PHILOSOPHY 453 WINTER 2020

ANCIENT METAPHYSICS AND NATURAL PHILOSOPHY: ARISTOTLE'S METAPHYSICS

Stephen Menn ΤΘ 2:30-4, 420 Sherbrooke W, Room 115

This course will be devoted to a close reading of the main argument of Aristotle's Metaphysics. Aristotle presents the Metaphysics as the crown of his theoretical philosophy (i.e. of knowledge valued purely for the sake of knowing it, like physics, not in order to guide action, like ethics and politics): as an ongoing pursuit of the most intrinsically desirable science, what he calls "wisdom" [σοφία] or "first philosophy," and what later writers call "metaphysics." But we should not assume at the outset that we know what wisdom or metaphysics is. Aristotle says different things about it—some preliminary things in other treatises, and then progressively more precise things in the course of the developing argument of the Metaphysics.

Readers from Fârâbî and Avicenna in the 10th century down to the present have been bothered by apparent tensions, both between different things Aristotle says about metaphysics, and between what he says about it and what he actually does in the Metaphysics. While he says a range of things about this science, most famously he sometimes describes it "ontologically," as a science of substance-in-general or of being-in-general, and sometimes "theologically," as a science of divine or eternal or unchanging beings. Most of his descriptions are more "theological" than "ontological," but he does not actually have much discussion of divine or eternal things in the Metaphysics outside one of its fourteen books, Book Λ, except where he is critically examining or refuting proposals that other philosophers, especially Plato, have made about divine or eternal things such as the Forms. These difficulties have led readers, not only to take different views about what Aristotelian metaphysics is and thus what the Metaphysics is about, but also to doubt whether Aristotle intended the Metaphysics as a unified treatise. Most influentially, Werner Jaeger in books published in German in 1912 and 1923 (the latter is available in English translation), proposed that the Metaphysics is a compilation, tied together afterwards either by Aristotle himself or by a later editor, of texts he had written in pursuit of different projects: in 1923 Jaeger thought that Aristotle had begun with a "theological" conception of wisdom and turned in later texts toward an "ontological" conception, and that Aristotle had then finally added some bridge-passages (especially Metaphysics E1) in which he tried, but failed, to show that theology and ontology are the same science. More recent readers have usually tried to be more charitable to Aristotle's insistence that these are compatible descriptions of the same science, and have made various proposals for how they can be so. But even if we can reconcile Aristotle's explicit descriptions of metaphysics, it is not easy to see how the actual argument of the Metaphysics helps to achieve the knowledge so described.

We will provisionally assume in the course that Aristotle intended the Metaphysics as a single treatise (although there is good evidence that we do not have it quite in the state that he intended, and probably he had not finished it to his satisfaction), and that Aristotle's views on the central issues remained reasonably stable. But keeping these questions in mind will help us to read the Metaphysics more carefully and critically. We will try to read most of the Metaphysics, concentrating on the introductory sections where Aristotle sets out the aim and structure of his argument (Books A, B, Γ1-2, and E1), on the central books where he actually carries out crucial parts of the argument (ΕΖΗΘ), and on Book Λ, where he draws his main positive conclusions and compares his solutions with those of his predecessors and contemporary rivals. In trying to illuminate Aristotle's argument in these books, we may also look at his other treatises, especially

the Categories, Posterior Analytics, and Physics, and at works of his predecessors that he is trying to answer or to surpass, especially Plato's Republic and Timaeus, as well as the work of contemporary members of Plato's Academy, most importantly Speusippus, known to us only in fragments. Our central concern will be to understand what Aristotle's own goals were in the Metaphysics, and how and to what extent he accomplishes those goals.

