The Aim and the Argument of Aristotle's Metaphysics

Stephen Menn

Iα1: The Metaphysics and the σκοπός of metaphysics

In a famous passage of his autobiography, Avicenna reports his struggles with the discipline of metaphysics. Having mastered all the other sciences, he set himself to read Aristotle's Metaphysics: he read the text forty times, until he had it by heart, but he still could not understand the work or Aristotle's aim in it, and he gave up metaphysics as hopeless. But later, when he discovered Fârâbî's little book On the Aims of the Metaphysics (only five pages long in a modern edition), he suddenly came to understand the aim of the book; he had no need to reread the text, since he knew it by heart, but now he understood how everything he had read before was related to its aim.[1] "Aim" here (Arabic gharad) translates Greek σκοπός, the principal object of a science, to which everything else the science discusses must be related (so health is the σκοπός of medicine, according to the first sentence of Galen's On the sects for beginners). The σκοπός of a science is equally the σκοπός of a treatise devoted to the science; so, since Aristotle makes it clear in the Metaphysics that he is pursuing a science called "wisdom" or "first philosophy," and since Fârâbî and Avicenna assume (I think rightly) that these are names for the same science, they assume that the aim of the Metaphysics will be the same as the aim of this science of first philosophy or metaphysics, whatever that may turn out to be. Avicenna's problem was not in understanding the individual sentences and arguments of the Metaphysics, but in understanding how they were supposed to function together in helping us to know the object, whatever it is, that is the aim of metaphysics.

Avicenna's problem continues to be the single greatest difficulty for readers of the Metaphysics, and thinking about this problem gives a useful way into the interpretive issues surrounding this text. For Fârâbî and Avicenna, and for more recent readers also, the problem arises in the first place from the fact that Aristotle describes the science he is pursuing in the Metaphysics both as a science of being in general (the modern shorthand is "ontology"), and as a science of eternal unchanging beings (which he once calls "theology"--a science of divine things, not of a single God). In the first place, wherever Aristotle discusses "wisdom" outside the Metaphysics itself, he describes it, either simply as the kind of knowledge most worth having for its own sake (rather than for its practical consequences), or as a knowledge of the noblest kind of beings (sometimes qualifying these as eternal or divine), never as a knowledge of beings in general; and wherever, outside the Metaphysics, he speaks of "first philosophy," he describes it as a science of unchanging or immaterial things, distinguishing it from physics as a science of changing and therefore enmattered things.[2] But in the Metaphysics itself, alongside texts like E1

[1] references to Avicenna and Fârâbî; now available in Gutas and Bertolacci (there's also another translation of the Avicenna)

[2] I list the passages in an appendix. all the texts on first philosophy or wisdom (or the like), inside and outside the Metaphysics, are gathered and discussed in Décarie, L'objet de la métaphysiqe selon Aristote (1961); many of the

1026a6-23 (first philosophy or "theology" is distinguished from physics and mathematics by the fact that its objects are both unchangeable and separately existing), there are also texts like the first sentence of Γ, announcing a "science of being qua being and of the things that belong to it per se"; and Aristotle makes clear, most explicitly at E1 1026a30-32, that this science of being is identical with first philosophy. Avicenna's problem in reading the Metaphysics arises from the difficulty of reconciling these statements about the σκοπός of first philosophy, but much more from the difficulty of understanding how the actual arguments of the Metaphysics serve this σκοπός. Since the majority of the texts describe the science Aristotle is pursuing in the Metaphysics in broadly "theological" terms (as a science of immaterial or eternally unchanging things or of first causes or principles), and since the few "ontological" descriptions are all in close proximity with "theological" descriptions with which they must somehow be reconciled, most readers before Avicenna's time thought they had to understand the whole Metaphysics as serving the σκοπός of theology; and they had been unable to do this convincingly. As Fârâbî puts it, most people think that the aim of the Metaphysics is "the account of the Creator and νοῦς and soul and whatever is related to these, and that the science of metaphysics and the science of theology are the same; and so they are confused and go astray, since we find that most of the discussion in this book does not have this aim, indeed we find in it no specific discussion of this aim except what is contained in Book Λ." Fârâbî's own solution would convince only a fairly desperate reader, and has had no recent takers that I know of; but his statement of the problem is still telling enough.[3]

A number of modern commentators have tried to solve Fârâbî's and Avicenna's problem by proposing that the apparent contradictions in the Metaphysics result in one way or another from the work of ancient editors. Most directly, Natorp proposed that the descriptions of first philosophy as theology were interpolations by later Peripatetics; but this is a violent and arbitrary solution, and fails in any case to deal with Aristotle's uniformly theological descriptions of first philosophy outside the Metaphysics itself.[4] Far more plausibly, Jaeger proposed that the different descriptions of metaphysics represented Aristotle's views at different stages in his intellectual

---

texts had already been discussed in Augustin Mansion, "Philosophie première, philosophie seconde, et métaphysique chez Aristote," Revue philosophique de Louvain, v.56, 1958, pp.165-221. note Patzig's admission of the facts, Articles on Aristotle v.3, p.47; likewise Natorp, "Thema und Disposition," pp.540-41. when Theophrastus says that Plato, "although he devoted most of his effort to first philosophy, also gave himself to the phenomena and touched on the investigation of nature" (in fr.230, Simplicius In Physica p.26,9-11), presumably Platonic first philosophy is the theory of Forms or kindred mathematical speculation. as we will see below, the dichotomy of "ontological" and "theological" descriptions (using these terms for convenience) is too crude, but it will do as a first approximation

[3]describe Fârâbî's solution; note on retranslating 'aql as νοῦς.

