

Sources of Desire

Sources of Desire:
Essays on Aristotle's Theoretical Works

Edited by

James Oldfield

**CAMBRIDGE
SCHOLARS**

P U B L I S H I N G

Sources of Desire:
Essays on Aristotle's Theoretical Works,
Edited by James Oldfield

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πάντες ἄνθρωποι τοῦ εἰδέναι ὀρέγονται φύσει

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EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

When Stuart Forestell and I planned the 2011 Graduate Conference on Aristotle at Boston College, at which a number of the essays in this book were originally presented, we decided that we wished to focus the discussion on the theoretical works. In part we did this because we had the sense that if the practical philosophy was within the purview of the conference a heavy majority of the submissions would relate to these texts, and the conference would default to discussion of the ethics (in the event, we received several submissions dealing primarily or exclusively with the ethics, despite the prohibition). This suspicion of ours reflected our view that while a great deal of attention is paid to Aristotle's practical philosophy, especially to the *Nicomachean Ethics*, this text playing a significant role in contemporary debates about moral questions, the theoretical philosophy enjoys significantly less attention, even if Aristotle specialists might debate these texts tirelessly. Where Aristotle's ethical ideas retain significant currency, the theoretical works are frequently seen as both outmoded and hopelessly erroneous, as a dead letter. A paradigm for this might be the suggestion made by Myles Burnyeat that we should "junk" Aristotle's philosophy of mind on the grounds that his conception of matter is fundamentally obscure.¹ Indeed, a historical case can be made, given the way that our modernity developed, that just what it means to be modern is to reject an Aristotelian way of thinking about nature. The mechanistic conception of matter and rejection of hylomorphism, the advent of heliocentrism, the theory of the development of species and the decline of biological essentialism: these are moments by which we define ourselves; these are markers of our maturity, the story goes, and that maturity was won by slaying the dragon of Aristotle's theoretical works.

Meanwhile, the practical philosophy, as already mentioned, enjoys a much better reputation. At times this imbalance in respectability has caused difficulties for Aristotelian ethicists. For instance, in Alasdair MacIntyre's earlier work, he attempted to deploy the tradition of virtue

¹ Myles Burnyeat, "Is an Aristotelian Philosophy of Mind Still Credible? A Draft." In *Essays on Aristotle's De Anima*, ed. Martha Nussbaum and Amélie Oksenberg Rorty (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992). See also the response in the same volume by Martha Nussbaum and Hilary Putnam, "Changing Aristotle's Mind."

descending from the *Nicomachean Ethics* while consciously eschewing many of the theoretical underpinnings of that tradition, in particular the metaphysical biology that lies at the heart of Aristotle's sense of what it means for a human being to flourish, to fulfill its *telos*. Since then, however, MacIntyre has himself conceded that these attempts were overly hasty, and that an Aristotelian virtue ethics is of necessity too bound up with theory, and in particular with biology, to avoid reckoning with its theoretical implications and presuppositions.² It seems that it might be necessary for those who find much to appreciate in the practical philosophy to run the necessary yards in the theory as well, even if many of its conclusions might ultimately be rejected. At the very least, the independence of the two kinds of thought should not be taken for granted too readily. Indeed, we need only pay attention to Aristotle's own words, the ones that give the epigraph to this book, to be reminded of the deep connection that pertains in the Aristotelian world between true human flourishing and philosophy: "All people by nature desire to know." Not only is it perhaps impossible, for Aristotle, to sever the understanding of ethics from the understanding of theory, but the proper activity of human beings, that which ethics seeks to fulfill, is itself the activity of knowing. The nature of human beings is literally to stretch out towards knowing; for Aristotle, we seek understanding just as a plant reaches out for the light. Ethics calls for knowing, for the understanding sought by theory.

The relation of ethics and theory has been thoroughly treated by Claudia Baracchi in her influential book *Ethics as First Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), and she takes up the subject again here with a reflection on Aristotle's discussion of the so-called principle of non-contradiction in *Metaphysics* Γ. In a careful reading of the argument, Baracchi endeavors to show how the crux of Aristotle's first philosophy depends upon the physical structure of the experience of those who would object to the principle, and thus that Aristotle's first philosophy is mischaracterized if described as a metaphysics in the traditional sense. The principle of non-contradiction emerges out of a situation in which there are decisions to make, and thus where there are mutually exclusive alternatives. The denial of non-contradiction is ultimately gainsaid not by words but by movements, by the practice of the denier. Thus, for Baracchi, Aristotle's theory is firmly wedded to becoming, and to the realm of ethics.

A related problem concerns William Wians, whose essay completes the first part of the book, which thus as a whole deals with the issue of the

² Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals* (Peru, IL: Carus, 1999), x.

beginning of Aristotle's first philosophy. Wians thoroughly considers the kind of text that we have in the *Metaphysics*, both in terms of the history of controversy about its composition and status, and in terms of the unique problems it poses within the Aristotelian system. In particular, Wians reflects upon the question of beginning, the great question of first philosophy. Since, as Aristotle's *organon* makes us aware, the first principles of any demonstration must themselves be indemonstrable, how do the first principles of first philosophy appear, if they are not perceptible and do not emerge from empirical study? Nowhere else in the corpus is Aristotle more enigmatic on the question of the indemonstrable foundations of a science than in the *Metaphysics*. Wians argues powerfully that this enigma is connected to several of the other enigmas surrounding the nature of the text, and that Aristotle's answer to this question has to do with the very habit of thinking, the *hexis* of *nous* referred to in the second book of the *Metaphysics*. Thus, once more we hear of a deep connection between thought and practice, and are reminded that for Aristotle the best life is that of contemplation, of sharing in the divine activity of thought thinking itself.

