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TOWARD RECONSIDERATION OF THE PREVAILING VIEW

INTRODUCTION

If one attempts a quick assessment of Aristotelian studies on the question that concerns us, one finds a number of apparently secure and widely shared assumptions among the interpreters:

1. Aristotle's preserved works contain an exposition of theological science to which the philosopher alludes in *Metaphysics* E 1 and K 7.

2. This exposition belongs to natural theology, the product of reflective human intelligence alone, without any other assistance.

3. It occurs in the *Metaphysics*, specifically in book Lambda, where the philosopher demonstrates that there must be a separate substance, an immovable mover.

4. In relation to other, perhaps earlier, texts, some preserved (*De caelo*, *Physics*), others lost (the *De philosophia*, for example), the text of Lambda probably represents Aristotle's last word on the subject.

5. Any opinions expressed elsewhere by Aristotle concerning the traditional gods are not taken seriously by him or, at the very least, do not invalidate his own theological views.

These different claims are not equally secure in the eyes of the interpreters. I have presented them in roughly decreasing order of certainty. All of them, however, pose problems to which, in varying degrees, students of Aristotle have been sensitive. I shall show this, beginning with the final claim.

REASONABLE OPINIONS ABOUT THE GODS

Aristotle's attitude with respect to opinions about the traditional gods is disconcerting in several ways. In chapter 5, I explore the topic fully. Here I shall be satisfied merely to refer to some of his statements favorable to the main body of beliefs sustaining customary religious practices. Aristotle is not content to say, on occasion: "We render to the gods" certain marks of honor, including himself among those who act in this way (*NE* iv 3.1123b18; cf. viii 9.1160 b24). For him, honoring the gods is an unconditional imperative, as is the state

of soul that it presupposes (a personal love): “Should one honor the gods and cherish one’s parents?” (*T* i 11.105a5–7). The only response this question deserves, he says, is punishment. It should not even be asked. The philosopher has a reason for this view, equally binding in the case of the gods and in the case of one’s parents: “the love of children for their parents and the love of human beings for the gods” is the love that the beneficiary owes to the benefactor. “For they are,” says Aristotle, “our greatest benefactors; they are, indeed, responsible for our existence, for our maintenance, and, once we are grown enough, for our education” (*NE* viii 12.1162a4–7). This judgment clearly explains Aristotle’s insistence that political leaders see to it that the city cares for the gods (*P* vi 8.1322b18ff.) through the institution of priestly functions, which he explicitly regards as having priority among civic functions (*P* vii 8.1328b11–13). It also explains his insistence on the creation of a public property able to generate revenues for the liturgies that concern the gods (*P* vii 10.1330a11–13), as is done in certain renowned cities (*P* ii 10.1272a19–20; 8.1267b34–35). And when he explains why the priestly functions must be reserved for the citizens themselves, Aristotle writes: “The gods should be honored by the citizens only” (*P* vii 9.1329a29–30), a provision on which one insists only if one thinks that the surpassing nobility of the gods of the city must be respected.

These sorts of assertions, both on first reading and after reflection, collide head on with the theological interpretation often given to Lambda. And they do so in three ways. First of all, such statements speak of the gods in the plural and without differentiation. For persons who find a monotheistic position in Lambda, the incompatibility is total.¹ “The Judaeo-Christian belief in a unique God,” as J. Owens noted, “makes the approach to Aristotle difficult and uncomfortable.”² For those who overcome this problem and agree to read Lambda 8 (where Aristotle gives his account of the immovable movers³) in its historical context, there are particular problems. Though polytheism, for Aristotle, is an assumption left undiscussed,⁴ he seems to conceive a hierarchy of immovable movers dependent on the immovable mover that governs the first sphere of heaven and thus appears to be *the* god par excellence, “God with a capital letter.”⁵ Now if this hierarchy (God and his angels, as it will be called in the Middle Ages) refers to the hierarchy of the traditional pantheon over which Zeus reigns as father, it is not mentioned in the statements that we have read (“The sacrifices do not all go to Zeus,” Aristotle writes at *NE* ix 3.1165 b15). There is no sign, therefore, of a hierarchy in favor of any god whatever.

The second difficulty is this: the gods mentioned, above all the guardians of the city, seem to possess a nearness that is hard to reconcile with the remoteness of the separate substances posited by Lambda.

And the third difficulty: the assumption, if not of divine providence, at least of divine beneficence (justifying the reciprocity of love in and through ritual), is diametrically opposed to the theological interpretation of Lambda.

In this text the question of providence, it has been noted, "was resolved in advance and in a completely negative way, when one is confronted with Aristotle's conception of a God who is unaware of our world and has no concern about human beings" (A. Mansion 1960, 39).

These difficulties, especially the last one, can be ignored only by overlooking in one's understanding of Aristotle's religious thinking everything he wrote apart from Lambda. This approach may suggest quite paradoxically that our philosopher was deficient in piety. Indeed, this is the response of L. Olle-Laprune to Lambda's "cold" metaphysical views: Aristotle "has no piety."⁶ On the other hand, those who pay more attention to Aristotle's religious statements outside Lambda have arrived at two types of judgment.

The first amounts to maintaining that Aristotle rejects the popular convictions to which he refers and which he uses to show a need for traditional forms of worship. This judgment, in fact, is not far from the view that refuses to take the philosopher's statements seriously; it often rests upon the assumption that, for Aristotle, popular religion is "a lie" (Defourmy 1932, 351). It is also partly based on a historical judgment that Greek religion was reduced to "external rites" not demanding belief.⁷ The former assumption is swept away by a reading of the texts cited: Aristotle shows all the marks of sincerity when he insists on the dignity of the gods who benefit both human beings and the city. The historical view that the Greek religion was a mere formality is equally easy to refute. Aristotle could, of course, commit himself to the traditional rites without believing at all in the myths concerning the gods supposed to justify them. But he does not promote these religious practices on the basis of tradition or faith in the myths but because of a deeper and less irrational general conviction: the beneficence of the gods. Another argument can be invoked: political or sociological needs enter into the insistence with which Aristotle recommends religious celebrations. Such celebrations provide the relaxation necessary after labor (*P* vii 9.1329a32; cf. 16.1335b14–16) and cement the union of the citizens who share in the same pious rejoicing (*NE* viii 9.1160a19–20 and *P* ii 4.1262b7–9). But this reason for religious observances is not Aristotle's only one, since it is added as an afterthought to the requirement to honor the gods as one does one's parents. Aristotle notes that one of the means that a tyrant uses to maintain his power is to feign a particular zealotry with respect to the gods, thus avoiding conspiracies because his subjects fear that the gods will not take their side against him (*P* v 11.1314b38–1315a3). Nobody should attribute to the philosopher himself, when he speaks of the gods and religious practices, the Machiavellian pragmatism that he ascribes to the tyrant. However, a similar position seems to result when one argues that Aristotle lacks sincerity since, on that hypothesis, the most natural explanation for his apparent piety would be his fear of colliding with public opinion.⁸

