

## THE IDEA OF THE GOOD

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### Article abstract

In this inaugural address, we will concentrate on the status and role of the good. The good is said in many ways just as “being” is. It is neither univocal nor purely equivocal but analogous, with a primary meaning to which all other meanings ultimately refer, taken from substance. And speaking of God, he is seen as the ultimate cause of motion through books seven and eight of Aristotle’s *Physics*; as first intelligible in *Lambda* 7 and 9; and as the primary good in this chapter 10. Now the good in that sense is the ultimate *telos* – the end – of everything, drawing everything to itself.

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## THE IDEA OF THE GOOD

THOMAS DE KONINCK

One of the finest anecdotes recorded in the *Aristoteles-Vita* of the Marcianus manuscript does, I think, shed a great deal of light on the relation between Aristotle and Plato. It is well known that Aristotle attended Plato's teachings during some 20 years, and only stopped doing so at Plato's death – which is but one indication, among many, of how much Aristotle revered Plato. Now the story is that when Aristotle would perchance miss one of Plato's classes, or seminars, Plato would say: *ho nous apesti*, «*The intellect is absent*», – adding that, as a consequence, apathy was likely to reign in the whole room, or words to that effect!<sup>1</sup> The story suggests that Plato enjoyed Aristotle's interventions in his classes, however critical they may often have been. Perhaps the anecdote was made up, in which case we should recall how much truth there may be in fiction.

I mention this at the outset, because reading through the array of abstracts of the talks given at the present meeting, the cumulative effect is indeed impressive, bringing out a number of disagreements – sometimes quite strong – between Plato and Aristotle. A biased observer might even be led to assume a sort of ferocity on the part of Aristotle against his master Plato. And yet had not Plato himself repeated that “we must not honour a man above truth” (*Republic X*, 595 c)? So much so that the famous adage *Amicus Plato, sed magis amica veritas*, “Plato is a friend, but more of a friend is truth,” could almost be derived from Plato, instead of from *Nicomachean Ethics* I, 6 (1096 a 14-16), as is the case. And of course the real culprit for this apparent conspiracy of Aristotle and Aristotelians against Plato and Platonists is simply that *Aristotle, Critic of Plato* is everybody's topic at this conference, the proposed common theme. The real culprit, in other words, is our great friend, Mark, here! Or there!

Had Plato been present at your interventions, we may well imagine how much he would have enjoyed them, especially if you had allowed him to attempt answers to your critiques, as he must have done with Aristotle's.

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1. For all relevant references, see Paul FRIEDLÄNDER, *Akademische Randglossen*, in *Die Gegenwart der Griechen im Neueren Denken. Festschrift für Hans-Georg Gadamer zum 60. Geburtstag*, Tübingen, J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1960, p. 317.

My talk will follow three steps, in which I shall try to concentrate our reflection on *The Idea of the Good*, and to raise a central question, or difficulty. These three steps might be called: 1. The Many Meanings of Good; 2. *Theôria tou theou*; 3. Conclusion.

## 1. The Many Meanings of Good

Here is an especially significant, albeit lengthy, quote from Aristotle:

But if we must speak briefly about these matters, we say first that it is to speak abstractly and idly to assert that there is an Idea whether of good or of anything whatever – this has been considered in many ways both in our popular and in our philosophical discussions. Next, however much there are Ideas and in particular an Idea of good, they are perhaps useless with a view to a good life and to action. For the good has many senses, as numerous as those of being. For being, as we have divided it in other works, signifies now what a thing is, now quality, now quantity, now time, and again some of it consists in being changed and in changing; and the good is found in each of these modes, in substance as mind and God, in quality as justice, in quantity as moderation, in time as opportunity, while as examples of it in change, we have that which teaches and that which is being taught. As then being is not one in all that we have just mentioned, so neither is good; nor is there one science either of being or of the good; not even things named good in the same category are the objects of a single science, e.g. opportunity or moderation; but one science studies one kind of opportunity or moderation, and another another: e.g. opportunity and moderation in regard to food are studied by medicine and gymnastics, in military matters by the art of strategy, and similarly with other sorts of action, so that it can hardly be the province of one science to study the good *per se*.<sup>2</sup>

This quote is taken from the *Eudemian Ethics* and is parallel to *Nicomachean Ethics* I, 6, which I mentioned earlier. I find the *Eudemian Ethics* even more explicit on this and other matters but you in no way need to agree.

Be that as it may, the teaching of Aristotle is here consistent everywhere. So far as the good is concerned it is said in many ways (*pollachôs legetai*) just as «being» is. As you will recall, in *Metaphysics Gamma* 2, 1003 a 32-33, Aristotle specified that those many senses of being “refer to a one and unique nature and are not homonymous” (*alla pros hen kai mian tina physin kai ouk homônymôs*). In other words and likewise, «good» is neither univocal nor purely equivocal but analogous, with a primary meaning to which all other meanings ultimately refer, taken from substance.

And we just heard Aristotle suggest that therefore the Idea of good is “useless with a view to a good life and to action.” Contemplating the idea of good

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2. *Eudemian Ethics* I, 8, 1217 a 19 – 1218 a 1, translation by Joseph SOLOMON, in Jonathan BARNES (ed.), *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, volume II, Princeton NJ, Princeton University Press, 1984.

is not going to tell you what to do here and now. The examples he gives are clear enough and we need not say more, it being so obvious. So here we have a strong and typical disagreement between master (Plato) and pupil (Aristotle).

