

Aristotle's Metaphysics

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The work we have now was put together by an editor. It is thus best seen as a collection of essays rather than a single work. Scholars are divided as to whether it's best to stress the *unity* of the essays or to stress the search for "puzzles" (the *aporetic* approach). I will tell you a fairly unified story, joining the four characteristics of "the science for which we search": 1) first principles and causes [aitiology]; 2) be-ing of beings [ontology]; 3) substantiality [ousiology]; 4) highest beings [theology].

1.2: aitiology: the science of first principles and causes (117-20)

4.1-2: ontology: the science of the be-ing of beings (128-30)

7.1 & 8.1: ousiology: the search for substantiality (150-1 & 174-76)

9.6: the key to substantiality: the distinction of potency and act (184-5)

12.7-10: theology: the prime mover (189-94)

1.2: aitiology: the search for the science of wisdom. The *Metaphysics* records the search for **first philosophy** or **wisdom**. *Metaphysics* 1.2 specifies this science as *the theoretical science of the first principles and causes*.

* First, Aristotle asks that we "consider our views about the wise person."

* After this survey comes *six criteria of the type of things known by wisdom*:

- 1) the most universal things (the principles of all beings)
- 2) the most difficult things (because furthest from perception)
- 3) the most exact things (first principles are more exact than applications)
- 4) the causes of things
- 5) things known for their own sake
- 6) the good of each thing.

* Next comes a list of *characteristics of this science* of principles and causes:

- 1) it is non-productive:
 - a) in principle, it arises out of wonder, to escape ignorance
 - b) in fact, it arose only with leisure, after necessity
- 2) despite poets' stories, it is fit for humans
- 3) it is the most honorable because most divine
 - a) it is the science most worthy of being possessed by a god

b) it is the science of diving things

4.1: ontology: the science of being. Now that we know that wisdom as aiology, the science of first principles and causes, is the most noble and divine science, we must now determine where to look for those first principles and causes. In *Metaphysics* 4.1 Aristotle tells us that we cannot look in any one corner of the cosmos, at any one set of beings, such as mathematical or physical objects. Rather, wisdom is now specified as *ontology*, the science of "be-ing of beings": the study of ordinary beings, but with regard only to their be-ing, their stable presence. Wisdom as ontology is thus is a "universal" science which will provide us with the first principles and causes we are looking for.

4.2: focal meaning. In a way, when we search for the be-ing of beings as the first principles and causes of beings, we are searching for the justification for using the verb "to be" with regard to certain things. Aristotle says here that the verb "to be" has many applications, but they are all relative; they all focus on one primary meaning. Although Aristotle does not name this primary meaning here, it is named in 7.1.

7.1: ousiology: the search for substantiality. The primary meaning of be-ing is specified by Aristotle here: all uses of the verb "to be" are relative to *ousia* or substance. Substance is what we're after: if we understand substance, we understand be-ing, and hence we will know the first principles and causes.

Here Aristotle begins one of the greatest records of philosophical inquiry we have: Books 7-9 of the *Metaphysics*, the search for substantiality, the criterion by which we can justify our everyday sense that complete organic beings like horses and men are substances. As we will see, we are after the stable presence of these beings, that which remains the same beneath all the changes they undergo.

In Book 7 Aristotle considers in turn four criteria of substantiality: a) subjecthood; b) individuality; c) essentiality; d) identity. We can't go into the notoriously difficult details (*Metaphysics* 7 is sometimes called "the philosopher's bootcamp"), but suffice it to say that all these proposals fail by themselves. They are only necessary; no one is sufficient by itself. We can understand how they work together to become jointly sufficient only after we understand a key distinction: that of potency and act, as developed in 9.6

9.6: the key distinction of potency and act. Here we have one of the most famous Aristotelian notions, one that is part of our everyday conceptual toolbox passed on in by our "Western culture."

As we see on our charts, Aristotle makes two sets of distinctions, which when combined, give eight possibilities.

