Introduction

1. ON ETHICS AS FIRST PHILOSOPHY

By reference to the ethical treatises and the *Politics*, but also to other texts of the Aristotelian *corpus* (most notably, the *Metaphysics* and the treatises of the *Organon*), the present study undertakes to demonstrate the indissoluble intertwinement of practical and theoretical wisdom (*phronēsis* and *sophia* as well as, concomitantly, *praxis* and *theōria*) in Aristotle's thinking. In this manner, I propose that *sophia*, theoretical wisdom, far from an autonomous and separate pursuit, should be acknowledged as integrally involved in becoming, sensibility, experience, and, hence, action. Of course, this line of inquiry cannot but address critically the established view of the separation, indeed the opposition of the two modes of reason. Such a dichotomous logic is retained even by those who, like Arendt and Gadamer, variously emphasize the practical over against the theoretical and do so by merely inverting the order of the hierarchy. However, the point is not to respond to the traditional privilege of theoretical wisdom by privileging practice or "rehabilitating" practical thinking instead. Rather, the aim here is to understand these modes of human endeavor in their irreducibility, to be sure, and yet, simultaneously, in their inseparability. More precisely, the investigation should cast light on the way in which practical considerations decisively mark the beginning or condition of all contemplation as well as discursive investigation.

Ultimately, it is a matter of showing how the theoretical is always informed by a set of practices, by the modality of comportment toward phenomena – of showing, that is, how encountering phenomena, the world, or nature in the broadest sense is always a matter of *ēthos*. As will

be expounded in the present work, *this apparently "modern" intimation is to be found at the heart of Greek thought.*

Implicated in an investigation thus oriented is the demonstration that Aristotle thinks ethics as first philosophy, that is, sees the philosophical articulation of scientific-theoretical knowledge, even of ontology, as resting on living-in-action, that is, as phenomenologically, experientially, sensibly grounded. Indeed, if it is the case that all manner of theoretical investigation comes to be through the primordial involvement in sensibility and action, then ethics, the structural study of such ineludible conditions, is the discipline crucially (if not exclusively) disclosing the origins, principles, and assumptions of knowledge, even of wisdom.[1] Ethics as first philosophy means that first philosophy is that reflection informed by *ēthos* (that reflection constituted in the experience of being traversed by life and living in a certain way) and aware of this ground that it cannot possess but only acknowledge.

Of course "ethics as first philosophy" here cannot mean a normative or prescriptive compilation. Nor can it signify a self-founding, all-encompassing, and rationally self-contained discourse. Understood as ethics, first philosophy may not retain such privileges, which would be the privileges of rational autonomy. Rather, the phrase "ethics as first philosophy" indicates that ethics is characterized by a certain comprehensiveness vis-à-vis all manner of human endeavor. At the same time, precisely qua ethics, the discourse coming first exhibits the consciousness of its own openness vis-à-vis that which exceeds it, that is, vis-à-vis that which is not discursive and in which all discourse as such belongs. This *logos* cannot fully account for its "differing and wandering" subject matter, nor can it itself bring about that which it strives to clarify, namely, the good or happiness. In other words, the *logos* of ethics is manifestly aware of its own incapacity for self-enclosure and remains open to that which can neither be discursively exhausted nor simply formalized. Such a *logos* understands itself in its openness to the infinite. Once again, central to this investigation will be tracing the limits of reason – or, more precisely, acknowledging how Aristotle draws such a delimitation.

Thus, despite the obvious Levinasian reference, "first philosophy" should be understood in an altogether Aristotelian sense, as the structural

[1] As al-Farabi puts it, the "science" and "inquiry" of ethics "investigates these intellectual principles [which are in the human being] and the acts and states of character with which man labors toward this perfection" (*Alfarabi's Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle*, trans. Muhsin Mahdi [New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1962], 23).

study of conditions and of the principles arising from them.[2] After all, the phrase *philosophia prōtē* is exquisitely Aristotelian in its use and elaboration. Granted, in the treatises gathered under the title of *Metaphysics* Aristotle often calls first philosophy *epistēmē*. However, the point will be to see what *epistēmē* could possibly mean and be like, if understood as "science of principles." For principles, on Aristotle's own terms, are not the subject matter of science, but rather constitute science's very premises and presuppositions.