[4]Natorp's articles are "Thema und Disposition der aristotelischen Metaphysik," Philosophische Monatshefte XXIV, 1888, pp.37-65 and pp. 540-574; and cf. his "Aristoteles' Metaphysik K 1-8, 1065a26," Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie v.1, 1888, pp.178-193, arguing that K is spurious. Natorp thinks that Metaphysics E is spurious, and (for double protection) that the offending lines of E1 are a later interpolation within this spurious text. Walter Leszl and Annick Stevens delete E1 1069a31-2, as had already been proposed by Francesco Patrizi in his Discussiones Peripateticae of 1581, p.106 {this part already published 1571}; Natorp made the much more complicated proposal to delete the sentences or clauses 1026a18-19 and a21-22; to take "εἰ" in a10 as meaning "whether" rather than "if," and the sentence as meaning that it belongs to the science of being to determine whether being extends more widely than the physical realm; and to take αὕτη in a23 and again in a30 as referring to the science of being, and the sentence at a27ff as meaning that if only physical things exist, physics and the science of being will be the same, whereas if there are also non-physical things, the science of being will be more universal and prior to physics [I'm not sure how he takes "οὕτως … ὡς"]. but while Natorp and Leszl are trying to get rid of theological descriptions of first philosophy, Patrizi and Stevens want only to get rid of the identification of first philosophy/theology with the universal study of being; which is not as obviously hopeless. I will discuss all these issues later

development, and that our Metaphysics contains both earlier texts, devoted to metaphysics as a study of immaterial substances, and later texts devoted to metaphysics as ontology. But it is important to recognize that Jaeger did not accept the radical view (which non-specialists often suppose to be the consensus of modern scholarship, or even to be proved by ancient testimony) that the Metaphysics is not a single treatise on first philosophy, but a later Peripatetic compilation of Aristotle's writings.[5] Since Metaphysics E1 emphatically affirms, in almost the same breath, both theological and ontological descriptions of the science, we cannot solve Fârâbî's problem by supposing that an editor has brought together ontological and theological treatises that Aristotle intended to keep apart, unless we are willing to credit this editor with writing (at least this part of) E1, and indeed much else besides. What Jaeger proposed instead was that Aristotle himself collected different pieces that he had written at different times and in pursuit of different conceptions of first philosophy, and tried to sew them together into a single comprehensive treatise on first philosophy: Jaeger thinks that Aristotle wrote Metaphysics Γ and E, and made revisions to the other books, as part of this project of unification.[6] So Jaeger, and after him Ross, conclude that Aristotle did intend the Metaphysics to be read as a single treatise, except for a few books lying "outside the main series," namely α, Δ, K and Λ, which they think were not part of Aristotle's plan, but were added from Aristotle's papers by later editors.[7]

I think it is clear, especially from the role of Metaphysics B in setting the program of problems for the later books, and from the references back to B in these books, that Jaeger and Ross must be right in concluding that Aristotle intended a treatise roughly like our Metaphysics as a unified treatise on first philosophy. It is also clear, especially from the verbatim duplication between much of Metaphysics A9 and M4-5, that Aristotle cannot have intended the text we now have to be the final form of the treatise: just how far our Metaphysics falls short of Aristotle's intention, whether because of editorial additions, because he had not adequately integrated his earlier writings, or simply because he had not finished the work to his satisfaction, must remain subject to discussion. (I will try to show, against Jaeger and Ross, that Δ and--more importantly--Λ are parts of the intended structure of the Metaphysics.) But to say that Aristotle himself intended his ontological and theological investigations, and his statements that first philosophy is ontology and that it is theology, to go together in a single treatise does not solve the problem of the

---

[5]something like this proposal goes back to Patrizi (who thinks that two treatises, ABKΛMN on theology and ΓΔEZHΘI on ontology, plus α which is a fragment of physics, got mixed together); Samuel Petit in 1630 proposed a more radical plurality of treatises. there is no ancient testimony in support of anything like this view (see my "The Editors of the Metaphysics" in Phronesis for 1995): there had always been unease about K and α, and about the duplications M4-5 = A9, Δ2 = Physics II,3, but these had been seen as isolated problems not imperiling the unity of the Metaphysics as a whole. since the work of Brandis and Michelet in the 1830's, the large majority of scholars have believed that Aristotle intended at least the majority of the books of the Metaphysics to belong to a single treatise. I will discuss the disputed issues in a later section. we can roughly distinguish four views (i) "maximalist" (Michelet, followed by Reale), that all books of the Metaphysics, or all except α, are intended to belong to the same treatise; (ii) the view of Brandis and Bonitz, that ABΓEZHΘ are an integrated treatise, with Iota and possibly MN and possibly Λ (Brandis says yes, Bonitz says no) more loosely attached; (iii) the view of Jaeger 1912, that ABΓEIMN are a more-or-less integrated treatise {some caveats about M replacing N}, with ZHΘ another treatise joined to it after Aristotle's death; (iv) the view of Jaeger 1923, Ross, Frede and Patzig, that Aristotle intended ABΓEZHΘIMN as a single treatise {Natorp says ABΓZHΘMNΛ, with Iota as an appendix}. {curiously, Frede included Λ in "The Unity of General and Special Metaphysics: Aristotle's Conception of Metaphysics," p.82, but excluded it in Frede-Patzig and most emphatically in his introduction to Frede-Charles}. {check two scholars who may be radical anti-unitarians, Christ and Düring}