But even if Aristotle's ethics implicates us in the study of and the attempt to understand his theoretical works, this does not yet answer the objection that these treatises are filled with problematic claims, claims that do not seem true to the phenomena. We might first of all offer an Aristotelian response to this, and suggest that every good study should begin by enumerating both what has been said by illustrious predecessors and the character of the problems the enquirer faces. Now it is certainly no controversial claim to say that the historian of philosophy should be concerned with Aristotle, so this is perhaps the easiest defense to make; it is necessarily a mistake to neglect the theories of such a crucial antecedent as Aristotle if we are to have anything like an adequate understanding of our own thought. In many cases, for instance in our understanding of biology, it is important to understand in what ways our thought has been shaped by moving away from Aristotelian patterns of thinking. Yet there is also fruit to be gathered by noticing how many silent influences Aristotle maintains in the modern era, a theme that Adam Knowles explores in the second part of the volume, which is dedicated to several examples of the treatment of Aristotle by the historical tradition. For his part, Knowles is concerned with the often silent presence of Aristotle's thought in Heidegger's thinking about silence. He argues that Aristotelian influence extends far beyond Heidegger's lectures on *Metaphysics* Θ, well into the later work, proposing that Aristotle provides a way of thinking about silence that goes beyond the dichotomy of the presence or absence

of speech, and thus clears the way for Heidegger's thinking. In doing so he adds to the impact that Franco Volpi has had in demonstrating the extent of Heidegger's Aristotelian debts. Knowles' essay is an intriguing contribution to our understanding of this matter.

Beyond the question of Aristotle's silent historical influences, there is also the matter of how the history of our thought may have been shaped by misconstruing his work. Where this is the case, it seems right that Aristotle should find spirited defenders, and he finds two of these in Aaron Jaffe and Mark Sentesy, whose essays complete part two of this book. In his discussion of the *Physics*, Jaffe defends the methodology of Aristotle's enquiry against a Kantian line of attack according to which the attempt to achieve scientific knowledge of nature would necessarily lead to subreption, that is, to attributing to the thing in itself what in fact belongs to the object only as a result of synthesis by the understanding. Jaffe argues that Aristotelian premises reject from the beginning the grounds for such a concern in that Aristotle conceives of his enquiry as natural, as itself participating in the nature that it would discover, a nature that is in itself the most intelligible thing of all, in contrast to the conception of nature as something outside, as categorically severed from the knower and in itself unknowable. For Kant, reason is opposed to nature, and its correct use relies on curtailing the natural tendency for reason to overreach. For Aristotle, Jaffe argues, what is natural includes the thinking of reason, and he endeavors to show that there are good Aristotelian reasons for this view. Thus, Jaffe contends, Aristotle's account provides grounds for defending it against the claim that it is methodologically flawed.

Sentesy is less concerned with defending Aristotle from a particular historical criticism, but in his own way he addresses a long history of what he takes to be the misunderstanding of some of Aristotle's most fundamental concepts, in particular the term *dynamis* and its relationship to *energeia* and *entelecheia*. He argues that traditional interpretations that have opposed potency to actuality, claiming both that they are incompatible and that potency is a derivative notion, make little sense of the key texts and of the phenomena. Instead, he proposes, we must understand potency on its own terms, positively, and see how it is in one way different from actuality and in another way the same. This bold thesis, as Sentesy suggests, has startling implications for Aristotle's conception of movement, and indeed for that of being.

In addition to remembering our predecessors, it is Aristotelian practice to consider as best we can the *aporiai*, the problems that prevent our thought from moving forward. Of course, problems such as the relation between universals and particulars and that between mind and body,

problems with which Aristotle was deeply concerned, have never faded from philosophers' interest. Yet it seems to me that the powerful ways in which Aristotle posed these problems for us retain their ability to provoke genuine insight, and indeed to remind us of aspects of these issues that our own interpretive predilections sometimes obscure from us. Such problems as these come to the fore in the third part of this volume, as William Britt, Eve Rabinoff, and Ronald Polansky discuss various questions of unity. In his essay, Britt takes up the aforementioned universal-particular problem by attempting to tackle the tensions between the account of knowledge as universal in the *Posterior Analytics* and that of substance as particular in the *Metaphysics*. He eventually argues that the self-thinking prime mover of *Metaphysics* Λ is analogous to the demonstrative principles demanded by the *Posterior Analytics*, and thus that the substances contemplated by the divine mind can be coherently thought of as both epistemologically and ontologically primary.

Rabinoff's contribution, on the other hand, considers a more down to earth problem. She discusses the various accounts of soul that Aristotle dedicates to the various faculties of living things, and she proposes that his description of nutrition is best understood as relating to the nutritive part of an animal soul, rather than being an account of the soul of a plant. To this end, she analyses in detail what Aristotle says about nutrition, and explains the dependency that pertains in an animal soul, not just of perception upon nutrition, but of nutrition upon perception, as the animal must move around guided by its senses in order to feed itself. Along the way, she offers a fascinating and original picture of the unity of the soul in *De Anima*.

