

NOTE FOR ARISTOTLE'S PROEMIUM TO WISDOM

The fourteen books of *Wisdom* or *First Philosophy*, the fourteen books *After the Books in Natural Philosophy* (the books *Meta Ta Phusika* or the *Metaphysics*) can and should be divided in two ways. There is the editorial and reference division, and the logical and understandable division.

The editorial and reference division is into fourteen books. And the editorial and reference division of each book has been made into chapters or into lectios (or readings). (An even more particular reference division is made by the Bekker numbers.) We follow the division into Lectios or Readings since for us, not Averroes, but Thomas Aquinas is by antonomasia *The Commentator* and his text divides each book into Lectios or Readings.

But the logical and understandable division is very different. This division is called *logical* because it follows the logical rule of division into two or three. For the most part, in this division we divide into two or three. When we divide into more than two or three, it is by combining more than one division into two or three. It is called *understandable* because it is ordered (as logic itself is ordered) to understanding what is divided.

When the logical and understandable division of a work is given, we tend to give where in the editorial and reference division the cuts are made.

The first logical and understandable division of most, if not all, of Aristotle's works is proportional to the logical and understandable division of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. The latter is divided into two: the prologue and the play. The prologue is very short compared to the play, but it prepares the audience for the play. Aristotle's works are usually divided logically and understandably into a proemium and the main work sometimes called the *tractatus*, or drawing out, in Latin. Like the prologue to the play, the proemium paves the way for the main work which is drawn out compared to the short proemium.

Aristotle is imitating his master, Plato, in this distinction between the proemium and the main work or drawing out. Plato, of course, wrote mainly Socratic conversations which are not the same kind of work as Aristotle's treatises. But in the *Timaeus* where Socrates listens to the discourse of Timaeus on the universe, Timaeus first gives a proemium (which Socrates praises for its excellence) before his main discourse.

The most essential part of a proemium is to state the aim (*skopos* in Greek) of the work. The desirability of knowing what is aimed at may also be elaborated. Often, in addition to the aim, is something about how to proceed in pursuing that aim. There may be other things to prepare the student for the main work. Thus the way is paved for the student to begin the main work or follow the drawing out of the work in which that aim should be attained.

If the student does not know what the author of the book is aiming at, he can hardly follow understandably what the author is doing in that book. And he may need to know also something about how to proceed.

Among the proemia of Aristotle, two have a most universal importance: the present proemium at the beginning of the fourteen books of *Wisdom* or *First Philosophy* (the *Metaphysics*) and the proemium at the beginning of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. For the former is a proemium, not only to wisdom, but to some extent to the whole of looking philosophy; and the latter is a proemium not only to ethics, but in some way to the whole of practical philosophy (Hence, Aristotle calls the knowledge he is aiming at there *political* for ethics contains the elements of political philosophy, the culmination of practical philosophy.) And it is interesting to note that these two proemia of most universal importance, besides being longer than most proemia, have both the unusual feature of an epilogue at their end where Aristotle recalls the two or three things he has done in that proemium, starting with the last and going back to the first.

We do not have a proemium to the whole of logic coming down to us from Aristotle (although there are proemia to different works). But Thomas Aquinas has given us the classical proemium to the whole of logic in the beginning of his commentary on the *Posterior Analytics* of Aristotle.

Thus, the first editorial and reference division of this work of wisdom is into fourteen books; but in the first logical and understandable division, the proemium is divided against the rest of Book One and Books Two through Fourteen.

The best way to understand Aristotle's *Proemium to Wisdom* is to read it carefully with Thomas' exposition or commentary where he lays it out. The

remainder of this note, with its somewhat random and ad hoc items, presupposes that careful reading and study.

As Thomas points out in his exposition and Aristotle recalls in his epilogue, the proemium has two parts. (The Proemium at the beginning of the *Nicomachean Ethics* has three parts.) The first part, which occupies the first and second readings in the editorial and reference division, is about the aim of wisdom which is to know causes and at last the first cause or causes. The second part, which is found in the third *lectio* or reading, is about the kind of knowledge wisdom is mainly (and also the limit to be reached).

