THE POWER OF WISDOM: FOUR CASE STUDIES OF A LATE 13TH CENTURY DEBATE

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INTRODUCTION: THE “SAPIENTIAL QUESTION” IN THE LATE 13TH CENTURY

In the famous opening of his *Metaphysics*—one of the most commented texts—Aristotle explains the structures of the genesis of knowledge: from sensation to memory to experience to art to knowledge or science (*episteme*).1 And he indicates the decisive principle, when he speaks about the difference between experience and art: “we suppose artists to be wiser than men of experience; . . . and this because the former knows the cause, but the latter does not”. And he adds: “which implies that wisdom depends in all cases rather on knowledge”.2 This is even more true, when it comes to “episteme”, which has to be understood in the full range and ambiguity of knowledge and its modes of habitualisation as discipline and science. “Since we are seeking this knowledge”, Aristotle states, “we must inquire of what kind are the causes and the principles, the knowledge of which is wisdom (*sophia*)”.3 According to Aristotle knowledge has to be understood as a process of production guided by constituting principles, which define the epistemic field and what is included in or excluded from it. From this account comes a twofold dynamics into this process of knowledge production. The first is universality: the more universal the knowledge, the more universal the principles. But this implies a certain hierarchy of the principles, described in the second part of the dynamics, which has two aspects: (a) “the science which investigates causes is also more

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3 Ibid., I, 2, 982a4–6.
capable of teaching, for people who teach are those who tell the causes of each thing”; and (b) “the science which knows to what end each thing must be done is the most authoritative of the sciences, and more authoritative than any ancillary science”.

Against this epistemological background we might comprehend the intellectual earthquake that the re-discovery of Aristotle provoked. The reception of the Aristotelian corpus, which must be understood as a process of transformation of the entire intellectual climate, had also an enormous impact on the institutions of learning. Within three decades the curriculum at the university of Paris became fully Aristotelian. But there is another consequence that became evident in the various disciplinary interventions and acts of censorship, under which the so-called condemnation of 7 March 1277 of contemporary interpretations functions as an icon, in particular for a new status of philosophy. According to some recent interpretations philosophy was now conceived as an independent, comprehensive doctrine of natural knowledge and ethical perfection, which has no need to call upon divine revelation and supernatural grace, against an old-fashioned, speculative, eclectic theology, which tried to claim the position of true wisdom. What we notice is the breaking of the model of an integrated Christian wisdom, which was defined for the Latin tradition by Boethius and Augustine. Boethius in his famous Theological Tractates explained Christian dogma in full accordance with Aristotle in terms of the knowledge of the highest principles, which Aristotle has called theology and which obtains the place of the highest of the theoretical sciences. Augustine picked up the Stoic definition of wisdom as the