Aristotle was not the author of the term “metaphysics.” He spoke of “first philosophy,” “wisdom,” and “theology.” Philosophical controversy has existed for a long time about the unity of metaphysical knowledge and the relation of metaphysics to theology in connection with these terms.¹

We find the key text in Aristotle where theology and first philosophy appear to be interchangeable, in Book 6 of the Metaphysics where Aristotle lists the theoretical sciences and mentions physics and mathematics. The last science he mentions is the “first science,” “theology,” and “first philosophy.” He bases his on a difference in the objects of the sciences.

Physics concerns substances that possess in themselves a principle of motion and rest. Physics studies substance under the aspect of form in connection with matter.

Mathematics studies substance with no regard to motion and in separation from matter. Aristotle leaves open the question whether such a substance actually exists or whether this is a question of how we apprehend material substances in mathematics (by what would later be called “mathematical abstraction”).

The problem of the object of mathematics relates to the fact that Plato presented a middle sphere, of numbers, between the sensible world and the World of Ideas. Aristotle shows that such a sphere does not exist and that the object of mathematics is the result of a special kind of abstraction.²

The first science, theology, or first philosophy concerns unchanging substances, substances that are not in motion and can exist separate from matter, immaterial substances. Aristotle called this science theology, because what is immaterial and unchanging is divine. He identified this theology with first philosophy because the divine substance is the first substance and the first being. So, theology concerns the first being in the hierarchy of being.

This first being and first substance functions as the first cause for all being. Consequently, the study of the first substance is simultaneously the study of first causes. Since theology concerns the first being, it studies a universal body of knowledge and concerns being as being.²

This condensed passage from Book 6 of the Metaphysics presented many difficulties for commentators. Theology appears as one of the theoretical sciences, but its object is separated substance. Since this substance is the first substance and the cause of all other substances, theology has a privileged position among the sciences. It is not merely one of the sciences.

Also, because theology is identical with the science of being as being, in some way, theology is universal in character.
Furthermore, we do not know the divine substance directly. We know it indirectly as a cause because, in the order of human knowledge, we learn of the first substance through knowledge of material substances.

Thus, as the science, we must link theology concerned with the first substance to first philosophy as the science of being as being. Aristotle’s analysis of substance in Book 12 starts by considering the motion and structure of material substances. It does not start from a direct knowledge of the divine substance. This consideration involves the divine substance’s existence and nature. Aristotle shows divine substance is to be eternal, in act, necessary, unextended, immaterial, simple, and self-thinking. Its existence is necessary since we must find an adequate cause for eternal motion.

Aristotle’s natural theology is not based upon a revelation from God or a direct knowledge of God. It is based upon a metaphysical analysis of the sensible world. Thus, theology is not an autonomous scientific or philosophical discipline. But it does occupy a special position in metaphysical knowledge, because what is divine is also the highest substance.

Aristotle sees the object of natural theology primarily as a cause, being as it is known by the senses, not as a substance. Since scientific knowledge is knowledge by causes, theology is a type of scientific knowledge distinct from mythology.

Aristotle’s demythologization of theological knowledge is one of the most important accomplishments of Greek thought. Before Aristotle, Xenophanes had already made a rational critique of anthropomorphic conceptions of the gods. But he did not develop his critique into a definite methodology of scientific knowledge. Aristotle started the scientific treatment of divine being.

The conception of God or the Absolute in natural theology depends upon the conception of being developed in metaphysics. So natural theology has its basis in metaphysics.

During the Protestant Reformation and later in the Enlightenment, some thinkers criticized the approach of subjecting revelation or Sacred Scripture to Greek philosophy and reason. The critics thought that the Aristotelian approach would lead to a distortion of Christianity.

However, from the point of view of the culture of science, this approach caused something amazing to take place. For the first time in history human beings subjected to the definite and rigorous intellectual criteria demanded by scientific knowledge what people had previously considered in mythology and poetic fantasies. The Ancient Greeks took the first step when they searched for God in theoria.

Medieval thinkers also took an important step when they marked out the framework for interpreting the revealed message. They considered our human way of knowing the world and the structure of the reality we know. Without losing its supernatural dimension, in this way, theology developed with the highest domain of human culture: science in the broad sense of knowledge of the truth.