

CAN AN ARISTOTELIAN CONSIDER HIMSELF A FRIEND OF GOD?¹

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Usually when, as here, a paper's title is a question, one learns the answer only some way into the argument. Ralph McInerny will probably tell you that that is a good way to write—or, at least, to write a mystery story. But I am going to violate that canon of good writing by telling you the answer to the question right away. It is no. An Aristotelian—by which I mean a man who holds consistently to the ideas of the Philosopher without going beyond them—cannot consider himself a friend of God.

There is a well-known reason for maintaining this. An Aristotelian cannot claim to be a friend of God since Aristotle holds that friendship requires equality and there is no equality between God and man. Let me offer some items of proof. In *Nicomachean ethics* [EN] viii,7, for instance, having just said that in friendship quantitative parity is essential, Aristotle remarks:

This becomes clear if there is a great interval in respect of excellence or vice or wealth or anything else between the parties; for then they are no longer friends, and do not even expect to be so. And this is most manifest in the case of the gods; for they surpass us most decisively in all good things.²

Aristotle goes on to say similar things about the possibility of friendship between ordinary folk and kings or those who excel in virtue or wisdom. And then he remarks:

In such cases it is not possible to define exactly up to what point friends can remain friends; for much can be taken away and friendship remain, but when one party is removed to a great distance, as God is, the possibility of friendship ceases. This is in fact the origin of the question whether friends really wish for their friends the greatest goods, e.g. that of being gods; since in that case their friends will no longer be friends to them, and therefore will not be good things for them (for friends *are* good things) [1159a5-8].

For the moment, I do not want to discuss the issue of men becoming gods; it is enough right now to have established that, as rational beings become more divine, they become less capable of friendship with mere men.

Another item of proof comes in the *Magna Moralia*, book two, chapter eleven, where a student of Aristotle's records the thought of the Master:

First, then, we must determine what kind of friendship we are in search of. For, there is, people think, a friendship [φιλία] towards gods and toward things without life, but here they are wrong. For friendship, we maintain, exists only where there can be an exchange of affection, but friendship towards God does not admit of love being returned, nor at all of loving. For it would be strange if one were to say that one loved Zeus [MM ii,11,1208b26-31].³

¹I have discussed some of the things discussed here in an article, in Italian, with a similar title: see Flannery 1999. I thank for their comments on the present paper Frs. Stephen Brock and Robert Gahl. I thank Dr. Fulvio Di Blasi for his kindness in inviting me to the Notre Dame conference "Ethics Without God?" and for his remarks after the paper.

²EN viii,7,1158b33-36. For Aristotelian translations in this paper, I make use of Barnes 1984—sometimes, however, altering a translation without further mention.

³On the authenticity of *MM*, see Cooper 1973 and Flannery 1995, 450, n.14.

There are passages in Aristotle where he says that friendship between man and God (or the gods) is possible. In *EN* viii,12, for instance, he says, “The friendship of children to parents, and of men to gods, is a relation to them as to something good and superior.”⁴ And in *EE* vii,10, he says, “the friendship of man and wife is a friendship based on utility, a partnership; that of father and son is the same of that of God to man, of the benefactor to the benefited, and in general of the natural ruler to the natural subject.”⁵ Note that by combining these two passages we discover a two way relationship of friendship: of men toward the gods (πρὸς θεούς) and of God towards man (πρὸς ἄνθρωπον).

Such passages as these in which Aristotle speaks of friendship with God are, however, easily accounted for. They point not to a contradiction within the theory but rather (as one comes to expect in reading Aristotle) to a multiplicity of senses of the word ‘friendship’ (φιλία). There is, of course, the well-known three-part division of friendship into the friendship of virtue, the friendship of pleasure, and the friendship of utility. But Aristotle also says, in the *Eudemian Ethics*, that these three types are themselves found in two, more fundamental categories of friendship: friendship according to equality [φιλία κατὰ τὸ ἴσον] and friendship according to preeminence [φιλία καθ’ ὑπεροχὴν].⁶ So, there are at least six types of friendship.⁷ When Aristotle says that friendship between man and God is possible, he obviously has in mind a type of friendship different from that which he denies of them. Which type is this? That is, which type (or types) of friendship is impossible between man and God? The passage cited initially above, from *EN* viii,7, strongly suggest that it is any type of friendship according to equality. In that passage Aristotle speaks of God (or the gods) as standing at “a great interval” or “a great distance” from man, saying that this is what makes friendship impossible.

