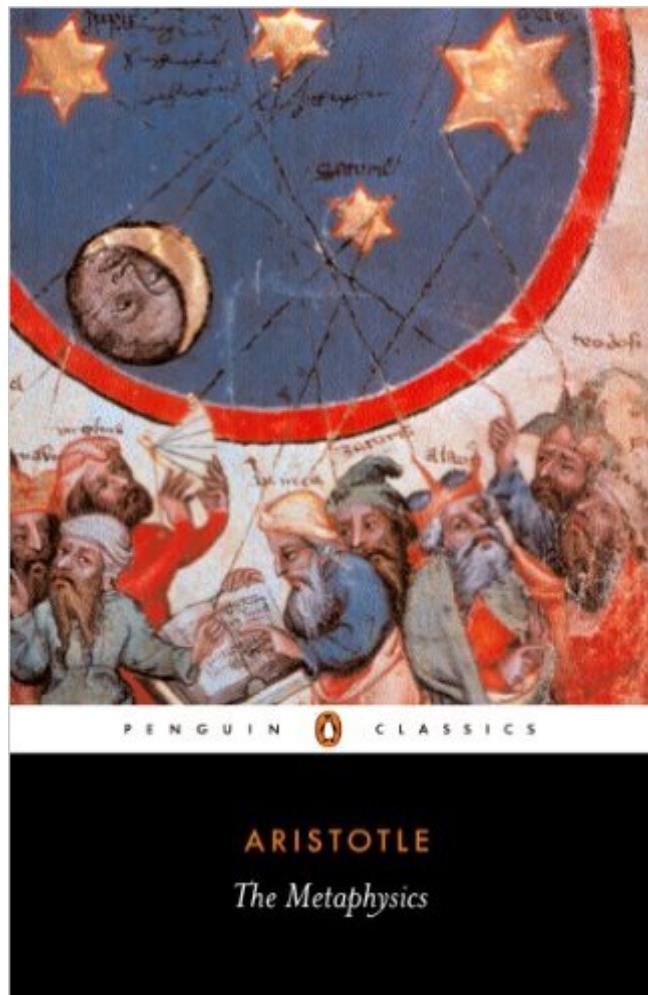


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# The Metaphysics (Penguin Classics)



## Synopsis

Aristotle's probing inquiry into some of the fundamental problems of philosophy, *The Metaphysics* is one of the classical Greek foundation-stones of western thought. *The Metaphysics* presents Aristotle's mature rejection of both the Platonic theory that what we perceive is just a pale reflection of reality and the hard-headed view that all processes are ultimately material. He argued instead that the reality or substance of things lies in their concrete forms, and in so doing he probed some of the deepest questions of philosophy: What is existence? How is change possible? And are there certain things that must exist for anything else to exist at all? The seminal notions discussed in *The Metaphysics* - of 'substance' and associated concepts of matter and form, essence and accident, potentiality and actuality - have had a profound and enduring influence, and laid the foundations for one of the central branches of Western philosophy. In this edition Hugh Lawson-Tancred's lucid translation is accompanied by a stimulating introduction in which he highlights the central themes of one of philosophy's supreme masterpieces. For more than seventy years, Penguin has been the leading publisher of classic literature in the English-speaking world. With more than 1,700 titles, Penguin Classics represents a global bookshelf of the best works throughout history and across genres and disciplines. Readers trust the series to provide authoritative texts enhanced by introductions and notes by distinguished scholars and contemporary authors, as well as up-to-date translations by award-winning translators.

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## Customer Reviews

.com, for reasons best known to themselves, have put my review of the Prometheus books translation of Metaphysics under the Penguin books translation (see below). Just to make things perfectly clear, the Prometheus books translation is bad, the Penguin books translation is good. Now, no matter where they put this, the truth will out.

I agree with Ian Slater's view that Hugh Lawson-Tancred's Penguin translation comes with an excellent Introduction. It also has very informative notes introducing the chapters. However, Lawson-Tancred's translation is way too literal for my liking and therefore very tedious to follow. Richard Hope's translation is more readable by far and takes the reader straight to the meaning of Aristotle's writings - which is what I want. To give credit to Lawson-Tancred, I read his chapter notes prior to reading each chapter in Hope's version. I find this to be a very satisfying compromise.