Aristotle's sincerity about traditional religion does not imply that the philosopher endorsed in a literal sense all the beliefs of his ancestors. One can

associate his hymn to an immortalized Hermias with what the *Nicomachean Ethics* says about virtue carried to a divine degree: "If, as is said, one passes from the human condition to that of a god by excess of virtue, such a disposition is clearly the opposite of bestiality" (*NE* vii 1.1145a23–24). It is not necessary to think that Aristotle is here endorsing the view of those who believe that humans can be made into gods. But the distance between the philosopher and received ideas is sometimes smaller, perhaps, than is imagined. We know that the *Nicomachean Ethics*, attacking the question of whether happiness is a gift of the gods, uses this cautious wording: "If any other gift is granted human beings by the gods, it is entirely reasonable that happiness too should be given by the gods, so much the more because it is the best of human things" (*NE* i 9.1099b11–13). Of course, Aristotle adds that the question would perhaps be more appropriate for another inquiry and that, even if happiness might not be sent by the gods, it would still remain a divine thing, seeing that it makes us like the gods. The philosopher undoubtedly tries to persuade his audience that happiness is achievable by humans even without divine assistance. But does it follow from this that "he does not take seriously the gifts of the gods, whatever form they may take" (Gauthier 1970, II, 1:73)? Clearly, one can argue that he does not if one maintains at the same time that, for him, "the gods of the crowd...do not exist" (*ibid.*). Not only is this claim impossible to prove, but it is contradicted by the obvious reading of the texts whose author, as we have seen, cannot for any valid reason be suspected of bad faith. When scholars imply that Aristotle is lying, what they do amounts to denial in the face of irrefutable evidence.

Such a denial coheres badly with a passage such as the following, where the philosopher sets out the advantages of a life devoted to the intellect:

the person who deploys the powers of his intellect and cultivates it seems to possess the best of dispositions and to be the best beloved of the gods. For if the gods have some concern for human affairs, as is thought, then it will be equally reasonable that they take pleasure in what is perfect and akin to them to the highest degree,...and that they give their benefits in return to those who cherish this above all and honor it, as to people who care for what is dear to themselves, and conduct themselves with righteousness and nobility. Now all these traits are primarily the attributes of the wise man; there is nothing unclear about this. Therefore, he is the best beloved of the gods. (*NE* x 8.1179a24–30)

This passage manifests a view that not only has every intention of conforming to ordinary beliefs concerning divine benevolence (here understood as a response to human attitudes and not a gratuitous gift for human benefit), but which, for that very reason, contradicts all the supposed theological implications of Lambda. This was formerly reason to suspect that Aristotle did not

compose it.⁹ Everyone today stops short of maintaining that Aristotle was an atheist, a thesis with no justification. Scholars prefer to say that Aristotle here is not stating his own opinions,¹⁰ that he “adopts the viewpoint of current opinions on the gods, opinions that he does not share and that teach us nothing about the ideas he might have concerning the relations between God and human beings.”¹¹ Such comments indicate only that their authors do not see any way to reconcile this passage, in which Aristotle aligns himself with current opinion, with Lambda’s supposed theological positions, and that they prefer to think that the philosopher does not believe what he says. There are on the one hand “the gods of the crowd who do not exist” and “in which [Aristotle] does not believe” (Gauthier 1970, II, 2:898), and on the other hand “the God of the *Metaphysics*...in which he believes” (II, 1:73). But why, if this is the case, does Aristotle propound a totally useless lie? If Lambda argues that there is but one god and that god is unaware of human beings, it contradicts the philosopher’s traditionally pious claims. How can we explain those traditional claims? Only by questioning the philosopher’s sincerity: Aristotle “is content to appeal to popular beliefs in order to defend philosophy *before the crowd*” (II, 2:898; my emphasis). This answer hardly deserves consideration. For if Aristotle here spoke to “the crowd,” which is ignorant of everything philosophical and so naive as to be oblivious that it is being deceived, what sense would there be to defend philosophy before it? To convert the many to philosophy? Clearly not. To remove their prejudices against philosophers? The use of easily detected lies is not a good means to this end. And who can argue that the *Nicomachean Ethics* is a collection of pieces addressed to the uncultivated crowd?¹² The whole position is incredible.

It is better to refer to the facts and not seek to displace Aristotle’s piety. In the texts we have cited, this piety is expressed toward the traditional gods, who are believed beneficent to the wise person in particular. These are the gods who are honored in the city, not the god whose contours Lambda sketches (cf. Gauthier 1970, II, 2:855, 858, and 859). To maintain that for Aristotle “the object of religion and the object of first philosophy are identical” (Elders 1966, 41–42) is misguided; it creates obstacles for understanding and is probably a bit crazy: “this philosophy was unable to ground a religion” (Lagrange 1926a, 322).

In face of these facts, some interpreters express another attitude more sympathetic to the philosopher’s undeniable sincerity. Studied at length, the evidence enables us to establish that Aristotle respected his ancestors’ devotion to the traditional gods and argued in its favor as we have seen.¹³ What then should be said about Lambda’s apparent opposition? Lacking a better answer, one invokes, for example, Aristotle’s hesitations both in Lambda, on the question of the relations of the first substance to the world, and in other texts, where the philosopher criticizes anthropomorphism but seems to hold back his opinion about the gods and the myths (Decharme 1904, 235–40). It is true that Aristotle