II

This idea that there is a great distance between God and man ought not to present difficulties for Christian readers of Aristotle—or whom we might dare to call “Christian Aristotelians,” such as the author of *Shakespearean Variations*, if I might employ a definite description in order to protect said individual from too easy mockery and disdain. For although we find in the Gospel of John, for instance, many scriptural passages that suggest that one can become a friend of God through union with Christ, it is still very important in the Christian Faith to maintain that, in another sense, friendship with God is quite impossible. If there were no such separation between God and man, the Incarnation, in which God *becomes* man, would be nothing to marvel at. If there were no such separation between God and the human sphere, two millennia of liturgical worship would have been a huge mistake: we ought long ago to have banned incense and kneeling and the striking of breasts, in favor of the standard rite of American Jesuit theologates: the coffee table Mass.

⁴ἔστι δ’ ἡ μὲν πρὸς γονεῖς φιλία τέκνοις, καὶ ἄνθρωποις πρὸς θεούς, ὡς πρὸς ἀγαθὸν καὶ ὑπερέχον [EN viii,12,1162a4-5; my emphasis]. See also *EN* viii,10,1160b25-26.

⁵γυναικὸς δὲ καὶ ἀνδρὸς φιλία ὡς χρήσιμον καὶ κοινωνία· πατρὸς δὲ καὶ υἱοῦ ἡ αὐτὴ ἵπερ θεοῦ πρὸς ἄνθρωπον καὶ τοῦ εὐ ποιήσαντος πρὸς τὸν παθόντα καὶ ὅλως τοῦ φύσει ἄρχοντος πρὸς τὸν φύσει ἀρχόμενον [EE vii,10,1242a31-35].

⁶*EE* vii,4,1239a1-4.

⁷Aristotle recognizes also a distinction between “moral friendship” and “legal friendship” [EE vii,10,1243a2-14; see also *EN* viii,13,1162b21-1163a1].

In Thomas Aquinas's *Quaestio Disputata de Caritate*, we find at one point the following objection to Thomas's position that charity, which establishes a strict connection between God and man,⁸ is a virtue:

According to the Philosopher in book eight of the *Ethics*,⁹ friendship consists in a certain equality. But the inequality of God with respect to us is of the highest degree, as of something infinitely distant. There cannot, therefore, be friendship on God's part with respect to us, or on our part with respect to God; and so charity, which designates such friendship, does not appear to be a virtue.¹⁰

The objection is obviously addressing the issue that concerns us at the moment: i.e., whether the distance between God and man posited by Aristotle excludes the possibility of friendship. There were a number of routes that Thomas might have taken in order to escape this conclusion (and the further conclusion that, therefore, divine charity is no human virtue): he might, for instance, have pointed to passages in the same book of the *Nicomachean Ethics* in which Aristotle discusses other types of friendship that do not require strict equality.¹¹ But he took no such route. His reply is rather that:

...charity is not of man in as much as he is man but in as much as, through the participation of grace, he becomes God [*fit Deus* (!)] and a son of God, in accordance with the first letter of St. John (chapter three, verse one), "See what love [*caritatem*] the Father has given to us: that we should be called sons of God and be so."¹²

In other words, were it not for Christ and the grace of the Incarnation, we would indeed be in the situation described by Aristotle: with a God infinitely beyond our ken and to be feared and honored rather than talked to as if to a friend. Or better: were it not for Christ, we would be left *only* with a God to be feared and honored, and without the salvation that cannot be conceived otherwise than in the light of the Incarnation, whereby we become one with God in our union with the Son of Mary, who was also the Son of God. As it is, our situation is one which continues to demand our natural awe and reverence for God, but acknowledges also that in Christ we are on such intimate terms with God that we can address him as our Father or even—in Christ—as our friend: "I no longer call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master does. I have called you rather friends [φίλους], for everything that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you" [John 15.15]. The Incarnation does not nullify our obligation to worship and to honor God: it just assures us that it has been—and will be—made complete, in a way undreamed of by human reason alone.

