



Ancient Greek Philosophy:

A Seminar on Aristotle's *Metaphysics*

June 9-29, 2025

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Eligibility: This course is open to students of classics, philosophy, and related disciplines. Preference will be given to graduate students in classics and philosophy; advanced and highly motivated undergraduate students are also eligible to apply.

General Structure of the Course

This course is designed as an advanced seminar on Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, which combines class instruction with field study.

Field study includes visits to archaeological sites and museums in Athens and beyond, including the Acropolis, the Athenian Agora, the Pnyx, the Kerameikos, the National Archaeological Museum, the Theater of Dionysus, as well as day trips to Sounion, Eleusis, Mycenae and Delphi.

A detailed list of the sites we visit and further activities will be provided to all participants prior to the beginning of the course.

Course description

Aristotle's *Metaphysics* is a collection of fourteen quasi-independent treatises –let's call them “books”– in which the author explores some of the most fundamental questions of philosophy and tries to establish the legitimacy of a supreme science variously called “wisdom” (*sophia*), “first philosophy” (*prote philosophia*) or even “theology” (*theologike*).

The title of the collection is not Aristotle's own: it stems from a Hellenistic editor who wished to indicate the work's position after (*meta*) the *Physics* in what came to be the standard arrangement of treatises within the Aristotelian corpus. The title was

rather felicitous, though. For the science called “wisdom”, “first philosophy” or “theology” in the text of the *Metaphysics* is supposed to be the highest branch of theoretical philosophy since it goes beyond (*meta*), i.e. transcends, the realm of natural entities studied by physics.

The *Metaphysics* is not a sufficiently unified work. In some books, wisdom or first philosophy seems to be identical with the science of being *qua* being, i.e., the universal science of everything that is (what we would call “ontology” or “general metaphysics”), whereas in other books wisdom or first philosophy is explicitly identified as theology, i.e., the specific science that deals with the being of gods (what is now called “special metaphysics”). How these two conceptions of first philosophy are related to one another is far from clear.

To make things worse, different things seem to stand in the foreground of Aristotle’s mind as appropriate topics of wisdom or first philosophy in different books. In book Alpha (I) wisdom is the science of the different kinds of principles and causes of things; in book Beta (III) fundamental questions about the scope and aim of wisdom are raised without being answered; in book Gamma (IV), the science of being *qua* being is said to be distinct from all particular sciences and to fall within this science’s scope to dialectically explore indemonstrable logical laws (such as the law of non-contradiction and the law of the excluded middle); in the sequence of books Zeta and Eta (VII-VIII) first philosophy seems to be the science of substance; in book Theta (IX) Aristotle deals with power and activity, and establishes the priority of the latter over the former; in book Iota (X) he explores the notions of unity and oneness; and in book Lambda (XII) first philosophy comes close to being astronomy as the science of the divine minds that move the universe.

The course will address some of those incongruities with a view to (i) highlighting Aristotle’s truly aporetic approach and (ii) establishing a rather unified reading of the work as a whole in terms of the author’s intention, if not actual achievement. More precisely, we shall discuss some basic questions by focusing on specific texts of the *Metaphysics* as shown in the Syllabus below. Students are expected to have studied the texts in advance, to have thought through them, and to have made a brief sketch about how Aristotle’s overall argument in each case evolves. An introduction by the instructor will be followed by extensive discussion with the participants.

Books and Assessment:

The following book must be acquired before students' arrival in Athens:

Reeve, C. D. C., *Aristotle, Metaphysics*, Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett 2016.

*Students seeking credit will be required to submit a research paper, due a month after the completion of the course. Papers received after this date will not receive a grade.

The final grade for the course will be determined on the basis of Class Participation (50%) and a Final Paper (50%).

Syllabus

During the first week of the seminar, we will focus on *Metaphysics A*.

