

# Metaphysics or Ontology? The Debate about the Subject-Matter of First Philosophy

## Index of the Section: "The 'Second Beginning' of Metaphysics"

- Introducing Aristotle in Middle Ages: the Latin Translations of the *Metaphysics*
- A Neoplatonic Metaphysics: the *Liber de Causis*
- The Place of Metaphysics in the Medieval Classification of Sciences
- Thomas Aquinas Doctrine of the Act of Being (*Actus Essendi*)
- Duns Scotus: Univocity of Being and the Subject of Metaphysics
- Properties of Being: the Medieval Doctrine of the Transcendentals
- Metaphysics or Ontology? The Debate about the Subject-Matter of First Philosophy
  - [Selected Bibliography on the Subject Matter of First Philosophy](#)

## INTRODUCTION

"As it now exists, the subject of metaphysics can be described by a distinction that became standard in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. (\*) According to this distinction, metaphysics has two principal divisions: general metaphysics and special metaphysics. *General metaphysics* includes ontology and most of what has been called universal science; it is concerned, on the whole, with the general nature of reality: with problems about abstract and concrete being, the nature of particulars, the distinction between appearance and reality, and the universal principles holding true of what has fundamental being. *Special metaphysics* is concerned with certain problems about particular kinds or aspects of being. These special problems are associated with the distinction between the mental and the physical, the possibility of human freedom, the nature of personal identity, the possibility of survival after death, and the existence of God. The traditional subject of what is real as opposed to what is mere appearance is treated in both general and special metaphysics, for some of the issues relevant to it are more general or fundamental than others."

From: Bruce Aune - *Metaphysics. The elements* - Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1986 p. 11

See, for example, Baruch Spinoza, "Thoughts on Metaphysics," in *Earlier Philosophical Writings*, trans. Frank A. Hayes (Indianapolis, 1963), pp. 107-61. See also the note on "Pneumatology" in G. W. von Leibniz, *New Essays on Human Understanding*, trans. Peter Remnant and Jonathan Bennett (Cambridge, Eng., 1981), p. LXIV

"The term 'metaphysics' as the name of the discipline is taken from the title of one of Aristotle's treatises. Aristotle himself never called the treatise by that name; the name was conferred by later thinkers. Aristotle called the discipline at work in the treatise first philosophy or theology and the knowledge that is the aim of the discipline, wisdom. Nonetheless, the subsequent use of the title Metaphysics makes it reasonable to suppose that what we call metaphysics is the sort of thing done in that treatise. Unfortunately, Aristotle does not give us a single account of what he is up to there. In some contexts, he tells us that what he is after in the treatise is a knowledge of first causes. This suggests that metaphysics is

one of the departmental disciplines, a discipline with a subject matter distinct from that considered by any other discipline. What subject matter is identified by the expression 'first causes'? Perhaps, a number of different things; but central here is God or the Unmoved Mover. So what subsequently came to be called metaphysics is a discipline concerned with God, and Aristotle tells us a good bit about the discipline. He tells us that it is a theoretical discipline. (...)

But Aristotle is not satisfied to describe metaphysics as the investigation of first causes. He also tells us that it is the science that studies being *qua* being. As this characterization gets fleshed out, metaphysics turns out to be not another departmental discipline with a special subject matter of its own. It is rather a universal science, one that considers all the objects that there are. On this characterization, then, metaphysics examines the items that constitute the subject matter for the other sciences. What is distinctive about metaphysics is the way in which it examines those objects; it examines them from a particular perspective, from the perspective of their being beings or things that exist. So metaphysics considers things as beings or as existents and attempts to specify the properties or features they exhibit just insofar as they are beings or existents. Accordingly, it seeks to understand not merely the concept of being, but also very general concepts like unity or identity, difference, similarity, and dissimilarity that apply to everything that there is. And central to metaphysics understood as a universal science is the delineation of what Aristotle calls categories. These are the highest or most general kinds under which things fall. What the metaphysician is supposed to do is to identify those highest kinds, to specify the features peculiar to each category, and to identify the relations that tie the different categories together; and by doing this, the metaphysician supposedly provides us with a map of the structure of all that there is.(...)

In the medieval Aristotelian tradition, we continue to meet with this dual characterization of metaphysics; and like Aristotle, the medievals believed that the two conceptions of metaphysics are realized in a single discipline, one that aims both to delineate the categorial structure of reality and to establish the existence and nature of the Divine Substance. But when we reach the metaphysical writings of the Continental rationalists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, we meet with a conception of metaphysics that expands the scope of the metaphysical enterprise.