In the first part, Aristotle shows (in the First Reading) that wisdom is about causes through a consideration of the natural road in our knowledge (the road from the senses into reason) which is going from a knowledge of the singular and that it is so towards a knowledge of the universal and why it so; and then he shows more precisely (in the Second Reading) that it is about the first cause or causes.

Even students, who have the most hazy understanding of what wisdom is, think that wisdom comes at the end of our knowledge, not in the beginning or even in the middle of that knowledge. Hence, Aristotle leads us from the order in our knowledge to see where it is going and what would be at the end. We can see on the natural road that, as we go from sensing, memory (of what has been sensed) and experience (from many memories of the same) towards art and science, we are going from a knowledge of the singular and that it is so towards a knowledge of the universal and why it so. Hence, we might guess that at the end would come the most universal knowledge and the knowledge which goes the furthest in knowing causes which would be a knowledge of the first cause. And this is correct for wisdom is both the most universal reasoned out knowledge and a knowledge of the first cause(s). But Aristotle wants us to go forward slowly to this grand conclusion. Hence, in the Second Reading, he thinks out a six-part description of the wise man or wisdom from which he reasons to this conclusion. But from the first three parts of this description, he reasons to wisdom being the most universal knowledge and from the last three he reasons to wisdom being a knowledge of the first cause or causes.

In the second part of the proemium (which occupies the Third Reading), Aristotle shows the kind of knowledge wisdom is and that it is the most desirable knowledge of all.

The distinction in a philosophical treatise between the proemium and the drawing out or main body of the work is proportional to the distinction found also in speeches and plays and operas where the proemium or prologue or overture is distinct from the main work and prepares the way for it. A passage from the third book of Aristotle's *Rhetoric*:

The proemium is the beginning of a speech, as the prologue in poetry and the prelude in flute playing. For all these are beginnings and as a paving the way for what follows. The prelude is like the proemium in display speeches; for flute-players begin by playing whatever they have to play well and to this join the keynote, so also one ought to write in display speeches; the speaker should say at once whatever he likes, give the keynote and then join the main subject...It ought to be noted that the proemia of courtroom speeches produce the same effect as the prologues of dramas and the proemia of epics...In dramas and epics there is a sample of the work, so that the hearers may know beforehand what it is about, and that the mind may not be kept in suspense for the undefined leads astray; so then he who puts the beginning, so to say, into the hearer's hand enables him, if he holds fast to it, to follow the story...The most necessary and proper function then of the proemium is to make clear the end for the sake of which is the speech.¹

Since we have compared the *Proemium to Wisdom* to the Prologue to *Romeo and Juliet*, we give here that prologue:

Two households, both alike in dignity
In fair Verona, where we lay our scene,
From ancient grudge break to new mutiny,
Where civil blood makes civil hands unclean

¹ Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, Bk. III, Chapters 14, 1414b 19-24, 1415a 8-10, 12-15, 22-24

From forth the fatal loins of these two foes
 A pair of star-cross'd lovers take their life;
 Whose misadventur'd piteous overthrows
 Doth with their death bury their parents' strife.

The fearful passage of their death-mark'd love,
 And the continuance of their parents' rage,
 Which, but their children's end, nought could remove,
 Is now the two hours' traffick of our stage.

The which if you with patient ears attend,
 What here shall miss, our toil shall strive to mend.²

Notice how Shakespeare mentions pity and fear, the emotions purged by tragedy, as he prepares the audience for a tragedy where pity and fear will be felt by the audience.

