

## Annotated Bibliography on the Debate about the Subject Matter of First Philosophy

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"In Aristotelian "first philosophy" (*prote philosophia*), wisdom is defined as 'the search for first causes and first principles.' (1) Thus, first philosophy is defined as the highest, governing science, even before its object has been determined, i.e. before knowing the precise number and the nature of these first principles, whether nature (*phusis*), being (*to on*), God, or, as Aristotle himself is inclined to think in *Metaphysics* VII (Z), *ousia*.  
The very claim that God is first principle -- if such a principle exists -- emerged in

the field of philosophy. Before Aristotle, Anaxagoras had already characterized the *nous* as divine. Further, as we have seen, the question of the nature and existence of a first principle is a crucial one for determining the status of the "highest science" for which Aristotle was looking in the *Metaphysics*. In a situation like this, a confrontation with the doctrine of the great revealed religions was unavoidable. This began in the period of the Alexandrian commentaries, continued in the Arabo-Islamic world, and the Latin Middle Ages inherited this rich and complex tradition. In fact, for a long time, medieval Latin thinkers believed that Aristotle had written a theology, supposedly the continuation of Book XII of the *Metaphysics*. They thought that this was to be found in the small text derived from Proclus' *Elements of Theology* and entitled *Liber de causis*.

Does the investigation of the natural world allow us to conclude the existence of a first principle? Following natural reason, what might prompt us to call this principle 'God'? In the highest part of philosophy, what functions does God as first principle play? Are we talking about the same God as the God of the Bible, or is this pure homonymy?

In the first part of this paper I sketch the thirteenth and fourteenth century debate concerning the object of metaphysics, which raised the question of whether God, insofar as he is first principle, is the object of this science. Then I investigate how the first principle can be apprehended and conceived as an integral part of a discipline that proceeds according to human reason. I consequently touch on how the question of the knowability of the first principle serves simultaneously to assign the limits of metaphysics and to determine fully the extent of its validity. Finally I show that Early Modern metaphysics, specifically René Descartes, while completely abandoning the peripatetic conception of knowledge prevalent in the Middle Ages, nevertheless retains certain aspects of the medieval tradition through the use that Descartes made of a philosophical conception of God that provided a foundation for the order of nature and guaranteed our knowledge." (pp. 75-76)

(1) *Metaphysics* A, 1, 981 b 27-28: "All men suppose what is called wisdom to deal with the first causes and the principles of things".

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12. Courtine, Jean-François. 1979. "Le projet suarézien de la métaphysique. Pour une étude de la thèse suarézienne du néant." *Archives de Philosophie* no. 42:253-274. Résumé: "La présente étude a pour visée ultime la détermination du sens de l'être comme « objectité » dans les *Disputationes Metaphysicae* de F. Suarez. La question est ici abordée indirectement à travers la mise au jour d'une thèse non thématique sur le néant ; les *Disputationes*, en leur projet même d'ontologie générale, et à travers leur architectonique, pointent en direction d'une métaphysique de l'objet encore indéterminé (*aliquid-nihil*), métaphysique qui trouve son plein déploiement dans la *Schulmetaphysik*, et se maintient jusqu'à Kant."
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23. ———. 2008. *Das 'Super'-Transzendente und die Spaltung der Metaphysik. Der Entwurf des Franziskus von Marchia*. Leiden: Brill. "The history of modern metaphysics is essentially marked by its splitting up into a metaphysica generalis and a metaphysica specialis, a well-known distinction

especially within Christian Wolff's systematic conception of metaphysics. This study investigates the actual origins of this significant development, which can be already found at the beginning of the 14th century. On the basis of a fundamentally revised doctrine of transcendentals the Franciscan theologian Francis of Marchia (~1290-1344) introduces for the first time a dissociation of the *primum cognitum* of the human intellect from the subject of metaphysics, according to which metaphysics is no longer one science in the sense of a *scientia transcendens*, as most of his predecessors claimed in the 13th century, but rather twofold: ontology and theology."