Someone schooled in the Aristotelian tradition would be puzzled by this new use of the term 'metaphysics' and would likely charge that, in the hands of the rationalists, what is supposed to be a single discipline with a single subject matter turns out to be the examination of a hodgepodge of unrelated topics. Evidently, rationalists were sensitive to this sort of charge, and they sought to provide a rationale for their redrawing of disciplinary boundaries within philosophy. What ultimately emerged is a general map of the metaphysical terrain. (5) The claim was that there is a single subject matter for metaphysics; it is being. So the metaphysician seeks to provide an account of the nature of being; but there is a variety of different perspectives from which one can provide such an account, and corresponding to these different perspectives are different subdisciplines within metaphysics. First, one can examine being from the perspective of its being just that -- being. Since this represents the most general perspective from which one can consider being, the branch of metaphysics that considers being from this perspective was dubbed *general metaphysics*. But the rationalists insisted that we can also examine being from a variety of more specialized perspectives. When we do, we are pursuing this or that branch of what the rationalists called *special metaphysics*. Thus, we can consider being as it is found in changeable things; we can, that is, consider being from the perspective of its being changeable. To do so is to engage in cosmology. We can, as well, consider being as it is found in rational beings like ourselves. To consider being from this perspective is to pursue that branch of special metaphysics the rationalists called rational psychology. Finally, we can examine being as it is exhibited in the Divine case, and to examine being in this light is to engage in natural theology. Pretty clearly, the rationalist notions of general metaphysics and natural theology correspond to the Aristotelian conceptions of metaphysics as a thoroughly universal science that studies being *qua* being and as a departmental discipline concerned with first causes; whereas the claim that metaphysics incorporates cosmology and rational psychology as branches expresses the new and broader scope associated with metaphysics in the rationalist scheme."

From: Michael J. Loux - *Metaphysics. A contemporary introduction* - Third edition - New York,

Routledge, 2006, pp. 2-5.

## HISTORICAL DIVISIONS OF METAPHYSICS IN A NUTSHELL

"*Metaphysics* (*ta meta ta phusika*) names a discipline practiced, from the 2nd cent. C.E. on, by the Peripatetic and Platonic schools, and also names two "classic" early Peripatetic texts, a long treatise by Aristotle and a short one by Theophrastus. The phrase *ta meta ta phusika* is first attested, as a title for both treatises, in Nicolaus of Damascus (1st cent. C.E.), but is probably earlier as a title for Aristotle's work. While the title comes from the arrangement of this treatise after Aristotle's physical works, this arrangement is determined by the perceived logical order of the subjects of Aristotle's different treatises and the recommended order for instruction; there is no basis for the modern legend that the title originates in a library catalogue. (The systematic arrangement of Aristotle's works is often credited to Andronicus of Rhodes [1st cent. B.C.E.], but the texts had clearly been given some systematic and pedagogical order before Andronicus' edition; it is controversial how far Aristotle himself intended this order.) The phrase "*ta meta ta phusika*" is intended as equivalent to Aristotle's "wisdom," "first philosophy," and "*theologikê*." Its advantage over these other names is that it is more specific. Thus the Stoics use "*theologikê*" to name the discipline that studies gods or divine things; but since these gods are themselves natural bodies, *theologikê* is a part of physics, although it may be the final, crowning part of physics, and although Cleanthes distinguished it from physics in a stricter sense (D.L. 7.41). The title "*ta meta ta phusika*," for a discipline occupying the same place as Stoic *theologikê*, makes it clear that the divine objects to be studied (unlike the divine objects studied in Aristotle's *De Caelo*) are beyond the physical world.