This translation of Aristotle's Metaphysics is published by NuVision Publications, which says that they are "specializing in rare, out-of-print books still in demand." The translator is W. D. Ross, and the translation was first published by Oxford University Press in the early nineteen thirties. It was later republished by Random House under the editorship of Richard McKeon. It seems that the translation is now in the public domain since the title page has no data on copyright. NuVision is to be commended for making available classics that are out of print. But they have hardly done justice to W. D. Ross. I have only made my way through Book III (out of XIV) of the Metaphysics, but I am distressed by too frequent errors of punctuation, omission of words, change of word order, and a total mangling of the last paragraph of Book III that makes it altogether unintelligible. Aristotle deserves better, and so does the reputation of W. D. Ross.

"After 'The Physics'" is the suitably opaque title for Aristotle's exploration of the fundamental nature of existence. It is not about religion as such, nor mysticism or magic; you can put those meanings of the word aside. It has been called by this title ever since a first-century B.C. editor decided to place it \*after\* Aristotle's "Physica" (On Nature). Aristotle seems to have called it "First Philosophy," which now suggests something introductory, as well as of first importance. Aristotle also sometimes describes it as "Theology," which is also rather misleading, although he does talk about a concept of what he considers divinity. The concept has little connection to most people's way of regarding religion, although Muslim, Jewish, and Christian Aristotelians all did their best to reconcile it with their ideas of what "theology" should be, sometimes with help from Neo-Platonist interpretations. No valid presentation is going to make it easy to understand, and Richard Hope's half-century old

translation is not for the faint of heart. Part of the problem, however, is not the (admitted) depth of Aristotle's thought, but the fact that he was thinking in an ancient language, an issue that Hope confronts, and, through his presentation, largely overcomes. The book looks cluttered, but a little use shows how functional it is. Hope's translation has an elaborate apparatus making clear how Aristotle's own choice of words underlies his English version. It shows, without argumentative commentary, how what in our language are discrete concepts fall together quite naturally in the Greek text. The same cross-references show that some ideas we would class together are kept apart in Greek, so Aristotle is not being obtuse in failing to notice how they fit. For those of us with an interest in philosophy or classical antiquity whose Greek ranges between non-existent and minimal, the results can be enlightening. Aristotle, it must be remembered, did not have at his disposal the kind of technical language devised over a couple of thousand years by thinkers working through Plato and, well, Aristotle's "Metaphysics". He used the Greek language of his time, expressing himself through the relationships between words in ordinary use. Also, he did not have to worry about whether foreigners -- the barbarians, after all -- would be able to make sense of his statements. Aristotle probably would have been horrified, as well as astonished, to learn that some of his important advocates and interpreters would know him only through Arabic or Latin versions. I have used the Hope translation for about a quarter of a century, often checking translations of excerpts in other works against it. I have not always come away with a greater understanding, but I have often found something I was missing by reading it either in "plain English" or technical jargon, and sometimes decided on his evidence that Aristotle's meaning was being misconstrued. I feel that this version will be of use to anyone with a serious interest in this branch of philosophy, or the history of thought. And, except as assigned reading, how many others are likely to look at it? Unless, of course, one has already mastered classical Greek, and has the time and patience to work out Aristotle's use of language directly. For those looking for a somewhat less intimidating-looking introduction, Hugh Lawson-Tancred's translation in Penguin Classics is highly regarded, and probably as readable as an accurate translation of the work is likely to get; and it has an extra half-century of Aristotelian studies behind it. The old Ross translation (the "Oxford Aristotle"), used through most of the twentieth century in various revisions, has admirers, although I personally found it the most difficult of the three to read at any great length. Finally, for those interested in history-of-philosophy problems beyond Aristotle himself, there is A.E. Taylor's old (1906) "Aristotle on His Predecessors," which was in print as recently as the early 1990s. It deals with the how Aristotle treats earlier philosophers in the first two books of "Metaphysics." This is a major problem, since his account is a main source of information on them, but seems to have been

meant by Aristotle to set up the terms of his own argument, and not as an investigation of what they had really meant. Of course, that is how philosophers and theologians have used Aristotle himself for centuries... (Reposted from my "anonymous" review of June 15, 2003.)

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