[6]check that this is right (does he not think that some version of Γ or E existed before?), and check whether Jaeger changed his mind on this between 1912 and 1923

[7]references in Jaeger and Ross

σκοπός of the book: it merely rules out easy solutions through "interpolation" or "development." Indeed, Jaeger thought, not that he had solved the problem of the σκοπός of the Metaphysics, but that it was unsolvable, and that Aristotle himself had failed to bring coherence to his earlier and later writings: Jaeger says that E1, in bringing together theological and ontological descriptions of the project, does not succeed in reconciling them, but only makes the contradiction more obvious.[8] This is a very unsatisfying conclusion, and there have been several attempts since Jaeger to give a more sympathetic understanding of how Aristotle thought his different descriptions of first philosophy could be consistent. I think that this is generally the right approach, and that Jaeger's counsel of despair is unnecessary. But a caution is in order. In order to solve Avicenna's problem of understanding the Metaphysics, it is not enough simply to reconcile Aristotle's different statements about the σκοπός of first philosophy: we also have to explain how the things Aristotle actually does in the different books of the Metaphysics are supposed to serve this σκοπός (and this includes understanding why he would make the statements he makes, where he makes them, about the aim and nature of the discipline). Even if we decided (as we should not) that the Metaphysics cannot be understood as a single Aristotelian treatise, but only as a compilation of several treatises, we would still have to understand it somehow: and this means understanding how Aristotle thought the arguments of the different books served the aim of first philosophy or wisdom, since he certainly did think they did this somehow, even if he did not write these books together as parts of a coherent strategy to attain that aim.

Over the last fifty years there has emerged something close to a consensus, in the English- and German-language (but not French or Italian) literature, on how Aristotle intended the ontological and theological descriptions of metaphysics to fit together; I will first quickly sketch what I take the content of this consensus to be, and then say why I think it is inadequate, and why we ought to look for a better account. Crudely, I think that while the current consensus gives an a priori possible reconciliation of Aristotle's different statements about metaphysics (which is more than Jaeger could do), it cannot give an adequate account of the actual argument of the Metaphysics, or indeed even of Aristotle's explicit statements about the discipline, when these are read in their proper contexts. A number of pieces of the puzzle have been cleverly assembled, but I think they have been assembled in the wrong order; some pieces of the Metaphysics have to be stretched or squeezed to make them fit, and others have to be left out altogether. My goal will be to present an alternative account that will do justice to all the parts of the Metaphysics, and allow them to be seen as forming a single picture.

Although the currently standard reading of the Metaphysics has been proposed, in different versions, by many writers, I will take Günther Patzig and Michael Frede as its clearest exponents. The main lines of the reading are as follows. The σκοπός of metaphysics is being qua being: the goal is to know the nature of being as such. But being is said in many ways, so that there is no one nature of being in all things; this threatens the possibility of a science of metaphysics. However, being is said πρὸς ἕν, primarily of substances, of other things derivatively; so we can know being by recognizing it in substance, which is paradigmatically being and so best exhibits the nature of being as such (this is thought to be the result of Metaphysics Γ1-2). "Substance" here is just a technical abbreviation for "whatever is being in the primary sense." But what things are substances in this sense? According especially to Frede (following here G.E.L. Owen), there are different, potentially incompatible criteria which a thing

[8]Aubenque too thinks that E1, in identifying ontology with first philosophy or theology, is stating a program which Aristotle was never able to fulfil; see discussion below

must satisfy in order to be a substance, notably that it must be a subject [ὑποκείμενον], indeed an ultimate subject not predicated of anything else, and that it must be an essence [τί ἦν εἶναι]; this second criterion can be divided into two halves, first that it must have an essence, then that it must be identical with this essence. These criteria seem to specify two different candidates for substance, since matter seems to be the ultimate subject of predication, while essence seems to be form. Metaphysics Z is supposed to take on the task of assessing the candidates for substance, seeing whether any candidate meets all the criteria. According to most interpreters, Z decides that form is the best candidate for substance, while admitting that the forms of material things are not perfectly substance, because they do not perfectly satisfy the criterion of separability: these forms are separable in thought, but they cannot actually exist separately from their matter. This shows that while primary substance is form, it is not the form of a sensible thing, but a form existing separately from matter, a divine form. This explains why Aristotle can describe first philosophy both as ontology (and also as a science of substance) and as theology: divine forms best exemplify form, forms best exemplify substance, and substances best exemplify being, so that divine forms will best exhibit the nature of being as such. So Aristotle will carry out his project of understanding the nature of being by narrowing his focus first to substances, then to forms, then finally to divine forms: once he has shown how being is exhibited in God or in the gods, he will then turn to explicate the derivative ways of being of other forms, then of other substances, and then of non-substances.[9]

While this story works fairly well at reconciling Aristotle's different descriptions of metaphysics as ontology or as theology, it does badly at accounting for the actual progress of thought in the Metaphysics, and it depends on attributing to Aristotle fundamental doctrines that cannot be found in the text. Although Metaphysics Z comes to bear a great deal of weight, it is