2. ON INTERPRETING ARISTOTLE: *EPISTĒMĒ* AS FIRST PHILOSOPHY?

It is almost universally agreed on that first philosophy, the intellectual pursuit in its highest and grounding (ground-laying) function, is identified by Aristotle with *epistēmē*, science, knowledge, or scientific knowledge. I say "almost universally" because such "universal agreement" does in fact pertain to a rather exiguous region of the world and to its determined, however self-confidently hegemonic, cultural formation(s) – a region and cultural lineage that we usually qualify as "Western." Within the philosophical "debates" taking place in the Western district, however, general consensus has made this understanding of Aristotle axiomatic. Indeed, with very few exceptions since Patristic-Scholastic (con)versions of the Aristotelian *corpus*, Aristotle's thought has been expounded particularly in its logico-systematic and "proto-scientific" vocation.[3] In this context, the concern with cognition remains the genuine ground back to which all other reflective modes are referred – the principal task of philosophy, the task revealing philosophy as first philosophy. Even when a certain emphasis on *praxis* is acknowledged in Aristotle (as is the case,

[2] While the concern with the infinitely, indeterminately pre-originary (pre-logical and pre-discursive) may be common to both Aristotle and Levinas, the Levinasian interpretation of infinite priority in terms of injunction is clearly remote from Aristotle's horizon.

[3] On the mode of inheritance and transmission of the Aristotelian discourse in the exemplary case of St. Thomas, see the excellent text by Mark D. Jordan, *The Alleged Aristotelianism of Thomas Aquinas* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1992). See also, to mention but a few titles, Charles B. Schmitt, *The Aristotelian Tradition and Renaissance Universities* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1984); F. van Steenberghen, *Aristote en Occident. Les origines de l'aristotélisme parisien* (Louvain: Éditions de l'Institut Supérieur de Philosophie, 1946); P. O. Kristeller, *The Classics and Renaissance Thought* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1955); Lorenzo Minio-Paluello, *Opuscula: The Latin Aristotle* (Amsterdam: Hakkert, 1972); F. Bottin, *La scienza degli occamisti. La scienza tardo-medievale dalle origini del paradigma nominalista alla rivoluzione scientifica* (Rimini: Maggioli, 1982); and H. Blumenthal and H. Robinson, eds., *Aristotle and the Later Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1991).

inevitably, with the ethical treatises and the *Politics*), the all-encompassing primordiality of *praxis* is not. The discourses of the practical as well as the study of the physical-phenomenal (such discourses and study share a common destiny) are understood in stark distinction from, and at once in subordination to, the scientific or "theoretical" endeavor.

Thus, approaches illuminating the centrality of the "practical" over against the "theoretical," of *phronēsis* over against *sophia*, of *vita activa* over against *vita contemplativa*, end up merely inverting the hierarchical order while preserving intact the separation of the "purely contemplative" from worldly engagement. Even when allegedly eclipsed, *epistēmē* (discursive and demonstrative knowledge, i.e., the exercise of *logos*) is in effect still sanctioned as *philosophia prōtē* – the operation of "reason" detached from the movements of desire as well as embodiment. Attributed to Aristotle, such an understanding of reason already inaugurates or promises a certain emancipation from the involvement with what-is – an emancipation from the commitment to phenomena in their glow and guiding truth, the "commitment to being" that modern "formal" logic will have assumed finally and with profit to have left behind. (Parenthetically, here one sees adumbrated the convergence and deep unity of Christian-theological and modern scientific discourses.) Such would be the axiom of Aristotelian exegesis in the "universe" of the West, certainly in its universities.[4]

2.1. Difficulties of Knowledge

Yet, as the Aristotelian reflection itself reminds us, axioms and principles (the beginning and ultimate foundation of demonstrable and hence demonstrated knowledge) are not themselves demonstrable, that is to say, are not themselves objects of knowledge. First principles neither pertain to nor result from the operation of knowledge, which finds in them its inception. They present themselves in and as perceptions exhibiting a cogency, a self-evidence that persuades and compels assent. Such is the character and extent of their force. These statements will receive further

