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COMPREHENDING THE WHOLE
METHODOLOGICAL PRINCIPLES GOVERNING
*ARISTOTELIAN METAPHYSICS AND ETHICS***

I.

The Problem and Task. With the success of modern science, philosophers have been put to the task of clarifying the nature of their own discipline and the kinds of methods employed therein. Ironically, such a task is itself a philosophical undertaking so that any final determination of the matter would appear to lead to the further question, again philosophical, as to the criteria employed in identification of the method or methods peculiar to philosophy itself. Initially, we would appear to confront an unavoidable *circulus vitiosus* that might lead us to abandon the undertaking altogether. Such circularity may also be indicative of the nature and methodology of philosophical inquiry itself, which is to say, a questioning that reflexively doubles back upon itself in the effort to attain greater clarity with respect to the object under interrogation. In the end, the incessant and interminable nature of philosophical inquiry may very well serve as the gateway through which we are led to identification of precisely what philosophy is and does.

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Within this essay, I consider the nature of philosophical inquiry by way of examination and identification of three methodological principles governing the unity of Aristotelian metaphysics and ethics.[1] By "methodological principles" is here meant general principles governing (1) the aims of inquiry, (2) comprehension of common features of experience and (3) the hierarchical organization of the sciences with respect to one another. So by "methodology" I neither mean nor restrict the use of this term to something along the lines of a fixed set of unchanging rules or norms of inquiry, as is commonly understood. Although philosophers have and continue to make use of a diverse set of methods throughout history (from deduction and induction to analysis and interpretation), such methods hardly distinguish philosophy methodologically from the several other sciences that make use of similar methods. From this perspective, it is necessary to identify the fundamental "forms" of inquiry, as it were, those principles governing philosophical inquiry itself.

From the perspective of an essay on the principles of philosophical inquiry, one certainly cannot hope to fully capture the whole of the phenomenon in question either adequately or exhaustively. For this reason, the methodological interrelationships that hold for Aristotelian metaphysics and ethics shall serve here as an example and exemplar according to which the larger problem of the whole shall in part be interrogated. Even so the choice of focus has not been made at random. From an Aristotelian perspective, metaphysics or first philosophy may be interpreted as the foundational science of *all* sciences. For instance, within the first book of the *Metaphysics* he there speaks of a science (*episteme*) whose knowledge is most representative of wisdom (*sophia*). This science is further said to involve a knowledge of the first principles and causes of all that which is, to which is included investigation into the nature of the good (*to agathon*) insofar as the good is itself "one of the causes" under consideration (i.e., the final cause).[2] Alternatively, within the *Nicomachean*

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1. The discussion of Aristotle within this essay is by and large interpretive and does not presume to approach the matter from any one philological perspective, standpoint or position. Technical terms in Greek (transliterated) and Latin will be supplied in italics only for the purpose of further clarification or else the avoidance of confusion with respect the concepts used.

2. Aristotle, *Meta.* 982a4-982b11.

Ethics, Aristotle ties human moral character and fulfillment to pursuit of the good.[3] Through contemplation (*theoria*) understood as the highest human activity this pursuit is linked to the speculative aims of wisdom so that metaphysics interpreted as both the science of being and the science of wisdom coupled with ethics as the science of the good of humanity including knowledge of how to become good are thereby brought into alignment.[4] Here it seems that the underlying foundations of such an alignment can hardly be ascribed to principles of induction and deduction alone.

From the above considerations a number of questions follow. Do metaphysics and ethics interrelate solely in terms of the speculative and practical pursuit of wisdom, or are there deeper methodological principles at work? In the event that there are such principles, what are they?

II.

Two Scholastic Doctrines. In the attempt to answer the above questions it is perhaps worthwhile to consider two Scholastic doctrines that developed under the influence of Aristotelian philosophy. These doctrines were formulated in response to the identifiable interconnections found among metaphysics and ethics as above discussed and as further asserted in relation to the two terms "being" and the "good". For example, within the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle there suggests that the, "good has as many senses as being".[5] This terminological affinity later received a precise interpretation among the scholastics from which the two doctrines of "convertible" terms and the "transcendentals" (*transcendentalia*) developed.

