

## Aristotle

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The course consists in a more or less exhaustive survey of Aristotle's views concerning knowledge and being. In examining Aristotle's main arguments for the possibility of knowledge, and scientific knowledge (*episteme*) in particular, as well as his main arguments for the priority of substance among all other beings and the dependence of all other beings on substantial beings, we will also consider the views of earlier philosophers (Presocratics and Plato) against which Aristotle reacts before constructing and proposing his own picture of reality. The thirteen weeks of the course will cover the following topics:

1st week. **Aristotle's theory of substance.** We will discuss the concepts of *individual* and *universal*, the division between the several categories of beings, the concepts of genus and species, the difference between primary and secondary substances as well as the dependence of all other categories on the category of substance. In examining the way Aristotle understands the role and the content of the term substance we will also consider the philosophical history of the term *ousia* (substance) and the role it played in earlier philosophical theories (e.g. those of the Milesian philosophers, Parmenides, Democritus and especially Plato).

2nd week. **Aristotle's theory of truth and meaning.** We will examine Aristotle's theory of signification as it is exposed mainly in *De Interpretatione* and his theory of truth and falsehood. We will discuss which are, for Aristotle, the bearers of truth and how his theory of signification and truth has a major impact on his early ontology in the *Organon*.

3rd week. **The discovery of the syllogistic and its role in securing scientific knowledge (*episteme*).** We will examine the way in which Aristotle arrives in formulating his syllogistic and the aims that this method is employed for. We will also discuss the traditional square of opposition. The main focus, however, will be on the type of syllogism Aristotle labels *apodeictic* (demonstrative syllogism) as a basic instrument for securing scientific knowledge (and we will also discuss the way this type of knowledge is analysed in the *Posterior Analytics*). In parallel we will examine the nature of Aristotelian definitions, distinguishing the various types of definition referred to in the *Analytics* (i.e. nominal definitions, real definitions, causal definitions and definitions by division).

4th week. **The foundations or first principles of scientific knowledge.** The whole enterprise of securing certainty for scientific knowledge leads Aristotle to examine how we manage to have epistemic access to the first principles of scientific knowledge (in each one of its domains) in a short and puzzling chapter concluding the *Posterior Analytics* (B.19). We will discuss the ideas explored by Aristotle in this chapter and the various interpretations proposed by his commentators with the aim of gaining some insight on the foundations of scientific knowledge and human cognition in general.

5th week. **The division of scientific disciplines and the priority of the science of being qua being.** Aristotle, by contrast to Plato, is a champion of the relative autonomy of the various scientific disciplines and crafts, not merely with respect to their content or subject matter, but also with respect to their method. This leads him to propose a classification of the various scientific disciplines and crafts with respect to the nature of their subject matter and with respect to their aims (theoretical disciplines aim at knowledge, practical disciplines aim at well-being, productive disciplines aim at crafting a product of some kind or other). This

classification is hierarchical and establishes an order of priority relations between scientific disciplines (this order will be relevant in examining Aristotle's views on what type of life constitutes a life of human flourishing). First among all disciplines comes the study of being *qua* being and this fundamental study has a double character: it is at the same time the most general science (it examines all being *qua* beings) and also the most divine (it examines the highest form of being, i.e. divine being). We will examine these ideas expressed in detail in the *Metaphysics* (book E (VI)), as well as the puzzles that Aristotle's ideas present us with and the possible solutions to those puzzles defended in the literature on *Metaphysics*.

6th week. **Aristotle's theory of change.** In week 6 we will turn on Aristotle's *Physics* and examine his theory of change (focusing on natural change in particular). Aristotle's *Physics* book I is paradigmatic methodologically. It sets a puzzle out of the views of his predecessors who either propose an incomplete, and therefore vulnerable, theory of natural change (e.g. Empedocles, Anaxagoras or Democritus) or deny the possibility of any change whatsoever (Eleatics). And then it solves the puzzle by offering a solution that answers all the desiderata for a complete theoretical approach of the phenomena. In sailing between these two contradictory analyses of his predecessors, Aristotle presents gradually his own solution exploiting sound elements from both and formulating a novel approach that will help him establish the credibility of natural science, i.e. a scientific study of the natural world that complies to the Analytics standards for scientific knowledge. His theory depends on the analysis of substantial beings into two elements: form and matter, thus giving rise to a different approach to substantial beings from the one we encounter in the *Categories*. This approach, labeled hylomorphism, will lead naturally to a new analysis of the primordial question: what is substance, and will guide both his examination of natural phenomena and natural substances (in the *Physics*, *De Anima* and the biological works), but also and most crucially his ontological views concerning essence and definition (in the treatises included in his *Metaphysics*).