Aristotle reasons from wonder being the beginning of philosophy to wisdom being looking or theoretical knowledge. We see this wonder in the first philosophers who are moved by it to seek the first causes of the things around them. Although this wonder is natural and therefore common to all men, it is much stronger in the philosophers. Democritus expresses the strength of this desire in himself when he said:

I would rather discover one cause than be master of the kingdom of the Persians.³

Plato before Aristotle has Socrates insist that this wonder is the beginning of philosophy:

Theaetetus:

By the gods, Socrates, how greatly I wonder what these things are and sometimes when looking at them, I am really dizzy.

² Shakespeare, Prologue to *Romeo and Juliet*

³ Democritus, DK 118

Socrates:

Theodorus seems to guess not badly about your nature, my friend. For this wonder is very much the undergoing of a philosopher. There is no other beginning of philosophy than this. And the one saying that Iris is the offspring of Thaumas did not make a bad genealogy. But do you begin to understand why these things are so?⁴

Notice the connection of the wonder of the philosopher with the questions what and why in this text. Theaetetus speaks of *what these things are* and Socrates of *why these things are so*. These two questions both ask about the cause as Aristotle teaches us in the second book of the *Posterior Analytics*. The wonder of the philosopher is a wonder what and why or a wonder about the unknown cause. Hence, wonder could be taken not only as a sign that philosophy is a looking knowledge, but also that it is a knowledge of causes.

Socrates or Plato puts in these words on wonder a statement that is not immediately clear. Perhaps, it was to see if we would wonder about it. Why was Hesiod making a good genealogy when he said that *Iris is the offspring of Thaumas*?

Thaumas is wonder personified and Iris in Homer is both the messenger of God and the rainbow personified. Iris is both of these because the messenger of God unites man and God and the rainbow unites heaven (the place of God) and earth (the place of man). Wonder insofar as it moves us to seek a knowledge of the cause and of the cause of the cause and eventually the first cause (which is God) unites man and God, at least on the side of his reason.

The connection of the wonder of the philosopher and the wonder of the philomuthos is sweetly touched upon in this passage from Boswell's *Life of Johnson*:

On Saturday, July 30, Dr. Johnson and I took a sculler at the Temple-stairs, and set out for Greenwich. I asked him if he really thought a knowledge of the Greek and Latin languages an essential

⁴ Plato, *Theaetetus*, 155C-D

requisite to a good education. JOHNSON: "Most certainly, Sir; it is wonderful what a difference learning makes upon most people even in the common intercourse of life, which does not appear to be much connected with it," "And yet, (said I) people go through the world very well, and carry on the business of life to good advantage, without learning." JOHNSON: "Why, Sir, that may be true in cases where learning cannot possibly be of any use; for instance, this boy rows us as well without learning, as if he could sing the song of Orpheus to the Argonauts, who were the first sailors." He then called to the boy, "What would you give, my lad, to know about the Argonauts?" "Sir, (said the boy) I would give what I have." Dr. Johnson then turning to me, "Sir, (said he) a desire of knowledge is the natural feeling of mankind; and every human being, whose mind is not debauched, will be willing to give all that he has to get knowledge."⁵

In the following text, Thomas brings out the significance of one example of wonder given by Aristotle in his Proemium to Wisdom:

sicut ex verbis Philosophi habetur in principio *Metaphysicæ* in proem., admiratio ex duobus causatur, scilicet ex hoc quod alicujus effectus causa occulta est, et ex eo quod aliquid in re videtur per quod aliter esse deberet; unde in hoc quod est diametrum quadrati non posse commensurari lateri, admiratio causatur ex hoc quod hujus causa ignoratur, et ex hoc quod ex parvitate linearum videtur quod una lateri commensurari possit.

Contingit ergo aliquid esse admirabile simpliciter, et aliquid esse admirabile quoad hunc. admirabile huic est omne ilud cujus causa occulta est sibi, et cui videtur secundum suam aestimationem aliquid obviare, quare non ita esse deberet: quamvis in re nihil sit repugnans, nec causa in se sit nimis occulta; et hoc potest dici mirum illi. Admirabile autem in se est id cujus causa simpliciter occulta est, ita etiam quod in re est aliqua virtus secundum rei veritatem per quam aliter debeat contingere. Hujusmodi autem sunt quae immediate a virtute divina causantur, quae est causa

⁵ *BOSWELL'S LIFE OF JOHNSON*, Oxford University Press, 1961, Saturday, 30 July, 1763, pp. 323-324

occultissima, alio modo quam se habeat ordo causarum naturalium.....