Taken together, being and goodness (as well as unity, truth and thing) were said to soar above all differences and were likewise said to be convertible, which is to say, equal in scope and interchangeable with one another without differentiation with respect to the subject. This is discussed in a number of

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3. Aristotle, *EN* 1097b1-5.

4. Aristotle, *EN* 1177a11-1177b25.

5. Aristotle, *EN* 1096a24.

6. E.g., *Summa Theologica*, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, *De Veritate*, *Sententia Libri Ethicorum*, etc.

works of Thomas Aquinas.[6] For instance, within the *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas there asserts that these two terms are really the same in subject (*secundum rem*) differing only conceptually (*secundum rationem*).[7] He further suggests that the basis of this relationship is rooted in human appetite (will, emotion, desire, etc.) inasmuch as the good is, echoing Aristotle's statement in the opening lines of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, "that which all things desire".[8] In his *Commentary* to that work, Aquinas explains that the good is enumerated among the primary things (*inter prima*), an apparent reference to the transcendentals, but that primary things are never known from what is prior but from what is posterior, as a cause is known from its effect.[9] This relationship is further elucidated in his *De Veritate*. Whereas such transcendentals as thing (*res*) and unity (*unum*) express an absolute mode common and consequent upon being, other terms such as truth (*verum*) and goodness (*bonum*) are said to express the mode of being in relation to an other.[10] So whereas truth expresses the correspondence of being and the intellect, goodness expresses the correspondence of being and human appetite.

Despite their virtues, these two doctrines have since then had a troubled history. So even as Francisco Suarez within the 16th century was reformulating classical Aristotelian metaphysics in terms of transcendental philosophy, Descartes was already pursuing a new path which Kant would later reformulate in terms of his transcendental philosophy.[11] Alternatively, within the early 20th century in the introduction to his influential *Sein und Zeit* (1927), Martin Heidegger there cites these doctrines as central to the historical oblivion into which the meaning of being has supposedly been cast.[12] Finally, among

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7. Aquinas, ST I, q. 5, a. 1. For further discussion of the Aertsen (1985). Also, for a more recent discussion of the convertibility see Schultz-Aldrich (2009). For a phenomenological perspective see Crosby (1983).

8. Aristotle, *EN* 1094a2-3.

9. Aquinas, *Ethic.* I, lect. 1, 9.

10. Aquinas, *De Ver.*, q. 1, a. 1.

11. Cf., Aertsen (2012).

12. Regarding the doctrine of transcendentals and the Aristotelian categorical "unity of analogy" Heidegger concludes: "Medieval ontology discussed this problem in many ways, above all in the Thomist and Scotist schools, without gaining fundamental clarity." (Heidegger 2004, p. 43)

many contemporary scholars, where these doctrines are at all mentioned, they are at best seen as interesting if not somewhat embarrassing scholastic relics best left to the history of philosophy.

The scholastic account and its critics aside, what is important to highlight is the fact that on the basis of these two doctrines a definite relationship between the two apparently diverse philosophical disciplines of metaphysics and ethics becomes discernible. This may be seen by further examination of Aristotle's remarks on methodology, the pursuit of wisdom and the analogy of being.

III.

Categorical Analogies. Within the first book of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle's remarks on methodology are well known: "Our study will be adequate", he begins, "if it has as much clearness as the subject-matter admits of, for precision is not to be sought for alike in all discussions".[13] Here subject matter dictates the particular method pursued. He further suggests that a mark of an educated thinker is sensitivity to such methodological differences. So we might expect mathematics which deals with unchanging abstract objects to differ methodologically from music theory which although having quantifiable properties is nonetheless an independent knowledge-domain having foundations in the qualitative properties of sound and aesthetic taste. The same may be said for metaphysics and ethics. Whereas metaphysics demands a demonstrative approach akin to mathematics (though unique unto itself), in the determination of moral disposition and right action within ethics where the given circumstances are often changing and variable, Aristotle concludes that the primary aim must be: "to indicate the truth roughly and in outline".[14]

These particular methodological differences are likewise overshadowed by Aristotle's broader distinction between speculative and practical science

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13. Aristotle, *EN* 1094b12-13.
14. Aristotle, *EN* 1094b19-20.