[9]references to Patzig (in Articles on Aristotle) and to Frede "The Unity of General and Special Metaphysics: Aristotle's Conception of Metaphysics" (in his Essays on Ancient Philosophy). Joseph Owens, working at the same time as Patzig but independently, reached similar conclusions in his The Doctrine of Being in the Aristotelian Metaphysics; Frede is starting from and modifying Patzig's proposal. note some differences among Owens, Patzig, and Frede. (i) Patzig speaks of God as οὐσία οὐσιῶν: it is not clear what he means by this, but apparently it is not just a title of honor, but implies a causal relation between God and other substances; by contrast Frede is not interested in any causal relation between God (or immaterial substances generally) and other things, but only in God's being an exemplary being (and exemplary substance). (ii) Owens says that "God is the [primary] meaning of being," Frede rather that God (or immaterial substances generally) instantiate the primary meaning of being: so while both Owens and Frede say that being is said πρὸς ἕν primarily of God and derivatively of other things, they seem to mean different things by this, Owens that for X to be is for it to stand in some appropriate relation to God, Frede that for X to be is for it to stand in some appropriate relation to the mode of being that God exemplifies (e.g. by fulfilling all the criteria for substantiality except for ἁπλῶς separability), which apparently it could do even if there were no God {a good text for this, where Frede is criticizing Patzig, is at "Unity" p.88}. thus Owens and Patzig are positing stronger relations between God and other beings than Frede; these stronger relations cannot be justified from the texts and to that extent Frede's position is more defensible; but the thesis that only God is a being (or a substance) in the primary sense also cannot be justified from the texts; and on Frede's view (unlike Owens' or Patzig's), Aristotelian metaphysics would not be a causal knowledge, which seems plainly impossible. {Owens complicates matters by refusing to describe the science of being qua being as "ontology," because he follows Merlan in taking "science of being qua being" to mean "science of immaterial beings."} it may be slightly misleading to describe the shared views of Owens and Patzig and Frede as a consensus in English and German scholarship, since there are some scholars who simply ignore the issue. an extreme case is Terence Irwin, who in Aristotle's First Principles, a work of some 700 pages, mentions theology only in a single footnote (8n42), although surely Aristotle's God is a first principle if anything is. Irwin's solution there is that the science of being qua being will also be a science of certain special beings if those beings have only the properties belonging to being as such, and no other properties. this is indefensible: Aristotle's God is, for instance, νοῦς, which is not a property that all beings have simply because they are beings

quite difficult to read this whole book as a connected argument that only form meets the different criteria for substance, and Frede and Patzig in their commentary on Z are forced, first to bracket Z7-9 and Z12 as later additions not contributing to the main argument, and then to conclude that the book as a whole is composed of as many as seven independent essays on substance, tied together by a common introduction. (I will return in Part II below to the argument-structure of Z, and I will argue that this book is better read, not as a discussion of the claims of different candidates to be substances, but as pursuing an entirely different question.) But the most serious difficulty is in the role that this interpretation assigns to Aristotle's theology. Although Aristotle says repeatedly that substances are called being in a different (and prior) way than accidents, he never says in any extant text that God or immaterial substances are called being (or substance) in a different way from other things.[10] (And so far from saying that God is the primary instance of form, Aristotle never says anywhere that God, or any other immaterial substance that he believes in--as opposed to ones Plato believed in--is a form at all.)[11] Certainly the actual argument of the

---

[10]in making this objection against Patzig and Frede and Owens I am in at least partial agreement with many French and Italian scholars, notably Aubenque and Berti. I agree with them that Aristotle never says that being is said πρὸς ἕν primarily of God and only derivatively of other things, much less explains why and how this would be true, and I also agree that we have no good reason to attribute this belief to Aristotle. the only function that the πρὸς ἕν predication of being has in the argument of the Metaphysics (and it is mentioned only in Γ2 and the K3 parallel, parenthetically in Z4, and perhaps implicitly in Z1, Λ1, and Λ4-5) is to say that, since all other beings depend for their existence on substance, it will be sufficient for us to study the causes of substance in order to grasp the causes of all beings; it would make no sense to extend this consideration to a πρὸς ἕν predication of being (or of substance) between immaterial and material substances unless we were looking for the causes of immaterial substances, which is not Aristotle's project. nonetheless, I do not see anything in Aristotle that would contradict the thesis that being (or substance) is said πρὸς ἕν of immaterial and material substances, and I don't think that those philosophers who proposed this thesis, often as part of an interpretation of Aristotle, were for that reason bad philosophers. (this view should not be described as "the scholastic view"--some scholastics held it and others did not.) some of Aubenque's and Berti's objections seem to turn on misunderstandings: an "analogy" or a πρὸς ἕν equivocity of being, whether between substances and accidents or between immaterial and material substances, would not involve "smoothing out" or "reducing" the plurality of being so as to implicitly make being univocal, nor would it necessarily involve any "deduction" or "derivation" of the many senses of being, either by producing the primary and derivative senses from a single grand scheme of division, as e.g. Brentano tried to do, or by deriving the lesser senses from the primary sense, as e.g. Frede promised on Aristotle's behalf. I think that what Brentano and Frede are proposing is un-Aristotelian, and dubious philosophy, but it is not intrinsic to the idea of πρὸς ἕν predication of being, either between substance and accidents or between immaterial and material substance. Aubenque's objections to the notion of an "analogy of being" are a red herring: he is right that it is not correct Aristotelian terminology to describe πρὸς ἕν predication as a kind of analogy, as some scholastics do, but many of them are aware that their terminology is un-Aristotelian, and Aubenque has not shown that the terminology entails any conceptual confusion, or in particular that it leads to thinking of being as univocal. (Aubenque and Berti are in part trying to show that Heidegger's critique of "ontotheology" applies only to scholastic interpretations of Aristotle and not to the real Aristotle; but while Heidegger is certainly against ontotheology, he does not seem to have any arguments against it.) note that while Aubenque thinks (making an inference from Metaphysics Iota 10) that "substance" is purely equivocal between immaterial and material things, Stevens, who gives similar denunciations of the Patzig-Frede-Owens view, thinks (inferring from the premiss that the categories are genera) that it is purely univocal. the truth is that there is not sufficient evidence to tell whether Aubenque, Frede, or Stevens is right, and this fact is itself a warning sign: Aristotle does not seem to have thought or cared much about the question, and any interpretation of the overall argument-structure of the Metaphysics that would turn on some one answer to this question is ipso facto suspect. here avoid duplication especially with Iβ2b