is never unreservedly categorical. If he were, there would be nothing to discuss. But if one says that the philosopher's hesitation "can only be attributed to the groping procedures of a train of thought that has not arrived at certainty" (Pépin 1971, 233), this is essentially because it is difficult to reconcile two series of texts—those of Lambda and those of which I have spoken. For, taken separately, these two series leave no room for doubt: to all intents and purposes, the former assures us that one cannot establish the existence of divine providence and the latter practically guarantees that there must be such a thing.¹⁴ More understandable, therefore, is the conclusion once uttered by W. J. Verdenius, who maintained that these contradictions ultimately must be preserved for they reflect a conflict, unresolved in Aristotle's mind, between personal convictions supported by reason and other convictions received from tradition, supported by the sense that a truth of nature is embedded in widely held opinions and must be taken into account (Verdenius 1960, 60). Aristotle's system would thus be marked by an incomplete "synthesis between divine transcendence and divine providence," taught respectively by Lambda and the other texts we have been discussing.¹⁵ This interpretation has the great merit of doing violence neither to the texts nor to the thoughts that they seem to express. Moreover, it is seductive, for it corresponds to the plausible hypothesis that the philosopher, in working out a rational theology that puts him out of alignment with inherited beliefs, cannot succeed in getting away from them, all the more because he finds some reason for not throwing them overboard: shared and old opinions often contain a kernel of irrefutable wisdom. Proverbs are the ruins of an "ancient philosophy," Aristotle said in a lost work (*De philosophia* frag. 8 Walzer). Thus he, like Socrates, could *reasonably* suppose on this ground that "the gods take care of human beings, although not in the way most people think" (Xenophon *Memorabilia* 1.1.19). But, precisely because there is this *reason* not to throw out common beliefs entirely, we are no longer facing a conflict between an entirely irrational faith and the demands of reason, but a conflict between two claims for which there are reasoned arguments.

Nobody, to my knowledge, has challenged the view that Lambda has theological significance and with it the view that Lambda contains a natural theology, albeit one that has been judged disappointing on the issues of providence and God's relations to the world (I shall come back to this). Thus, it has been said, while arguing against the likelihood that Lambda has gaps on these questions: "At bottom [Aristotle] had no interest in these problems, which are more 'theological' in the modern sense of the term than 'philosophical'" (Berti 1973, 100). Does not this distinction, on whatever grounds it may be made, reveal to us how alien Lambda's speculations are, not only to theology "in the modern sense of the term," but also to the claims that Aristotle himself defends concerning the gods? It is immediately clear and has been recognized for a long time that those claims arise primarily in contexts where the philosopher is trying to shed light on practical questions, matters of no interest at all to

Lambda's theoretical inquiries (cf. M. Louis 1909, 140, 152–53). Might it not be the case, then, that for Aristotle theoretical science, in spite of the most contrary appearances, has no theological concerns at all?

TEXTS ON THE MARGIN OF LAMBDA

The prestige of the theology of Lambda was seriously crippled when W. Jaeger's *Aristoteles* inaugurated the movement of developmental studies. There were two reasons for this. First, Jaeger tried to show that Lambda was not the summit of Aristotle's system, but a very provisional stage in the evolution of the philosopher's thought, devoted ultimately to something like what we would now call positivism (Jaeger 1948, 221). Second, in order to reconstruct the first stages of this evolution, Jaeger drew attention to preserved or fragmentary texts, in many cases neglected up to then, that seemed to contain the elements of a theology noticeably different from the theology of Lambda and to suggest that the philosopher had hesitations regarding doctrines supposedly firmly established in his thought (Jaeger 1948, 69, 163, 124–64; 166ff., etc.).

Concerning the first point, later studies have claimed to invalidate Jaeger's position by denying that Lambda was "purely Platonic" and thus informed by views later discarded by Aristotle.¹⁶ Concerning the second, they have largely acceded to Jaeger, trying to retrace the details of our philosopher's theological development.

Jaeger's position rests on an implicit postulate,¹⁷ that every philosopher tries to express a certain number of religious intuitions in a world view and in the form of reasonable propositions. This perhaps explains, at least in part, H. von Arnim's attempt to take Aristotle's "theory of God" as a criterion of his evolution.¹⁸ This kind of project was quickly abandoned, but not the attempt to establish the stages that led the philosopher, starting from a criticism of the idea of the self-moving soul that Plato presented in the *Laws*, to arrive at the theory espoused in Lambda.¹⁹ The major landmarks in that itinerary became the *De philosophia* and the *De caelo* (which seem to be connected), then the writings of natural science: the *De motu animalium*, but especially *Physics* vii–viii, most of these texts permitting the scholar to reconstruct or rather to follow the working out of a philosophy of motion.²⁰

Even if they in fact have no chronological significance for the genesis of Aristotle's thought, the studies devoted to these texts have clearly established that with the *De philosophia*, the *De caelo*, and *Physics* vii–viii, one gets closer and closer to Lambda's positions. The question remains whether one thus passes from one theology to another, given the "lack of complete agreement between statements about God" that one meets in these different pieces of evidence (Elders 1972, 11).

Consider, first of all, *Physics* vii–viii, devoted to the need to affirm the existence of a prime mover. Much studied for this reason, both in themselves²¹

and for their relations with Lambda,²² these texts seem to furnish the first attempts (still inadequate in some respects) to resolve problems finally overcome in the *Metaphysics* concerning the universal principle of movement (cf. Aubenque 1977, 357–67; Berti 1981, 250; Lloyd 1968, 140–57), although Lambda has different aims and tries also to clarify the nature of the prime mover whose existence as a cause the *Physics* seeks to demonstrate.²³ Thus the tradition seems justified when it says that Lambda contains a “transposition” or a “sublimation” of the conclusions of physics into a theological proof.²⁴ And the sometimes profound differences observed between the two texts²⁵ tend also to justify the tradition’s refusal to see *Physics* vii–viii as the expression of a theology. It is, moreover, quite significant that Aristotle himself not once in these *Physics* texts utters the word θεός and nowhere hints that his demonstrations have implications for the problem of the gods or God.²⁶ It thus seems clear that without Lambda there would be no reason to claim that the conclusions of the *Physics* had theological significance for Aristotle. Nothing would permit speaking, for example, of a “demonstration of God in book vii of the *Physics*”²⁷ or would legitimate the tradition’s annexing this book to the documents that teach about Aristotle’s God.²⁸ In short, in the absence of Lambda, no one could claim without argument that the passages of the *Physics* regarding the need to posit a prime mover had clear theological significance in Aristotle’s mind. Nevertheless, one cannot ignore Lambda when interpreting these passages²⁹ and they appear in a new light if, as many think, a theology in the strict sense of the word is presented in this famous book of the *Metaphysics*. Must we, therefore, reserve our judgment on the conclusions of the *Physics* before proceeding to examine the opinion that Lambda contains such a theology? Not entirely. For if Lambda’s theology is a theology of the prime mover, then, by virtue of the close connections between this book and *Physics* vii–viii on the doctrine of the prime mover, one can say that these books were the inchoate expression of such a theology. Now there is a way to get to the bottom of this issue. We must ask whether, for the Greek philosopher that Aristotle was, the need to locate the ultimate cause of becoming outside nature helped to resolve inquiries regarding the existence or the nature of the gods.