After setting out the problem about the object of metaphysics and some possible solutions, I will turn to Aristotle's descriptions of the project of "wisdom" in Metaphysics A. Aristotle starts by describing wisdom as the kind of knowledge most worth having for its own sake (setting aside any practical consequences); Aristotle argues that it will consist in knowledge of ἀρχαί or first principles, i.e. of whatever exists prior to everything else: such objects must be eternal, since they cannot have been produced from anything prior to themselves, and they must be capable of existing independently from all other things. But what are these ἀρχαί and what discipline can bring us to know them? In Aristotle's time, the competing disciplines were physics (practiced by many pre-Socratics), dialectic (practiced by Plato), and perhaps mathematics (claimed by some in Plato's Academy to be the true path to the ἀρχαί). Aristotle argues that none of these disciplines suffices to give genuine knowledge of the ἀρχαί, and that a further discipline of "first philosophy" is needed. Since we cannot know the ἀρχαί by direct observation, we must infer them as causes of some more manifest effect. But there are many different effects from which we could begin, and each effect has different kinds of cause (that is, different ways of answering the question "why?"). So the first task of the Metaphysics is to narrow down what metaphysics will be, by determining what kinds of cause, of what effects, genuinely lead to eternal first principles, prior to the ordinary objects of experience.

Aristotle proposes in Metaphysics Γ that the highest principles will be found as the causes of the most universal effects, namely being and unity. But since being and unity each have many senses, and since each sense may have many causes, there remain many causal paths to pursue, each of which Aristotle explores in the subsequent books. In each case Aristotle is concerned to evaluate the claims that earlier philosophers (especially Plato) have made to discover wisdom by these paths: in each case the issue turns on whether the given sense of being or unity has a cause that is genuinely prior to, and separate from, ordinary objects of experience. We will examine in detail Aristotle's negative arguments, in Metaphysics Z, that the causes of being-as-substance (i.e. the causes, to each thing, of its being the thing it is) are not prior to ordinary objects, and do not lead either to an eternal material substrate or to eternal Platonic forms. If time permits, we will also look more briefly at his treatment in Metaphysics IMN of approaches, favored especially by Plato and Speusippus, to the ἀρχαί as causes of unity and plurality: these approaches typically begin from mathematical rather than from physical things, and look for ἀρχαί as elements (formal or material constituents within a thing) rather than as extrinsic (efficient or final) causes; we will look at how Aristotle develops these contrasts between his approach and his opponents', and how he intervenes in and exploits the internal disagreements of the Academy. Finally, we will consider Aristotle's positive argument, in Metaphysics Θ and Λ, that the powers [δυνάμεις] of things, which are causes of being-in-potentiality, are posterior to the activities [ἐνέργειαι] which are causes of being-in-actuality, i.e. the causes, to each thing, of its being actually what it had been only potentially, and that a chain of such causes leads up to an eternal ἀρχή which is pure activity without unactualized potentiality. We will conclude by looking at the comparisons and contrasts that Aristotle draws in Λ between his own and other Greek philosophers' accounts of the ἀρχαί, and at his attempt to vindicate Plato's claim that there is a single first principle of all things, and that it is the Good and the source of goodness to all

other things.

The course will be divided into four units. Their principal readings, central issues, and approximate time-lengths are as follows:

U1: Metaphysics A-E: Aristotle's metaphysical project (3 weeks)
U2: Metaphysics Z-H: causes of being as substance (mainly negative results) (4 weeks)
U3: Metaphysics IMN: causes of unity, mathematicals and Forms (negative results) (2 weeks)
U4: Metaphysics Θ and Λ: causes of being as actuality (positive results) (4 weeks)