First, let's distinguish between *two forms of potency*:

a) power, which can mean either:

i) the capacity to change something (e.g., muscle power as the capacity to do physical work, to move things around)

ii) the disposition to act (e.g., a trained ability, like being able to speak a language)

b) potential, which can mean either:

i) the capability of being changed (e.g., living things can be killed)

ii) the capability of developing by learning (e.g., a baby who can learn a language)

Second, let's distinguish between *two forms of act*:

a) motion, which can mean either:

- i) changing something from one state to another (e.g. actually moving things around with your muscles)
- ii) being changed (e.g., actually being moved from life to death)

b) activity, which can mean either:

- i) the awakening of the capability of developing by learning (e.g., actually learning a language)
- ii) intensifying a state by acting on a disposition (e.g., actually speaking a language that you have learned)

The distinction between motion and activity is crucial.

Motion aims at a completed state that is outside the motion. In other words, motion aims at rest, so that in one way, motion is "suicidal." For example, the motion of building aims at the completed building, so that motion is directed to the point of its finishing, its "death." In other words, when the building is finished, then so is the building.

Activity however aims at an immanent completion, not an external goal. Activity awakens or intensifies an inner state; activity is complete in itself. Aristotle gives three examples in 9.6: seeing, understanding, thinking: when you see something, you completely see it, you have completed the activity.

With this distinction, and a little help from *De Anima*, Aristotle's "psychology," we can say that the substantiality of human beings, the stable presence by which we can identify them, is the disposition to think with *logos*, with measured speech that fits cosmos and polis and with *nous*, with insight into first principles. (We'll see how this fits into the *Ethics* and *Politics*.) Our substantiality must only be our power to think, our trained capacity to think; it can't be the pure activity of thought, because of our bodies, which pull us out of thought by fatigue and hunger. We'll have to wait to consider *theology*, the study of the highest beings, to see pure activity.

Nonetheless, at this point we have put together three characteristics of first philosophy, if only in the case of human beings: a) it is the science of first principles and causes; b) is the science of the being of beings; c) it is the science of substantiality. Our power to think is: a) the first principle and cause we need to understand how humans are human; b) our stable presence, our being (since we have the power always, even when tired or asleep); c) our substantiality, that which joins the four criteria of subjecthood, individuality, essentiality and identity.

However, despite the neatness of our achievement so far, Aristotle never tires of reminding us that "humans are not the highest beings." Why not? Because we move, and motion aims at rest; we are not complete and self-contained.

12.7: *theology: the prime mover*. Now to add the last element, the study of the highest being, the divine one, the one that will link all three previous elements

Aristotle argues from the accepted fact of eternal, continuous, circular motion of the stars. Since all motion must have an unmoved mover, the only mover capable of provoking such motion must be an eternal substance of

pure activity, one that never rests. Now such a mover moves others "as does the object of understanding or desire" (189): it provokes motion in imitation of its complete self-sufficiency.

How can we understand such a thing? At 1072b15, Aristotle gives us some clues: the prime mover has "the same character as our own way of life has for a short time." This turns out to be the insight into insight, or thought thinking thought: the Eureka of Eureka, except continuous and never-ending (1074b35). Such a condition of totally and perfectly self-contained activity would be perfect pleasure and pure life, as 12.7 argues. It must be a pure activity, with no matter or potential, because it never needs to stop. It is not a trained disposition to think that resides in a troublesome body, but pure disembodied thought.

Now to see how the *Metaphysics* comes together with the doctrine of the prime mover.

a) aitiology: the prime mover is the first principle and cause of all beings, as its principle of self-sufficiency provokes natural change. All moving things ultimately desire to rest, to stop moving. But because of matter, they must keep moving: the stars must keep circling. As far as humans go, we can imitate in two ways: 1) as embodied thinkers, we can strive after insight, but this must be let go eventually due to fatigue and hunger; 2) as animals, we can strive after circular regeneration, but this is only passing on the same form in different matter (hence the father vs. mother; form vs. matter distinction you talked about yesterday).

b) ontology: the prime mover is the principle of stability, which is the meaning of be-ing. It never changes; it is one and self-identical. Its condition is what all beings aim at, not just some beings.

c) ousiology: the prime mover is the most exemplary substance, fulfilling the highest criterion of substantiality, pure activity, the one that evaded us humans, who had to settle for the disposition to act because of our disturbing bodies.