Meanwhile, Polansky, author of one of the definitive English commentaries on *De Anima*,³ rounds out the volume by investigating the very particular problems that the study of soul creates for Aristotle's division of the sciences. In Aristotle's schema, psychology is primarily a physical subject, since the soul is a principle of motion of a body. However, the involvement of mind in the soul is a profound complication, for mind seems somehow to transcend the body. This leads Polansky to a reading of the perennially controversial passages in *De Anima* III and *Metaphysics* Λ in which Aristotle writes about *nous*. He comes to the striking conclusion that for Aristotle the first mover is not mind or intellect but rather only the activity of thinking, and that when Aristotle says *nous*

³ See Ronald Polansky, *Aristotle's De Anima* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

he means human intellect only, through which the divine movement that structures the world is active.

Whatever other reasons one might have for contemplating these old, difficult, and sometimes frustratingly arcane books, it seems to me enough to say that many of the ideas in them are beautiful, even if it requires a very careful and patient attentiveness to see it. I feel that one of the distinctive qualities of this book lies in the extent to which the authors take Aristotle seriously on his own terms, as an inquirer into nature, as opposed to a benighted figure who can at best illustrate the extent of our progress. This seriousness on the part of the contributors has made them particularly sensitive to what is beautiful in Aristotle. I trust that in turn they prove capable of sharing with the reader, to whom I heartily recommend their work, the sense of wonder, the desire to know, that such beauty can inspire.

**BEGINNINGS OF THOUGHT:
THINKING HABITS**

THE CONDITION OF FIRST PHILOSOPHY

CLAUDIA BARACCHI

I.

The discourse of first philosophy opens remarkably: “All human beings by nature desire having seen (*eidenai*). A sign of this is their fondness of sensations” (980a21-22).¹ Such an opening signals that, in the ensuing discussion, human beings will have been at stake—human beings and the question of their nature. At stake will have been beings inceptively characterized as desirous, stretching out in a movement of longing (*oregesthai*), reaching beyond themselves, in an open-ended gesture of self-transcendence towards the surroundings, which lets the surroundings in; beings in the pursuit and enjoyment of seeing, which will have been having-seen, that is to say, a matter of time (hence the insistence, in this opening, on the future perfect). Indeed, human beings, in their very being, originally display their fondness of sensuous perception. They let the sign (*semeion*) of that enjoyment transpire. For they sense the promise and the richness of sensation in its becoming: temporally layered and retained, progressively transfigured through repetition, sensation gives rise to otherwise insightful perceptions. Seeing gives rise to having seen, which entails an experienced frequentation of phenomena, the ability to intervene in their unfolding, to supplement them creatively, and to see through them, seizing them in their structure and causal connections. It is because of such a fecundity that sensations are cherished, quite simply.

Let us linger on this opening note. Human beings—all of them—strive to understand, to come to know, and do so by nature. It has been said that, in pursuing knowledge, human beings in a way pursue themselves, their own nature, their own fulfillment and perfection—that in this way they become what they are to be and realize their being in plenitude.² But what

¹ Here and throughout the present essay the translations of passages from the *Metaphysics* are mine, although I have fruitfully consulted, and not infrequently followed, Hippocrates G. Apostle’s translation. Likewise mine are the translations of the other passages from the Aristotelian *corpus*.

² Alexander of Aphrodisias, *Metaphysica commentaria*, 4-10.

must be underlined here is that human beings *are drawn* to such a realization: their becoming themselves is prompted by desire (impulse) and does not occur, say, in the mode of self-determination. Thus, knowing and, broadly speaking, comprehending, come to pass in virtue of a certain *pathos*. Aristotle continues:

... they [the sensations] are liked for their own sake, and of all sensations those received through the eyes are liked most. For, not only for the sake of doing something else, but even if we are not going to do anything else, we choose... seeing over against the other sensations. The cause of this is the fact that, of all the sensations, seeing makes us know [*poiei gnorizein hemas*] in the highest degree and makes clear many differences. (980a22-27)

Both the desire for “having seen” as well as the predilection (*agapesis*) for sensation point to the passion and passivity variously marking the human condition. This need not be understood as a malady, but it reveals the human being as conditioned, as not unconditional.

Human beings will have undergone the drive to pursue insight. In turn, the pursuit of insight will have been taken up in virtue of another undergoing of the soul, the undergoing that occurs in and as sensuous perception. Understood in light of the fundamental trace of passivity, the human being already emerges in its openness and receptiveness to what it is not. In its hospitality towards what it is not, in its being inhabited (traversed, or even invaded) by that which exceeds it, the human being is inceptively manifest as a strange ontological structure defined through alterity, a structure whose definition involves alterity, and, therefore, a certain infinity or indefiniteness.