[4] One finds, no doubt, exceptions and countermovements to this prevalent trend. Among them, it is necessary at least to mention Rémi Brague's *Aristote et la question du monde. Essay sur le contexte cosmologique et anthropologique de l'ontologie* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1988), which undertakes to recover the Aristotelian meditation as a whole in its unfolding out of the phenomenological datum of the world. Two indispensable works by Pierre Aubenque should also be recalled, namely, *La prudence chez Aristote* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1963) and *Le problème de l'être chez Aristote* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1962).

argumentation in the study that is to follow, mostly focusing on Aristotle's ethical discourses. They are, however, corroborated by numerous Aristotelian observations on the complexity of the question of knowledge (its *genesis* and foundation), most notably in the "logical" treatises. Let us merely recall here the opening of the *Posterior Analytics*, in which it is said that "[a]ll teaching and learning through discourse [διανοητικὴ] proceed [γίγνεται] from previous knowledge [ἐκ προϋπαρχούσης γνώσεως]" (71a1–2).[5] It is *gnōsis* (or *progignōskein*) that provides the conditions for the discursive procedures of demonstrated knowledge. But *gnōsis*, this knowledge that is prior or precedent in the sense that it rules by lying under, as an underlying governing principle, is a rather inclusive designation. It ranges from belief or conviction to the comprehension of what is necessarily true, from understanding in the sense of *eidenai* as well as *xunienai* to perception through sensation (*aisthēsis*).[6]

However, the indemonstrability of principles is not the only difficulty. As the "experimental" sciences make especially clear, axioms and principles may not be immutable. An entire axiomatic configuration can be overturned and overcome by the results of the demonstrative procedures it grounds (and hence, at once, un-grounds). This is the case, for instance, whenever hypotheses axiomatically assumed are either not confirmed or explicitly negated by the end of the trial, whether such a trial be epistemic-syllogistical or empirical – and one *must* wonder whether these different dimensions of demonstration can ever *simply* be dissociated. The competing conjectures of the pre-Socratics concerning the elemental composition of the cosmos, or the very broaching of the question of the cosmos in elemental terms, or, even more broadly, the Aristotelian understanding of the cosmos in terms of regions uniquely characterized, as distinct from the Galilean mathematical model, from the Cartesian notion of space as

[5] Here and throughout this study, I have fruitfully consulted, whenever available, Hippocrates G. Apostle's translations of the Aristotelian texts – even though my own rendition often diverges from his. The following translations by Apostle were published by the Peripatetic Press (Grinnell, Iowa) in the year indicated in parenthesis: *Metaphysics* (1979), *Physics* (1969), *Nicomachean Ethics* (1975), *Categories* and *Propositions* (1980), *Posterior Analytics* (1981), *On the Soul* (1982), *Politics* (with Lloyd P. Gerson, 1986). I have translated the passages from further treatises by Aristotle here cited. All other translations of ancient Greek texts quoted in the course of the present work are likewise my own. As regards the Aristotelian corpus, I have utilized W. Jaeger's edition of the *Metaphysics* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1957) and all the dual editions in the Loeb Classical Series (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, various years).

[6] Of interest in this regard is also the passage at *Topics* 100a18ff. (esp. 101a30–31), where Aristotle speaks of first principles as compelling belief and agreement, while being established on the basis of commonly held views.

homogeneous extension along rectilinear coordinates, from the curved space of relativity or of non-Euclidean geometries – the juxtaposition of these axiomatic pronouncements concerning the same (the "universe") bespeaks the elusiveness and fragility of that which is articulated in and through them. It calls attention to the role of the interpretation of "the same," that is, to the role of interpretation in the constitution of what is spoken of as "the same." What will have been called a "paradigm shift" fundamentally gives itself as a shift in axiomatics or axiomatic reconfiguration.