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 Inaugural Address at the Free University of Amsterdam (January 16, 2004).  
 "Concluding remarks. We have to come to a close. The study of the history of metaphysics has been addressed from the perspective of the postmetaphysical era. We shied from reproducing the claims to self-evidence that the various metaphysical projects convey and, seeking for safer, more objective ground, rather investigated into the structures that underlie this self-evidence and induce its very production. This line of questioning brought us to consider a connection which is characteristic of the foundation of metaphysics in the Middle Ages, the one between the first object of thought and the *subiectum* of first philosophy. Without reducing the speculation on the first object of thought to the modern concept of subjectivity - both parties would resist their insertion in such a history of continuity -, the medieval discussion on the first object of thought proved to have an important feature in common with the later philosophy of subjectivity, insofar as an investigation into the horizon of knowledge settles the possibility of a homogeneous field and, therewith, of metaphysics. Yet these same structures which establish the homogeneous field of metaphysics are, in the 14th century, involved in its dispersion. This event, the dispersion of metaphysics at the beginning of the 14th century, was verified by four examples and clarified by the image of the scattered field: the collision of the homogeneous field of metaphysics with the object of knowledge made it disperse in a scattered field. Still, because of its foundation in an established distribution of subjectivity, the medieval dispersion of metaphysics remained entirely unproblematic. Only the explicit turn to the subject for the unfurling of the homogeneous field of metaphysics after the Middle Ages allowed a refreshed dispersion of subjectivity to damage the confidence in metaphysics and herald the postmetaphysical era.  
 Perhaps the question arises whether, in this way, metaphysics itself has indeed become impossible. Is it not rather a certain episode of its history that has come to a close, an episode in which this foundational scheme of subjectivity grew to full stature and then faded away? But it would be quite ahistorical to think that one could escape from this development and once more try, free now from the rise and

fall of subjectivity, to establish a homogeneous field of metaphysics. This reality of which we are not the most creative part, is constituted, on a theoretical level, by structures of which we cannot dispose, structures that, historically determined, are imposed upon us and do not allow us - thus the diagnostics of our postmetaphysical era - to describe reality, like metaphysics intends to do, in terms of a homogeneous field.

This transition from the era of the philosophy of subjectivity to the post-metaphysical era was symbolized by the succession of those both catchwords 'subjectivity' and 'structure'. Structural reflection on subjectivity reveals its constitutive vigor to be embedded in or even derived, not to say borrowed from more fundamental structures in the ordering of knowing, structures that propose and indeed define both the subject-positions to be occupied and the object-domains of metaphysics allegedly constituted by mutually irreducible instances of subjectivity. Turning things round, a conclusion is reached to which we - rather on the sly, as must be admitted - were tacitly leading all this time. For if, by accepting the perspective of the postmetaphysical era and receiving the self-evidence of metaphysical projects not as something given, but as constituted by analyzable structures, we reached insight into tendencies of dispersion in the history of metaphysics, then, finally, also the self-evidence to which the *postmetaphysical* era appeals reveals itself to be produced and analyzable as to its constitutive structures -- with this analysis, thus we may conclude, we have made a beginning here." (pp. 63-64)

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"Soulevant la question de la garantie de la possibilité de la métaphysique par une critique de la raison, l'Auteur examine le rôle de Duns Scot et de Kant dans le passage historique de la métaphysique comme science du transcendant à la métaphysique comme science du transcendantal. Honnefelder mesure la pertinence de l'étant infini comme objet de la métaphysique, et en établit le sens à partir d'une explication modale."
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"In the following, we will investigate metaphysics' status as a scientific discipline, through an examination of the medieval sources of the approach that most profoundly transformed modern metaphysics, i.e. Kantian transcendental philosophy. Starting with Kant's direct sources we will trace the discussion back to the ideas of John Duns Scotus (§ 1) and of Francisco Suarez (§ 2), in order to demonstrate with regard to its most important features just how Kant received (§ 3) and transformed (§ 4) these ideas."

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*Metaphysics as the Science of God* pp. 538-584; *Metaphysics as the Science of Being* pp. 585-638.