developed within the first two chapters of the first book of the *Metaphysics* in relation to the discussion of wonder and the science of wisdom. There the distinction hinges upon the motives of the inquirer in the pursuit of knowledge where speculative wisdom results from knowledge pursued as its own end and practical wisdom results from knowledge pursued as a means toward some other end. Aristotle concludes that the study of being is neither a practical nor a productive science.[15] Alternatively, with respect to the study of morality he clearly suggests that we seek knowledge in this case: "not in order to know what virtue is, but in order to become good".[16] Consequently, we are not to inquire into the nature of right and wrong as detached observers, as it were, as spectators sitting on the sidelines for then, as he suggests, such a practical inquiry would find no utility. Inasmuch as the study of morality has the primary aim of the moral improvement of both individual and society, to that extent such inquiry ought to be rooted in the practical pursuit of knowledge *for the sake of* becoming good.

From the above remarks it is evident that for Aristotle metaphysics and ethics employ distinct methodological approaches to knowledge depending upon the subject matter under study. These two domains are likewise distinguished along broader lines based upon the overall purpose (viz., speculative versus practical) according to which knowledge is sought. Despite this, far more fundamental methodological principles are identifiable.

In the above-cited passage within the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle there goes on to list the specific *ways* in which the two terms "being" and "good" relate. Just as the term "is" signifies one or the other of the categories including substance, quantity, quality, etc., so too the term "good" is applied, "in the category of substance, as of God and of reason, and in quality, i.e. of the virtues, and in quantity, i.e. of that which is moderate, and in relation, i.e. of the useful, and in time, i.e. of the right opportunity, and in place, i.e. of the right locality and the like."[17] What is here evident is the fact that the explicit categorical

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15. Aristotle, *Met.* 982b11.
16. Aristotle, *EN* 1103b26.
17. Aristotle, *EN* 1096a24-28.

interconnections there identified are *far more than* terminological. We find instead that between metaphysics and ethics there what might be called "categorical analogies" between each domain so that patterns guiding comprehension of one domain (viz., metaphysics) are applied to comprehension of the subject matter of the other (viz., ethics). In consequence, Aristotle relates the category of substance to mind and God, and as ethics is further determined to be principally about virtue, to that extent, he fixes upon the moral agent as the subject to be interrogated.[18]

Further categorical analogies are thereafter brought into play. So the metaphysical category of quality finds analogy in ethics in the form of the various "colors" of virtue—from justice to temperance, courage to wisdom. The category of quantity likewise finds analogy with the quantitative analysis of virtue as a mean between excess and deficiency, and through the category of relation the mean is determined to be "relative to us".[19] Categorical analogies are in fact identifiable for *every* metaphysical category inasmuch as being and the good are convertible terms—including action, passion, time, place and so on—and this fact serves to determine the way in which the subject matter of ethics is thereafter analyzed.

What we find is that despite their differences metaphysics and ethics are in fact methodologically united in far more fundamental ways, indeed, so much so that we consider such disciplines *fundamental branches of philosophy itself*. That is not to say that similar categorical analogies cannot be found among the other branches of philosophy or even among the diverse specialized sciences. To the contrary, we discover categorical analogies in the comprehension of the subject matter of mathematics, history, physics, etc. For example, in Number Theory it is necessary to identify first the substance or subject of consideration, viz., the integers 0, 16, 1, 85, 427, etc. Quantitative kinds are further identifiable, as the series of numbers 0, 1, 2 and so on. There are qualitative kinds as the odd and the even (3 and 2), the positive and the negative (-2 and 2). There are further relations evidenced in the various operations including the greater and the lesser (3 > 2), addition (3 + 2 is

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18. Aristotle, *EN* 1102a5ff.
19. Aristotle, *EN* 1106b35ff.

5), multiplication (3 x 2 is 6) and so on. We do not, however, find categories of time and place as well as action and passion. In other words, whereas metaphysics and ethics appear to be "convertible sciences", metaphysics and mathematics and so too ethics and mathematics do not.[20] This is an essential point that may serve as a basis for identification of the underlying differences between philosophy and the other sciences. Metaphysics and ethics appear to share in a "global" methodological relationship that other sciences simply do not share in to the same degree but only partially, implying a hierarchical organization of the various sciences with respect to the methodology of philosophy.

IV.