It could perhaps be objected that, for Aristotle, (1) premises or principles that are *held* to be true (definitions, theses, experimental hypotheses) do not have the same status as premises that are both true and necessary (axioms in the strict sense); (2) experiential or experimental evidence is not strictly but only derivatively apodictic; (3) subsequently, investigations resting on such "demonstrations" do not qualify as *epistēmē stricto sensu*, that is, necessary and unqualified knowledge. But the question is exceptionally intricate, and, while Aristotle consistently distinguishes between qualified and unqualified (hence immutable) knowledge, the instability of this distinction is also often intimated in the course of his reflections. A passage may be recalled from the *Posterior Analytics*, which is indicative of the problems involved in the definition of unqualified knowledge and its proper realm. It is said here that unqualified knowledge is restricted to the domains of the single disciplines and that, in demonstrating in an unqualified way, one cannot "prove something in one genus by passing over from another genus" (75a38–b21). Unqualified knowledge would seem to be granted by the restriction of its scope: it appears to be unqualified precisely because it is not formal, not abstractly comprehensive, in fact uniquely adhering to the matter at stake in each kind of investigation. Yet, Aristotle adds, because unqualified demonstration (if indeed its conclusion is to be universal and eternal) necessitates universal premises, "there can be no unqualified demonstration and no unqualified knowledge of destructible things, but there may be as if in an accidental way, namely, not universally but at a certain time or in a qualified manner" (75b24–27). But if there cannot be unqualified knowledge of what is destructible, of what is mortal, one wonders *of what* unqualified knowledge would be, *to what* it would properly pertain, and how such a scientific knowledge (if it were in fact to come to be) of the indestructible and immortal could constitute just a discipline among others.

Largely devoted as it is to the analysis of logico-apodictic procedures, Aristotle's meditation nevertheless appears to be crucially attuned to

the obscure, difficult origin of knowledge – to the unfolding of the discourses (*logoi*) of knowledge out of an agreement that, precisely because axiomatic, is less a matter of "epistemic certainty," let alone of "objectivity" (all anachronistic terms in the Aristotelian context) than of shared belief or conviction. The *Organon* itself exemplarily displays the scope of his reflection, ranging from the painstaking interrogation and formalization of scientific method in the two *Analytics* to the emphasis on the dialectical, ultimately doxico-political ground of knowledge in the *Topics*.[7] Indeed, the doxic and dialectical dimension of the beginning of *epistēmē* is explored in the "analytical" treatises as well, as the following statement from the *Posterior Analytics* shows:

> All sciences share together [ἐπικοινωνοῦσι] some common [axioms, principles] [κατὰ τὰ κοινά] (I call "common" those which the sciences use [as axioms, principles] from which they demonstrate conclusions; and those [axioms, principles] are not that about which they prove something, nor that which they prove [as belonging to something]); dialectics too is common to all sciences; and so is any other discipline which tries to prove universally the common [axioms, principles], e.g., that everything must be either affirmed or denied. . . . But dialectics is not concerned with anything definite or with any one genus, for it would not be asking questions; for the one who demonstrates would not ask questions because he cannot prove the same conclusion from opposite things. (77a27–34)

The exploration of both sides of a contradiction pertains to dialectics (see also *Prior Analytics* 24a21–b12). Aristotle later on will repeatedly underline how difficult it is to distinguish clearly the work of those who demonstrate, and therefore posit premises as true (i.e., begin with that part of the contradiction *given* as immediately true), from the procedure of the dialectician, who cannot start from a given premise and must therefore ask for assent (i.e., mediate) in order to grant the truth of his or her beginning (see, e.g., 77a36–40).

2.2. Other Readers

It is perhaps in virtue of this posture, of this alertness to the problematic origin of scientific knowledge, that in other cultural districts, most notably in the circles of the mediaeval Judeo-Islamic commentators, the reception of Aristotle (and, for that matter, of Plato as well) has taken a

[7] On the possibility of reading an *Ur-Ethik* in the *Topics*, see Hans von Arnim, "Das Ethische in Aristoteles *Topik*," *Sitzungsberichte der Akademie der Wissenschaften in Wien*, 205, no. 4 (Vienna, 1927).

direction significantly divergent from the Western privileging of *epistēmē* as the primary, purest philosophical mode.[8] In the Persian-Arabic context the noetic, psychological, and "metaphysical" strands of the Aristotelian inquiry have been understood not so much, or not exclusively, in terms of the priority of cognitive concerns, but rather in their ethical and political relevance – in light of a certain ethical primacy. In this connection it becomes evident that *logos* rests on *dia-logos* – that dialogue (the *logos* open to infinity, taking place as communing and communication) grounds the quest for knowledge and, most significantly, constitutes the condition for the possibility of being human.