Although Aristotle uses "wisdom" and "first philosophy" for the same discipline, these names are not interchangeable and are used in different contexts. "Wisdom" (discussed mostly in ethical contexts) designates a certain intellectual virtue, namely, whatever knowledge is most desirable for its own sake and not for any practical consequences. "First philosophy" specifies the object of this knowledge and contrasts it with other disciplines: If there were only physical substances, then "physics would be the first science" (Met. 1026a27-9), but if (as Aristotle thinks) there are eternal unchanging substances separate from matter, then first philosophy can be *contrasted* with physics as the science of the best and divine kind of substance. Aristotle thinks that none of the existing sciences will do as first philosophy. In the early *Topics* (105b19-29) Aristotle recognizes the tripartition of logic, "physics," and "ethics" elsewhere credited to his Academic contemporary Xenocrates, in which all *theoretical* philosophy (knowledge pursued only for its own sake) would fall under physics. But now Aristotle seeks a further theoretical discipline. One candidate would be Platonic dialectic, which, beyond examining hypotheses by question and answer, also classifies and defines and so seeks to grasp the eternal Forms of the definienda. Aristotle admires the practice of dialectic and the ideal of a universal presuppositionless science, but rejects Plato's exaggerated claims for dialectic. Aristotle contrasts dialectic (which aims at defending or refuting, before a general audience, the claim that S is P) with the specialized causal investigations (seeking the real reason why S is P), which alone can produce scientific knowledge. The knowledge (and the scientific definitions) of the forms of natural things can be grasped only by physics, not by dialectic; and the forms reached in this way are not separate eternal stances but depend for their existence on matter. If separate eternal substances do exist, then they can be known (if at all) only by another causal inquiry, which, unlike physics, would lead us from manifest sensible effects to a cause separate from sensible things."

From: Stephen P. Menn - *Metaphysical thought, Classical* - in: Donald J. Zeyl (ed.) - *Encyclopedia of Classical Philosophy* - London, Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 1997, pp. 335-336

"Aquinas divided *sapientia* into *metaphysica* (being as being), *prima philosophia* (first principles), and *theologia*. This scheme remained intact until early modern times. It was replaced by Christian Wolff, who

divided metaphysics into general and special, calling general metaphysics, the science of being as being, by the name '*ontologia*' (...)

Special metaphysics was now divided into the three branches of rational theology, rational psychology, and rational cosmology, namely the (rational) sciences of God, souls and bodies respectively, which in fact correspond in subject matter to the divisions of Aristotle's second philosophy. Kant's 'metaphysics of nature', subordinated to epistemology, was divided similarly into a general part, ontology, opposed to the physiology of reason, itself divided into two 'transcendent' parts (rational theology, rational cosmology) and two 'immanent' parts (rational psychology and rational physics). Husserl gave the discipline of being the name of ontology, but divided it into formal ontology and several material or regional ontologies. Formal ontology deals with formal ontological concepts, those concerned with objects in general, as distinct from formal logical concepts, those concerned with truth and inference. Regional ontologies study the most general concepts and principles of the principal regions of being, including physical nature, consciousness, mathematics and the divine. Husserl himself spent much of his time on methodological issues and his regional ontologies were only sketched. Husserl's student Ingarden divided ontology into existential, formal and material. Existential ontology is concerned with what he called moments of existence, like forms of dependence, modality and temporality, which are combined into modes of being. Formal ontology studies different objects according to their form (thing, property, event, process, relation, state of affairs, system), material ontology according to their kind (spatio-temporal, psychological, divine'. For Ingarden 'metaphysics' denotes among all possible ontologies the one that is actual."

From: Peter Simons - *Metaphysics: definitions and divisions* - in: Jaegwon Kim and Ernest Sosa (Eds.) - *A Companion to metaphysics* - Oxford, Blackwell, 1995, p. 312

## **Metaphysics or Ontology? The Debate about the Subject-Matter of First Philosophy) IN GERMAN RENAISSANCE PHILOSOPHY**

"The earliest German textbook on metaphysics was published by the Wittenberg professor Daniel Cramer in 1594, two years before Taurellus' *Synopsis*. Cramer's *Isagoge in Metaphysicam* is a very modest attempt to present the contents of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, but the work is important because its basic structure was retained in other early German textbooks. After a preface on the subject-matter of metaphysics, he reversed the order of the two central sections of Aristotle's work, dealing in his book I with the properties of being (act and potency, *ens per se* and *ens per accidens*, the transcendentals), in his book II with its principles (the categories and the principles of natural substance) and finally in his book III with its species (the intelligences). Cramer's work was not strictly a commentary on the *Metaphysics*, but rather a textbook written in the form of questions and answers on points of metaphysical doctrine. The treatises of his successors were also independent of Aristotle's text and sought to apply and develop his thought. (...)

Decisive for the development of German metaphysics as the science of being was the publication of Suárez' *Disputationes metaphysicae* at Mainz in 1605, eight years after its first publication at Salamanca. Suárez' work was well suited to the purposes of the Lutheran thinkers. (...)

The influence of Suárez' approach may be observed as early as the works of Cornelius and Jakob Martini and most clearly in the *Opus metaphysicum* (1617) and *Epitome metaphysica* (1618) of Christoph Scheibler, professor of logic and metaphysics at Giessen.