Two main issues need to be emphasized. In the first place, the originary, i.e., constitutive character of desire in what will have been called “metaphysical investigation” cannot but radically qualify the whole enterprise of first philosophy. Not by chance, Aristotle’s attempt to outline the scope and aims of such an enterprise, in *Metaphysics* Alpha, occasions an outstanding terminological proliferation: *episteme*, *sophia*, *philosophia*, *phronesis*, *gnorizein*, *gignoskein*, *theorein* all designate the pursuit of first philosophy. The investigation undertaken in the *Metaphysics* has many names and can be said in many ways. Indeed, these initial words already intimate that the nature of the investigation will hardly have been metaphysical—that, rather, the pursuit of science in the inquiry of first philosophy emerges from a condition, that of humans, essentially marked by manifoldness and desirous motility. The coming to be of science, if any, should be understood within the compass of such a “physical”

dynamism, of this striving both embodied and never quite beyond or past (*meta*) nature (*phusis*). So literally metaphysics is unthinkable for Aristotle (and we have no *Metaphysics* by Aristotle).³

The second issue to be put into relief is the gesture by which Aristotle draws together the desire for knowing as “having seen” and the love of sensation, most notably of visual perception. This anticipates the indissoluble bond of sensible perception and perception of the “universal,” upon which Aristotle will return time and again. By the time the inquiry of first philosophy begins, there has always already been a seeing. As “having seen,” understanding, *eidenai*, comes to be in the repetition of the experience of seeing. The *pathos* of vision lets beings light up in their differences and, therefore, in their distinctness and unique perspicuity. However, in its recurrence, visual perception also brings about a certain ordering of the differences it takes in. Far from being the mere exposure to a proliferation without either scansion or structure, seeing (knowing as having seen) entails realizing the iterative (recursive) character of what is: in experiencing beings I also experience their return, their reappearance after an interval, whether spatial or temporal.

Thus, in virtue of what could be called “a structured spaciousness of the gaze” (*krinein* already pertains to sensing, according to Aristotle)⁴, I

³ Al-Farabi concludes his treatise on “The Philosophy of Aristotle” noting that “we do not possess metaphysical science.” *Alfarabi’s Philosophy*, 130. Quite consistently, in al Farabi’s thinking, we find the indissoluble intertwinement of physical and metaphysical considerations. In this context, the two modes of inquiry do not pertain to different and discontinuous regions of being. Rather, physics and the science thrusting beyond it regard the same beings (in the plural), but in different ways. Al-Farabi says that when Aristotle addresses themes such as the active intellect, he inquires “into the beings in a way more inclusive than natural theory” (129). What will have been called “metaphysics” investigates “the beings,” in the plural, “in a manner different than natural inquiry” (130), that is to say, holistically, according to what traverses beings and is common to them. Thus, “metaphysics” (at this point the quotations mark are an appropriate sign of caution) broadens physics, brings physics beyond itself—without, however, leaving *phusis* behind. Whatever excess to physics may be indicated in the “metaphysical” investigation, such an excess still inheres in the beings studied by physics and discloses such beings according to the whole, i.e., “universally.” It is because of this that, strictly speaking, “we do not possess metaphysical science.” Al-Farabi (whose influence on later developments of the Judeo-Persian-Arabic conversation with Greek antiquity and the Latin West was immense, and decisive for thinkers such as Ibn Sina) comes to similar positions quite consistently (consider, e.g., the treatise on “The Attainment of Happiness,” *ibid.*). In the present essay I undertake to highlight the genuinely Aristotelian ancestry of such insights.

seize the similarities compelling me to gather certain beings together at a glance, to acknowledge their belonging together, that is, in a sense, their being the same. Concomitantly, in virtue of mnemonic retention, I seize the similarities that turn the *perception* of a being into the *recognition* of it. I recognize a being in the sense that I cognize it again, as the one I already encountered and is now returning. At once establishing and requiring temporal cohesiveness (a connection between before and after), recognition is cognition of the relative sameness of the being that comes back after having been seen already, however altered and approximate in its return. In returning, beings come somehow to abide.⁵ The “many differences” that vision makes “clear” emerge in their vividness and definiteness there where the perceptual availability of humans (a letting-in that is already a discerning) and the vibrant constancy of beings (a return that keeps taking place) touch.⁶ In this sense vision, or more generally sensation (*aisthesis*), “makes” (*poiei*) me “know” (*gnorizein*).⁷

In the opening words are condensed issues that will receive broader elaboration at subsequent stages in the *Metaphysics* or even in other treatises, from the *Posterior Analytics* to the *Nicomachean Ethics*: sensuous perception at work in the formation of understanding “according to the whole”; the difficult intimacy of intelligence and sensibility; the genetic narrative of the coming into being of intellectual perception,

⁴ This is pervasively affirmed in *De anima*, but also crucially in *Posterior Analytics* 99b35-6.

⁵ This points to the broad question of the constitution of universals and principles, that way of seizing beings at a glance, as it were, in their abiding structure. The *locus classicus* of the elaboration of this theme is *Posterior Analytics* Beta 19.

⁶ On sight as the “angelic” mode of perception that “announces” (*eisangellei*) “many differences,” see also *On Sense and the Sensibles*—where, however, hearing enjoys a certain primacy in its contribution to learning and *phronesis* (437a4-17).

⁷ The suggestion here is that, in the specific human experience, sensation already may present an inherently iterative and hence mnemonic constitution, i.e., that memory, *mneme*, may not simply be a somehow subsequent addition to the bare fact of sensing. This suggestion is to an extent obscured by the discussion in Alpha 1, which focuses on a genealogy of intellection whose horizon is life, the animal domain at large, and not the properly human experience. It is, however, corroborated by a remark in *De Anima* where, in surmising that each organ of sense receives the sensible being proper to it, but without the matter, Aristotle seems to assimilate sensation to imagination and point to a kind of “memory of the senses”: “It is in view of this that sensations and imaginings [*phantasiai*] [of the sensed beings] are in the sense organs even when those [sensed beings] are gone” (425b24-25).

indeed, of the sciences, out of dynamics of desire and creativity deeply (indeed, obscurely) rooted in physiology. It is in and under these circumstances that first philosophy begins.⁸ The beginning (the origin) of discourse is also, crucially, silent.