⁸See *Quaestio Disputata de Caritate* q.un. a.1 ad 4, ad 8, and ad 16.

⁹The reference appears to be to *EN* viii,6,1158b1; see also 13,1162a34-36.

¹⁰*Quaestio Disputata de Caritate* q.un. a.2 obj.15: "Praeterea, secundum Philosophum in VIII *Ethic.*, amicitia in quadam aequalitate consistit. Sed Dei ad nos est maxima inaequalitas, sicut infinite distantium. Ergo non potest esse amicitia Dei ad nos, vel nostri ad Deum; et ita caritas, quae huiusmodi amicitiam designat, non videtur esse virtus."

¹¹Although they do require *some* form of equality: see *EN* viii,13,1162a34-b4.

¹²*Quaestio Disputata de Caritate* q.un. a.2 ad 15: "Ad decimumquintum dicendum, quod caritas non est virtus hominis in quantum est homo, sed in quantum per participationem gratiae fit Deus et filius Dei, secundum illud I Ioan. III, 1: videte qualem caritatem dedit nobis Pater, ut filii Dei nominemur et simus." See also Thomas's *ST* I-II q.109 a.3 ad 1 ("quandam societatem spiritualem cum Deo"); q.110 a.1 ("Alia autem dilectio [Dei ad creaturam] est specialis, secundum quam trahit creaturam rationalem supra conditionem naturae, ad participationem divini boni. Et secundum hanc dilectionem dicitur aliquem diligere simpliciter, quia secundum hanc dilectionem vult Deus simpliciter creaturae bonum aeternum, quod est ipse"); q.110 a.3; q.112 a.1; II-II q.23 a.1; q.24 a.2. I thank Fr. Stephen Brock for these references.

But it is one of the extraordinary things about Aristotle that he so often sets out the framework in which the unimaginable can be made intelligible, in a precise manner. There is no doubt that Aristotle holds that God has no friends. At one point in the *Eudemian Ethics*, he asks whether it can be true that “if a man be in all respects self-sufficient [αὐτάρκης], he will have a friend: whether a friend is sought from want or not? Or is the good man perfectly self-sufficient?” [1244b2-4].¹³ And a couple of lines later he applies this idea to God: “This is most apparent with respect to God,” he says: “for it is clear that, needing nothing, neither will he have need of a friend, nor will he ever *have* that of which he has no need.”¹⁴ And yet, as we have already seen, he maintains in the same work that there *is* friendship between God and his creations, i.e., friendship according to preeminence.

These two strands of thought are reconciled by simply acknowledging that friendship is one thing, being friends quite another. Aristotle says this in as many words at the beginning *Eudemian Ethics* book seven, chapter four. With reference to friendship according to equality and friendship according to preeminence, he remarks: “Both are friendships; those who are *friends*, however, are friends according to equality.”¹⁵ In other words, there can be φιλία where there are no φίλοι. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, in speaking about another type of friendship according to preeminence, i.e., that pertaining to kings, Aristotle remarks: “The friendship between a king and his subjects depends on an excess of benefits conferred [ἐν ὑπεροχῇ εὐεργεσίας]; for he confers benefits on his subjects if, being good, he cares for them with a view to their well-being, as a shepherd does for his sheep” [EN viii,11,1161a11-14]. There can indeed exist a certain friendship between a shepherd and his sheep. But this does not mean that the friends of the shepherd are sheep—or *can* be sheep. Similarly with God: the benefits he bestows—life, happiness, knowledge—establish a certain relationship of friendship. But this does not make God and us friends: “buddies.” Nor does this not derogate from his goodness (i.e., that he is not our friend). As Aristotle says in the passage we have just seen, it is *because* of his goodness that this type of friendship exists.

