

INTRODUCTION TO
ARISTOTLE'S THEORY OF BEING AS BEING

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by

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translated by

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FOREWORD

Philosophy finds itself “between tradition and another beginning.”¹ For this reason it seems necessary to reconsider the foundations of traditional philosophy in the hope that out of these considerations new questions may arise which may lead to a new philosophical foundation. To this end neither the large manual nor the monograph is well suited. What is required, instead, is to take a few steps which lead our thoughts directly into the problems of a given, traditional, philosophical foundation.

In this sense the present work wishes to provide an “introduction” into that philosophical foundation which, until Hegel, had a decisive influence upon traditional philosophy. Consequently, it does not see its task in providing a survey of this whole complex of problems. Nor does it offer solutions to questions about difficult passages which have been the subject of two thousand years of Aristotelian scholarship. Instead, it follows a definite path which might bring this Aristotelian science, the theory which seeks to determine being *as* being, *on hei on*, closer to the student of philosophy.

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WERNER MARX

¹ Cf. by the author: *Reason and World: Between Tradition and Another Beginning*, The Hague, 1972.

PREFACE

This introduction is limited to a single theme of Aristotelian philosophy, namely, the science (*episteme*) of being as being, the science which is regarded as the foundation of traditional philosophy and which, in addition, has always been one of the main concerns of Aristotelian scholarship. Aristotle defined the object of this science in Books Alpha, Epsilon, Kappa, Lambda, and also in other passages of his metaphysics.¹ Only in book Gamma, however, did he discuss more thoroughly the program of this one, particular science, the program which necessitates that it be only one science. There, in Book Gamma, he defined more precisely the nature of its object. This is one of the reasons for which we will take this book of the metaphysics as our point of departure. By doing so we gain a first insight into the “program” of the theory of being as being; at the same time, a series of questions arises which can serve as an outline for this treatise.

Gamma 1 begins:

There is a science (*episteme*) which contemplates (*theorei*) being as being (*to on hei on*) and that which belongs to it per se.²

This programmatic statement leads to the following questions: What does Aristotle mean by “knowledge” without qualification? What does

¹ The work traditionally called the *Metaphysics* was not conceived of by Aristotle as one work. Instead, it consisted of a series of independent, shorter writings which were first brought together into one work by later editors. The title “Metaphysics” was derived from the book’s position in Aristotle’s works as a whole, namely *μετὰ τὰ φυσικά* (after the Physics). Initially, therefore, the meaning of the title had no bearing on the contents of the book itself.

² *Meta. Γ 1*, 1003 a 21 f. Ross translates: “There is a science which investigates being as being and the attributes which belong to this in virtue of its own nature.” Note: In this text the translations by W. D. Ross (*The Works of Aristotle translated into English*. Oxford, 1908, 1928²) are given in the footnotes only when they differ greatly from our own.

he mean by “science” (*episteme*)? Finally, what is characteristic of that knowledge and that science which contemplates “being as being”?

The very next sentence answers these questions only insofar as it distinguishes the science in question from other sciences in one particular respect.

This is not the same as any of the so-called particular sciences; for none of these others treats universally (*katholou*) of being as being. They cut off a part of being and contemplate what belongs to this part (*to symbebekos*) as for instance the mathematical sciences do.³

The specific difference is thus “universality.” The other sciences address themselves to a particular generic unity, and they proceed in such a way as to subsume the objects of their inquiry under particular classes. None of them treats of being “universally,” as does the science in question here. But how are we to understand the universality in the procedure of this unique science?

Does Aristotle mean that this science investigates a multitude of species? Or does he have in mind a particular manner of approach or a particular characteristic of the object under investigation? What, for example, is the difference between the theoretician of physics, the *physikos*, and the theoretician who inquires into being as being? To be sure, later passages in Book Gamma give some indications of how to answer these questions,⁴ but a more thorough answer can be given only within the framework of an inquiry which begins with a definition of what Aristotle means by knowledge and proceeds from there to a characterization of that which is peculiar to philosophical knowledge and its objects. Therefore, following the course cited above, the first part of the present treatise will attempt a definition of this particular science.

The introductory sentence from Gamma 1 quoted above already referred to the subject matter of the theory in question here: being as being. But what is the meaning of the word “being” (as a participle)? Does this term refer to “being” in general, to that which is universally “being,” or only to that which is “being” in a particular way? And what does Aristotle mean by the word “as” (*hei*) in the formula “being as being” (*to on hei on*)? The very next sentence appears to answer this question:

Since we are seeking the principles and highest causes, it is clear that these are necessarily and essentially of a certain nature.⁵

³ *Ibid.*, a 22-26.

⁴ Cf., e.g., *Meta.* Γ 3, 1005 a 33 ff.

⁵ *Meta.* Γ1, 1003 a 26-28. Ross translates: “Now since we are seeking the first

But what do the terms “principles” and “highest causes” mean? And above all, what is this “nature” whose principles and causes are supposed to be sought? The next section does not respond to these questions either, but it does give an important clue to the Aristotelian way of philosophizing.