Weeks 2 and 3 will include three sessions each, on the following topics:

1st class: the relation of philosophy to the history of philosophy, and the relevance of the kinds of causes to wisdom (book Alpha) – *Metaphysics* I.1-8, 10

2nd class: the requirement of perplexity and the method of formulating puzzlements in an either-or dilemmatic form (book Beta); examples of the method – *Metaphysics* III.1, 3-4

3rd class: the focal meaning of being against the background doctrine that being is said in many ways, and the relevance of the principle of non-contradiction to first philosophy (book Gamma); different kinds of being (book Epsilon) – *Metaphysics* IV.1-6, VI.1-2, 4

4th class: being *qua* substance and the four candidates for what substance ultimately is (book Zeta); substance *qua* substratum, *qua* essence, and *qua* universal – *Metaphysics* VII.1-4, 7-9, 13

5th class: being *qua* power and *qua* activity (book Theta); the priority of activity over power, ultimately in all respects – *Metaphysics* IX.1-3, 6-9

6th class: being *qua* the activity of divine contemplation (book Lambda); overview of the argument of the *Metaphysics*; remaining puzzlements. – *Metaphysics* XII.1-2, 6-10

A note on the bibliography

Aristotle's *Metaphysics* has been critically edited and extensively annotated by Ross (1924). This remains the standard edition and commentary of the work as a whole. The OCT critical edition (Jaeger 1957) provides a less satisfactory Greek text. Tredennick (1933) gives both a Greek text and an English translation.

A concise introduction to the *Metaphysics* is provided by Gill (2005) and a more extended one by Politis (2004). Patzig (1979) and Frede (1985) offer quite similar solutions to the vexed question of the relation of ontology to theology in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. Reale (1980) provides a unitary reading of the work as a whole. In a very convincing interpretation of Aristotle's ontology, Kosman (2013) places due emphasis on the notion of activity. So does also Menn (forthcoming), who is an exception to academic orthodoxy in claiming that the investigation of substance in books Zeta and Eta is a false path.

Ross's revised translation (1984) is very good. However, we shall use the latest English translation by Reeve (2016), which tends to be closer to the original Greek text.

Bibliography

Frede (1987) = Frede, M., "The Unity of General to Special Metaphysics: Aristotle's Conception of Metaphysics", in his *Essays in Ancient Philosophy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1987, 81-95.

Gill (2005) = Gill, M. L., "Aristotle's *Metaphysics* Reconsidered", *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 43 (2005), 223-241.

Jaeger (1957) = Jaeger, W., *Aristotelis Metaphysica*, Oxford Classical Texts, Oxford 1957.

Kosman (2013) = Kosman, A., *The Activity of Being: An Essay on Aristotle's Ontology*, Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press 2013.

Menn (forthcoming) = Menn, St., *The Aim and the Argument of Aristotle's Metaphysics*:

<http://www.philosophie.hu-berlin.de/de/lehrbereiche/antike/mitarbeiter/menn/contents>.

Patzig (1979) = Patzig, G., "Theology and Ontology in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*", in: J. Barnes, M. Schofield & R. Sorabji (eds.), *Articles on Aristotle*, vol. 3: *Metaphysics*, London: Routledge 1979, 33-49.

Politis (2004) = Politis, V., *Aristotle and the Metaphysics*, London/New York: Routledge 2004.

Reale (1980) = Reale, G., *The Concept of First Philosophy and the Unity of the Metaphysics of Aristotle*, trans. J.R. Catan, Albany: SUNY Press 1980.

Reeve (2016) = Reeve, C. D. C., *Aristotle, Metaphysics*, Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett 2016.

Ross (1924) = Ross, W. D., *Aristotle's Metaphysics: A Revised Text with Introduction and Commentary*, 2 vols., Oxford: Oxford University Press 1924 (reprinted with corrections 1953).

Ross (1984) = Ross's revised translation of the *Metaphysics* in: J. Barnes (ed.). *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, 2 vols., Princeton: Princeton University Press 1984, II.1552-1728.

Tredennick (1933) = Tredennick, H., *Aristotle: Metaphysics*, Loeb Classical Library, 2 vols, Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press 1933.