"The subject-matter of metaphysics has been debated since the time when Aristotle first conceived the idea of the science. He himself speaks of 'the science we are seeking' and describes it differently in different places. In *Metaphysics* IV 1003a 21-6)) he speaks of a science which studies being as being and contrasts this science with the special sciences, like the mathematical disciplines, which investigate the attributes of a part of being. Two chapters later, IV.3 (1005b2), Aristotle speaks of a science which he calls 'first philosophy' because it grounds the first principles or axioms of the special sciences. But in book VI.1 ( 1026a18-1 9) he distinguishes three types of speculative science, physics, mathematics and 'divine science', so that one must ask how he understood the relationship between the general science of being, first philosophy and divine science. It is clear that divine science studies objects that are separate from matter and not subject to change. But Aristotle seems to have wanted to identify this science both with the investigation of being and with the science of the principles of the sciences, on the ground that divine science concerns itself with the highest principle of being in general and can for this reason preside over the special sciences. At the same time, each of these definitions of metaphysics must be understood in accordance with Aristotle's own idea of what

science is. In his conception, scientific knowledge is attained by way of the definition of the essential natures of things and the demonstration of the attributes which necessarily belong to them. Basically, Aristotle understood reality as an ordered structure. Even where his definitions are definitions of events, these are understood not in their variability as a process, but rather as reified. His science of metaphysics deals therefore with all reality according to its fixed essences and their necessary attributes and has consequently a static character, like the ancient society which it reflected.

In the course of history it was Aristotle's conception of metaphysics as divine science that gave rise to the most difficulties. The encounter of his idea of God as first substance with divergent religious traditions often forced later thinkers to modify the conception of metaphysics as the science of being. In late antiquity those philosophers who came to the defense of the pagan gods tended to interpret metaphysics as the science of intelligible reality, arranged in hierarchical degrees, separate from matter, but mediating between the divine and the material worlds. In Islam the doctrine of God's oneness compelled philosophers and theologians to emphasise the great gulf which separates the necessary being of the creator from the radically contingent being of the created world. Medieval Latin Christianity learnt of both of these approaches through Avicenna and Pseudo-Dionysius. The notions of a necessary first substance and a hierarchy of intelligences readily found a place in the contemplative and ordered society of the Middle Ages. The Christian notion of a God active in himself as triune and active in the world as incarnate as the fundamental articles of a faith thought to be even more certain than scientific knowledge would seem to have demanded a new definition of science and a new definition of the reality which metaphysics studies. But, paradoxically, it was only with the revolutionary social changes that marked the period under consideration in this volume [the Renaissance] -- a period in which the medieval faith was breaking down - that a vision of reality as dynamic process and a new understanding of science emerged.

This new conception of reality appeared in various guises, as a new mathematics, as the idea of a magical control over nature, as a conflict between Plato and Aristotle, or in connection with the doctrine of God. It was resisted by scholastic authors, who sought for apologetical reasons to maintain Aristotle's static notion of being. But as more and more new sciences -- sciences connected with this new vision of reality and often undreamt of in antiquity -- came to maturity, even thinkers in the Aristotelian tradition were forced to reopen the question of the definition of metaphysics and its relationship to the individual sciences. Since each of these problems -- the problem of God and the problem of the science of being -- had its own history, I shall treat them separately." (pp. 537-538)

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"In the fourteenth century, a new version of the first solution makes its appearance. Unlike its thirteenth century predecessor, this version of the solution is aware of the notion of the formal object uniting the various discourses comprising a science, yet it rejects such a notion. This deconstruction of the problematic surrounding the subject of metaphysics may be seen most clearly in the writings of Ockham and Buridan. With this development, the medieval history of the problematic of the subject of metaphysics may be said to reach its apogee by returning to its origins. The notion of a formal unity in a science, a unity that transcends the merely logical unity of a particular demonstrative syllogism, is once again missing from the discussion.  
In this, the second edition of his classic study, Albert Zimmermann has once again