This is the theoretical framework into which Christianity inserts itself: a framework in which there is a distinction between being related to God as awe-struck subject and being related to him as his friend. The utterly surprising completion of the framework is provided by Jesus Christ, who makes it possible that we be both at once. The framework itself, however—the basic setting of the story—had already been set out clearly by Aristotle.

III

Actually, however, this is all still a bit simplistic—that is, this idea that these two types of friendship with God are to be isolated the one from the other: one the one hand, Aristotelian friendship according to preeminence, wherein God remains at an unapproachable distance, and, on the other, Christian friendship according to equality, wherein we become friends of God by being one with Christ who is one with the Father. Do not get me wrong: the two *are* distinct; and

¹³ ἀπορήσειε γὰρ ἂν τις πότερον, εἴ τις εἴη κατὰ πάντα αὐτάρκης, ἔσται τούτῳ <...> φίλος. εἰ κατ’ ἐνδειαν ζητεῖται φίλος, ἢ οὐ; ἢ ἔσται <ὁ> ἀγαθὸς αὐταρκέστατος; [EE vii,12,1244b2-5: Walzer and Mingay 1991].

¹⁴ μάλιστα δὲ τοῦτο φανερόν ἐπὶ θεοῦ· δηλον γὰρ ὡς οὐδενὸς προσδεόμενος οὐδὲ φίλου δεήσεται, οὐδ’ ἔσται αὐτῷ οὐ γέ μιν ἐνδεής ποτε [EE vii,12,1244b7-10: Walzer, et al. 1991].

¹⁵ φιλία μὲν οὖν ἀμφοτέραι, φίλοι δ’ οἱ κατὰ τὴν ἰσότητα [EE vii,4,1239a4-5; my emphasis].

therefore the Aristotelian scheme is no less impressive than I have been suggesting—not to mention the tying together of the scheme in Christ. But our understanding especially of Aristotelian friendship with God according to preeminence requires yet some work.

For one thing, if we were to say simply that according to Aristotle “God remains at an unapproachable distance” this would play into the hands of those who maintain that the God of Aristotle is a solipsistic one, with no interest in the doings of men and, consequently, no knowing effect on those doings. We all know the text that best supports such an interpretation, i.e., the passage in the twelfth book of the *Metaphysics* where God is defined as thinking on thinking (νόησις νοήσεως; *Metaph.* xii,9,1074b3) whose only worthy object of thought is himself. But there are precious few texts that point in this direction and plenty of others that point in the direction of a God who is not only interested in what happens here but can also have an effect upon it.

Take, for instance, the remark in *Nicomachean Ethics* x,8, where he uses as the basis of an argument that philosophical contemplation is the highest vocation the idea that the gods are concerned about human affairs (1179a24-9):

For if the gods [he says] have any care for human affairs, as it seems they do [ὡςπερ δοκεῖ], it would be reasonable both that they should delight in that which was best and most akin to them (i.e., intellect) and that they should reward those who love and honor this most, as caring for the things that are dear to them and acting both rightly and nobly.

And in the *Eudemian Ethics* Aristotle says the exchange of roles that occurs in the city—a citizen becomes alternatively commander and commanded—is done not out of benevolence “in the way that God acts benevolently”¹⁶ but for utilitarian reasons. Both these passages suggest—or, to be more precise, they say—that God (or the gods) pays (pay) attention to what happens in the world of men.