⁸ The same enigmatic character of beginning and the non-logical conditions of *logos* are adumbrated in Aristotle's remarks on the historicity of intellectual articulation. The philosophical discourse, and most notably the discourse of first philosophy, is not first after all. It is a geo-historical phenomenon, and hence an intrinsically hermeneutical problem. In *Metaphysics* alpha elatton, Aristotle illuminates the *arche* of truth, or, more precisely, of the discourses of truth, in terms of the choral formation and transmission of lineages. We are who we are, and formulate the questions we do formulate, in the framework within which we find ourselves, because others before us, handing down to us the "habit" of thinking, literally "caused" us to be as we are. The short treatise (993a30-995a20) is, as a whole, a meditation on the historical as well as logical problem of the *archai* and on the discursive-interpretive nature of the inquiry. In the *Peri philosophias* we find various (if fragmentary) gestures towards the archaic roots of the philosophical quest for truth—roots almost irretrievable, whose traces Aristotle nevertheless recalls, as a reminder of the questionable status of his own discourse and as an acknowledgment of the bond with "the ancients." Thus, the sources reporting the contents of this treatise variously suggest the assimilation of philosophy (as Aristotle himself pursues it) to the archaic traditions of *sophia* (the *sapientia* attributed to the figures of Orpheus or the Magi, to the Egyptians, or even to the popular wisdom harbored in proverbs and sentences). See *Peri philosophias* 5-8, in the edition established by W. D. Ross. An analogous awareness of the predecessors and of the wisdom traditions from which our discourses stem is to be found even in *Protrepticus* 10c (*ibid.*), especially in the segment reported by Iamblichus (Iambl., *Protr.* 8), which ascribes to the fabulously remote Hermotimus, prior to Anaxagoras, the intuition of the divinity and immortality of *nous* in us. But even in *Metaphysics* Alpha, a treatise chronologically contiguous to *Peri philosophias*, we find similar mentions of the Egyptian origin of mathematics (981b23-25) and in particular of Hermotimus. In the course of his examination of the ancients' meditation on first principles, Aristotle emphasizes the early recognition of the intelligence manifest in and as the *cosmos*: "When someone said intelligence is in nature, as in animals, and that it is the cause of the arrangement [*tou kosmou*] and of every kind of order in nature, he appeared like a sober man in contrast to his predecessors who talked erratically. We know that Anaxagoras openly made these statements, but Hermotimus of Clazomenae is credited with having made them earlier" (984b15-20). In this auroral figure, then, we glimpse at someone who speaks without being dissociated from the matter at stake, well rooted in experience ("necessitated by truth itself" [984b10])—someone neither drunk nor asleep, knowing what he is saying. We, Aristotle is intimating, are not a beginning but latecomers. Late and forgetful, across discontinuities and destructions, we are connected to the dimly lit landscapes of the past by tenuous,

II.

One finds pervasive traces of this problem in the Aristotelian *corpus*, but here we shall focus on the rather outstanding treatise *Metaphysics* Gamma, on “being qua being.”⁹ First of all, says Aristotle, it pertains to one science to investigate first principles and causes:

There is a certain science which contemplates being qua being and what belongs to it in virtue of itself. This science is not the same as any of the so-called “partial sciences”; for none of those sciences examines [*episkopei*] being qua being according to the whole, but, cutting off some part of it, each of them contemplates the attributes of that part, as in the case of the mathematical sciences. Now since we are seeking the principles and the highest causes, clearly these must belong to a certain nature [*phuseos tinos*] in virtue of itself. If, then, also those who were seeking the elements [*stoicheia*] of beings were seeking these principles, these elements too must be elements of being, not according to an attribute, but qua being. Accordingly, it is of being qua being that we, too, must find the first causes. (1003a21-32)

The formulation of the task at hand could hardly be formulated more lucidly: the investigation of being qua being involves the individuation of first principles or causes—the first principles or causes of being qua being, that is to say, first principles or causes as such. The science of being is to investigate into the first and highest elements of being, and is to do so by investigating beings.

This is most relevant. The difference between the “partial sciences” (such as mathematics, which is partial because abstract and distant from beings in their integrity) and the science of being is not a shift in focus from beings to being, as though the investigation regarding being were other than and separate from that regarding beings. Rather, the science of being effects a shift from the examination of a part or aspect of being to the examination of being as such, as a whole, that is, the examination of

fragile links, whose fragmentary and problematic character Aristotle recalls in *Metaphysics* Lambda: “while probably every art and every philosophy has often reached a stage of development as far as it could and then again has perished, these doctrines about the gods were saved like relics up to the present day. Anyway, the opinion of our forefathers and of the earliest thinkers is evident to us to just this extent” (1074b10-14).