The bare fact *that* the "same" texts *can* be (and have been) heard in such considerably different, if not irreconcilable ways corroborates Aristotle's insight into the doxic provenance and labile, even paradoxical status of knowledge – that is, of *logical*, discursive articulations, of "argument," or, which is the same, of reason (*logos*).[9] For the agreement out of which knowledge becomes and on which it rests is achieved thanks to less than essential reasons, and remains exposed to rather imponderable, fleeting, in fact, dialectical circumstances. Such an agreement is not inevitable, not automatically compelled by necessity, but critically obtained thanks to the plausibility and power of rhetorical presentation – thanks to *logos* less in the sense of logical articulation than in that of conversation. Because of this, knowledge (in general, and in a most perspicuous fashion the knowledge explicitly articulated through interpretive practices) comes to be revealed in its ethico-political valence, indeed, as a *basically* ethical issue always involving questions of discursive, dia-logical,

[8] To mention only a few fundamental contributions on this theme: Philip Merlan, "Aristoteles, Averroes, und die beiden Eckharts," in *Kleine Philosophische Schriften* (Hildescheim-New York: Olms, 1976); A. Badawi, *La transmission de la philosophie grecque au monde arabe* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1968); F. E. Peters, *Aristoteles Arabus: The Oriental Translations and Commentaries on the Aristotelian* Corpus (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1968); F. E. Peters, *Aristotle and the Arabs: The Aristotelian Tradition in Islam* (New York: NYU Press, 1968); P. Merlan, *Monopsychism, Mysticism, Metaconsciousness: Problems of the Soul in the Neoaristotelian and Neoplatonic Tradition* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1963); and R. Sorabji, ed., *Aristotle Transformed. The Ancient Commentators and Their Influence* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell UP, 1990). See also the especially noteworthy text by E. Booth, *Aristotelian Aporetic Ontology in Islamic and Christian Thinkers* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1983).

[9] Let this be underlined again: *logos* means, simultaneously, word, language, saying, discourse, story, argument, speech, reason, rationality (*ratio*), and logical structure (in the sense of informing law). Its relation with the verb *legein* illuminates its further, perhaps most embracing meaning as "gathering." As in the case of other essentially untranslatable terms, such as *nous*, the various semantic facets and nuances of *logos*, in particular its discursive and rational dimensions, should be held in play simultaneously.

argumentative comportment, and the ensuing responsibilities and communal configurations. After all, as Aristotle observes in *Metaphysics* Alpha Elatton, "[t]he way we receive a lecture depends on our custom [κατὰ τὰ ἔθη]; for we expect [a lecturer to use] the language [λέγεσθαι] we are accustomed to, and any other [language] appears not agreeable [ὅμοια] but rather unknown and strange because we are not accustomed to it [ἀσυνήθειαν ἀγνωστότερα καὶ ξενικώτερα]; for the customary is more known [σύνηθες γνώριμον]" (994b32–995a3). Rigorously following from this remark is the intimation that all inquiry, including the genuinely scientific one, presupposes a range of rhetorical conditions, a certain "how" of *logos*. Such conditions constitute the axiomatic structure of the inquiry, its "way or turn," *tropos*: "Therefore, one should already be trained in how to accept statements, for it is absurd to be seeking science and at the same time [ἅμα] the way [τρόπον] of [acquiring] science; and neither of them can be acquired easily" (995a12–14).

It is because of such problems that one finds in the Jewish and Persian-Arabic approaches to Aristotle a pervasive preoccupation with language, an awareness of the rhetorical dimension of "metaphysical" discussions, of the simultaneously obscuring and illuminating operations of *logos* and, consequently, of its limits.[10] Finally, what is thus intimated is a certain impossibility of metaphysics understood as emancipation from *phusis* and, *mutatis mutandis*, of *theōria* understood as transcendence of *praxis*. Metaphysics *as such* would indeed be the study of what is beyond nature – but in the wake of a semantic stipulation leaving nothing unturned. For that which is "beyond nature" would not be construed as that which without further qualification transcends nature, but rather as that which, though