provided scholars with a remarkable collection of otherwise unavailable texts along with penetrating studies on that perennial metaphysical question: what is the subject of metaphysics. As indicated by the title, Zimmermann's treatment of the medieval discussion on the object of metaphysical knowledge ranges over the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, covering authors from the generation of Richard Rufus and Roger Bacon up to John Buridan. The new edition takes account of most of the considerable literature that has appeared since the original publication in 1965. (...) Zimmermann's volume divides into two parts. The first presents texts drawn from medieval commentaries on Aristotle's *Metaphysics* in which the subject of metaphysics is discussed. The second part is subdivided into three chapters: the first sketches out the primary sources for the medieval discussion -- found chiefly in the writings of Aristotle, Avicenna, and Averroes; the second describes the advent of the three basic solutions proposed by medieval authors for the solution to the problem; and the final chapter shows the subsequent development of these three solutions. The study closes with reflections upon the medieval treatment of the problem and what impact the medieval discussion had upon the development of early modern philosophy as well as contemporary European thought.

Given the ambiguity of Aristotle's various statements on the subject of metaphysics, Avicenna and Averroes attempted to work out systematic accounts of the subject of metaphysics. Applying rigorously the model of scientific knowledge expressed in Aristotle's *Posterior Analytics*, Avicenna concluded that being as being, understood as common to substance and accident, had to be the subject of metaphysics since God's existence was sought in metaphysics and no science proves the existence of its subject. Agreeing with many of the basic assumptions of Avicenna, Averroes came to the opposite conclusion: metaphysics has as its subject God since the existence of God is already shown in natural philosophy and thus may be assumed for the purposes of metaphysical investigation.

The medieval philosophers worked out three alternative solutions to the problem presented to them by the texts newly received at the outset of the thirteenth century. The first solution, clearly evidenced in the writings of Roger Bacon, proposed that there are various subjects for the science of metaphysics and thus diffused the disagreement between Avicenna and Averroes. In the case of Bacon, the three subjects are being as being, substance, and God, subjects that are treated successively in the sequence of books in the Aristotelian *Metaphysics*. As Zimmermann notes, this solution is not only too facile but indicates that its proponents had not developed the notion of a single, formal subject that unites all the features treated within the scope of a science; Bacon is an especially clear case in this regard since he located the unity of metaphysical knowledge in the reducibility of all metaphysical objects to the First Cause and not in any formal unity of the subject matter.

The second solution Zimmermann finds most fully expressed in the writings of St. Thomas Aquinas, though he sees adumbrations of it in the commentaries of Albert the Great and Richard Rufus. Unlike the defenders of the first solution, those advancing the second solution are distinctive in having a refined notion of the formal object of the science and positing the unity of the science to be derived from the formal object. According to this solution, being as being or being in general (*ens in communi*) is limited to the range of creaturely being, a notion of which we attain through our acquaintance with sensible substances. The existence of God is not presupposed for metaphysical science though some judgment (*separatio*) that being is separate in notion and reality from merely sensible things is required. Instead, God relates to metaphysical knowledge as the cause and the principle of the subject

of the science or ens commune; hence, God's existence may be known in and through metaphysics, but the names derived from the concept of being that constitutes the object of the science can tell us little about His nature. The final solution developed by medieval philosophers was also the one most commonly adopted by them. Positing being as being as the subject in the widest possible sense, these thinkers claimed that God falls under the subject of metaphysics in that sense, albeit they often qualified that claim by stating that the sense of being that applies to God and creature is only analogously the same. One of the earliest adherents of this view was the great Dominican theologian Robert Kilwardby, but the most famous of those subsequently defending the view were Henry of Ghent and John Duns Scotus. In many ways, as Zimmermann notes (p. 329), Scotus's systematic presentation of this view marked the culmination of its development and led to the form that the medieval discussion would have thereafter, connecting the discussion of the subject of metaphysics to distinctively Scotistic theses such as the univocity of being."

Timothy Noone, Review of the volume in: *The Review of Metaphysics*, 54, 2000, pp. 183-185.

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