⁹ I have addressed this text and inherent issues in an earlier discussion, which appeared in my *Aristotle's Ethics*. See especially “Interlude: *Metaphysics* Gamma.”

what belongs to being not according to an attribute but in virtue of being itself considered in its wholeness. What belongs in such a way is a principle or cause. It is origin and beginning, source and condition. This transition from the partial or accidental to the whole, and hence to principles, characterizes the science of being. Such a science still concerns beings, but considers them according to the whole, which means: being may come to be contemplated through the consideration of what belongs to beings according to themselves. Or, again, approaching being and catching a glimpse of it means contemplating the principles, the highest “elements of beings.” For, as principles, “the elements of beings... must be elements of being... qua being” (1003a28-31). The shift from mathematics to the science of wisdom is not thematic (from one “subject matter” to another) but concerns *how the same* is contemplated. It is a shift from abstraction and partiality to a holistic concern.

Here we should note the interchangeability of the language of being and beings and the language of being and nature. The latter is amplified in the lines immediately following this initial statement. Aristotle defines more incisively the connection between being and nature, or, minimally, between being and nature understood in a certain way: “Being is said in many ways, but all of these are related to a certain nature, one and single [*pros hen kai mian tina phusin*], and not equivocally” (1003a33-4). The science of being may be connected with physics, at least with physics comprehensively construed, i.e., not as a “partial science.”

Aristotle then addresses the following *aporia*: Would such a science as that just defined pertain only to the first principles of being(s), or also to the first principles of demonstration?

We must state whether it belongs to one or to a different science to inquire into what in mathematics are called “axioms” and into substances. It is evident that the inquiry into these *belongs to one science* and to the science of the philosopher; for the axioms *belong to all beings and are not proper to some one genus apart from the others*. And everyone uses them, since they are *of being qua being*, and each genus is [a being]. However, they use them only to the extent that they need them, that is, as far as the genus extends, with regard to which they carry out demonstrations. So, since it is clear that the axioms *belong to all beings qua beings* (for this is common to them), the contemplation of these axioms belongs also to one who is to know [*gnorizontos*] being qua being. Because of this, no one who examines only a part of being, such as the geometer or the arithmetician, tries to say anything about them, whether they are true or not, except for some physicists who have done so for an appropriate reason. (1005a19-32; my emphases)

Aristotle underscores once again that one may come to know “being qua being” through the examination of what belongs to “all beings qua beings,” i.e., what is common to beings as a whole. He also intimates the proximity of such an inquiry and that of “certain physicists.”

The statement announces the unity and inseparability of formality and being, of the structure of logico-mathematical procedures and the investigation into that which is—of logic and ontology. The axioms “belong,” inhere in beings as such, as a whole. They are what all beings share in common. In this distinctive sense, the inquiry regarding axioms is one with that regarding being itself, indiscernible with respect to it. Physics, the investigation of *phusis* at stake here, may not be assimilated to the mathematical disciplines, as if exhibiting their characteristic partiality. Rather, it appears to address the question of being and that of the axioms precisely in their belonging together, and to do so for altogether essential reasons. Formal or symbolic logic is not unthinkable for Aristotle. It is not the innovation of modernity that remains inaccessible to the ancient thinker. If anything, formal logic is all too thinkable in Aristotle’s perspective: in its unbound possibility, it urgently imposes itself on thinking as deeply troubling, undesirable. The unrestrained alienation of *logos* from that which it constitutes a constant source of preoccupation, as numerous moments in the *corpus* demonstrate.¹⁰

¹⁰ Even aside from the general Aristotelian thrust towards the adherence of inquiry and its discourse to the matter of thinking (as emphasized in *Metaphysics* Alpha, it is the “things themselves” [984a18], i.e., “phenomena” [986b31], i.e., the “truth itself” [984b10] that “necessitate” the course of the investigation), consider the paradigmatic problem of incontinence discussed in the ethical treatises, whose structure precisely signals the exacerbated separation of *logos* from experience—*logos* becoming empty, empty sound regressing into pure *phone*, in fact, into noise that says nothing of life, while life is flowing somewhere else, untouched. The divorce of intellectual analysis and action disintegrates the psychosomatic complex, resulting in an abstraction of rational procedures and, concomitantly, in unenlightened action, “as in the case of someone asleep or mad or drunk. Now such is the disposition of those who are under the influence of the passions.... So it is clear that incontinent human beings must be disposed like these. The fact that such people utter scientific speeches [*to de legein tous logous tous apo tes epistemes*] ... is no sign that they know what they are saying; for even those under the influence of the passions [i.e., drunkards, madmen] utter [*legousin*] demonstrations and verses of Empedocles, and also beginners [in science] string together statements [leading to a conclusion] [*tous logous*], but they do not quite understand what they are saying, for these expressions must sink in, and this requires time. So those who are incontinent must be regarded as speaking [*legein*] in the way actors do on the stage” (1147a11-24).