In spite of such efforts to maintain the integral character of metaphysics, Lutheran writers came increasingly to regard an independent natural theology as a necessity. They distinguished between traditional metaphysics, as a discipline which had the task of explaining certain generally valid terms and principles, and a discipline which was often called *pneumatologia* because it dealt with the nature, properties and activities of spiritual being. (...)

Scheibler himself contributed to the distinction of the two subjects by publishing a separate textbook on *Theologia naturalis* (1621). In the preface to this work he gave a practical reason for treating the subject separately -- to limit the extent of his general treatment of metaphysics -- but the division was in fact a natural consequence of his own distinction between a *metaphysica generalis* and a *metaphysica specialis*. Also contributory to the separation of the two sciences was the publication at Cologne in 1595 of the *De communibus omnium rerum naturalium principiis* of the Jesuit Benito Pereira. The Wittenberg professor Johannes Scharf referred in the preface to his *Pneumatica* (1629) to Pereira's distinction between first philosophy as the science of being and metaphysics as the science of God, and maintained that it was well founded. (...)

The publication at Basle in 1594 of Jacopo Zabarella's *Opera logica* played an important role in this development. Whereas the theoretical sciences employ a synthetic method in the presentation of doctrine, drawing conclusions from first principles, the practical sciences make use of an analytic method -- described by Zabarella -- which takes as its point of departure the end or purpose of an action and seeks to discover the means and principles by which this end might be attained. (...)

Consequently, whereas Lutheran writers on metaphysics sought to maintain the unity of Aristotle's science and only reluctantly admitted the necessity of an independent natural theology, Calvinist authors tended to distinguish clearly between two sciences, a science of God to the extent that he is accessible to human reason and a science of being understood as a universal science which supplies the principles for all the particular sciences.

For the formulation of the distinction they turned to the Jesuit Benito Pereira. In the preface to his *Isagoge in primam philosophiam* (1598) the Marburg professor Rudolphus Goclenius spoke of two separate sciences, a universal science called 'first philosophy' and a particular science called 'metaphysics'. First philosophy deals with being, its properties and its principles; metaphysics studies the various types of immaterial being: God, the intelligences and the human soul. Goclenius composed no treatise on metaphysics as the science of God, but his *Isagoge* is an introduction to first philosophy as the science of being. The work has two parts, the second of which deals with individual questions in the form of disputations. The first part, entitled *Praecepta metaphysica*, contains his complete treatment of the science. The first chapter deals with the definition of first philosophy and the notion of being, chapter 2-15 take up the simple and conjunct properties of being and the last three chapters treat substance and accident as its principles.

Goclenius seems to have been aware of the difficulties involved in restricting the term 'metaphysics' to the science of God while speaking of the science of being as 'first philosophy'. In his *Lexicon philosophicum* (1613) he made a new and important addition to philosophical terminology. In the article on abstraction he divided the speculative sciences according to the types of abstraction from matter that characterise them; that employed in physics he described as 'physical', that made use of in the science of God and the intelligences as 'transnatural' and that used in the science of being and the transcendentals as 'ontological'. (pp. 13-19) The term occurs here in its adjectival form, but it soon appeared as a noun. The term 'ontology' made it possible to recognise the claim of the science of being to be metaphysics just as much as the science of God. It was in this way that the term 'metaphysics' came to designate both the universal science of 'first philosophy' or 'ontology' and the particular or special science of 'natural theology'. (pp. 626-632, notes omitted).

From: Charles H. Lohr - *Metaphysics* - Chapter 16 in: Charles B. Schmitt (ed.) - *The Cambridge history in Renaissance philosophy* - Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1988, pp. 537-638.

"Lutheran Aristotelianism

(...) (31)

By appealing to the philosophical idea of God, Lutheran theologians were to be able to respond to the threat to Orthodoxy which came from some extremist theologians, who maintained not only that the doctrines of faith could not be proved, but also that they are contrary to reason. Distinguishing clearly

between that which belongs to reason and that which belongs to revelation, Calixt (\*) maintained that reason in its own sphere cannot contradict revelation. The philosophical idea of God which man is able to attain is not such that we can say that it conflicts with the revealed idea. This approach may be observed in the works of Cornelius and Jakob Martini and most clearly in the *Opus metaphysicum* (1617) and *Epitome metaphysica* (1618) of Christoph Scheibler, professor of logic and metaphysics at Giessen.(32)

In this way a new understanding in Lutheran Orthodoxy of the nature and method of revealed theology brought about a distinction between metaphysics as the science of being and metaphysics as natural theology. Lutheran writers came increasingly to regard an independent natural theology as a necessity. They distinguished between traditional metaphysics as a discipline which had the task of explaining certain generally valid terms and principles, and a discipline which was often called *pneumatologia* because it dealt with the nature, properties and activities of spiritual being. Scheibler contributed to the distinction of the two subjects by publishing a separate textbook on *Theologia naturalis* (1621).