I have ordered C.D.C. Reeve's new translation of the Metaphysics at the Word Bookstore on Milton Street. (The Word takes only cash and personal checks, not cards. Ask for the books you want at the counter.) That translation is required, although you may also want to compare other translations into English or into any other language you may read, and students with some knowledge of Greek are strongly encouraged to make as much use of the Greek original as you can. I will also assign some passages in other works of Aristotle, notably the Physics and the logical works (the "Organon"), and you must have a translation of these. There are three widely available collections of Aristotle's works, the Basic Works of Aristotle edited by McKeon, the New Aristotle Reader edited by Ackrill, and the Aristotle: Selections edited by Irwin and Fine. Any one of these should be sufficient for at least most of the assigned readings in Aristotle. You may well already own one of these from a previous course. If not, you should acquire one of them: the Word has the McKeon and Ackrill in stock. The McKeon is the most comprehensive of these, and also the cheapest, but its translations are into somewhat old-fashioned English, and sometimes unnecessarily verbose. You can always find any passage (except sometimes from the extant fragments of Aristotle's lost works such as the Protrepticus) in the Complete Works of Aristotle edited by Jonathan Barnes, available electronically in the library: go to https://mcgill.worldcat.org/, search "Barnes complete Aristotle" (without the quotation marks), open the e-book, and click on particular titles as many times as you need to get to a particular passage. (Short passages can be copied and pasted to your own document for printout.) The fragments of Aristotle's lost Protrepticus (both in Greek and in English translation) are downloadable from http://www.protrepticus.info/protr2017x20.pdf. Some texts will also be assigned from Plato, and I will assume that you have access to translations of his dialogues. The standard collection in English is Plato: Complete Works, edited by Cooper-Hutchinson, but other translations are also acceptable as long as they have the Stephanus page numbers and letters in the margins. Other assigned readings may be put on the course's iversity site (see below). All assigned texts, whether in the Metaphysics or not, are equally required, and you must always have each day's readings with you in class, in a bound book or a photocopy or printout, not just on a computer, since computers and other electronic devices are not allowed in class. The readings are not supplements to help you understand the topic that the course is about: the readings are what the course is about. The aim of the course is to read the Metaphysics intelligently, understanding what Aristotle is doing, overall and in the details of particular arguments.

The course will meet for two 90-minute lecture-discussion sessions each week. Discussions will depend very heavily on details of the reading: you must always have done each week's reading carefully and on time, and have the texts with you in class, so that you are prepared to answer questions about them. These are extremely difficult texts, and you should allow yourself considerable time to do the readings and reflect carefully and critically on what is going on in

them. Do not come to class if you have been unable to do the readings.

The normal prerequisite is Philosophy 355 (Aristotle) at McGill, or equivalent courses elsewhere that cover Aristotle's logic and physics, not just his ethics or politics. This course is not an introduction to Aristotle. Students who have taken Philosophy 354, Plato, are also welcome, but if they have not had an Aristotle course they will have to do some additional background reading. Students who have not had a general Aristotle course must talk to me after the first meeting about what extra work they might need to do. Students who have not taken either Aristotle or Plato cannot stay in the course without my permission: you should be starting with Plato and Aristotle, not with an advanced course. Students must know, or rapidly learn, the Greek alphabet, and must be ready to listen to discussions of the meaning of Greek words, but no prior knowledge of Greek language is required, although it would of course be an advantage.

Grades will be based on a 5-7 page paper (20%, due date to be announced in class), a 12-15 page term-paper due on the last day of class (40%), class participation (20%, requiring serious active participation in discussions), and at least two short analyses of the arguments of particular texts (totalling 20%): I will ask each student at least twice during the term (depending on class size) to prepare such an analysis and to copy it and distribute it in class as an aid to discussion. These handouts should generally be between 2 and 4 single-spaced pages. (Graduate students are exempted from the short paper requirement, and should write a 20-25 page research term-paper, worth 50% of the grade, with class participation, including leading discussions if requested, worth 30% and handouts worth 20%.) Students will also have to learn the Greek alphabet, and must pass a test on the Greek alphabet to remain in the course. Do not ask for extensions: if a paper is handed in late, I may or may not grade it, but I will make no guarantees ahead of time. The papers should be on texts or arguments that we have not discussed, or have only touched on, in class: you should design them as if they were additional lectures or discussion-pieces on something in the Metaphysics that the class did not have time to get to—and inevitably we will have had to skip many interesting things. While constraints of space may mean that the short paper has to be mainly expository, the term-paper allows more scope for considering objections and different possible interpretations. Papers that repeat class lectures and discussions, or rely uncritically on secondary literature, including Reeve's introduction and notes, will fail. The aim of the papers is to show that you have acquired the skills to read and interpret Aristotle's arguments on your own. Reeve is one scholar among others, and his opinions are not evidence. You should consult with me well before the end of term on your proposed topic for the term-paper. In accord with McGill University's Charter of Students' Rights, students in this course have the right to submit in English or in French any written work that is to be graded.

