπειρίαν περιέχον τέλος αἰὼν ἐστίν, ἀπὸ τοῦ αἰεὶ εἶναι αἰληφῶς τὴν ἐπονυμίαν, ἀθάνατος καὶ θεῖος. ὄθεν καὶ τοῖς ἄλλοις ἐξήρηται, τοῖς μὲν ἀκριβέστερον τοῖς δ' ἀμαυρῶς, τὸ εἶναι τε καὶ ζῆν.” cf. Also Aristotle, *De Anima*, ed. W.D. Ross (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956), 415a26-b3: “the most natural act is the production of another like itself, an animal producing an animal, a plant a plant, in order that, as far as its nature allows, it may partake in the eternal and divine. That is the goal towards which all things strive, that for the sake of which they do whatsoever their nature renders possible.”

principle, then, depend the heavens and the world of nature.”¹⁴ We must naturally wonder, however, what god’s activity is, such that it can create the entire cosmos.

The activity of the divine that causes the cosmos is thinking. In *Λ.7*, Aristotle lays down that the activity of god must be contemplation. This is not rigorously proved here, as Aristotle is not focusing here on the relation of god to the world, only on god itself; nor in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, where he comes to the same conclusion, there looking at what human happiness must be. Instead, Aristotle simply looks at the best human activity, and assigns it to god. But there are certain *aporiæ* concerning the nature of thought, which Aristotle lays down in *Λ.9*. The *aporiæ* are as follows: (i) thinking must have *something* for an object, for if it thought of nothing, it could scarcely be the best thing; (ii) but if it thinks of something, then the object of thought would be more worthy than god; (iii) god cannot think of something base, for then thinking would hardly be the best thing. To overcome these problems, Aristotle posits the following: “therefore it must be of itself that the divine thought thinks (since it is the most excellent of things), and its thinking is a thinking on thinking.”¹⁵ But this thinking is not a narcissistic self-reflexivity. Instead, thinking is self-reflexive in that it becomes the object thought:¹⁶ for “in the theoretical sciences the definition or the act of thinking is the object. Since, then, thought and the object of thought are not different in the case of things that have not matter, the divine thought and its object will be the same, i.e. the thinking will be one with the object of its thought.”¹⁷ Divine thought thinks itself because in thinking there is no difference between thinking-subject and thought-object.

The object of this divine thinking is nothing other than the entire cosmos. As in form, where *energeia* is what causes the being of a sensible Entity, it must also be the *energeia* of god that causes the cosmos to be. This *energeia* is thinking, which has the world for its object. Rather than itself narcissistically, god thinks the entire cosmos, its thinking “reaches out toward a world other than itself which it posits as its object.”¹⁸ This is what I take Aristotle’s phrase “The actuality of thought is life”¹⁹ to mean. The *energeia* of god is precisely the cause of the being, not just of the celestial spheres, as Aristotle shows in *Λ.6*, but also of *phusis*, the entire world of nature. This is further elucidated by a passage from *De Anima*:

since in every class of things, as in nature as a whole, we find two factors involved, (i) a matter which is potentially all the particulars included in the

¹⁴ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1072b13: “ἐκ τοιαύτης ἄρα ἀρχῆς ἤρτηται ὁ οὐρανὸς καὶ ἡ φύσις.”

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 1074b33-5: “οὐκ ἂν εἴη τὸ ἀριστον ἢ νόησις. αὐτὸν ἄρα νοεῖ, εἴπερ ἐστὶ τὸ κράτιστον, καὶ ἔστιν ἡ νόησις νοήσεως νόησις.”

¹⁶ See Aryeh Kosman, “Metaphysics *Λ* 9: Divine Thought,” *Aristotle’s Metaphysics Book Lambda: Symposium Aristotelicum*, ed. M. Frede, D. Owain, and M. Charles (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000).

¹⁷ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1075a2-5: “ἐπι δὲ τῶν θεωρητικῶν ὁ λόγος τὸ πρᾶγμα καὶ ἡ νόησις; οὐχ ἑτέρου οὐδ’ ὄντος τοῦ νοουμένου καὶ τοῦ νοῦ, ὅσα μὴ ὕλην ἔχει, τὸ αὐτὸ ἔσται, καὶ ἡ νόησις τῷ νοουμένῳ μία.”

¹⁸ Kosman, 323.

¹⁹ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1072b27: “ἡ γὰρ νοῦ ἐνέργεια ζωῆ.”

class, (ii) a cause which is productive in the sense that it makes them all ... and in fact mind as we have described it is what it is by virtue of becoming all things, while there is another which is what it is by virtue of making all things.²⁰

While a human thinking mind is merely potential to think all things, the divine mind (which is described in III.5 as separate and essentially activity) is *poietikon* of all things. Divine thought, which becomes all things, *makes* all things as its *energeia*.

We are now in a position to elucidate the metaphors that Aristotle gives in Λ.10 to explain the relation of God to the rest of the cosmos. The first analogy given is that of the general and the army. It is clear that the general is what gives the order to the army, and indeed all things in the cosmos are ordered towards an end: “all things are ordered together somehow, but not all alike – both fishes and fowls and plants; and the world is not such that one thing has nothing to do with another, but they are connected.”²¹ This end is not that which is benefitted, but rather the end which things strive to attain.²² The army strives to be like the general, in as much as they complete his will: what is in the mind of the general as merely internal becomes externalized in the maneuvers of the army. But while the general is more free than the army, and the order depends on him, he still requires the army to fully actualize his nature. For the general cannot on his own go out and win battles or conquer cities; he requires the army, through which he can actualize his knowledge of strategy and tactics. Equally, god requires the world into which it can externalize itself.²³ If god were off by itself, his activity would be nothing without its externalization into the world.