Let me offer some more items of proof. In *Metaphysics*, book twelve, chapter nine, in the very sentence in which Aristotle uses the phrase νόησις νοήσεως and rejects the notion that God might have as his proper object something other than himself, he tells us why this is important: it is important since otherwise God’s power would be diminished. [I quote]: “He [God], therefore, thinks himself, since he is the most powerful [τὸ κράτιστον]: that is, his thinking is thinking on thinking.”¹⁷ But the power Aristotle is determined to preserve is very clearly the power whereby God has an effect in the world. This is apparent from chapter six of the same book and his criticism of the Platonists. The problem with the Forms, he says, is that they *do* nothing: they have no effects.¹⁸ What follows this remark, in book twelve, chapters seven through ten (which include the remark about νόησις νοήσεως and “the most powerful”), is put forward as an *alternative* to Platonic theory: an alternative in which effective power *is* present.

That God’s seemingly inward-looking characteristics are precisely what drive his external effects is made clear in *Physics* viii,5. There Aristotle speaks approvingly of Anaxagoras, according to whom “Mind” (or God) is “impassive and unmixed”—that is to say, unmixed with the world. This does not make Mind less influential but more. Says Aristotle by way of

¹⁶ἔστι δὲ ἐνταῦθα καὶ ἄρχον καὶ ἀρχόμενον οὔτε τὸ φυσικὸν οὔτε τὸ βασιλικόν, ἀλλὰ τὸ ἐν τῷ μέρει, οὐδὲ τούτου ἕνεκα ὅπως εὖ ποιῆ ὁ θεός, ἀλλ’ ἵνα ἴσον ἦ τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ καὶ τῆς λειτουργίας.[*EE* vii,10,1242b27-30: Susemihl 1884].

¹⁷αὐτὸν ἄρα νοεῖ, εἴπερ ἐστὶ τὸ κράτιστον, καὶ ἔστιν ἡ νόησις νοήσεως νόησις [*Metaph.* xii,9,1074b34].

¹⁸*Metaph.* xii,6,1071b12-32.

interpretation of Anaxagoras, Mind “would only cause motion the way it does being unmoved, and it would only *assert its power* [κρατοῖν] being unmixed.”¹⁹ So, the unmoved mover’s separate status as contemplator of himself is precisely for the purpose of having an effect outside himself.

That God’s efficaciousness is not an unknowing one becomes apparent in some often neglected remarks in book one, chapter two, of the *Metaphysics*. Aristotle says there that the knowledge most suited to God is “divine knowledge” (or divine science). This knowledge is not unlike that which he goes on to attribute to the first unmoved mover in book twelve: it is the most noble type of knowledge since it is both knowledge that God *has* and it *has* God as its object. But it is also knowledge in which humans can share, for, as he says, “divine power cannot be jealous” [*Metaph.* i,2,983a2-3]. It is knowledge that extends to the present realm: it is, in short, metaphysics.²⁰ God therefore knows metaphysics—and not just the metaphysics of the twelfth book of (his work) the *Metaphysics*.

So then, we have a remark in Aristotle, according to which God has as his thought’s object himself as thinking on thinking; we have also various other remarks, some of them quite close to the remark about thinking on thinking, which suggest that God is not closed in upon himself but has power, infused with knowledge, in the world known also to us. One way of accounting for these separate strands of thought is to say that Aristotle was simply inconsistent—or, perhaps more plausibly, inconsistent over time, holding, at one point in his career, traditional ideas about the relationship of God (or the gods) to the world of men, at another time propounding a more philosophically sophisticated theory which isolates God from that world. I prefer rather the solution proposed by Thomas Aquinas: that, in thinking on himself, God knows—and controls—all other things.²¹ This saves us from having to do, almost literally, a “hatchet-job” on Aristotle, positing separate developmental strata in his writings: sometimes within individual books, sometimes even within a single sentence.