This understanding of the relationship between philosophy and theology opened the way for the free development in Lutheranism of natural theology as a theoretical science -- using the synthetic method -- distinct from the practical science of revealed theology -- using the analytic method.

### Calvinist Aristotelianism

The analytic method had little success in those German territories -- like the Palatinate, Nassau, Hesse-Kassel and several smaller principalities -- which leaned towards Calvinism. In accordance with the architectonic spirit of Calvinist Scholasticism; (33) Reformed theologians at the universities of Heidelberg and Marburg and later at Herborn and Burgsteinfurt regarded their science as essentially speculative and followed the synthetic method in the presentation of doctrine. Rejecting the Lutheran transposition of the tracts on salvation and soteriology in systematic works on theology, they took the glory of God and predestination as their point of departure.

Reformed dogmatics began with God as the first cause and final goal of all things, and treated his eternal decrees of providence and predestination before taking up his government of the world in time. In this conception natural theology formed an integral part of the *cognitio Dei perfecta* at which theology aimed.

Consequently, whereas Lutheran writers on metaphysics only reluctantly admitted the necessity of an independent natural theology, Calvinist authors tended to distinguish clearly between two sciences, a science of God (to the extent that he is accessible to human reason) and a science of being (understood as a universal science which supplies the principles for all the particular sciences).

Thus the Marburg professor Rudolph Goclenius (34) in the preface to his *Isagoge in primam philosophiam* (1598), spoke of two separate sciences, a universal science called 'first philosophy' and a particular science called 'metaphysics'. First philosophy deals with being, its properties and its principles; metaphysics studies the various types of immaterial being: God, the intelligences and the human soul.

Goclenius seems to have been aware of the difficulties involved in restricting the term 'metaphysics' to the science of God while speaking of the science of being as 'first philosophy'. In his *Lexicon philosophicum* (1613) he made a new and important addition to philosophical terminology. In the article on abstraction he divided the speculative sciences according to the types of abstraction from matter that characterize them; that employed in physics he described as 'physical', that made use of in the science of God and the Intelligences as 'transnatural' and that used in the science of being and the transcendentals as 'ontological'. The term 'ontology' made it possible to recognize the claim of the science of being to be metaphysics just as much as the science of God. It was in this way that the term 'metaphysics' came to designate both the universal science of 'first philosophy' or 'ontology', and the particular or special science of 'natural theology'.

(\*) [Georg Calixt (1586 – 1656), author of the *Epitome theologiae* (1619)]

(31) Concerning the Aristotelianism of Lutheran Orthodoxy, see Troeltsch (1891); Weber (1907), (1908);

Petersen (1921); Wundt (1939), (1945); Dreitzel (1970); Sparr (1976); Leinsle (1985); Lohr (1988b), pp. 620-31; Wollgast (1993), pp. 128-220; Kusakawa (1995).

The influence of Spanish-Jesuit Aristotelianism on German Protestant philosophy is discussed by Eschweiler (1928); Lewalter (1935).

(32) Concerning these authors, see Lohr (1988a), pp. 247 (C. Martini), 247-248 (J. Martini), Petersen (1921), pp. 306-8; Wundt (1939), pp. 119-23 (Scheibler).

(33) Concerning Calvinist Scholasticism, see Althaus (1914); Lohr (1988b), pp. 631-638; Wollgast (1993), pp. 128-220.

(34) Concerning Goclenius, see Lohr (1988a), pp. 169-170.

[Form the complete references see: [Selected Bibliography on the Subject Matter of First Philosophy](#)]

From: Charles H. Lohr - *Metaphysics and natural philosophy as sciences: the Catholic and the Protestant views in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries* - in: Constance Balckwell, Sachiko Kusakawa (eds.) . *Philosophy in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth centuries. Conversations with Aristotle* - Aldershot, Ashgate, 1999, p. 290-291.

Last updated: Friday, November 25, 2011