## 2. *Theôria tou theou*

But now is the problem. The same *Eudemian Ethics*, in its last page (1249 b 12-25) – quite famous now for the many discussions it has provoked – speaks of *theôria tou theou* as the end of human life, in the following terms. I quote from the expanded translation provided by W. J. Verdenius:

[...] Medical science is a rule in one sense and health is in another, i.e., the former exists for the latter. Such is the case with the faculty of contemplation; for [its rule is God, and] God is not an imperative ruler, but is the end with a view to which prudence issues its commands. The term “end” has two meanings, which have been distinguished elsewhere, [viz. the purpose for which something is done, and the person or thing for whose good something is done. In the case of God, the latter meaning is to be excluded,] since he is in need of nothing. Therefore whatever mode of choosing and of acquiring things good by nature will most produce the contemplation of God – whether of body, wealth, friends or the other goods – that is the best mode, and that standard is the finest. But if a mode of choice or acquisition either through deficiency or excess hinders one from serving or contemplating God, that is a bad one. Accordingly, that condition is the best for the soul, and that spiritual standard is the best, to take notice of the other part of the soul, in so far as it is such, as little as possible.<sup>3</sup>

Aristotle has earlier defined *auto to agathon* as being *telos tôn anthrôpôn praktôn*, the good itself to be the end of human actions. He needs at present to determine what the supreme good must be. God is the rule, he says, though not in the sense of a ruler issuing commands, but rather in the sense of being the end for the sake of which *phronêsis*, prudence, issues its commands. That he does mean God when he writes *ho theos* in the text, is borne out by the fact that he adds: “God is in need of nothing.” The standard of perfect virtue is, then, “the contemplation of God.” It is the best standard for the soul, helping to take as little notice as possible of its irrational part.

If there is a Platonist in this room, couldn't she or he get up and say: “But surely, all of this is in total contradiction with the statements referred to earlier where Aristotle claimed, against Plato, that contemplating the idea of the good is “useless with a view to a good life and to action”?”

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3. Willem Jacob VERDENIUS, *Human Reason and God*, in *Untersuchungen zur Eudemischen Ethik, Akten des 5. Symposium Aristotelicum*, herausgegeben von Paul MORAUX und Dieter HARLFINGER, Berlin, Walter de Gruyter, 1971, p. 286.

### 3. Conclusion

Worse still, there is *Metaphysics' Lambda* 10. In chapters 7 and 9 of Book *Lambda*, or XII, Aristotle has thoroughly discussed the life of God as *noêsis noêseôs*, thought thinking itself, and mentioned in chapter 7 that the end *kinei hôs erômenon* (1072 b 2) “moves by being loved,” and this is of course the good again, but, as he writes at the outset of chapter 10:

We must now consider also in which way the nature of the whole (*hê tou holou physis*) possesses the good and the best [*to agathon kai to ariston*] – whether as something separated and by itself, or as its arrangement. Or is it in both ways, like an army? For an army’s goodness is in its ordering, and is also the general. And more the general, since he is not due to the arrangement, but the arrangement is due to him. All things are in some joint arrangement, but not in the same way – even creatures which swim, creatures which fly, and plants. And the arrangement is not such that one thing has no relation to another. They do have a relation; for all things are jointly in relation to one thing (*pros men gar hen hapanta syntektai*). But it is as in a household, where the free have least licence to act as they chance to, but all or most of what they do is arranged, while the slaves and beasts can do a little towards what is communal, but act mostly as they chance to. For that is the kind of principle that nature is of each of them. I mean, for example, that at least each of them must necessarily come to be dissolved; and there are likewise other things in which all share towards the whole (1075 a 11 – 25, translation David Sedley).

Let me add at once that, after having discussed other opinions on the matter, Aristotle concludes the chapter with a return to the army analogy, quoting from Homer: “The rule of many is not good; let there be one ruler.” (*Iliad*, II, 204)

The good, we see here, is the ordering of the army, either immanent to the army, or transcendent as in the general – to use a different, more modern, vocabulary. But is it not the idea of good which is the criterion here again, says our putative Platonist?

And speaking of God, he is seen as the ultimate cause of motion through books seven and eight of Aristotle’s *Physics*; as first intelligible in *Lambda* 7 and 9; and as the primary good in this chapter 10. Now the good in that sense is the ultimate *telos* – the end – of everything, drawing everything, *hôs erômenon*, as beloved, to itself.

Please help me, all of you: would Plato disagree? Is not Aristotle seemingly contradicting himself?

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## SUMMARY

In this inaugural address, we will concentrate on the status and role of the good. The good is said in many ways just as “being” is. It is neither univocal nor purely equivocal but analogous, with a primary meaning to which all other meanings ultimately refer, taken from substance. And speaking of God, he is seen as the ultimate cause of motion through books seven and eight of Aristotle’s *Physics*; as first intelligible in *Lambda* 7 and 9; and as the primary good in this chapter 10. Now the good in that sense is the ultimate *telos* – the end – of everything, drawing everything to itself.

## SOMMAIRE

Ce discours d’ouverture portera sur le statut et le rôle du bien. Comme l’être, le bien se dit de multiples façons. Il n’est pas univoque ni totalement équivoque, mais se dit de manière analogique, comportant une signification première à laquelle se réfèrent ultimement toutes les autres, dérivée de la substance. À propos de Dieu, il est donné à titre de cause dernière du mouvement aux livres sept et huit de la *Physique* d’Aristote; comme premier intelligible en *Lambda* 7 et 9; et en tant que bien fondamental au chapitre 10. C’est en ce sens que le bien est le *telos* – la fin – ultime de tout, attirant tout à lui.