Teleological Affinities. I have thus far touched upon the methodological interrelationship between metaphysics and ethics in terms of categorical analogies that hold between distinct domains of inquiry. Inasmuch as metaphysics is usually taken to be the foundational science of all sciences, indeed as "universal" science, it isn't entirely surprising that the other philosophical domains of inquiry (ethics, epistemology, aesthetics, etc.) should obtain a foundation in and from metaphysics. What is often neglected, however, is the influence of the parts upon the whole. If we consider knowledge to be a kind of whole, then the parts of knowledge become integral to the formation of that whole. For this reason just as metaphysics methodologically informs ethics, so too ethics and the specialized sciences must methodologically inform metaphysics, albeit in different ways.

To see why this is the case we note first that as a practical science, ethics will necessarily differ from metaphysics here understood in an Aristotelian sense as a speculative science. Despite this, a likeness of ends is discernible. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle explicitly states that in obtaining the

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20. This is evident, to some extent, in Aristotle's distinction within the *Metaphysics* (1005a20-25) between ontology and mathematics coupled with further remarks regarding the distinction between being-one and the number one within the tenth book.

good we obtain happiness or well-being (*eudaimonia*).[21] Well-being is further associated with contemplation (*theoria*) and the contemplative life. Contemplation is further linked to the pinnacle of human knowledge, including self-knowledge, found in wisdom (*sophia*).[22] Alternatively, although speculative in nature, the desire for wisdom at ground to metaphysics is ultimately connected to both contemplation and well-being. To that extent, metaphysics is ultimately wed to ethics by "teleological affinity" in the sense of a likeness of ends.

In the second place, as already noted, Aristotle characterizes the good as that which all things desire. The good is in turn the object of human appetite, viz., of desire, want, pursuit and indeed every activity ordered toward an end. Although the *speculative consideration* of the nature of the good belongs principally to metaphysics, the science that has as its aim a consideration of *how to become good* is ethics. We furthermore obtain the good first, in the rational ordering of human action toward an end and second, in the actual pursuit of that end.

As ethics seeks knowledge of how to become good to that extent it requires practical wisdom or prudence (*phronesis*). Inevitably, prudence dictates the *best* means toward obtaining an end. So in mathematics, methods of deduction and proof are best. In ethics, a rough outline is best, and so on. Prudence in turn plays an integral part in the foundational development of every science whether practical, productive or speculative, and as prudence is chiefly an instrument of the intellect applied toward obtaining the end and as the end is here determined to be the good, to that extent, an ethical component is teleologically interwoven into metaphysics and in turn, into each science.[23]

V.

Architectonic Principles. Turning to the third type of principle, within the *Metaphysics,* Aristotle there concludes that inquiry into being is

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21. Aristotle, *EN* 1095a15-20.

22. Aristotle, *EN* 1177a15-1178a5.

23. So the good is divided into three types—good, useful, etc. Method draws from the utility of the good and so emphasizes efficiency in pursuit of the end.

principally an inquiry into substance along with the various accidents or attributes necessarily belonging to substance.[24] What we find within the Aristotelian account of being is a hierarchical ordering of the various senses of being in relation to substance as their focal point. As already stated, analysis of any and every object assumes the categorical consideration of first a subject and alternatively quantities, qualities, relations and so on. In other words, every object of consideration implies a categorization of that object so considered. The same condition must likewise hold for the nature of human knowledge insofar as we take and consider human knowledge itself as an object of study. This implies that we study the categorical objects of knowledge in a categorical way. The further implication is that human knowledge is both categorically classifiable *and* structured, pointing to a third kind of methodological principle that I here call "architectonic principles".

Although I have discussed only metaphysics and ethics, the argument is understood to extend to the other branches of philosophy including principally logic, epistemology and aesthetics. This follows from the further admission of the convertibility of being, truth and the beautiful. Taken together these fundamental philosophical disciplines serve as founding domains underlying the unity of human knowledge. But such a foundation is not to be understood in the sense of a deductive system where philosophy provides the first principles and the several specialized sciences are deduced from those principles. To the contrary, as being is the founding term from which the remaining transcendental terms are thought to ultimately derive their sense, to that extent the unity of knowledge finds a parallel with the unity of being. Metaphysics becomes the categorical "subject" of human knowledge, the remaining philosophical disciplines serving as convertible branches of that unity. On the other hand, the several specialized sciences become the categorical "accidents" ordered around that subject. Knowledge in turn finds unity through the architectonic ordering of the parts around the whole where metaphysics serves as both the starting point (first philosophy) and end (wisdom).