7th week. **Hylomorphism.** This week we will examine the consequences of Aristotle's theory of change and of his hylomorphism for his analysis of natural substances and his definition of nature in general. We will examine the contrary arguments presented by Aristotle that suggest the priority of form or matter in the definition of nature and natural substances, as well as the way Aristotle confronts and classifies the views of his predecessors. Finally we will consider Aristotle's preferred solution: the priority of form over matter in the identity or essence of compound substances. Still we will also look closely on matter's influence and contribution to the identity of natural substances and study the differences between the objects of natural science and mathematical sciences respectively.

8th week. **Aristotle's theory of causation and his teleology.** Aristotle's universe has a teleological structure in that the entities in it are directed towards an end or a final cause. However, Aristotle's teleology is original and peculiar in that it is not based on an intellect that designs or constructs nature so as to aim at specific ends. Final causes are somehow intrinsic to the structure of the universe without being imposed from above or by an external agent. This type of natural teleology (as opposed to a metaphysical teleology suggested for instance in Plato's *Timaeus*) is defended by an intricate set of arguments in the *Physics* which we will examine closely by taking into account various interpretations offered in the literature concerning their exact aim and conclusion. In the course of examining these arguments we will comment on Aristotle's four types of causes (material, efficient, formal and final cause) and his critique on his predecessors for neglecting final causation and consider why Aristotle accuses them for proposing incomplete explanations of the natural phenomena.

9th week. **Aristotle's definition of the soul.** We will examine the application of Aristotle's hylomorphism on his analysis of living beings as compounds of soul and body presented and defended primarily on the second book of the *De Anima*. We will look at the soul as the actuality of a body having organs, or, equivalently, as the several unified functions of a living body, and we will pay particular attention to the analysis of the perceptual capacity of living beings.

10th week. **Levels of potentiality and actuality.** In the course of explaining the perceptual capacity of living beings and its development and functioning Aristotle discusses in detail his distinction between potentiality and actuality, in various levels. This distinction is used extensively in Aristotle's works on natural philosophy,

but its details have caused some disagreements between commentators. We will examine this vexed issue by looking into the various ways his approach has been understood. And we will also look at the biological works, and in particular on Aristotle's embryology, in order to examine how the different levels of potentiality and actuality are employed by Aristotle in order to account for the formation of the various soul-capacities of living beings. In this way we will get a more unified picture of Aristotle's hylomorphism.

11th week. **The ontology of the *Metaphysics I*.** With an understanding of the main tenets of Aristotle's hylomorphism we will turn on the central books of his *Metaphysics* (VII-IX) in order to examine his answer on what constitutes the essence of a natural being. Aristotle considers several candidates (essence, universal, the genus, subject) for this role before concluding that the essence or definition of a natural being should be identified with its form. We will examine the two main criteria put forward by Aristotle for his preferred solution as to what constitutes the essence of an entity (namely subjecthood and particularity (*tode-ti-ness*)) and we will evaluate his arguments against the candidacy of universals, genera and mere subjects.

12th week. **The ontology of the *Metaphysics II*.** In week 12 we will examine Aristotle's positive solution concerning the candidacy of form as the essence of a being. His preferred solution, however, is not unambiguous and has led commentators to propose diverging interpretations of it. We will consider the controversies between such interpretations, the arguments supporting them, and we will discuss the problems that the solutions proposed face both textually and philosophically as well as what possible moves can resolve such interpretative controversies.

13th week. **Philosophy and its history.** In this concluding meeting we will discuss the particular value the study of the history of philosophy has for the philosophical enterprise in general. We will pay specific attention to Aristotle's own way of studying and structuring the history of a philosophical question or puzzle in order to propose a new solution for it. But we will also consider contemporary views on the different approaches to the history of the discipline and the several tools a historian of philosophy may employ in approaching, evaluating and critically assessing past theories and ideas.

## Bibliography

### A. Primary Sources:

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- Ross, W. D. 1928. *Aristotle: Metaphysica. The Works of Aristotle*, Volume VIII (second edition). Oxford University Press.
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### B. Secondary Bibliography:

#### Introductions and Companions to Aristotle:

- Ackrill, J., 1981. *Aristotle the Philosopher*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
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- Shields, C.2012. *The Oxford Handbook on Aristotle*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.
- Lear, J.1988 *Aristotle: the Desire to Understand*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Shields, C. 2014 *Aristotle* 2nd edition, London: Routledge, 2014.

#### Web resources:

History of Philosophy without any gaps:

<https://historyofphilosophy.net/>

Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy:

<https://iep.utm.edu/>

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy:

<https://plato.stanford.edu/>

Mooc Courses:

Susan Sauve Meyer, Aristotle and his successors:

<https://www.coursera.org/learn/aristotle>

Works of Aristotle:

Internet classics Archives:

<http://classics.mit.edu/Browse/browse-Aristotle.html>

A bibliography on Aristotle:

<https://faculty.washington.edu/smcohen/433/433bibl.htm>