PHIL 355 Winter 2014 – short description

The purpose of this course is to offer students an introduction to the philosophy of Aristotle. But that's a challenge for two reasons. First, Aristotle wrote and lectured on such a wide variety of subjects. Second, he developed specialised techniques for addressing philosophical problems and a technical vocabulary for talking about them. With Plato, we seem to be witnessing the beginning of philosophy, and it is not hard to make beginning students feel as if they are getting on to the wagon just as it is taking off. But, with Aristotle, philosophy has already made such strides that it could well seem to beginning students that the wagon has long since taken off and left them behind. So the Aristotle course especially needs some kind of focus. I can't think of a better way to focus it than to organise it around the question: how did Aristotle conceive of philosophy? I plan to use the special cases of physics and psychology to help round out the answer, because Aristotle clearly disagreed with his most significant predecessors about the status and strategy of these two disciplines. In the case of physics, that is quite clear, because Plato seems to deny explicitly that physics is a part of philosophy. He treats physics in the *Timaeus* as nothing more than a 'likely story'. Aristotle thinks that physics is a part of philosophy and hence that it can be a rigorous science. That means ideally that it can shown to proceed from certain first principles. But one of the problems Aristotle faced is figuring out what those principles are. Since he believed that physics had not yet been converted into a science, he could not simply appeal to some textbook presentation of them. Furthermore, he denied explicitly that a given science – assuming that it has achieved scientific status – can provide a demonstration of its own principles. How could it, after all, given that its principles, whatever they may be, are its point of departure: a demonstration of the principles of science X, if possible, would have to be carried out by some other science Y. These problems apparently suggested to Aristotle that, in order to convert physics into a science, there would first have to be a pre-physical exercise in the course of which the not-yet-physicist philosopher tests the current positions of the would-be physicists. This exercise would take the form of a debate with the would-be physicists using techniques of argument familiar to Plato and his rivals for students: people that Plato and Aristotle both would have called sophists. We will have to spend some time probing the texts of the organon that spell out these techniques: in the *Topics* and the *De interpretatione*. Then we will see how these techniques are put to use in Book One of the *Physics* to narrow in on the principles of this new discipline, and then see how these principles are put to work in Books Two-Four of the *Physics*, excerpts from the *De Caelo* and the *GC*. We will then want to see how the same techniques and the results of the physics were to be used to convert psychology into a science too. That will again make for an interesting contrast with Plato, because, on the one hand, Aristotle wants to make psychology a part of physics, but at the same time his chief criticism of Plato's psychology seems to be not that Plato had a too idealistic, immaterialist conception of the soul, but rather that Plato's conception of the soul was too low, base or parasitic on our representations of bodily things. I hope that there will be time too to explore a little bit of the book called the 'Metaphysics'. If there is any time left, we will look at the ethics. But for this term, ethics will be the afterthought, and there will be no time for the politics.