[11]the only plausible exceptions are the texts of Physics I,9 and II,2 cited in the appendix to this section, but in context these are talking about Platonic forms. for Aristotle, "form" is primarily a kind of cause, and Aristotelian immaterial substances are not formal causes, either of themselves (since nothing is a cause of itself) or of anything else (since they are separated from material things, and since Aristotle emphatically rejects the suggestion that the form of any material thing could be separated from that thing). the description of the movers of the heavens as forms

Metaphysics, as it turns from the discussion of material substances to the theology of Metaphysics Λ, does not rely on a difference in senses of being; Λ says nothing about how God exemplifies being, or how other ways of being are derivative from his. Indeed, Owens and Patzig and Frede are driven to conclude that while the Metaphysics must culminate in a theological ontology, that culmination is not Λ: Λ is not part of the Metaphysics as Aristotle intended it, but a substitute for a theological ontology which Aristotle never managed to write, or which was not preserved.[12]

What I have said so far is not intended as a refutation of Patzig or Frede or other recent writers on the Metaphysics. But it should bring out some roughness in the fit between their reconstructions of metaphysics and the actual argument of the Metaphysics; more than this, it should raise uneasiness about their procedure. These writers begin with a hypothetical reconstruction of what Aristotle might have thought about the connection of the different objects of metaphysics, based on his explicit descriptions of the science, giving priority to its description as "a science of being qua being" and assuming that whatever else metaphysics does it does as a means to an understanding of being; then they try to fit their reconstructions onto the Metaphysics, and, if the fit is bad, they assume that Aristotle intended a different Metaphysics.[13] This is particularly serious when it comes to the theology: while we cannot reject out of hand the possibility that Λ, or any other particular book, does not belong to the intended structure of the Metaphysics, Λ is the only real source for Aristotelian theology that we have, and it is a very bold step to dismiss this book and posit instead a theology of quite different content. Our problem, like Avicenna's, is to understand the Metaphysics, and not merely to understand some other treatise on first philosophy that Aristotle might have written. My aim in this book will be to present an account of Aristotle's metaphysical project that is drawn from, and explains, the actual progress of thought in the Metaphysics, positing the minimum possible discrepancy (and there is certainly some) between what Aristotle intended and the Metaphysics we have. While we must, of course, explain Aristotle's different explicit statements about first philosophy or wisdom, I

---

goes back as far as Alexander of Aphrodisias, but has no support in Aristotle; this was brought to general scholarly attention by E.E. Ryan, "Pure Form in Aristotle," in Phronesis for 1973

[12]this conclusion about Λ goes back to Bonitz; which is no excuse. I will have a full discussion later of Λ's relation to the rest of the Metaphysics. for now let it be said that there is an undeniable back-reference to Metaphysics Θ8 at Λ6 1072a4, with a simple εἴρηται. so far, no one that I have pointed this out to (including Frede) has been able to look me in the eye and tell me that Θ and Λ are not intended as parts of the same treatise

[13]even Aubenque, who distinguishes between "first philosophy" or theology and "metaphysics" (by which he means ontology), seems to think that what is impelling Aristotle is the task of unifying the many (esp. categorial) senses or determinations of being, which leads him to seek a divine being free from the predicative structure which generates this multiplicity {check whether this is fair to Aubenque: maybe he thinks there are two independent sources of Aristotle's project, the one you've described and one coming from a critique of Plato's description of divine things}. this, like Owens and Patzig and Frede, assumes that Aristotle is pursuing theology as a means to an ontological end. but the Metaphysics never mentions any such ontological purpose for theology, and Aristotle regards the plurality of senses of being as a fact (and one that needs to be recognized in order to avoid sophistical reasoning, as Aubenque rightly stresses), but not as a problem that needs to be overcome. the Metaphysics never gives the kind of account of divine being that Aubenque thinks Aristotle is seeking, and Aubenque concludes that Aristotle's project was not completed, indeed would and could never have been completed, and that the real lessons of the Metaphysics will be learned by seeking the reasons behind this failure. it is to Aubenque's credit that he is sensitive to tensions between different things Aristotle says, or between what he says he will do and what he actually does in the extant texts, and that he does not too quickly move to defuse these tensions chronologically (actually, even Aubenque does this rather too often) or throw away parts of the text he doesn't like and replace them with imaginary things Aristotle might have written. the problem is that some of the tensions Aubenque sees are between Aubenque's speculative reconstruction of Aristotle's project and what Aristotle does, not between what Aristotle says he will do and what he does

will try to do this by interpreting each of these statements in its context in the ongoing argument of the Metaphysics.[14] Doing this will also allow us to respond to Aubenque's challenge, to see that ontological and theological (and indeed other) descriptions do indeed describe the same science, and that E1's description of a science of separately existing eternally unchanging things which will also give an account of being and its attributes is not simply an ideal of a unified science, in tension with the transmitted Metaphysics, but accurately describes the ongoing argument of the text itself.