IV

Let us look now at the other vector in the God-man relationship. That is, I have been arguing that even within the Aristotelian theory of friendship, in which the friendship of friends is distinct from friendship according to preeminence (καθ’ ὑπεροχὴν), the latter, of which friendship between God and men is an instance, does not entail a lack of interest of one pole for its opposite. So far I have considered only God’s interest in the world, including the world of men. But what can we say about man’s response to God? Even granting (for the sake of not going beyond Aristotle) that man cannot be a *friend* of God, is man’s task simply to acknowledge

¹⁹διὸ καὶ Ἀναξαγόρας ὀρθῶς λέγει, τὸν νοῦν ἀπαθῆ φάσκων καὶ ἀμιγῆ εἶναι, ἐπειδὴ γε κινήσεως ἀρχὴν αὐτὸν εἶναι ποιεῖ· οὕτω γὰρ μόνως ἂν κινοίη ἀκίνητος ὢν καὶ κρατοῖη ἀμιγῆς ὢν [*Phys.* viii,5,256b24-27].

²⁰This most universal type of knowledge embraces all subordinate knowledge: *Metaph.* i,2,982a23, 982b2-4. See also *Metaph.* iii,4,1000b3-6, where the theory of Empedocles is criticized because it makes of God, who is prevented by his nature from knowing all the elements, “less wise than all others.”

²¹in *Metaph.* §2614: “Considerandum est autem quod Philosophus intendit ostendere, quod Deus non intelligit aliud, sed seipsum, in quantum intellectum est perfectio intelligentis, et eius, quod est intelligere. Manifestum est autem quod nihil aliud sic potest intelligi a Deo, quod sit perfectio intellectus eius. Nec tamen sequitur quod omnia alia a se sint ei ignota; nam intelligendo se, intelligit omnia alia.”

the unbridgeable distance between himself and the divine and to set about being more human, or is he not called rather to become like God as much as possible?

We are dealing now, of course, with the ancient concept of ὁμοίωσις θεῷ, found most famously in Plato and in Plotinus,²² but found also, I would maintain, in Aristotle, even if that exact phrase does not appear. We have already in effect seen this in the passage from *Metaphysics*, book one, chapter two, where Aristotle says God’s knowledge is the most divine type of knowledge and that, not being jealous, he shares it with his rational creatures. But Aristotle says this also most explicitly, and in an ethical context, in the tenth book of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Having excluded the possibility that God (or the gods) might have a, strictly speaking, practical life, he says: “the activity of God [ἡ τοῦ θεοῦ ἐνέργεια], which surpasses all others in blessedness, must be contemplative; and of human activities, therefore, that which is most akin [συγγενεστάτη] to this must be most of the nature of happiness” [*EN* x,8,1178b21-3]. He then goes on to say, “To the gods, the whole life is blessed; to men, in so far as some likeness [ὁμοίωμα] of such activity belongs to them” [*EN* x,8,1178b25-7]—i.e., some likeness of the “activity of God.”²³ Indeed, Aristotle directly confronts the argument that, given the vast difference between God and man, man should renounce any pretensions of becoming like God. [He says in *EN* x,7:]

If intellect 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 [i.e., the best thing in us] be small in bulk, much more does it in power and worth surpass everything.²⁴

Remarks such as these force upon us an understanding of the role of the divine in Aristotelian ethics more complicated than is, perhaps, at first apparent. I have to admit that in a book of my own I relegated the divine in ethics primarily to ethics’ ends.²⁵ Aristotelian ethics cannot be, as, for example, Martha Nussbaum would have it, independent of religious belief since the very goods that help to establish its structure are described by Aristotle as divine—and even as gods.²⁶ Human acts are articulated: they stretch over time. Since the gods are simple, we cannot associate them with that which stretches over time; but we can associate them, he says, with the ends which, standing at the extremes, are without parts. All this I still regard as true, and I would even add a passage to those I cited in my book: i.e., the first chapter of the second book of *De caelo*, where Aristotle speaks of the gods of the ancients as “the limit of all other movement.”²⁷ But this cannot be the whole of the matter since Aristotle clearly has more in mind when he urges us to “strain every nerve to live in accordance with the best thing in us.” We

²²φυγή δὲ ὁμοίωσις θεῷ κατὰ τὸ δυνατόν· ὁμοίωσις δὲ δίκαιον καὶ ὄσιον μετὰ φρονήσεως γενέσθαι [*Theaetetus* 176A9-B2]; in Plotinus, see *Enneades* I,2,1.