The study of this question obviously involves interpretation of the entire pre-Aristotelian tradition with respect to both religion and philosophy. In any case, an affirmative answer cannot be taken for granted. With respect to religion, it is hardly necessary to recall that, for the early Greeks, the reality of the gods was never connected as divine reality was later in the Judaeo-Christian tradition to the existence of a supersensible creator upon whom the created world depends and whose existence reason should prove. Rather, the Greeks, who traditionally had the sense that the gods were present in nature (for the gods are with us, in our midst), asked about the gods’ form and their manifestations or about their actual presence in this or that object or phenomenon. Aristotle, as W. Leszl has noted, belonged to this tradition.³⁰

On the level of philosophy, it is appropriate, moreover, to remark that Parmenides, who initiated the kind of thinking retrospectively called “metaphysical,” carefully refrained from labeling as god the being that he posited as an absolute, beyond the changing manifold which opinion attains (Dubarle 1986, 61; Burkert 1985, 310). And the stance that he initiates in this way is one that his heir Plato rigorously preserves. The intelligible Ideas in general, in which the sensible things constituting our world participate, and the Idea of the Good that presides over their order are the last things to merit the name of gods.³¹

All things considered, the evidence concerning the early Greek tradition seems to convey the opposite message from what has been customarily thought; theological thought and metaphysical thought in this tradition do not spontaneously coincide. I shall come back to this point shortly. But if I am right, not only would it be strange if Aristotle at the end of the *Physics*, finding himself obliged to seek a prime mover beyond the world, would have understood this step as a theological one, but it would also be strange, a fortiori, if Lambda itself embodied such an approach. Let us keep this warning in mind.

If, moreover, we modify our perspectives in order to enter into those of the ancient Greeks, then we may suspect that since for them the gods are in the world Aristotle would confront theological ideas somewhere in his studies on nature itself. This expectation is not disappointed when one reads the *De caelo*.

This text, a “curious mixture of physics and theology,” as it has been called (Sinnige 1973, 26), often passes for a moment of transition in Aristotle’s theological reflection, leading from the first attempts (*De philosophia*) to Lambda (passing through *Physics* vii–viii on the way) and serving as a sort of first shot at the science mastered in the *Metaphysics*.³² The *De caelo* contains many references that can be exploited in this direction (cf. Schmitz 1985, I, 1:265–68). But the text is especially important because of the “astral” or “sidereal theology” that it is supposed to express.³³ “Astral theology,” it has been said, “seems to have furnished Aristotle with his fundamental intuition of God” and could constitute a first awkward attempt at theology—corrected jointly by the *Physics* and the *Metaphysics*—for “the means of arriving at God will evolve perceptibly [and] be included in a scientific framework.”³⁴ Yet the passages of the *De caelo* of interest for theology require a careful analysis, for they are few and difficult to interpret. Indeed, when one looks at the text closely, as T. Sinnige did, one discovers that the claims of Aristotle that interest us show up without any genuine argument.³⁵ What is more, they are the statements most often linked to popular and currently widespread beliefs concerning the gods (cf., e.g., *DC* i 3.270b4–11), opinions the philosopher judges to agree with his account of the heaven (cf. ii 1.284a2–3, b3–5).

This convergence, as I have said, is not surprising. Studying the nature of the heaven, the philosopher takes as his object the residence of the traditional celestial gods as well as the entities that the tradition describes as gods: Helios, Selēnē, etc. (cf. Nilsson 1940, 1–5). It would be surprising if the Greek

philosopher were oblivious to the religious attitude that his culture imposed on his object of study. The interpreter has the sense that for Aristotle, as for most of his contemporaries, the celestial world remains divine and populated with genuine divinities,³⁶ and even that his essential purpose is religious rather than scientific,³⁷ inasmuch as in his view physics might be called upon to corroborate religious belief.

On this hypothesis, what would the possible “astral theology” be? One must answer: the teaching of a “physicist” who thinks that he can affirm from his study of celestial beings that, for example, they are not mere rocks³⁸ but things that fit the general notion of the stars and the planets found in common opinions about the gods. Under these circumstances, one will admit that it would be difficult for Aristotle, who believed that he was sanctioning the most traditional faith on this point, to depart from it later in order to entrust to *meta*-physics the job of describing the true god or gods. One will especially admit that this physical doctrine, which if it is right reinforces the traditional belief in the celestial gods, is not properly speaking a theology, unless incidentally. It does not involve any concern with questions evoked by the idea that the celestial beings are gods. In particular, it leaves aside entirely the question whether or not there exist other gods—those that the city honors but does not equate with celestial bodies. It is limited strictly to sustaining current belief on what is, all things considered, a secondary point, which would not even justify a reform of religion in the direction of astral religion. For this would imply, as P. Boyancé has correctly noted, the dogma that “the true gods are the stars and the stars alone” and “that one must therefore equate them with the figures made known to us by religious practices and myths.”³⁹ We find no evidence for such a dogma, of course, in the *De caelo*, but we do seem to find the tacit agreement of an exceedingly traditionalist author with the prevailing religious view,⁴⁰ and the explicit agreement of a naturalist with certain details of that view. In short, on the theological level, nothing in the text that suggests an unusual and innovative perspective.⁴¹

As a result, the hypothesis of an astral theology, which hardly deserves its name, would seem contrary to the theological interpretation of Lambda. In order to save the latter, one must not suppose an evolution from the *De caelo* to the *Metaphysics* but a revolution involving both philosophical doctrines and religious positions, a revolution whose existence nobody has suggested. Yet nothing, except an ad hoc hypothesis, argues that the *De caelo* was written significantly earlier than Lambda.

It is hardly certain that the *De caelo* intends to confirm what most people think about the visible celestial gods when it appeals to traditional concepts or voices an opinion of theological relevance. Perhaps Aristotle’s intent is also and especially to satisfy the inverse demand. If physics can corroborate religious thought, the latter, in turn, can also corroborate physics. Aristotle occasionally says as much (e.g., *DC* i 9.279a33).⁴² Now this perspective surely had to be important for the philosopher. Two reasons prove it. First, the fact that

the *De caelo* presents itself essentially as an exposition of physics, devoted to the heaven from a nonreligious perspective. In the second place, Aristotle's interest in opinions received from the ancients because of their core of truth can permit us to conjecture that, in his mind, early religious opinions could testify not only for religious truths but truths of any order, including claims of a strictly physical sort. Therefore, before endorsing the view that the *De caelo* has a theological intention, there is reason, it seems, to study this issue in greater detail.