It is important to begin at the real beginning of Aristotle's argument. Ever since Brentano's On the Many Senses of Being in Aristotle of 1862, the discussion of the σκοπός of Aristotelian metaphysics has mainly been devoted to exegesis of the first sentence of Metaphysics Γ, that "there is a science which studies being qua being, and the attributes which belong to it per se": this sentence has been taken out of its context, as if it were Aristotle's first and defining statement about first philosophy or wisdom.[15] But if we read this sentence in its proper context in the argument of the Metaphysics, we can see that it is not intended as a self-sufficient definition of the science that Aristotle is pursuing; and we can see better both what this sentence means in itself, and how Aristotle means it to fit together, both with the other things he says about this science, and with what he actually does in the Metaphysics.

Brentano says on his first page, setting the keynote of the whole modern discussion: "first philosophy must begin with a determination of the sense of the name 'being', if indeed, as Aristotle claims repeatedly and with great definiteness, its object is being qua being."[16] Brentano seems not to notice that Aristotle's Metaphysics does not begin with anything remotely like this. Metaphysics A does not discuss the meaning or meanings of "being" (in a short passage near the end, A9 992b18-24, Aristotle says that this ought to be done, without as yet doing it); A never says that wisdom is a science of being (it does not mention "first philosophy"), nor does it otherwise show interest in ontology. The first place in the Metaphysics where Aristotle speaks of a science of being (and he never does so when he speaks of wisdom or first philosophy in other treatises) is the first sentence of Γ. And although this sentence has often been taken as a new beginning (or even as the real beginning of the Metaphysics), it is part of a continuous argument begun in A and B. Γ1 states Aristotle's answer to the third and fourth aporiai of B, among the four "methodological" aporiai, asking questions about "the science we are seeking": the third aporia asks whether "there is one science of all οὐσίαι, or many sciences" (997a15-16, cp. 995b10-11) and, if many, "of what kind of οὐσία this science should be held to be" (997a16-17); the fourth aporia asks whether "the study is only of οὐσίαι or also of the per se attributes [τὰ συμβεβηκότα καθ᾽ αὐτά] of the οὐσίαι" (995b18-20, cp. 997a25-26). The first sentence of Γ answers both of these questions by saying that "there is a [single] science which studies being qua being and the [attributes] which belong to this per se" (1003a21-22). [17] Since a single science

[14]contrast Frede "Unity" pp.82-3

[15]an extreme example in Kirwan's Clarendon ΓΔE, which argues that AαB are irrelevant as context, that Γ is the real beginning of the treatise, no more dependent on AαB than on other works of Aristotle; and who pretends that the dispute about ontological or theological interpretations of metaphysics is simply a dispute about whether "science of being qua being" at the beginning of Γ means a universal science of being (which of course it does) or a science only of some preeminent kind of being--no other texts are relevant. although Décarie had collected the relevant texts in 1961, very little use seems to have been made of his work

[16]reference (I'm taking this from the published English translation)

[17]I am assuming that the opposition between οὐσίαι and συμβεβηκότα in these aporiai is the distinction between beings (in whatever category) and their attributes, not between substances and accidents in the categorial sense, since it makes no sense to describe accidents in the categorial sense as συμβεβηκότα καθ᾽ αὐτά of substances, as the B1 version of the fourth aporia does (the B2 version does not use this phrase but seems to be thinking in the same

does all this, it will be the science Aristotle is seeking, and he will not have to choose between competing sciences; but he was already referring to "this science," "the study," "the science we are seeking," before he concludes that there is a single science of being. So he was not seeking it as "a science of being qua being," but under some other description, concluding only later that there is a science of being qua being and that it meets this description.

The context of the aporiai in Metaphysics B shows that the science Aristotle is seeking is wisdom, whatever wisdom may turn out to be. Thus the first aporia asks whether there is a single science of the formal, final and efficient causes, and, if these are not the same science, "which of these is the [science] we are seeking" (996b3), or "which of the sciences should be called wisdom" (996b9): "wisdom" and "the science we are seeking" are equivalent expressions.[18] So the first sentence of Γ is part of an inquiry into the question "what is wisdom?". More specifically, it is an inquiry into the question "what causes does wisdom know?". This is an appropriate way to specify a science, since every science is a knowledge of some causes, and the first four aporiai of B each pursue some aspect of this question. Most obviously, the first aporia asks what kind of cause (efficient, final, formal?) wisdom will know. But, also, the second aporia is asking whether wisdom will know causes of beings or principles of demonstrations, and the third and fourth aporiai ask which beings it will know the causes of (all οὐσίαι or just some? οὐσίαι or their attributes?). As Aristotle states these aporiai in B1, the second aporia asks "does it belong to the science to consider only the ἀρχαί of οὐσία or also the ἀρχαί from which everyone [i.e. the practitioners of every science] demonstrates?" (995b6-8), and the third aporia picks up one half of this antithesis by asking "if it is about οὐσία, then is there one [science] of all [kinds of οὐσία] or are there several, and, if there are several, are they all on a par, or are some of them to be called wisdoms and the others something else?" (995b10-13). The second aporia is presupposing that wisdom will be about some kind of ἀρχαί, and asks whether these will be ἀρχαί of οὐσία or (also) of demonstrations: so when the third aporia picks up the first half of the antithesis, "if it is about οὐσία", that means "if it considers the ἀρχαί of οὐσία [rather than ἀρχαί of something else]." The third aporia then asks which οὐσίαι these are, and the fourth aporia asks whether their attributes are also included. Γ1 states Aristotle's answers to these questions, namely that the causes wisdom knows are causes of all beings as such, and of their per se attributes as well (and Γ3 adds that wisdom also considers the principles of demonstration):