[Ad 1] creatio, proprie loquendo, non est opus miraculosum, quia deficit una conditio miraculi: quamvis enim causam occultam habeat, tamen non est in re unde aliter esse deberet: immo esse rerum naturali quodam ordine a primo ente producitur, quamvis non per necessitatem naturae.⁶

Aristotle says in the Proemium that God cannot be envious. Thomas unfolds the reason for this in the following text:

Praeterea. Absque errore cognitivae virtutis esse non potest ut illud quod est bonum apprehendatur ut malum. Nec est nisi in particularibus bonis ut alterius malum possit bonum existere alteri, in quibus corruptio unius est generatio alterius: universali autem bono ex nullo particulari bono aliquid deperit, sed per unumquodque repraesentatur. Deus autem est universale bonum, cuius similitudinem participando omnia dicuntur bona. Nullius igitur malum sibi potest esse bonum. Nec potest esse ut id quod est simpliciter bonum et non est sibi malum, apprehendat ut malum: quia sua scientia est absque errore, ut supra ostensum est. Invidiam igitur in Deo impossibile est esse, etiam secundum suae speciei rationem: non solum quia invidia species tristitiae est, sed etiam quia tristatur de bono alterius, et sic accipit bonum alterius tanquam malum sibi.⁷

Aristotle has spoken well of the reason why wisdom is the best knowledge. The Latin word for wisdom, *sapientia*, is sometimes explained etymologically by Thomas as *sapida scientia* or savoury knowledge. One could also speak then of the excellence of wisdom figuratively. To speak metaphorically, wisdom is the sweetest and most savoury knowledge there is. Shakespeare speaks of the foolish as bitter and unsavoury:

⁶ Thomas Aquinas, Two Causes of Wonder, *Scriptum super Lib. II Sententiarum*, Dist. XVIII, Q. I, Art. III, Sol. and Ad 1

⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Liber I, Capitulum LXXXIX

Come bitter conduct, come unsavoury guide!⁸

And this leads by us by the hand to see that the opposite is sweet and savoury.

Metaphor is based on likeness and the likeness in the metaphor *sweet* is best explained by Thomas:

Dulcedo proprie est in corporalibus, metaphorice autem dicitur in spiritualibus. Unde oportet quod in spiritualibus dulcedeo sumatur ad similitudinem corporalis. Habet autem hoc dulcedo corporalis, quod reficit gustum corporalem et quietat et delectat: similiter et spiritualis dulcedo quietat et reficit et delectat spiritualem gustum.⁹

The sweet is pleasant, refreshing and restful. Even an imperfect knowledge of the higher things is more pleasant than a perfect knowledge of the lower things, as Aristotle says in the *Parts of Animals*. Moreover, since all the lower forms of reasoned out knowledge resolve to wisdom, wisdom is most restful. And the first cause is unchanging. And rest is refreshing. And since wisdom perfects our knowledge of that through which all other things are known, it refreshes us in the sense of restoring strength to the mind. As Heraclitus said, those who speak with understanding must be strong in what is common to all. And since this is said of the wise by antonomasia, wisdom must be refreshing, restoring our powers.

Wisdom is also savoury. When we savour something, we dwell on it, not proceeding quickly to something else. The things considered in wisdom most of all need to be savoured because they are so wonderful and/or because so many things depend upon them and/or because they are difficult to understand. We must savour a food or wine to judge it and the wise man most of all judges.

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⁸ *Romeo and Juliet*, Act V. Sc. 3, Romeo

⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *In Davidem*, Psalmus XXIV