This suggests a certain convergence of physics and philosophy or, indeed, first philosophy. Aristotle continues:

Clearly, then, it is the task of the philosopher, that is, of the one who investigates all substances insofar as they by nature come under his or her science, to examine also the principles of the syllogism. Now, it is fitting for one who is to have knowledge [*gnorizonta*] in the highest degree concerning each genus to be able to state the most certain principles of things in that genus, so that one who is to have such knowledge of being qua being, too, must be able to state the most certain principles of all things. This is the philosopher, and the most certain principle of all is that about which it is impossible to think falsely; for such a principle must be most known [*gnorimotaten*] (for all may be mistaken about things which they do not know [*gnorizousin*]) and also be non-hypothetical. For a principle which one must have if one is to understand anything is not a hypothesis; and that which one must know [*gnorizein*] if one is to know [*gnorizonti*] anything must be in one's possession for every occasion. (1005b5-17)

The discussions considered thus far lead to the question of the ultimately first, most certain, and most known principle—the principle informing all axiomatic structure as well as the unfolding of being qua being, i.e., qua “all beings.” Aristotle begins to uncover such a supreme principle. Remarkably, what will come to light through such an undertaking is precisely the ethical stratum sustaining the entire discussion and assertion of the absolutely first axiom. Let it be emphasized already at this juncture that the first and ultimate principle, which is by definition “most known,” cannot as such be demonstrated. That which is here under scrutiny cannot even be demonstratively approached. Knowledge of principle(s), which is knowledge in the highest degree, is not scientific knowledge, *episteme*, in the strict (syllogistic, apodictic) sense. Rather, it grounds scientific knowledge in its strictness and stringency. Again, the pervasiveness of the language of *gnorizein* should not go unnoticed. First philosophy is science (of wisdom, of being) in a highly qualified sense—which is precisely what makes it unique and first.

That which, from a scientific point of view, appears as qualified knowledge, is the most authoritative, most commanding knowledge—the undeniable and necessitating evidence which, while not scientific, in fact *because* irreducible to science, grounds science. Knowing the ultimate, most elementary and fundamental principle is not a matter of laying down hypotheses, of formulating some disputable sentence. What is hypothetical and disputable is by definition exposed to overturning, contradiction, negation. It involves reversibility and counterpoint, implicates equally

plausible positions, in fact, contrapositions. Regarding the first principle, however, it is “impossible to think falsely.” It can only be affirmed; it is in fact affirmed both in affirmation and in negation. It involves an affirmation more primordial than the affirmation that would still contemplate negation as its counterpart and completion. If it is at all thought, it is thought truthfully.¹¹ Aristotle proceeds to lay out the absolutely first principle as follows:

Clearly, then, such a principle is the most certain of all; and what this principle is we proceed to state. It is: The same [thing] cannot at the same time both belong and not belong to the same object and in the same respect.... Indeed, this is the most certain of all principles; for it has the specification stated above. For it is impossible for anyone to believe something to be and not to be, as some think Heraclitus says.... If, then, contraries cannot at the same time belong to the same subject (and let the usual specifications be added also to this premise), and if the contrary of an opinion is the negation of that opinion, it is evident that the same person cannot at the same time believe the same object to be and not to be; for in being mistaken concerning this that person would be having contrary opinions at the same time. It is because of this that all those who carry out demonstrations make reference to this as an ultimate opinion. This is by nature a principle also of all the other axioms. (1005b17-33)

That which will have been called “principle of non-contradiction” finds here its first perspicuous formalization (though it is anticipated already in Plato’s *Republic*).¹² We should investigate more in depth the

¹¹ See also 1061b34-35. In *Metaphysics* Kappa Aristotle takes up anew and extensively the discussion of the first principle.

¹² Plato diagnoses the problem of contradiction in the context of his analysis of psychism. The human experience of inner division, of being at odds with oneself and pulled in opposite directions, does not so much reveal the psyche in its intrinsic conflict and contradiction. Rather, it reveals the compositeness of the psyche, its being an articulate and complex organism, and therefore the possibility, never simply overcome, of disagreement among the various components. As Plato has Socrates say, “it is clear that the same part can not at the same time produce or undergo contraries (*tanantia*) in the same way and in the same respect (*kata tauton ge kai pros tauton*); thus, if we find such [contradictions] taking place in souls, we shall know that at stake is not the same thing but many” (436b-c; my translation). Plato’s entire psycho-ethical elaboration hinges on this finding and the urgency it announces, that is, the need for consistent and tireless care of the psychosomatic system in order to heal rifts and divisions among its constitutive elements. Clearly the diction “principle (or law) of non-contradiction” is equally extraneous to Plato and Aristotle. We should remain mindful of the anachronism, even as we go on to employ this phrase.

relation between being and axiom—more precisely, between being and the principle of non-contradiction. The latter concerns beings, things in their multiplicity and singularity, and, at the same time, also yields a structural insight into being as such, as a whole. We may venture to say that this principle *is* being, or rather, indiscernible from being: being as it manifests itself at once in its manifoldness and holistically. For, again, investigating being qua being, being according to the whole, means investigating its principle(s). The principle of non-contradiction is indiscernible from being qua being, i.e., qua “all beings”—and this means that it is indiscernible from being in its becoming, in and as spatio-temporality. To put it otherwise, this principle may be understood as the mode and condition of being’s eventuation—that is to say, the very mode of being’s self-articulation into and as beings in their becoming. Indeed, these essential aspectival and temporal indices should be highlighted: any thing, indeed, all things, cannot be and not be such and such *at the same time and in the same respect*.¹³

In one and the same gesture, the principle of being is exhibited as a principle of beings, of substances in their particularity— as belonging to being and to beings, or, rather, as principle of *being qua beings*, principle of *being qua becoming* (in terms of time and place). Such a principle announces the common, shared structure of the becoming of beings, revealing its most basic truth. Aristotle is suggesting that being (or a being) in its occurring does not admit of self-denial, that being (or a being), in occurring, cannot also not occur—at least, not at the same time and in the same respect. To be sure, self-denial (along with the concomitant contradictory beliefs) does mark the spatio-temporal unfolding of being—the flowing of any thing into alterity, any thing ultimately being resolved into an other, even its other, its own dissipation. As Aristotle will note later, in Book Kappa, “the thing in motion must be in that from which it will be moved and not be in itself, must then be moving into another thing, and must finally become in it; but then two contradictories cannot be true of it in each of these at the same time” (1063a19-21).