> since we are seeking the ἀρχαί and the highest causes, it is clear that they must be [causes] of some nature per se. So if those who sought the στοιχεῖα of beings were also seeking these ἀρχαί, the στοιχεῖα must be of being, not per accidens but qua being: so that it is of being qua being that we too must grasp the first causes (Γ1 1003a26-32).

I will come back later to discuss how Aristotle argues for this conclusion in Γ1-2. For now the point is that when Γ1 says that wisdom is a science of being qua being, it is asserting that the causes wisdom knows will be causes of being qua being, rather than causes of something else--

---

way). however, there are also indications in B to support the other interpretation, and the truth may be that in B not enough has yet been said to make the meaning determinate, and that Γ will develop both possible interpretations--more on this in Iβ2. even if B is thinking of the opposition between substances and accidents, Γ's answer will still be that there is a single science that treats of all substances and also of their accidents

[18]So too, where the third aporia in B2 asks "of what kind of οὐσία this science should be held to be" (997a16-17), the parallel in B1 asks "whether all [the sciences of the kinds of οὐσία] are on a par, or whether some should be called wisdoms and others something else" (995b12-13): "this science" and "wisdom" are equivalent.

causes of some one genus of beings, or causes of being under some description other than "being". And this is not the definition of wisdom from which the Metaphysics begins. Rather, in AB, before the "ontological" characterization is given, there is already a conception of wisdom, and arguments that wisdom so conceived is desirable; then in Γ Aristotle makes, and argues for, the claim that the way to achieve the wisdom described in AB will be to study the causes of being.

However, it is independently clear that the "first philosophy" or "θεολογική" described in E1 is meant to be identical with the wisdom described especially in A1-2, even setting aside the last sentence of E1 saying that it belongs to first philosophy to investigate being and its per se attributes: first philosophy is the most choiceworthy of the theoretical sciences (and thus of all sciences), the most valuable [τίμιον] science and about the most noble object-genus, and about the divine (E1 1026a18-23); wisdom was (among all theoretical knowledge, i.e. all knowledge choiceworthy for its own sake) the most choiceworthy for its own sake (A2 982a14-16, a30-b4), and the most valuable [τίμιον] and the most divine science, both as being knowledge of divine things and as being the kind of knowledge that a god would have (A2 983a4-11).[19] The question is whether the identity of ontology and theology is, as Aubenque says, merely an unfulfilled (even unfulfillable) ideal of wisdom, or whether it describes how Aristotle actually proceeds in the Metaphysics. It is clear that he does not proceed as Frede and Patzig and others suggest, by first describing knowledge of the nature of being as intrinsically desirable, then pursuing knowledge of substance as the way to achieve knowledge of being, and then pursuing knowledge of divine things as the way to achieve knowledge of substance. A does not start with an ontological description of wisdom, and neither Λ nor any other text says that divine things give special insight into the nature of being or of substance. It would be closer to the truth to say the opposite: what Aristotle initially describes as desirable, in A and in works outside the Metaphysics, is a knowledge of divine things or of especially remote objects that it is especially valuable to know, and he pursues the knowledge of being, and more specifically the knowledge of substance, because the way to acquire knowledge of such divine things is to infer them as causes of being as such, and specifically of substance. We must remember how few are the texts where Aristotle speaks of a science of being or of substance: there are none outside the Metaphysics, and outside Γ1-3 the only clear examples are E1 and the openings of H and Λ (and parallels to the Γ and E texts in K). The point is not that these ontological texts are outvoted. But all these texts without exception make it clear that by "science of being" or "science of substance" they mean a knowledge of the causes of being or substance: besides Γ1, already cited ("since we are seeking the ἀρχαί and the highest causes, it is clear that they must be [causes] of some nature per se ... so that it is of being qua being that we too must grasp the first causes," 1003a26-32), the opening of E says "we are seeking the ἀρχαί and causes of beings, and it is clear that this is [of them] qua beings" (1025b3-4), the opening of H says "it has been said that we are seeking the causes and ἀρχαί and στοιχεῖα of substances" (1042a4-6), and the opening of Λ says "the study is about substance, for we are seeking the ἀρχαί and causes of substances" (1069a18-19).[20] So, instead of trying to interpret the theology of Λ (or some other lost theology)

[19]the parallel to E1 in K adds that the object of theology "would be the first and most principal [κυριωτάτη] ἀρχή" (1064a37-b1); wisdom was knowledge of "the first ἀρχαί and causes" at A2 982b8-9. also "wisdom is both scientific knowledge [ἐπιστήμη] and intuitive knowledge [νοῦς] of the things which are most valuable [τιμιώτατα] by nature" (NE VI,7 = EE V,7 1141b2-3)

[20]in the H and Λ passages my underlining corresponds to a heavy emphasis that Aristotle achieves in Greek through the word-order. in the E, H and Λ passages I write "we are seeking" where Aristotle uses a passive "these things are being sought"; he does use the first person plural in Γ1

as directed toward discovering exemplary instances of being, it is more natural to say that the ontological investigations of the other books are directed toward discovering the causes of beings or of substances, and thus toward discovering divine things as causes of ordinary beings.

