

ΝΟΥΣ in Aristotle

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For Aristotle νοῦς is the highest form of intellectual activity. A direct and immediate apprehension of basic truths. Νοῦς plays a crucial role in Aristotle's concept of god. God is νοῦς whose object is itself. Humans have a portion of νοῦς too, and in this they are like gods (to a very limited extent). For humans, νοῦς also has fundamental importance in Aristotle's epistemology. Using mathematics as his model, Aristotle held that all sciences proceed by means of demonstrations. The demonstrations are based on basic principles. If we have a demonstration that the sum of the angles of a triangle is equal to two right angles, then that proof is based on certain principles. These principles are basic because they cannot be proved. But if the conclusion of the proof is true because the principles are true, then why are the principles true? If the truth of the principles is what makes the conclusions true, then what makes the principles true? Our knowledge of the conclusion depends on our knowledge of the principles. But how do we know the principles? This is a serious problem because without good reason to believe that we can know the principles, we have no good reason to believe that we can know the conclusions. And without good reason to believe that we can know the conclusions, then there is no good reason to believe that we can have scientific knowledge.

Aristotle knew all this. This is why he says that νοῦς (the kind of grasp we have of scientific principles) is different from ἐπιστήμη (the kind we have of conclusions). But although he says a great deal about ἐπιστήμη, he says very little about νοῦς, the cognitive state. When he discusses νοῦς his main concern is to show that it is different from ἐπιστήμη and to identify the role it plays in sciences. When he talks about how we obtain νοῦς, he says that we do so through a process involving several stages. First, perception, then memory, then something he calls ἐμπειρία, and finally νοῦς. But this does not answer the question that must occur to anyone who studies this part of Aristotle: granted that νοῦς is very important and granted that it results ultimately from seeing particular instances of phenomena, what is the nature of the cognitive state that is νοῦς, and *how* do we reach that state, through what cognitive mechanisms? Aristotle never faces this problem. He leaves us with the impression that we have some infallible instinctive or intuitive way of grasping basic truths. A mysterious and possibly even mystical element that is not at all at home in his theory of demonstration!

On the other hand, occasional remarks of his point toward certain psychological phenomena that have recently become a subject of interest to cognitive psychologists. In this paper I will give a sketch of this new development in cognitive psychology and show how it offers a partial solution to the problem of understanding how νοῦς works.