²³τοῖς μὲν γὰρ θεοῖς ἅπας ὁ βίος μακάριος, τοῖς δ’ ἀνθρώποις, ἐφ’ ὅσον ὁμοίωμα τι τῆς τοιαύτης ἐνεργείας ὑπάρχει. This is the key text of John Dudley’s very good treatment of the role of God and contemplation in Aristotle’s ethics Dudley 1999, 5: (Dudley 1999 being a translation of Dudley 1982).

²⁴*EN* x,7,1177b30-1178a2; cp. *Metaph.* i,2,982b31-2.

²⁵See Flannery 2001, 22–23.

²⁶See *EN* i,12,1101b25-7; 1102a2-4; x,8,1178b7-22.

²⁷*Cael.* ii,1,284a5-6. See also *EN* vi,13,1145a10-11. That the extremes are involved in practical reasoning is apparent from *EN* vii,11,1143a36-b3.

do not have to strain every nerve to perform actions that finish in ends, since they *all* finish in ends—as do, for that matter, the actions of dogs, slugs, and even rocks, according to Aristotle.

Becoming like God and becoming better men is, according to Aristotle, a matter of organizing our lives in accordance with truth—or, perhaps better, in accordance with *truths*. Such organizing concerns in the first place, or at the highest level of living well, philosophical truths about the universe: in short, metaphysics. I have already relayed some of what Aristotle says about this “most divine of sciences” in chapter two of the first book of the *Metaphysics*. But it is also clear in that chapter that the study of metaphysics is continuous with the more human and practical pursuits. Metaphysics is portrayed there not as an activity unconnected with the ethical lives of men but as that which ultimately gives it sense. The man who pursues knowledge in its purest form and in the most disinterested way, says Aristotle, will pursue the knowledge found in metaphysics; but he will do this because it is knowledge of the ends that inform all other forms of knowledge, especially practical knowledge. All desire for knowledge finishes in the desire to know “the first principles and causes,” which Aristotle identifies as “the good” [τὰ γὰρ θὸν].²⁸

If, therefore, becoming better men involves becoming more like God, living well (ethics) is quite a complicated affair—as is the way in which God comes into it (although only from our point of view, not from his). It involves not just our orientation toward the goods (or the good) but also the way in which we organize our personal lives, our families and other communities, in such a way that they and we can thrive. It involves ordering professions, such as medicine, according to rational principles, i.e., principles that truly lead to the proper ends of such professions. It involves establishing and maintaining universities in a way that respects the designs of the creator of the universe they are set up to study.

It is true that God’s knowledge of all such matters is simple. It can only be so. He does not need, for instance, to call the various details to mind; he does not need to put them in order. The knowledge that he has of man’s complex city is immediate and intuitive. But this does not mean that we should understand his importance for the organization of human culture as similarly simple: occupying only the “limit regions,” so to speak. If what Aristotle says in *Metaphysics* book one, chapter two, is true and the knowledge that God has is the same knowledge that we might share in, and if we are encouraged to imitate it, to “strain every nerve to live in accordance with the best thing in us,” then being moral is not just a matter of *aiming* at God but of intending to make our complex cultural structures correspond somehow to his simple knowledge of them. And that is a complicated task.²⁹

V

To conclude, then, we have before us now the major pieces of the puzzle: i.e., the major ideas necessary for understanding the difference between a Christian conception of friendship with God and an Aristotelian one. An Aristotelian—by which, to repeat, I mean a man who

²⁸*Metaph.* i,2,982b9-10. See also *Metaph.* xii,7,1072b3.

