

THE FOUNDATIONS OF
WISDOM

VOLUME 2

PHILOSOPHY
OF NATURE
STUDY GUIDE

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PHILOSOPHY OF NATURE STUDY GUIDE

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CONTENTS

Introduction	1
List of Important Definitions for Natural Philosophy	3
Chapter 1.	4
Chapter 2.	6
Chapter 3.	8
Chapter 4.	11
Chapter 5.	14
Chapter 6.	16
Chapter 7.	19
Chapters 8–10	22
Chapter 11	27
Chapter 12	29
Chapter 13	32
Chapter 14	34
Chapter 15	37
General Questions for Natural Philosophy.	40

Introduction

THIS IS A STUDY GUIDE to accompany volume 2 of *The Foundations of Wisdom: An Introduction to the Perennial Philosophy* (Natural Philosophy). In this study guide I will explain the overall structure of volume 2 and how to read the text of volume 2. I will also include essential, chapter-by-chapter questions you should be asking and answering as you read through the text.

Logic as a Prerequisite for Natural Philosophy

If you have not already read the first volume of this series (Logic), or if you have not at least studied classical logic, you are not equipped and prepared to benefit fully from this text. Logic is a prerequisite to the study of natural philosophy, and so before reading this book, you should set it aside and learn some logic. For example, in this book I will define nature and motion. I will also demonstrate conclusions such as the fact that every mobile is divisible, and nothing mobile moves itself. These demonstrations use self-evident and *per se* statements. Unless you have studied logic, you will not be in the best position to judge these definitions or arguments. Logic teaches the road to follow in every science, so it should be learned before the others.

The Need for a Teacher

In the study guide for logic, I touched upon the need for a teacher in philosophy, or in any difficult matter. Since natural philosophy is among the things which are difficult to learn, and which require much experience, natural philosophy cannot be learned well simply from a book. No book, no matter how well-written, is sufficient as a guide for the life of the mind. Therefore, I reiterate the conclusion I reached before about logic: I strongly recommend that, in addition to reading the natural philosophy book and this accompanying study guide, the reader should try to find someone who already knows this subject matter well who can fulfill the role of a teacher.

The Overall Plan of the Natural Philosophy Book

This book is divided into two parts. In the first part (chapters 1-4) I cover some preliminaries to the study of natural philosophy. In the second part, I consider natural things (chapters 5-15).

Before making an investigation of natural things, a few things have to be considered as preliminaries: the place of natural philosophy among the other sciences and arts; the subject of natural philosophy (what natural philosophy is about); and the method to be followed in natural philosophy. These preliminaries are considered in chapters 1-4. And since natural things are movable things, I also consider the question about the possibility of motion in chapter 4.

Once these preliminary matters have been considered, the book considers natural things. This is divided into three parts: the general principles of natural things and our knowledge of them

(chapters 5-10); the consideration of natural (i.e., movable) things themselves (chapters 11-13); and the consideration of the ultimate causes of motion (chapters 14-15).

One could divide it as such:

Part I: Preliminary Matters (Chapters 1-4)

Chapter 1: The place of natural philosophy among the other sciences and arts

Chapter 2: The subject of natural philosophy (what natural philosophy is about)

Chapter 3: The method to be followed in natural philosophy

Chapter 4: The possibility of motion

Part II: Natural Things (Chapters 5-15)

Chapters 5-10: The general principles of natural things and our knowledge of them

Chapters 11-13: The consideration of natural (i.e., movable) things themselves

Chapters 14-15: The consideration of the ultimate causes of motion

Using Supplementary Texts

Some chapters refer the student to supplementary texts in the footnotes. These texts are, for the most part, original texts of great thinkers. Depending upon the abilities of the teacher and students, as well as upon the time you have to complete the course, these supplementary texts can be very helpful to examine a subject in greater detail. If the teacher is very knowledgeable and familiar with the supplementary text, and the students are more advanced, these texts will be very helpful for increasing the student's knowledge of natural philosophy. However, the course can be completed without reading the supplementary texts. They are options for those who desire to use them.

How Much Reading and Study Time should be Devoted to Each Part?

The time needed to cover the materials in this book is the sum of the time it takes to read the book and cover the material in class. The amount of time it should take a student to read the book carefully is approximately fifteen to twenty hours. The amount of class time to cover the contents of this book should total to somewhere between forty-five to sixty hours. So a student should expect that the total amount of time necessary to cover the entire contents of the natural philosophy book with this accompanying study guide will be between sixty and eighty hours.