I think this is basically the right approach. But, as stated, it is too crude, and open to the obvious objections which have been raised by Aubenque and others. Not all causes of being lead up to divine things: if we begin with ordinary corruptible beings and follow the upward chain of their material causes, their formal causes, or even their efficient causes (me, my father, my grandfather, …), we do not reach anything divine. Indeed, Aristotle seems to allow only very "thin" causal connections between divine things and ordinary beings: the divine things described in Metaphysics Λ, if they are causes of being at all, seem to be so only in rather incidental ways, and it seems more accurate to describe them as causes of motion rather than of being. Certainly it is difficult to see how a knowledge of these divine things could constitute a "science of being qua being": Aristotle never gives a "downward way" using these divine causes to explain being, and it is clear that this is not merely an accident of textual transmission, that he could not possibly have done so given the restricted causal connections he is willing to accept between divine things and the sensible world.

Now we could try to answer these objections by saying that, in pursuing wisdom, Aristotle is not interested in all the causes of being, or even in all the first causes of being (if this would include, say, any material cause that has no further material cause, and any formal cause that has no further formal cause), but only in those causal paths which lead up from the manifest beings to divine causes. While a properly scientific and critical study of divine things would have to start from an examination of being and its causes, it might be able to dismiss some causes of being (some kinds of causes, perhaps material or formal causes, or causes of some senses of being, perhaps being per accidens or being as truth), after a preliminary examination has shown that these causes do not lead up to divine things, and relegate the detailed study of these causes to some other science.

This is, again, a possible solution, and indeed I think something like this is ultimately right, but it immediately raises further objections. First there is Fârâbî's objection to most of his predecessors, who think that the aim of the Metaphysics is "the account of the Creator and νοῦς and soul and whatever is related to these, and that the science of metaphysics and the science of theology are the same; and so they are confused and go astray, since we find that most of the discussion in this book does not have this aim, indeed we find in it no specific discussion of this aim except what is contained in Book Λ." It is easy enough to say that we should begin with sensible things, as what is best known to us, in order to reach knowledge of divine things, but it is much harder to explain how the long and complicated arguments of earlier books of the Metaphysics are supposed to function as means to the brief theology of Λ. Second, it is not clear what justifies the restriction of attention to those causal chains that lead up to divine things. While the Metaphysics does not begin from an ontological description of wisdom, it is an oversimplification to say that it begins from a theological description: A1-2 describe wisdom as knowledge of ἀρχαί and first causes, and say that these will be difficult and valuable for us to know, but not that they are unchanging or immaterial (matter is not mentioned one way or the other) or that they exist separately from sensible things. A2 does say that wisdom will be knowledge of divine things, but its only justification is that "it seems to everyone that god [ὁ θεός, generic] is a cause [τῶν αἰτίων, partitive] and an ἀρχή" (983a8-9). It is not said, and would certainly not seem to everyone, that gods are the only first causes and ἀρχαί, so even if the argument from consensus is admitted it would seem to show only that wisdom will include

knowledge of divine things, not that it will be constituted by knowledge of divine things. And even if it is entirely constituted by knowledge of divine things, it is not clear why these divine things would have to be unchangeable or separate from matter: the Stoics after Aristotle's time, and surely many philosophers before, thought that the gods were things in the physical world, and Aristotle himself agrees that the heavenly bodies are divine.

All these difficulties can be solved, and will be in the following pages. But to do this we must first give a much closer look at Aristotle's argument in A1-2, at his concepts of ἀρχή and cause, and at how his different explicit or implicit descriptions of wisdom function within the developing argument of the Metaphysics. The dichotomy of "ontological" and "theological" descriptions of wisdom is too crude to capture Aristotle's argument. The descriptions of wisdom in AB are broadly "theological" rather than "ontological," in that they describe wisdom as a knowledge of a special, remote, and important kind of beings, but they are much less determinate than the description of wisdom as θεολογική in E1. E1 is the only place in the corpus (apart from the K7 parallel) where Aristotle speaks of θεολογική, and the first place in the Metaphysics where he clearly asserts that wisdom must study immaterial or unchanging things (though he also says this outside the Metaphysics), and so in a sense the determination of wisdom as theology comes later in his argument than the determination of wisdom as ontology in Γ1-2. In understanding what Aristotle is aiming at in the Metaphysics, we should not start by assuming either that he is trying to provide an ontology or that he is trying to provide a theology; rather, we should look at what he says about wisdom in Metaphysics A and why he thinks such a wisdom is desirable, and then see how the argument of the subsequent books contributes to acquiring a wisdom in this sense. If we follow this general program for reading the Metaphysics, we will also be able to understand, not only Aristotle's justification for his explicit statements about wisdom in subsequent books, but also how these statements contribute to the overall project of acquiring wisdom.