²⁹In the final chapter of *Metaphysics*, book twelve, Aristotle says that we must “consider also in which of two ways the nature of the universe contains the good or the highest good, whether as something separate and by itself, or as the order of the parts. Probably in both ways, as an army does. For the good is found both in the order and in the leader...” [*Metaph.* xii,10,1075a11-14].

holds consistently to the ideas of the Philosopher without going beyond them—cannot consider himself a *friend* of God (in the sense of a companion), although he can say that there exists between himself and God a relationship of friendship. Moreover, although God’s side of the relationship must be conceived of in a special way,³⁰ the friendship between God and man, according to this conception, involves real interaction between the two poles of the relationship. A Christian, on the other hand, can consider himself (at least possibly) a friend—a companion—of God through union with Christ. In addition, the Christian is party to a friendship with God that is “according to preeminence,” a relationship such as is given a precise philosophical account in Aristotle.

How, then, might we characterize in a succinct way the difference between the Aristotelian and the Christian ways of conceiving friendship with God? One is tempted to say that the difference is that only Christians hold that they can become true friends of God by becoming equal to him through union with Christ. But we have already seen that Aristotle considers at least the possibility that a man might become a god [*EN* viii,7,1159a5-12]. The second-century Peripatetic commentator Aspasius argues that becoming a god is impossible and that, therefore, Aristotle is merely considering an hypothesis.³¹ I think that this is quite likely correct. When Aristotle introduces the matter, he does so as if he were considering a standard *aporia*: “This,” he says, “is in fact the origin of the question whether friends really wish for their friends the greatest goods, e.g. that of being gods...”³² But even if it is true that Aristotle does not think that men can become gods, still, his theory does allow for the possibility, even if it is just an hypothetical possibility. We cannot say, therefore, that he gives us no way of understanding true friendship with God. Indeed, what he says, even if hypothetically, is remarkably similar to the position of Thomas Aquinas, which we have already seen: man becomes friends with God only by becoming equal to him.³³

What then *is* the difference between Aristotle and Christianity in this regard? The difference is that, for Aristotle, in order (hypothetically) to become a friend of God, we must cease to be men.³⁴ He saw no other way. Christ, on the other hand, brought us the Good News that we can be friends of God without ceasing to be men. We can do this since he, Christ, was both God and man and we can become one with him. This is information to which Aristotle had no access. It comes to us by Revelation and by grace. It makes all the difference.

³⁰See Thomas Aquinas, *ST* 1.28.1 ad 3: [*C*]um creatura procedat a Deo in diversitate naturae, Deus est extra ordinem totius creaturae, nec ex eius natura est eius habitudo ad creaturas. Non enim producit creaturas ex necessitate suae naturae, sed per intellectum et per voluntatem, ut supra dictum est. Et ideo in Deo non est realis relatio ad creaturas. Sed in creaturis est realis relatio ad Deum, quia creaturae continentur sub ordine divino, et in earum natura est quod dependeant a Deo.

³¹διὸ καὶ ἀπορεῖται εἰ βουλήσεται ὁ φίλος τῷ φίλῳ τὰ μέγιστα ἀγαθὰ, οἷον θεὸν γενέσθαι. φανερόν μὲν οὖν ὅτι τὰ ἀδύνατα οὐ βουλήσεται ὁ φρόνιμος· τοιοῦτον δὲ τὸ ἐξ ἀνθρώπου θεὸν γενέσθαι· ἀλλ’ ἐξ ὑποθέσεως, εἰ δυνατόν εἴη θεὸν γενέσθαι, ἄρᾳ γε βουλήσεται; [Aspasius 1889, 178.25–29].

³²ὄθεν καὶ ἀπορεῖται, μή ποτ’ οὐ βούλονται οἱ φίλοι τοῖς φίλοις τὰ μέγιστα τῶν ἀγαθῶν, οἷον θεοῦ εἶναι [*EN* viii,7,1159a5-7].

³³See above at note 12.

³⁴There is a fragment in Cicero in which Aristotle is said to speak of man as a “mortal god”: “sic hominem ad duas res, ut ait Aristoteles, ad intellegendum et ad agendum esse natum quasi mortalem deum” [Rose 1886, F 61]. But also here the implication is that the two concepts do not go together: man is “*quasi* mortalem deum.”

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