To receive a passing grade for the course, students must show that they have kept up with the readings and are able to discuss them in class. Students who are unable to do this will be asked to withdraw. Since there is no final exam, my only evidence that you have read the texts other than those you discuss in your papers and handouts, and that you have read them intelligently and critically, will be your class attendance and participation, including answering questions in class. I cannot grade you if I cannot certify that you have done this.

All students and auditors must sign up for the course on iversity, https://un.iversity.org, on the first day of class, so that they can receive reading assignments and any other messages for the course. I will announce each day's reading assignment on iversity, and if the text is not in Reeve's Metaphysics or in the standard Aristotle collections, I will post a copy of the text itself. I will also use iversity to ask for volunteers to prepare handouts on the next day's readings; please volunteer by posting a reply on iversity.

In all papers and class handouts, references to the texts of Aristotle must always be to the Bekker page and line numbers printed in the margins of most editions and translations (e.g. "1042b21") or to book and chapters numbers (e.g. "De Anima II,7"), never to the page numbers in Reeve or any other collection. Similarly, references to the texts of Plato must be to the Stephanus page numbers and letters printed in the margins of most editions and translations, never to the page numbers in Cooper-Hutchinson. Don't worry if your line numbers may be a line or two off. References to books of the Metaphysics should be not by numbers but by Greek letter names, A = I, α ("alpha elatton") = II, B = III, Γ = IV, Δ = V, E = VI, Z = VII, H = VIII, Θ = IX, Iota = X, K = XI, Λ = XII, M = XIII, N = XIV. You will have to get very familiar with the letter-names for these books: when someone says "Zeta" or "Theta" or "Lambda," that should immediately mean something to you about the content of the book. (See the handout on the books of the Metaphysics.)

Students should be aware that there are sometimes serious difficulties, and disagreements among different scholars, not only about how to grammatically construe and translate Aristotle's sentences, but also about what words Aristotle wrote. As with any classical text, different manuscripts often have different texts: usually the differences are slight, but sometimes they are important. Our earliest manuscripts of the Metaphysics are from about 1200 years after Aristotle wrote it. I will sometimes disagree with Reeve on these issues. Also, different translators will give different English equivalents for Aristotle's technical terms. We will discuss these issues in class; you will have to get used to them.

For those who wish to read the text in Greek, there are three main options. The most convenient and up-to-date edition of the Metaphysics is Werner Jaeger's Oxford Classical Text of 1957, available on Amazon for $65. A fuller edition, with more critical apparatus and a useful commentary, is W.D. Ross' edition of 1924 (2 volumes). There have been several reprints (some incorporating Ross' later revisions), but all are expensive. Both Ross and Jaeger are adventurous in emending the text. Probably still the safest edition (although it lacks access to one important manuscript) is Hermann Bonitz' edition and commentary of 1848-9. This is in the public domain and can be downloaded from, for instance, https://archive.org/details/aristotelismeta00bonigoog, which contains both volumes. If you use Bonitz, please download and print at least all of volume 1 (the edition); volume 2, the commentary (in Latin), is also very useful.

If there is sufficient interest, I am willing to have an extra weekly session reading selections from the Metaphysics in Greek with Greek-reading students and auditors. I propose meeting Fridays from 2:00 to 3:00, in Leacock 927 if that room is available. Let me know in the first class if you are interested.

McGill requires me to add the following paragraph: "McGill University values academic integrity. Therefore all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offences under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures (see https://www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/honest for more information)."

Computers and other electronic equipment may not be used in class; classes may not be recorded under any circumstances.

My office is Leacock 921; I will be available there Wednesdays from 4:00 to 6:00. I can sometimes be reached, especially in the evenings, at my office phone number, 398-7452 (no voicemail). I cannot in general answer emails: come to office hours, or talk to me after class (not before class), or if necessary call. I may be able to give brief answers to brief messages on the iversity site.