

# Summary of Chapter One of Aristotele's First Book on Physics

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Aristotele's Lectures on Physics or Lectures about the Physicians (Περὶ φυσικῆς ἀκροάσεως or τὰ περὶ φύσεως) is an introduction on the understanding of nature of the Pre-Socratic philosophers – the natural philosophers (Φυσικοί), most of them wrote works called “On the Physics”, but their original works are not preserved till today, therefore Aristotele is giving us a first hand account on what was known about them in his times. He rules out which physicians were right or wrong according to his view and then presents his own view in the end of the book. In the first chapter of book one, he starts talking about the first element, in the context of the ἀρχή (origin), αἰτία (cause), and the first element (στοιχεῖον) itself, and points out that we can only say we found knowledge on all principles, if we know their origin, cause or in one word, their fundamentals. Knowledge and experience all go back to this basic source, and we can only say that we have knowledge if we are aware of the above. Therefore, he wants to analyze this for the natural science and it turns out that **the insight understanding that we have does not equal the real insight understanding of the thing itself**. Or in other words, we all know that water is fluid, but only chemistry who has separated water into its elements knows what water is really made of. So all in all, the first thesis is that we know things only when we have known its substances to its first element. Aristotele thus uses the **deductive method**, such as he introduces in his works on logic. **One first sees the full object and then goes deeper inside it** – from the general term to the singular things inside. In other words, to find truths, we have to know the beginning, if we know the beginning we can reflect on the end goal. He strictly, says it when he advises us that we begin to search for reason through the thing which is less immanent for itself, but more immanent for us, which means we start analyzing things by what we see most in it, but what we see most in it probably is the least part of it when we came to analyze it till the end. The things which are clear to us, indeed are part of a structureless diversification, or in other words Aristotle talks here about the one and the many in contrast.

So the first conclusion: our goal is to find the **cause** of everything, and to find it we have to analyze things through deduction by taking the one thing and going deep inside its

structureless diversity and find all the substances which make the thing as the thing it is, till we find the first element. All the early Physikoi tried to find the first element and to describe the world. It was the main target of Pre-Socratic philosophy to explain what the world is made of and how it began as we can only say how everything will end and where we will go if we found the beginning. This means that there must be a finite causality, because otherwise one can never find an ending, and there must be the possibility to deduce things from one another. In the end, there must be an origin or first cause (ἀρχή, αἰτία, στοιχεῖον).

If there were only natural forms – so to say natural-processes-only, then we just needed natural science as fundamental science (cp. *Metaphysics VI 1, 1026 a ff.*). However, despite the natural processes there are also substances which are without processes and eternal quality, and therefore, there must be a theological discipline – a first philosophy – despite the physics which tries to find that-which-is-being as such, while the στοιχεῖον is a kind of cause and principle, however he does not refer here to the στοιχεῖα of the Physikoi itself, since he thinks that they already are a kind of combination which includes the στοιχεῖον (cp. *Aristoteles: Physikvorlesung, übers. v. Hans Wagner, in: Aristoteles, Werke Bd. 11, hrsg. v. Hellmut Flashar, Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1983, p. 390 f.*).

So as mentioned before, water is fluid and seemingly one can say everything arises out of water – the planet, life, everything is born through water. But chemistry knows that water is separable. If it is separable into further elements it cannot be the first cause, but it might include the first cause, thus it can’t be water.

As next, Aristotle introduces the problem of conceiving something of the whole, and makes it clear if we compare an ὄνομα (noun, name) with a λόγος (term, definition). The noun itself has the problem that it is just uncertain in its determination. What is a circle? A circle on a sheet of paper is different than a circle of friends, while the definition has to give the characteristics of the noun (cp. *Wagner, 1983, p. 391*). Using this comparison Aristotle ends the first chapter and thus it leaves us the question of the origin, however he gave us the concern and the matter. And he showed us that the name of something often is not enough to find the characteristics. To say ‘water’ is the beginning could never be enough because what is water? And if we answer this question we find things in water, which shows that it does not satisfy our question of the first cause.

To put it in a nutshell Aristotle introduces us into the question of origin. He shows that natural science as fundamental science is not fully satisfying and that the Physikoi of the past did not come to a conclusion of the first element. Instead, Aristotle wants to find the first philosophy,

in which the eternal quality is found. There must be an element that was first and last, thus it raises a rather theological question.

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