

NOTE FOR THE SECOND BOOK OF WISDOM

Sometimes it may be useful to put ourselves in Aristotle's shoes and try to think of what we would do next. Since one man is wiser than another because he sees what is before or after what the other man sees, or because he sees a before and after which the other man does not see, it may be an occasion to learn and admire the wisdom of Aristotle.

Let us put ourselves then in the shoes of Aristotle after the Proemium to Wisdom and the consideration of the opinions of his predecessors about causes in the rest of Book One. In the Proemium, we saw that the goal of wisdom is to know causes and, at last, the first causes. And we also saw in the Proemium that this is the most desirable knowledge. But we also saw in the Proemium that wisdom is about things difficult for man to know. Then we considered our predecessors who had sought this goal of knowing the first causes to see if we could learn wisdom from them. But in each of them we had seen some failure to reach this goal of wisdom. Hence, we must discover wisdom ourselves although perhaps not without the help of our predecessors. And Aristotle will begin the Third Book of Wisdom with some consideration of how discoveries are made by our reason. But before the Third Book comes the Second Book. Why? Once we know that we cannot learn or fully learn wisdom from our predecessors, is not the *next* thing to consider how we may discover what we do not know and then proceed in that way to discover?

Thomas Aquinas has unfolded the division and the order of the questions raised in Book Three and in the dialectical discussion of them there from what we learn in the last part of the Second Book (in the fifth *Lectio* or Reading). And we can begin to understand why a dialectical consideration of things should come before a reasoned out knowledge of them in natural philosophy and in wisdom (as in the Third Book of Wisdom), but not in geometry, from what we learn in the beginning (and the end) of the Second Book of Wisdom. But these things can begin to be understood only after we have mastered the teaching of the Second Book.

Another question that might occur to us after the Proemium to Wisdom and the consideration of the opinions of our predecessors about causes is how can we get wisdom. This is a pressing question, given the difficulty of getting wisdom and the failure of others to get it. What is the road to follow in wisdom? What is the way of going forward in this reasoned out knowledge? And Aristotle will

eventually take up this question, but he sees something before it to consider in Book Two. There is a more general question that comes before the question what is the road to follow in wisdom, what is the way of knowing in this reasoned out knowledge. This more general question is: how should the road to follow in any reasoned out knowledge be determined? This question comes before, not only the question about the road to follow in wisdom, but also about the particular road to follow in any other form of reasoned out knowledge (such as in natural philosophy or geometry or ethics).

But is there a reason why this general question should be considered in wisdom since it is necessary for every form of reasoned out knowledge?

We learned in the Proemium that the wise man directs all others to some extent. Now in every reasoned out knowledge, one is directed by a knowledge of the road to follow in that reasoned out knowledge. Hence, the man who considers how these private roads of reasoned out knowledge should or should not be determined is, to some extent, directing all others. But this is the office of the wise man as we learned in the Proemium to Wisdom.

Moreover, as Aristotle shows in the middle of the Second Book, the consideration of truth belongs most of all to the wise man. Hence, it is fitting that the wise man considers how the road to truth in any reasoned out knowledge should be determined.

But Aristotle sees that there is an even more universal consideration to be made by the wise man before he considers how the particular road to truth in any reasoned out knowledge should or should not be determined. This is the consideration of how man is towards knowing truth. This is what Aristotle considers in the First Lectio or Reading of the Second Book while it is in the Fifth and Last Reading of the Second Book that he considers how the road to follow in any reasoned out knowledge should be determined. He artfully places in the middle of the book a reason why both of these considerations belong to the wise man for he shows there that the consideration of truth belongs most of all to the wise man.

In the middle of the Book, after he has shown that wisdom is most of all about truth through its being about first causes, he refutes the mistake of thinking there are no first causes. But by showing that in each of the four kinds of cause there are first causes, he also advances us toward the goal of wisdom. Aristotle, in what I call the sub-plot of Books One and Two, has confirmed that there are

four kinds of cause (under one or more than one of which we must look for the first causes) when he considered the opinions of his predecessors in Book One and now in defending the reason why wisdom is chiefly the knowledge of truth that there are first causes in each of these kinds. In this there is a certain likeness in the fourteen books of wisdom to the Nicomachean Ethics. In the latter, Aristotle draws a line around the end of man in Book One, and then after considering the virtues and other things in detail, he is able to come back to the end of man in Book Ten and determine more perfectly what that end is. And here he advances in Books One and Two towards the goal of wisdom by showing that it must be found in one or more than one of four kinds of cause and that in each of these kinds there is a first cause. But then he considers many other things, which enable him in the last Books of Wisdom to determine much more fully what is the first cause or causes.

We see also in this how Aristotle imitates his master, Socrates or Plato who teaches us in the *Phaedo* to strike a balance between the hope of finding the truth and the fear of being mistaken. Seeing the difficulty of wisdom and the failure of those who have tried to reach its goal gives us a healthy fear of mistake. But it is also discouraging so that Aristotle balances the fear with the hope of getting somewhere when we come to know that there are four kinds of cause and that there are excellent reasons for concluding that there are first causes in each of these kinds.

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