What we have just seen suffices to indicate the weak point of one-sided interpretations. The *De caelo* clearly seems to give precious little support for the hypothesis that it contains a theological position that would break with traditional views and foreshadow Lambda. This support is reduced further, if it is granted, as it usually is, that this text's theological passages are linked to the *De philosophia*.

In contrast with the preserved works, the fragments of this lost dialogue seem to reflect an intention to conceive the relation of the world and humanity to the divinity in a special way (see Allan 1952, 114; Organ 1962, 303–5). Thus Jaeger, the first to have proposed the detailed study of this issue, maintained that the *De philosophia* expressed for Aristotle an essentially religious concern.⁴³ The same or about the same judgment is made by A. Festugière, for whom the *De philosophia* provided a “religious explanation of the universe.”⁴⁴ The question ultimately posed is whether such a preoccupation with all its implications could be repudiated by the philosopher in the process of a philosophical and spiritual (r)evolution in which he broke with the past.

We know, for example, that the dialogue gave an account of the origin of beliefs in the gods⁴⁵ in a way that recalls Plato (*Laws* xii 966d). We also have reason to think that it offered arguments tending to support these beliefs, especially the well-known “cosmological” argument, which reasons from the order of the world (frags. 13, 16, 17; cf. Bos 1989, 174–84) and which the *Metaphysics* ignores (cf. Baudry 1931, 104). The latter, it has been said, uses more scientific arguments⁴⁶ and naturally abandons this popular teleological thinking,⁴⁷ giving up beliefs in various immanent divinities (Baudry 1931, 104) in favor of a transcendent god. Is this about-face plausible? Critics today dare to answer in the negative, with solid arguments which do not depend upon psychology or the interpretation of ideas and which, moreover, challenge the philosopher's supposed (r)evolution on all these points. First, nothing establishes that the positions of the lost Aristotle (in this case, of the *De philosophia*) represent the ideas of his youth, presented in a publication that he was soon going to renounce. Second, there does not exist, in any preserved text, the least disavowal of earlier opinions deemed out of date by their author. Third, on the contrary, these preserved texts (in this case, the *De caelo*) seem to be related to observations set forth in the lost writings and refer to them for fuller reflections on the subject (cf. Bos 1989, 99–101; and, earlier, Chroust 1977, 130–31; Moraux 1965, cviii).

Thus we must see in this singular type of literature to which the *De philosophia* belonged (see Effe 1970, 74–75, 81, 85) and which expounded the philosopher's religious views, an orientation other than the physical (or scientific) one adopted in the *De caelo* (cf. Easterling 1976, 262–63), without postulating a real incompatibility between the two (Bos 1989, 109). It seems, under these circumstances, that the *De caelo*'s author, far from distancing himself from the views of the *De philosophia*, keeps them in the background and distances himself only from the theological perspective in which the dialogue developed them.

Does this reveal a new way to view the texts to which scholars generally appeal to reconstruct Aristotle's theological views? It seems so. Drawing conclusions from an inquiry into all these texts, J. Pépin not long ago asserted "the remarkable stability of certain themes" and was surprised by their "permanence," noting also that they are amenable to "the traditional theology" (Pépin 1971, 243, 248). This corroborates quite well the remarks just made and does justice to Aristotle's faithfulness to the core of beliefs broadly shared in his time. Sensitive, however, to the variations of the philosopher, Pépin added that the key to understanding Aristotle's development (*enjeu de l'évolution*) was the doctrine of the immovable mover" (Pépin 1971, 248). The question now posed is whether this doctrine, which is not stated all at once, possesses theological significance or rather falls outside theology. All evidence supports the belief that Aristotle's ideas of the unmoved mover constitute the position of a philosopher who, as we have seen, does not break with the idea that the gods are *in* the heaven and grace us with their benefits.

This question, which obviously contains several dimensions, amounts essentially to asking, in modern terms, whether Aristotle regarded metaphysics as theology, i.e., whether he understood the science of the supersensible as somehow disclosing the true gods.

I have already said that this question is not answered easily. A partial answer is found in the *De caelo* and perhaps in the *De philosophia*, both of which refer to realities beyond the world.

An ancient piece of evidence regarding the *De philosophia* (Cicero *De natura deorum* 1.33)—one discussed innumerable times—reproaches Aristotle's work for confused and indecisive theological language, for calling "god" many things indifferently and contradictorily, among them, apparently, a being beyond the world and a mind without a body, something hard to specify.⁴⁸ The testimony in Cicero's dialogue is hostile and lumps together everything that Aristotle said about the transcendent being and what he said about other beings called gods who are immanent in the world. The text seems to endorse the impression that Aristotle's detractors wanted to create when they said that he taught a "double theology" (Bos 1989, 193). If we must suspect that one of these theologies does not represent the philosopher's view, there is reason to think that it is the "theology" that concerns the transcendent reality, not in spite of, but because of the fact that, according to the Cicero passage, Aristotle

attributed to it “all divinity” (*omnem divinitatem*). This expression does not inform us that the supreme being was identified as a god in the strict sense, or as the first of the gods, or even less as the only true god, only that the quality of being “divine” in the highest degree was conferred on it. The expression probably referred to a generic sort of divine reality (τὸ θεῖον) that Aristotle’s dialogue posited at the peak of the perfection of beings according to the argument *ex gradibus* (frag. 16). And, linguistically, it recalls what the *De caelo* itself calls τὸ θεῖον...πάν τὸ πρῶτον καὶ ἀκρότατον (*DC* i 9.279 a32–33) in a passage that Simplicius (in *CIAG* vii, 288–89) compared to the *De philosophia*.

Obviously, all this is hypothetical, but the hypothesis relies upon the distinction between the notions of the god and of the divine that serves to clarify our question: could Aristotle not differentiate between the gods located within the world and the divine realities beyond the world without transferring to the latter all the attributes of the former? In other words, did the Greek philosopher insist that the higher and transcendent reality was god? Or did he only understand this reality as similar to the gods immanent in the world, that is to say, eternal like them? If he was able to acknowledge without hesitation that the gods were closer to us than was the supreme ontological order, then he also had to locate theology closer to natural philosophy than he located metaphysical speculation.