The second analogy used by Aristotle, that of the household, provides insight into the relation of the cosmos to God. The sons of the paterfamilias have obligations and duties to their father, they are not free. They are, in a way, equivalent to the celestial bodies. Thus, the more closely things imitate the god, the less potentiality they have, and the more they remain self-identical.²⁴ God is incapable of being any different than it is; it is a principle of pure goodness and therefore any change would be for the worse. The sub-lunar bodies are the equivalent to the slaves and the kine. They live mostly at random, because they can only to a small degree attain their *telos*.²⁵ As Menn writes,

But they [the sub-lunar bodies] can still play their appropriate parts in the

²⁰ Aristotle, *De Anima*, 430a10-15: “ἔπει δ' [ὥσπερ] ἐν ἀπάσῃ τῇ φύσει ἐστὶ [τι] τὸ μὲν ὕλη ἐκάστῳ γένει (τοῦτο δὲ ὁ πάντα δυνάμει ἐκείνα), ἕτερον δὲ τὸ αἴτιον καὶ ποιητικόν, τῷ ποιεῖν πάντα . . . καὶ ἐστὶν ὁ μὲν τοιοῦτος νοῦς τῷ πάντα γίνεσθαι, ὁ δὲ τῷ πάντα ποιεῖν.”

²¹ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1075a15-20: “πάντα δὲ συντέτακται πως, ἀλλ' οὐχ ὁμοίως, καὶ πλωτὰ καὶ πτηνὰ καὶ φυτὰ: καὶ οὐχ οὕτως ἔχει ὥστε μὴ εἶναι θατέρῳ πρὸς θάτερον μηδὲν, ἀλλ' ἔστι τι.”

²² Menn, iii.g.3, 5.

²³ See below.

²⁴ For instance, the elements quickly change into an out of one another, while animals and plants are more lasting, and the celestial bodies have still less potentiality.

²⁵ For instance, animals and plants can only attain eternity in species, not in individuals.

teleological order, by imitating the divine *arche* or at least imitating the heavenly bodies, which they do by persisting eternally (through their species) in roughly periodic activity. But much of their life will remain unregulated and unpredictable, and will be determined by the necessity of their material conditions, or simply by chance, and not by final causality.²⁶

The good (which I now suppose Aristotle to be speaking of) is present throughout the entire cosmos, but only in degrees: the higher bodies can more perfectly attain the divine perfection because they are better ordered and more free from the constraints of matter. But indeed all things do participate in the order; the good is present even down to the elements, even if only weakly.

There remains an *aporia* concerning the relation of god to the world. If god is purely and eternally actual and good, why is there privation in the world? In sensible Entities, rational potencies, through the exercise of mind, can create opposite instantiations: a doctor, for instance, could just as easily make a healthy person sick as he could heal a sick person; non-rational potencies, on the other hand, “[they] produce opposite results by their presence or absence.”²⁷ But it does not seem good that god, which is thinking all things at all times and eternally making them actual, should suffer there to be *steresis*. Aristotle’s answer is that there is nothing that is opposite to god, as Λ.10 demonstrates.²⁸ Throughout his criticisms of previous philosophers runs the strain that they all made their principles contraries. Aristotle’s response is that god is without contrary, but is rather primary. Therefore all things are good to the fullest extent possible: “for this is the sort of principle that constitutes the nature of each. I mean, for instance, that all must at least come to be dissolved into their elements, and there are other functions similarly in which all share for the good of the whole.”²⁹ All things, from the elements all the way to the sphere of the fixed stars participate in the order of the good. Matter, which is not, as the Platonists make it, a contrary; it is the potentiality to become actual. And it is always being as actual and as good as possible. It is, however, in the nature of matter that it cannot perfectly achieve its *telos*, because it is simply potentiality.

How god is the *arche* of the cosmos I hope is now clear. Separate and sensible Entities are related to one another analogically: god is to the cosmos as form is to matter. God’s activity, thinking all things is *poetikon* of the cosmos. God stands as formal, final, and efficient cause to the cosmos, just as form stands to matter. This relation solves the *aporiæ* of previous philosophers who made their principles contraries. Matter is not contrary to form, nor is the cosmos contrary to god; instead the good pervades all things,

²⁶ Menn, iii.g.3, 7.

²⁷ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1050b34: “τῷ παρεῖναι καὶ μὴ τῆς ἀντιφάσεως ἔσονται αἱ αὐταί.”

²⁸ See Doull, 46-7 for a characteristically incomprehensible reflection, which, as far as I can tell, comes to a different conclusion, namely that the difference of god from nature is reconciled in the divine activity, and the unification of sameness and difference is also found in the relation of god to nature.

²⁹ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1075a22-25: “τοιαύτη γὰρ ἐκάστου ἀρχὴ αὐτῶν ἢ φύσις ἐστίν. λέγω δ’ οἷον εἰς γε τὸ διακριθῆναι ἀνάγκη ἅπασιν ἐλθεῖν, καὶ ἄλλα οὕτως ἔστιν ὧν κοινωνεῖ ἅπαντα εἰς τὸ ὅλον.”

making all things as much like itself as possible, given the necessary limits imposed by matter. Quite literally: “it’s all good.”