

INTRODUCTORY NOTE FOR THE FOURTEEN BOOKS

We are accustomed to call these fourteen books of Aristotle the *Metaphysics*. But custom can be a tyrant, as Shakespeare teaches us. And if you went into a modern bookstore and looked for some “metaphysical” books, they would probably refer you to the occult and metaphysical section, which, of course, has nothing to do with Aristotle’s fourteen books.

In his Proemium to these fourteen books (in the beginning of the first book), Aristotle calls this kind of philosophy *wisdom*. Now how can he call some human knowledge *wisdom* simply and without qualification when he and all the great Greek philosophers think that God alone is wise fully and perfectly? They all think that either God alone is wise; or if man can be called wise in some way, it is only in some very imperfect and qualified way. Thus we might say that Socrates is wise *as a man can be wise* and this limited or imperfect way separates the wisdom of man from that of God. God has wisdom simply and without qualification; He is wise simply and without any qualification.

The answer to this question is that the distinction between what is so simply and without any qualification and what is so only in some imperfect way and with qualification can be applied in the comparison between man’s knowledge and the knowledge of God or in the comparison of this kind of philosophy to the other kinds of philosophy.

If we compare man’s knowledge to God’s knowledge, God is wise simply and without qualification and man can be wise only in some imperfect way and with much qualification.

But if we compare this kind of philosophy to the other kinds of philosophy, we can say that this kind of philosophy is wisdom simply and without qualification while natural philosophy and ethics & political philosophy are wisdom only in some qualified way. Natural philosophy is a wisdom *about all natural things and their causes* and ethics & political philosophy are a wisdom *about human life and the end of human life which is happiness*. Wisdom, as we learn in the Proemium, is about *all* things and the *first* causes or cause. It is not about some things in particular and their first causes. These fourteen books are about all things and their first causes or cause.

Thus we may rightly call these fourteen books, the fourteen books of *Wisdom*.

Aristotle has another name for the knowledge taught in these fourteen books. He calls them *First Philosophy*. Andronicus of Rhodes, the early editor of Aristotle's books, placed these fourteen books *After (Meta) the (Ta) Books in Natural Philosophy* (phusika) and our word *metaphysics* is a result of running together these three words without any understanding of the original words.

Now there is an apparent contradiction in the words here because how can *first* philosophy be *after anything*. The first is before everything else.

But this apparent contradiction is easily untied by a knowledge of the twelfth chapter of the *Categories*. There Aristotle teaches us that the word *before* is a word equivocal by reason. And he distinguishes in order there the four central senses or meanings of the word. And in so doing, he is also teaching us the central senses of the word *after* for there is the same knowledge of opposites. And because words like *first* and *last* are defined by before and after, he also enables us to distinguish the meanings of *first*, *last* and any other word (such as *order*) defined by before and after. It is fitting that wisdom be named from two different senses of order, in one of which it is first and in the other last. We are forced to begin thinking about the various senses of order which means a before and after. And *sapientis est ordinare*.

These fourteen books come after the books in natural philosophy in the order of learning. This sense of before and after is led back to the third sense in the *Categories*. But wisdom is called first philosophy by the fourth sense of before which is better and more honorable. As Aristotle says in the Proemium to *Wisdom*, every other knowledge is more necessary than this, but none is better.

One could also call wisdom first philosophy because the word *philosophy* names a knowledge which a lover of wisdom would pursue and that would be first and most of all the knowledge which has most the character of wisdom.

It could also be called first philosophy because it is about first things, especially the first being and the first causes or cause.

But it is also appropriate that the fourteen books of *Wisdom* be called the books *After the Books in Natural Philosophy* because for over 200 years, the

Greek philosophers identified wisdom with natural philosophy. Until one knows that there are immaterial substances, one would identify what is with bodies (and what is found in bodies). Thus, it was a common opinion that whatever is must be somewhere; and if it is not somewhere, it does not exist. And it is a property of natural bodies to be in some place. And it is only in the study of natural things that one can reason that there are immaterial things. Thus, this name brings out that wisdom is something other than natural philosophy and something that comes after natural philosophy in the order of learning.

The best way to learn these fourteen books of *Wisdom* or *First Philosophy* is to read the text of Aristotle with the exposition of Thomas Aquinas.

But there are also other texts of Thomas that cast some light on particular texts in the 14 books. These along with some notes can be divided according to the book and lectio to which they are relevant. Some translations of parts of the text of Aristotle can also be useful. Some texts from other authors besides Thomas will also sometimes be given.

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