The *De caelo* discloses this possibility, inconceivable for us. In the passage just cited which Simplicius compared to the *De philosophia*, Aristotle conceives the transcendence of the world without space or time, where he curiously situates immaterial and eternal realities that possess a perfect and surpassingly independent life (*DC* i 9.279a18ff.).⁴⁹ It is in regard to this order of realities that he appeals to the notion of the supremely “divine.” Now “those beings” (τὰ κεῖ), metaphorically located beyond the last celestial sphere (the sphere of the fixed stars), are surely the equivalent of the impassible world of the incorporeals of which Plato speaks. The *Phaedrus*, in fact, describes the intelligibles as “those beings” (τὰ κεῖ)⁵⁰ of ineffable supremacy, which are visible beyond the celestial vault (247b–e). The *Phaedrus* not only authorizes us to assert that the reality described in the *De caelo* is absolutely transcendent, it also lets us determine to what extent and in what way it is distinguished from the gods. For the *Phaedrus*, far from describing these beings as gods, states that the gods, composed of body and soul (246c–d), belong to our world and ultimately are gods only because they ascend without impediment onto the celestial vault to nourish themselves by contemplating the realities situated beyond: “these realities,” we read, “are just those that, because he cleaves to them, makes a god be a god” (249c). What does such language tell us about the gods’ relation to the metaphysical order? It tells us that the gods, whose dignity for a Greek rests on their primacy within the universe, are what they are not because of their transcendence but because they can completely

know transcendent reality. From this perspective the gods' relation to the metaphysical order is more epistemological than ontological. I shall have reason to return to the repercussions of this perspective. For now it suffices to understand that it was not impossible for Aristotle to assert the existence of a "divine" or supersensible reality above the gods properly so-called, or to conceive a theoretical inquiry of a metaphysical sort without a genuine theological dimension as we understand it today.

THE SEPARATE SUBSTANCE OF LAMBDA

The modern tradition of Aristotle interpretation, linking as it does metaphysics and theology,⁵¹ has never questioned the importance of Lambda,⁵² which it deems "a systematic theological study."⁵³ Chapters 7–10, devoted to non-sensible substance, present the investigation of three questions that, from the perspective of medieval theological *Summae*, concern respectively the existence of God, his nature, and his relation to the world.⁵⁴ The first of these questions, moreover, is the occasion of a demonstration that serves as the model for Thomas Aquinas' "tertia via" (cf. Buckley 1971, 77; Oehler 1955, 82; cf. Schüssler 1982, 105). The reflections upon the pure act of thinking that Aristotle presents in the second passage⁵⁵ are frequently regarded as "the highest point attained by Greek theological speculation."⁵⁶

The profound admiration of interpreters for this passage nevertheless gives way to a disappointment, just as profound, concerning the ideas that Aristotle then professes, in the third passage, about the relations of this pure thought to the world: "this God is great," C. Piat once wrote, "but then how much has this God had to impoverish himself in order to purify himself! And what solitude is more terrifying than his!" (Piat 1912, 120; cf. Sacchi 1982, 124) For the theologian of the Christian tradition, it is a violent paradox (cf. Robin 1944, 161) that the being of "infinite perfection"⁵⁷ who is supposed to be the author and father of the world and human beings should stand aloof from them (cf. Ferguson 1972, 124 and Defourny 1932, 354, 357). Attempts to show that Aristotle left room for the first mover's efficient causality⁵⁸ or that the principles of his system do not exclude such causality (cf. Piat 1912, 120; A. Mansion 1960, 43; Jolivet 1956, 6ff., esp. 77 and n. 1) can perhaps show that Christian theologians are within their rights when they use the philosopher's metaphysical speculation in elaborating a theology that conforms to doctrines of creation and providence, but they cannot prove Aristotle would agree.⁵⁹ All the exegetes have reached the same conclusion: Lambda does not argue for any provident creator god or even for an omniscient one.⁶⁰

While disappointing some, Aristotle's account of the prime mover and its relation to the world has seemed odd to everyone. If the philosopher meant to use Lambda as the occasion to present his theology in the doctrine of the unmoved mover, he would have been obliged to try to reconcile this theology

with his claims elsewhere concerning the gods, if he still took them seriously, or to deny those statements, if he no longer took them seriously. But there is nothing like this, as is well known: just a total indifference toward such demands. In this connection some have wished to invoke a difficulty faced by the philosopher. It is alleged, for example, that he was torn between reasons for asserting transcendence and reasons favoring providence (A. Mansion 1960, 42), or that there are gaps in the exposition he left for us.⁶¹ But this is the type of explanation that one should not hazard unless there is nothing better to propose. Before deciding to adopt such an approach, we should examine a number of points.

We are on the verge of attributing to Aristotle hesitation between transcendence and divine providence. Before doing so, we should first know if he had some reason to hesitate, for if he did not we would be attributing to him a difficulty not his own. In order to ascertain whether he had such a reason, it suffices to ask if in his view the idea of "god" was bound together with the idea of transcendence and the idea of providence.

On two occasions we have seen evidence that the association between god and transcendence (or separation from the sensible) seems less natural to the Greek mind than is commonly thought. A comment by Aristotle himself is relevant here: "the gods and the heroes," he says, "differ immediately from human beings, we think, by virtue of a great superiority, first in body, then in soul" (*P* vii 14.1332b17–20). Thus it seems that what distinguishes the gods from humans is not that the gods lack bodies but that the bodies and souls of the gods are superior to those of humans. Of course, Aristotle's comment reports a common opinion, but its very existence as a common opinion proves that we are justified in stressing how odd it would be for the Greeks to locate a god outside the sensible realm. For what reason would Aristotle himself have insisted on such a supersensible location for a god? I can see but one ground for it a priori. It would be that, in his eyes, the god's dignity cannot be reconciled with the secondary status that would otherwise be attributed to him. But, alas, the argument from dignity does not appear in *Lambda* as a defense of the description of the separate substance as god. Such a defense, which would have gone beyond what traditional theology demanded, would normally have had to be presented there. Indeed, Aristotle is not insensible to the dignity of "the most divine." But, as we know, he derives from it an argument for an attribute other than transcendence.⁶²

The early Greek idea of the gods, whose link to transcendence was tenuous at best, was nonetheless clearly associated with the idea of providence operating in the world for human benefit. Plato tries to defend such a conception of providence in the *Laws* (see Gueroult 1924, 29–30). And we have noted the passages where Aristotle makes use of this conception, which the Greeks seem to have shared with all peoples (cf. Van Steenberghe 1961, chap. 1–3; Dopp 1961, 150).