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24. Aristotle, *Met.* 1003a33-1003b20.

Before concluding this section it is important to address a possible ambiguity in relation to the term "wisdom" as predicated of both philosophy and metaphysics. The ambiguity would seem to suggest that as the pursuit of wisdom, philosophy is reducible to metaphysics understood as the science of wisdom. This ambiguity may, however, be cleared up on the basis of the following considerations. Within the second chapter to the fourth book of the *Metaphysics* Aristotle there affirms an architectonic structure for being, suggesting that: "The term being is used in many senses, but with reference to one thing and to some one nature and not equivocally." The example of "health" is further given where its various uses are found to refer in partly the same and partly different ways to the a singular notion, which is to say, "one thing in the sense that it preserves health, another in the sense that it produces it, another in the sense that it is a symptom of health, another because it is capable of it." [25] Such a terminological ordering of these various senses with respect to a singular and dominant focal meaning the scholastics later called "analogy of attribution".[26] With respect to the term "being" the general idea is that the various senses of being including the categorical, the accidental, the true and the false, the actual and the potential, are all ordered toward substance (and so to the categorical sense) as their focal point, as it were, the prior and indeed *dominating* notion at play.

So too we may interpret the various senses of "wisdom" analogically. First, we predicate wisdom of metaphysics in a *primary* sense inasmuch as metaphysics is the "subject" of human knowledge. Second, we predicate wisdom of the other philosophical disciplines in a *secondary* sense inasmuch as the other philosophical disciplines reflect the "convertible" or "transcendental" senses of human knowledge. Third, we predicate wisdom of the other specialized sciences in a *derivative* sense inasmuch as the specialized sciences offer knowledge of the "accidental" parts of wisdom but never knowledge of what unites, in an essential way, the whole. What is evident from this is that with respect to the claims of wisdom, even as the several specialized

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25. Aristotle, Met. 1003a35.
26. Cf., Cajetan (2009).

sciences are architectonically ordered toward philosophy, philosophy is architectonically ordered toward metaphysics.

VI.

Concluding Remarks. From this rather cursory examination of the matter, we discover that the ties between metaphysics and ethics are far more fundamental than an initial inquiry in the matter may have been thought to reveal. In the first place, we approach the analysis of right action and moral character categorically identifying the subject matter, working out the quantitative and qualitative determinations of virtue and so on.

In the second place, even metaphysics has an ethical component to it. This was seen in relation to the teleological aims and ends of inquiry itself. Within metaphysics we seek knowledge for the sake of knowledge but simultaneously the search for knowledge, through wisdom, is tied to the human practical pursuit of the good and the desire for well-being. So metaphysics finds teleological union within ethics in and through pursuit of the good as the transcendentally determined end of human knowledge.

Third, human knowledge is architectonically ordered akin to a tree. At the trunk, we find the science of being. At the intersection between the trunk and the first primary branches, we discover the other philosophical domains of inquiry. Among the scattered branches and leaves of the tree we discover the specialized sciences. As the pursuit of wisdom, philosophy brings unity to the various parts. The various sciences likewise serve as particular specifications of human knowledge architectonically ordered toward and around philosophy as their focal point, where metaphysics subsists as the principle of knowledge and ethics as the guiding thread that directs this pursuit toward an end.

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ABSTRACT

It is an ironic if not troublesome fact that philosophy, which has traditionally considered itself the foundational science of all sciences, is still very much in doubt regarding the nature of its subject matter, the kinds of methods it employs and the status of its knowledge claims. Whether or not such difficulties can be entirely overcome, we ought to at least continue the attempt to resolve them. One possible path toward this end is to consider what unites as opposed to what divides philosophy. Within this essay, I examine the methodological relationship between metaphysics and ethics through consideration and reinterpretation of the concept of 'convertibility' as first conceived within the works of Aristotle and later among the medieval scholastics. According to this view, to say that "x is" and "x is good" is to assert not a real but a conceptual distinction inasmuch as both terms are mutually interchangeable (convertible) with respect to the subject. Three methodological principles governing union of these two philosophical branches of knowledge are thereafter identified. Following this, I examine the possible ways in which these principles may be applied to consideration of the nature of philosophy and the unity of knowledge.