If then those who searched for the elements of beings (*ton onton*) were seeking the same causes, then the elements must have been elements of being, not by accident, but of being as being. Therefore, it is of being as being that we also have to grasp the first causes.⁶

Earlier thinking had searched for the necessary basic elements of being. These basic elements are among the causes of being. From this Aristotle concludes that the early thinkers were already seeking the elements of being “as” being. He acknowledges again his obligation to follow his great predecessors and likewise to seek the first causes of “being as being.” Instead of expressly defining the subject matter of the science of being as being, Aristotle shows by this recourse to tradition how such an inquiry is possible and necessary. The whole of book Alpha of the *Metaphysics* had already attempted to show that the inquiry into first principles and causes is not a new beginning, but only the logical continuation of the thinking of Aristotle’s predecessors. Likewise, here in book Gamma, the subject matter of the science in question is justified by demonstrating that the question of being as being is a continuation of the ancient question of first principles.

Such a justification, however, does not represent a definition of the science, and it is just such a definition which seems to be at issue in the introductory chapters of book Gamma. Is this definition to be found perhaps in the sentence quoted above, which states that these principles and highest causes are “of a certain nature”? Indeed, the task of the first section of the second chapter of book Gamma is to define this “nature” explicitly; how this is accomplished will be shown later.

In any case, a further reason for our beginning with book Gamma is this: in none of the other books of the *Metaphysics* which deal with being as being did Aristotle attempt such a definition. We believe we can show that the justification for introducing this theory as an “ontol-

principles and the highest causes, clearly there must be something to which these belong in virtue of its own nature.”

⁶ *Ibid.*, a 28-32. Ross translates: “If then those who sought the elements of existing things were seeking these same principles, it is necessary that the elements must be elements of being not by accident but just because it *is* being. Therefore it is of being as being that we also must grasp the first causes.”

ogy," whose meaning then discloses itself as that of an "ousiology," lies in that "nature" whose principles and highest causes are being sought. The question of whether and to what extent this ousiology has a theological character will be raised at the conclusion of our inquiry. But first of all, what is the "certain nature" whose principles and highest causes are being sought?

The second chapter begins:

Being (*to on*) can be said in many ways, but all-that-is is related to a unity (*pros hen*) and one certain nature (*physis*) and is not *homonym*, but is related in the same way that everything which is said to be healthy is related to health either in that it preserves health or in that it is a symptom of health or in that it is capable of it. And that which is medical is related to the medical art (either it is called medical because it knows the medical art or because it is the work of the medical art) and just as we find other things said in many ways, similar to these examples, so can being be said in many ways, but all related to one principle. Some things are called being because they are *ousiai* (substances), others because they are affections of *ousia*, others because they are a process towards *ousia*, or productive or generative of *ousia* or of things which are spoken of as related to *ousia* or negations of one of these or of *ousia* itself; it is for this reason that one even says of non-being that it is non-being.⁷

As he often does, Aristotle proceeds here from the assumption that we can speak of something in a variety of ways. Thus being also appears in our speech in manifold ways. Under close scrutiny it appears that because of a definite "dependent relationship" (see p. 18), all these diverse ways are related to a certain, single "nature." Aristotle calls this one, eminent unifying concept (*Inbegriff*) "*ousia*," essence, substance (see p. 20).

Everything which can be called being is being in that it either is *ousia* itself or is related to *ousia* in some manner, for instance, as its quantity and quality, its generation or destruction, its negation, and so on. *Ousia* appears as the point of reference underlying the various meanings of "being." It is "the one, certain nature." But what does *ousia* mean? Aristotle tried to answer this question in the form of a science which is not only assertive, but which seeks principles as well. The inquiry beginning with Gamma 1 concerns the *episteme* which inquires into being as being and therefore, ultimately into *ousia*.

A science presupposes, however, that it has an area of investigation

⁷ *Meta. Γ 2*, 1003 a 33 - 1003 b 10. This translation follows that by Ross, with some significant differences. Throughout the *Metaphysics*, Ross renders *ousia* with *substance*.

which can be clearly circumscribed. Can *ousia* be grasped in this sense as the point of reference for the manifold meanings of “being”? Is it able to unify the area of investigation of this science? We read:

Just as there is *one* science which deals with everything related to health, so it is with the other sciences. Not only is it one science which contemplates the *kath'hen legomena* (that which, in its relationship to a common genus, represents a structured unity) but it is also one science which contemplates that which is related to *one* nature (*pros mian physin*), for even this, in a way, is related *kath'hen*. Thus it is clear that the contemplation of being as being belongs to one science. Every science is concerned chiefly with that which is primary, that on which everything else depends and to which it is related. If this primary something is *ousia*, then the philosopher should address himself to principles and causes of *ousia*.⁸

At this point the train of thought is concluded. The science concerned with being as being addresses itself to these principles and causes. As now becomes apparent, however, it deals with an area of inquiry which receives its unity from a primary principle, from a certain nature, *ousia*.

Two groups of questions emerge from what has been discussed so far. The group discussed above concerns the area of investigation of the science in question. Part Two of this inquiry will deal with these questions by considering how Aristotle develops the theory of being as being with regard to *ousia* in books Zeta, Eta, and Theta. Following this, Part Three will consider the problem of the “relationship” of this “ousiology” to “theology,” whose object, especially in book Lambda, is that unique *ousia* which Aristotle understands to be God and the divine.

This book concludes with an attempt to determine the significance of this theology for ousiology. First, however, in Part One that series of questions must be clarified concerning the concept of *theoria*: What is knowledge? And above all, what kind of knowledge develops into science, and finally into that science which in its perfected form — that is in the form of the highest *theoria* — is able to contemplate “being as being”?

⁸ *Ibid.*, b 11-19.