Contradiction, then, is the cipher of temporality and signals finitude, the ephemeral character, instability, and reversibility of all that is—for the becoming of any thing does indeed entail constant oscillation between contraries and even development as self-negation, growth as thrust towards self-destruction. However, at any given moment and in any particular perspective, contradiction is impossible and inconceivable. (Of

¹³ See 1061b36-1062a2.

course, in this perspective the question of the status of the moment gains considerable relevance, along with the overall understanding of time and temporality.)

A number of consequences flow from this way of approaching the theme. The principle of non-contradiction does not amount to a denial of irreducible complexity, a quintessentially metaphysical attempt at capturing the flow of becoming, its infinite richness, within the logic of the opposition between being and non-being. Rather, the irreducible complexity harbored in becoming, in its time and manifoldness, is what the principle at once (ontologically) makes possible, (logically) explicates, and does justice to (revealing discourse in its ethical dimension). In stating the impossibility of contradiction at the same time and in the same place (*hama*), the principle grants differentiation and determinacy in becoming and, thus, safeguards radical difference, the singularity and uniqueness of each moment and each facet in the unfolding of being, however relentlessly passing away. Far from being a matter of indeterminacy or confusion, complexity and difference take place in and as the ongoing mutability of the determinate, in its starkness and vividness. The principle, thus, acknowledges the irreducible compositeness, as well as the unity, of being as becoming. The principle of non-contradiction presents itself as the principle of com-position. This means: of paratactic juxtaposition, of letting the irreducible be woven together in the open expanse of place and time. What is at stake, in brief, is the possibility of community, of togetherness, beyond the requirement of homogeneity and conformity.

At the same time, the principle of non-contradiction informs thinking, in the sense that it lays bare the basic structures of thinking in its logical as well as psychological dimensions. For such a principle concerns not only beings in their being, but also our experience, indeed our beliefs and opinions thereof. It concerns not only the being of beings but also, most importantly, the being of this being that we are—the being of this being that perceives beings as such and perceives itself as a being. The principle informs *what* we undergo, think, and say as well as the structure, the *how*, of our undergoing, thinking, and saying. The principle of being, or principle as being, at once configures the mode and the communication (transmission, propagation) of our perceiving. Thus, such a principle announces the unity of thinking and content: of *thinking*, the constellation of perception in the broad sense (whether sensible, intuitive, or otherwise), but also intending, pointing towards, wanting to say (meaning); and of the *content* perceived, meant, and said. Just as things cannot at the same time and in the same respect both be and not be such and such, so one cannot at

the same time and in the same respect both mean and not mean a certain content.

What becomes prominent here is the psycho-phenomenological stratum of signification, in fact, the psycho-phenomenological ground and source of signification. Propositions cannot be empty, merely formal. The speaker must mean what she says, must discern what she says as meaningful. One speaks only from belief, compelled by what one believes. One speaks from conviction regarding some thing or other, thereby intending or meaning some thing or other. In other words, perceiving, opining, and their articulation through and as *logos* are understood in their unity, as coherently following the things that unfold. In their unity, thinking and speaking adhere to the dynamic configuration of things, to their self-disclosure, which admits of no contradictory view at the same time and in the same respect.¹⁴ Such an adherence to things, to beings in their becoming, is evidently not one, but always spatio-temporally indexed—following beings in their place and time and itself always situated in place and time.¹⁵ When this adhering is suspended, one faces meaninglessness, or even folly, that is, uprootedness, distance from the necessity of what is.¹⁶

Being, thinking, and meaningfully speaking appear, thus, to share the same condition(s). They are indissolubly intertwined in the discussion in Book Gamma.

There is, in sum, one science about both principles of being and principles of demonstration. For, indeed, axioms belong to being qua being in its articulation, in its spatio-temporal unfolding, and hence to all beings qua beings. First philosophy is not only the science interrogating beingness, *ousia*, but also the science interrogating itself as it interrogates beingness, i.e., the science thinking itself in its possibility and principle(s). It is crucially self-reflective. And it is self-reflective precisely as it fails to

¹⁴ Of the adherence of *logos* to being, Aristotle will say: “Again, if the name signifies [*semainei*] something and this is truly asserted, it is necessary for that which is asserted to be; and if it is necessary that it be, it cannot at that time not be; hence, it is not possible for opposite assertions to be true of that same thing” (1062a 20-23).

¹⁵ This is why, far from accomplishing the confining of sophistry and the arts of discursive confrontation, the Aristotelian reflection sheds light on that which informs such practices in their possibility and actuality. In this sense, the view here presented radically diverges from the treatment by Barbara Cassin and Michel Nancy in *La décision du sens*.

¹⁶ See 1062a16-20.