[10] Maimonides' case is exemplary in this respect. On this subject, see Idit Dobbs-Weinstein, *Maimonides and St. Thomas on the Limits of Reason* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995). For an approach to Aristotle's *Metaphysics* focusing on the "many ways" in which being can be said and the relation between language and metaphysical or theological inquiries, see al-Farabi, *Book of Letters*, ed. M. Mahdi (Beirut: Dar el-Mashreq, 1969), and the following related studies: Shukri B. Abed, *Aristotelian Logic and the Arabic Language in Alfarabi* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1991); Fuad Said Haddad, *Alfarabi's Theory of Communication* (Beirut: American University of Beirut, 1989); and Joep Lameer, *Al-Farabi and Aristotelian Syllogistics: Greek Theory and Islamic Practice* (Leiden: Brill, 1994), esp. chap. 9, 259–89. Consider also the systematization of the disciplines in Avicenna, according to which rhetoric, in its psychological stratum, is a part of logic. See, e.g. (particularly concerning the relation of Avicenna's brief text "Character Traits and Passions of the Soul" to the Logic of the *Hikma*), L. Massignon, D. Remondon, and G. Vajda, *Miscellanea* (Caire: Institut Français D'Archéologie Orientale, 1954), 19ff. See also the Logic of the *Danesh-Name Alai* (*Avicenna's Treatise on Logic*, ed. and trans. Farhang Zabeeh [The Hague: Nijhoff, 1971]), esp. 40ff.

belonging in nature, is *not by nature* and cannot be accounted for by reference to nature. It is in this peculiar, highly qualified sense that one can here speak of transcendence.[11] Such is the character of ethical and political matters, in fact, of human undertakings as a whole – and, thus understood, this would be the properly metaphysical concern.[12] The perception of the unity of action and contemplation calls for a semantic shift according to which transcendence can only mean that which eludes and surpasses the scientific grasp; separation comes to indicate that which is shared in common and impossible, unthinkable aside from community (Averroes); metaphysics comes to mean ethics (politics); and ethics signifies first philosophy, in which science belongs and properly positions itself.

2.3. Phenomenal Wisdom

Not only, thus, is knowledge (the articulation of reason) shown in its dependence on *phusis* and *praxis*, hence as belonging in the domain of ethical considerations, but metaphysics itself turns out to be irreducible to the discourse of *epistēmē*, to reason *tout court*. In Aristotle this is most explicitly the case in those moments of the investigation broaching the inevitable problem of the *theos*, of the ultimate source of all that is, lives, and moves. In engaging the ultimate question of the divine (i.e., *nous*), the metaphysical discourse exceeds the bounds of knowledge (reason) and exposes itself in its wondering thrust toward the unmoved, that of which there is or can be no science.[13] Whether focusing on first principles

[11] The simultaneity of belonging and excess with respect to nature makes it clear that at stake is neither a kind of naïve naturalism nor the logic of the transcendental in its rational-practical implications.

[12] See, e.g., al-Farabi, *The Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle*, esp. the programmatic concluding remarks (130). See also how Avicenna's Metaphysics of the *Shifa'* (*Healing*), after culminating with a discourse on god (Books 8–10), is brought to its proper end by political considerations ranging from cultic forms to civic institutions and law-making (Avicenna, *La métaphysique du* Shifa', trans. G. Anawati [Paris: Vrin, 1978], 2 vols.).

[13] One will recall the mythical turn in *Metaphysics* Lambda, which represents a most unusual development in Aristotle. At this crucial stage, immediately after declaring that "there is only one heaven" and before examining the question of *nous*, Aristotle puts forth a remarkable reflection that deserves to be quoted in full. "The ancients of very early times [παρὰ τῶν ἀρχαίων καὶ παμπαλαίων]," he says, "bequeathed to posterity in the form of a myth [ἐν μύθου σχήματι] a tradition that the heavenly bodies are gods and that the divinity encompasses the whole of nature [περιέχει τὸ θεῖον τὴν ὅλην φύσιν]. The rest of the tradition has been added later as a means of persuading the masses and as something useful for the laws and for matters of expediency; for they say that these gods are like