As a ballpark figure, chapters 1-4 should take approximately ten to fifteen hours to read and discuss; chapters 5-6 should take approximately ten to fifteen hours to read and discuss; chapters 7-10 (with the Appendix) should take approximately fifteen to twenty hours to read and discuss; and chapters 11-15 should take approximately twenty-five to thirty hours to read and discuss.

These are simply estimates based upon my experience teaching this material. There may be reasons or circumstances why a particular student might use significantly more time than what is recommended here, but it would be unusual that a student would need significantly less time than the 60 hours recommended here.

List of Important Definitions for Natural Philosophy

THE FOLLOWING DEFINITIONS ARE IMPORTANT for understanding natural philosophy. Because definitions are the seeds of all of our knowledge and are presupposed to everything else we can know, the student should memorize all of these definitions. The best way to memorize these definitions is to sit down with a partner and verbally ask one another the definition of each term on this list. Once you can quickly repeat the definitions three times without making a mistake, you can go on to the next one on the list until all of them are memorized. Some of these definitions pertain to the earlier chapters (like the definition of principle), while others pertain to the later chapters (such as the definitions of time and place).

- Principle (ch. 2):** The first thing from which something is or comes to be.
- Cause (ch. 2):** That upon which anything depends for its being or coming to be.
- Element (ch. 2):** The first material cause of a thing which is indivisible with respect to its form.
- Nature (ch. 7):** An intrinsic principle of motion and rest which is first and *per se*.
- Matter (ch. 5):** That out of which something comes and which remains in it.
- Form (ch. 5):** That which makes a thing to be what it is.
- Agent (ch. 8):** The first source of a thing's motion or coming to be.
- End (ch. 8):** That for the sake of which something is or comes to be.
- Privation (ch. 5):** That out of which something comes and which does not remain in it.
- Motion (ch. 11):** The act of the potential insofar as it is potential.
- Place (ch. 12):** The first, immobile surface of the containing body.
- Time (ch. 12):** The number of motion according to before and after.
- Chance (ch. 10):** An agent cause which acts outside the intention of the agent and rarely.

Chapter 1

What to Look for in Chapter 1

Try to understand clearly the distinction between speculative and practical knowledge, and why speculative knowledge is better than practical knowledge.

Notice the different usages of the words “matter” and “material” in reference to the division of the speculative sciences based upon their separation from matter.

Summary and Explanation of Chapter 1

Chapter 1 considers the place of natural philosophy among the various arts and sciences. The first distinction needed to place natural philosophy among the other branches of knowledge is the distinction between speculative and practical knowledge. Therefore, at the beginning of chapter 1 the book considers this distinction and argues that speculative knowledge is better and more worth knowing than practical knowledge. This conclusion is counter-intuitive for modern students, who are accustomed to hearing that practical knowledge is the best kind of knowledge. This is understandable, since the goods provided by practical knowledge are closer to the senses and, therefore, better known to us. For example, food and shelter are very well-known goods, and they are the result of practical knowledge, such as agriculture and architecture. Nevertheless, what is better known to us is not always better in itself. The statement that the whole is greater than its parts is better known to us than the statement that the human soul is immortal, yet the latter statement is clearly better in itself than the former statement.

After showing that natural philosophy is situated among the speculative sciences, the book goes on to distinguish between the three branches of speculative knowledge (mathematics, natural philosophy, and metaphysics). This distinction is based upon their different relationships to matter.

Questions about Chapter 1

What is the key difference between practical and speculative knowledge?

Why is speculative knowledge better than practical knowledge?

How do we know that natural philosophy is a kind of speculative knowledge?

What are the two divisions used to differentiate the speculative sciences?

Given that there are two divisions used to differentiate the speculative sciences, why aren't there four speculative sciences?

What is meant by matter when it is said that some things exist in matter, or some things are defined with matter?

The division of speculative knowledge into three species implies that a division based upon different ways of being immaterial is a species-making difference. What would have to be included in the definition of knowledge in general (i.e., knowledge considered as a genus) for different ways of being immaterial to make specifically different kinds of knowledge? (Hint: consider the definition of species-making difference from the last book.)