Given this cultural background and Aristotle's practice elsewhere, it is unlikely that, in reflecting on the idea of the god, Aristotle found himself forced to choose between transcendence and providence, a dilemma that tradition had not posed and that had been tacitly solved in advance. It is even more unlikely that, in reflecting on substance, the philosopher sacrificed providence to transcendence. To do so would have been to show the most complete indifference to the two-fold break with tradition that he would have been making. Moreover, given his other statements, he would have been contradicting himself.

Lambda's position shocks even persons prepared by Christian tradition (contrary, on this point, to the classical Greek tradition) to understand the doctrine of the first substance as theology. From this perspective Aristotle's God would be neither a creator nor a providential deity; He would have neither consciousness of evil nor interest in the world and human beings; He would not even be aware of them (cf. Edel 1982, 133). As G. Verbeke loyally wrote, "one might ask what is left" (Verbeke 1983, 27; cf. Viertel 1982, 430). Everyone knows what is left: along with the pure act, a principle of universal intelligibility and consistency (cf. Claix 1982, 470). Not only does this principle not have much *in other respects* that compares to the God of Jews, Christians, and Moslems,⁶³ but also it does not conform to the idea that the Greeks themselves had of a god.

Starting from this point, therefore, we must try to read Lambda without prejudice. This book is devoted to the study of substance (1.1069a18), a recognized species of which, Aristotle at once indicates, is "immovable" substance. Some thinkers, he adds, referring to the Platonists, regard this sort of substance as "separate" (for example, the "forms" and the "mathematical objects") (1.1069a33–35). He himself (beginning at 10.1075b3) shows the need to affirm such an "immovable" substance, without which, he will say farther on, "there could be [in the universe] neither principle nor order nor generation nor celestial beings" (10.1075b25–26); but at the same time he rejects the Platonists' equation of these nonsensibles with "forms and numbers," for as he will himself say those things, if they exist, "are not responsible for anything" (1075b27–28). Such, therefore, is the problem. Nothing explicitly designates Lambda as a theological reflection in which the philosopher is inquiring about the existence of God or the gods. Aristotle's whole lengthy demonstration of the proposition that eternal movement requires an immaterial cause, a pure intelligible act that moves other things as an object of love does, unfolds without a single mention of the word θεός (6.1071b3–1072b14). Nor is "god" at issue when Aristotle inquires about the number of immovable substances (8.1073a14–1074a38) or when in chapters 9 and 10 he studies the subsequent difficulties concerning the object about which the first intellectual substance thinks⁶⁴ and the separability of the good that this substance represents. In short—and this is a point insufficiently noted—Lambda observes an absolute silence about the god or gods, except in two short passages, without which the

question whether the doctrines presented there have theological significance could not even be raised.

The first of these passages, in which the god is mentioned in tones that some have found lyrical,⁶⁵ occupies exactly six lines (7.1072b24–30). These lines are part of a longer passage located shortly after the proof that there exists an immaterial principle on which the heaven and nature depend. Aristotle has already established the identity of this principle, a pure intelligible act, and the way in which it sustains the movement of what it moves, as the object of love does. He now tries to show more clearly the excellence of the primary act (starting from 1072b13). The effort is not gratuitous, as we shall see.

Aristotle proceeds by means of a comparison that takes the human condition as one term: “this is an existence comparable to the best that we can experience for a short time” (1072b14–15). And he shows that the perfect pure act of the universal principle resembles the act of thinking by which the intellect becomes intelligible to itself when it grasps its immaterial object. In the fleeting moments of such thinking, human beings thus reach a condition of perfection analogous to that of the pure separate act when the distinction characteristic of whatever is in motion between the end and what pursues the end is abolished (compare *DC* ii 12.292b4–6): these moments correspond to states of perfect happiness.

In this passage, which establishes the perfection of the pure act and where Aristotle will suddenly and briefly raise the issue of the god, his intention is not to provide a scientific demonstration that the first substance is God. As what follows in the text indicates, the philosopher’s aim is to contradict the view that “the most beautiful and perfect thing does not pertain to the [first] principle” (1072b31). This is the reason why, as we have just seen, the philosopher tries to stress that the principle must be understood on analogy with the act by which and in which our intellects attain to the moment of highest perfection. Thus the fleeting theological statements of lines 1072b24–30, far from being the conclusion to which Aristotle would like to lead his listeners, are themselves also aimed at securing more tightly the philosophical thesis defended in this passage.

It is by a strange error of perspective that the last of these lines has been regarded as Aristotle’s conclusion. This error has even led most modern editors (Bonitz, Jaeger, Ross, etc.) to replace the unanimous reading of the manuscripts here with a reading derived from the commentary of Themistius: “We say, therefore (ὁῖ), that the god is . . .,” instead of “we say, moreover (ὁὲ), that the god is . . .” (1072b28–29). The editors’ reading implies that Aristotle thus lays down his own conclusions about the god’s essence in a formula employing the royal “we,” whereas in fact he limits himself to appealing to what is ordinarily said concerning the god, i.e., to a common opinion, what Thomas Aquinas called a *fama* (Thomas, *In Metaphysicam Aristotelis com.*, no. 2544).⁶⁶

Not only do the statements of lines 1072b24–30 not represent a theological conclusion that Aristotle wishes to add to his theory of the pure act, but they

are not even totally deduced from the preceding analyses. If looked at carefully, they seem to be a digression guided by an appeal to the ordinary opinion that the human intellect has a “divine” character; for, after having carefully distinguished the act of thinking from the capacity to receive the object of thought, the philosopher writes: “therefore it is the latter [i.e., the act of thinking], rather than the former [the potentiality for thinking] that constitutes what intellect seems ($\delta\omicron\kappa\epsilon\iota$) to possess of the divine, and the contemplative act is the most pleasant and perfect” (1072b23–24).⁶⁷ This popular opinion ($\delta\omicron\kappa\epsilon\iota$) concerning the “divine” character of our intellects has a precise meaning and involves an implication that Aristotle assumes here without argumentation.

Clearly, the intellect is held to be “divine” because it makes possible our attainment of happiness (an attribute of the gods); for, as the *Nicomachean Ethics* notes, relating a universal belief: “we suppose that it is the gods especially who possess blessedness and happiness” (x 8.1178b8–9),⁶⁸ while “the other animals do not partake of happiness” (x 8.1178b24). If intellect distinguishes the human from other animals and raises him to the level at which happiness is possible, it is thus reasonable to think that intellect has something divine in it, seeing that the gods especially are thought happy. The implication—which is not a matter of course—is that the gods, if they exist, owe their happiness to intellect or to a form of intellect found in human beings.

Here in the *Metaphysics* Aristotle assumes this implication, but he does not argue for it. Nowhere does he try to prove that the gods exist.⁶⁹ As for showing that they are happy by virtue of the same type of intelligent activity as is found in human beings, only the *Nicomachean Ethics* furnishes a proof, characteristically dialectical, which refutes as laughable or absurd the idea that the gods owe their happiness to a human activity other than contemplation (x 8.1178b8–22).⁷⁰

In fact, the *Metaphysics* takes for granted the claim that the gods’ happiness derives from contemplation.⁷¹ The well known theological statements that immediately follow Aristotle’s recovery of the opinion that intellect is divine are limited to making this point, without transition:

- (1) “If therefore the god always possesses this sort of happy disposition which is ours sometimes, this is wonderful and, if he has more, that is even more wonderful;
- (2) now he has [it] like this;
- (3) and life in any case pertains [to him], for the act of intellect is life and he is act.⁷²
- (4) And his essential act is a perfect and eternal life. Moreover we say that the god is an eternal perfect living being, so that life and a continuous and eternal duration pertain to the god; for the god is this living being” (1072b24–30).⁷³

The claims of (1), which relate to the god in the generic sense, correspond to a conviction independent of its present context. They come quite close to

reproducing the following idea from the *Nicomachean Ethics*: “with the gods, all of life is happy; with human beings, life is happy to the extent that there is something which resembles this [contemplative] sort of act” (*NE* x 8.1178 b25–27). Statement (2), on the other hand, connects the attribute of divine happiness to the preceding considerations.⁷⁴ Thus Aristotle takes the initiative to say that the activity to which the gods owe their reputation of blessedness, an activity that he assumes to be contemplative in nature, must be understood as a kind of thinking. What follows indicates that the god’s activity, reduced to thinking, implies life (3) and that this life is perfect and eternal, as current opinion supposes for such a living being (4).

The digression—(3) and (4)—gives expression to certain basic beliefs about the gods inherited from the tradition. Perhaps Aristotle thought that this tradition could be harmonized, to an extent, with a philosophical account of the pure separate act, which would thus assign to the god a precise ontological status. But in the context this is not precisely his intention. It is more probable that he is mobilizing current theological opinion on the points mentioned in order to support a claim about the first substance. As a whole, Lambda’s chapters devoted to this entity do not seek to solve categorically the questions raised by belief or disbelief in the gods. The passages just reviewed pursue another goal. They try to show in passing that the kind of act whose perfection is being studied corresponds to the act of the gods, who are reputed to be happy and presumed to be perfect eternal living beings. This supports better than other considerations the conviction that the first substance has the excellence attributed to it. That being established, it will be enough to show that the reasons that can be stated against this position are false reasons: οὐκ ὁρθῶς οἴονται (1072b34).

One must go farther. If we want to consider without prejudice the theological digression of lines 1072b24–30, we may legitimately ask to what extent Aristotle wished to equate separate substance (or the first mover) with the god. In claiming that the happy disposition of the god must be “like this” (2), did he really want to do anything other than specify the kind of act through which the god possesses his happiness? And in saying that the god is such an act (3) did he really wish to refer to anything other than that in which a god *essentially* consists, as when he says, elsewhere, that the human being is intellect?⁷⁵ It seems not. And we will find no argument supporting the contrary view.

The reason is that the philosopher’s interest in theology is very much limited by his objectives and focused, within these limits, on certain more or less probable matters of opinion about the gods. It is not important to him that other opinions must be left aside; for here the ideas about the god are not an end but a means. In other words, they enter into Aristotle’s thinking primarily as a methodological instrument. To establish this point, we may turn to the metaphysical discussions of Theophrastus, which are closely connected to the reflections of his master and close associate.

Theophrastus’ metaphysical problems, it has been said, are of “extreme interest” and most appropriate for clarifying “the real meaning of the master’s

metaphysical approach" (Festugière 1931, 357). For along with Aristotle, Theophrastus assumes the view, formulated at the end of Lambda, that "the substance of the universe" cannot be "episodic," that is, a series of natures without internal connection between them (*M Λ* 10.1076a1).⁷⁶ "It is more reasonable to admit," he says at the beginning of his metaphysical problems, "that such connection exists and that the universe is not episodic" (Theophrastus, *Metaphysics*, 4a13–14).⁷⁷ Thus, Theophrastus takes up Aristotle's reflection on substance where Aristotle had left it, presumably in order to appraise its cogency. The disciple takes into account the master's hypothesis regarding the nature of the substantial principle that secures the unity of the whole, and what he says about the way one must proceed in order to grasp this principle's nature seems to be a genuine commentary on the texts of Lambda I just interpreted. One must disclose this principle, Theophrastus declares, "either by analogy or by means of another similarity" (4b12–13; cf. 8a19–20). The method of analogy or of comparison that enables us to attain the principle is, in fact, the one I drew from the passage in which Aristotle refers to the god (and to the intelligent human being) in order to suggest the condition of the immaterial principle. Yet is Theophrastus actually thinking about the same reference, the same point of comparison? We do not have to take this as a mere hypothesis, for he himself indicates it beyond any shadow of a doubt. He writes: "It is necessary perhaps to grasp [the principle] by [reference to] a faculty that surpasses the rest, *as if we were conceiving the god* (ὥσπερ ἂν εἰ τὸν θεόν). The principle on which the existence and the substance of everything depends is, in fact, divine. It is quite easy to account for it in this way," Theophrastus adds, "but it is difficult to do so more clearly and more convincingly" (4b13–18). Aristotle's immaterial principle surpasses, if not the understanding at least all representation, but one can reach it by means of an "as if." Theophrastus' words, on this subject, are unambiguous: the principle is not the god; it is like the god, merely comparable to him.

The interpretation of Lambda that takes its lead from this assertion of Theophrastus follows a less suspect authority than that of other, much later interpreters of Aristotle. But Theophrastus' authority is less important than the fact that he provides evidence for a method in use at the time, which consists of conceiving the universal principle on the model of the god and implies that first philosophy's interest in beliefs or ideas about the god is explained not by the wish to confirm such beliefs by rational means, but by the wish to find in such beliefs ways of representing by comparison first philosophy's proper object. Was this method Aristotle's? We may doubt it, but we may also doubt the contrary and consequently formulate the hypothesis that Lambda's theological statements portray the god as an analog of the first substance that illuminates what this substance is.

It is to such a hypothesis that one is led by examining the second passage of Lambda that mentions the gods, the well-known lines that bring chapter 8