

FORCE AND DYNAMISM IN ARISTOTLE AND HEIDEGGER: BECOMING WHAT YOU ARE . . . TO BE

Force and dynamism (actuality and potentiality; *energeía* and *dunámis*) together constitute one of the four fundamental “ways” of being described by Aristotle in the *Metaphysics*; and one of the two “ways,” along with being according to the categories, that constitutes the subject matter of the primary science. Aristotle’s ontology remains the phenomenologist’s touchstone, and indeed this characterization of being has guided the work of Heidegger among others.

Comparisons between Aristotle and Heidegger before the *Kehre* have become more frequent since the publication of Heidegger’s courses of the twenties and thirties. Such studies usually take for granted that there is a modal reversal between the two ontologies. In the standard interpretation, for Heidegger possibility [*Möglichkeit*] precedes actuality, and Heidegger indeed says this (e.g. *SZ*: 38/63). For Aristotle, it is said, the reverse is true: and here lies the error.¹ In fact, in Aristotle, actuality is contrasted not with possibility [*dunátōn*], but with potentiality [*dunámis*]: actuality, he says, is prior to potentiality (*Meta*: 1049b 4ff).

In this paper, I examine the modal shift from Aristotle’s actuality to Heidegger’s possibility. There is indeed such a shift, I argue, and it is in fact definitive of the changed ontological project. But to characterize the shift simply as a reversal is inaccurate. For Aristotle, as I discuss in the first section, actuality clearly precedes potentiality, both in the order of knowledge and in the order of being. This is clear on the basis of his conception of science as the study of universal principles and grounds, and, more particularly, in his conception of the science of being qua being as the study of the universal principles and grounds of *ousía* as universal, actual form. In section two, I explore the distinct meanings of “possibility” and “potentiality” for Aristotle: “potentiality” has a much more restricted use. Just as Aristotle’s notion of physical potentiality and what Heidegger calls possibility are not identical, neither is Aristotle’s notion of potentiality limited to the coming-to-be of form in sensible things. The notion of rational potency corresponds more nearly to what Heidegger means by “potentiality”:

In section three, I note that Heidegger does not restrict himself to the use of “possibility”: In fact he uses “potentiality for-” [*können*-] frequently,

particularly in the common construction “potentiality-for-being” [*Seinkönnen*]. Potentiality-for-being refers to the determined ontological structure of Dasein: But this structure itself, as transcendence, is exhibited ontically as the necessity to choose possibilities. Potentiality in Heidegger suggests less what Aristotle means by the (determined) coming into species form of *every* being, as much as it does the practical movement of *each* Dasein in appropriating that which is given to it: these are possibilities of being. For both Heidegger and Aristotle, as in Pindar’s famous maxim, human being becomes what it already is (. . . determined by *phúsis* to become), and in this sense, Heidegger’s potentiality, and Aristotle’s rational potency coincide. However, insofar as the coming to be of Dasein is a free appropriation of possibilities, we can accurately speak of a shift in modal focus between the two philosophers. Aristotle treats human being as a species with little metaphysical attention to the individual. For Heidegger, each Dasein becomes what it is *to be*; since Heidegger articulates the individual nature of Dasein, the future of each individual as chosen possibility is emphasized.

Heidegger’s course of SS 1931, *Aristotle’s Metaphysics Theta 1–3: On the Essence and Actuality of Force* (GA33), provides us with an extraordinary interpretation of Aristotle. Published in 1981, this work puts meat on the bones of our prior understanding of the influence of Aristotle on Heidegger in his earlier work; it is especially important for an understanding of modality in *Being and Time* and gives some indications of Heidegger’s clear re-appropriation of Aristotelian concepts. It is important also, however, to look again at Aristotle’s texts on their own merit. In part one below, I indulge in a long discussion of Aristotle’s metaphysical project, in part because his own words are too often forgotten in the recent comparisons with Heidegger, but primarily because the import of the modal shift Heidegger makes is less obvious if we have not revisited the logical beauty of Aristotle’s enterprise.

1. ARISTOTLE’S SCIENTIFIC METAPHYSICS AS KNOWLEDGE OF UNIVERSAL PRINCIPLES AND GROUNDS: ACTUALITY (FORCE) PRECEDES POTENTIALITY (DYNAMISM)

Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* treats the science “*epistēmē*” of being qua being (1003a 20). As such it studies the principles and grounds of things which are (1025b 3). What “science” means here is important in establishing Aristotle’s prioritizing of actuality over potentiality in the realm of ontology.

In the *Nichomachean Ethics*, Aristotle defines *epistēmē* as a mode of conception dealing with universals and things that are of necessity and cannot vary [*ex anágkēs ára estì tò epistetón*] (NE: 1140b 31); it studies eternal things that do not come into existence or perish (NE: 1139b 20ff; 1140b 30). Scientific knowledge then is knowledge of: 1) universals that express formal relations between phenomena; or 2) form as the unchangeable element of sensible things; or 3) God, which is pure form, and thus the principle of rationality, the first principle of the sciences.

From the point of view of knowledge acquisition, we know that for Aristotle all knowledge begins with perception of particulars. From here, we build up to knowledge of universals through the process of induction [*epagōgē*]. Induction requires the leap to an “intuitive” grasp of the universal, [*noûs*], and it is thus that we come to know first principles. *Epistēmē*, on the other hand, designates the outcome of a deduction from first universal principles [*archai*], which are themselves known through induction (NE: 1139b 30) and intuition (NE: 1141a 7). Science works with “facts” or propositions, statements that are based on perception of particulars, and it seeks universal true statements that are explanatory of particulars. *Epistēmē* then is the understanding of universal explanatory grounds, formally revealed through deductive applications of *archai*. In short, science uses principles gleaned through an inductive procedure to find universal grounds for particulars.

In the *Posterior Analytics* Aristotle discusses the general conception of science, laying out the characteristics of *epistēmē* in detail. Each science should have its own object, a particular subject genus, and its own indemonstrable first principles, though all sciences have recourse to common axioms (APo: 77a 27). There is one supreme or primary science that furnishes first principles upon which other sciences are based (though not the first principles specific to each science). This science is the one that Aristotle pursues in the *Metaphysics*. The *Metaphysics* is concerned with seeking the most universal grounds and principles of what is. Since the first principles of this science apply to being *qua* being, and specifically to *ousía*, they are applicable to any of the more specific subject matters of the other sciences, which study “some portion of being” (*Meta*: 1003a 25).

In the realm of ontological inquiry, *epistēmē* studies unchanging form. Though particular to an individual sensible thing (this form in this matter), form is also universal (the same form common to many individual things). The science of being treats the form of particulars in its universal, unchanging aspect, on the level of species.

The capacity to know scientifically, *epistēmē*, is ultimately expressed through the activity of *theoría*. The eternal objects of theoretical inquiry are in contrast to the class of things that are the concern of the activities of making and doing [*poiēsis* and *praxis*]; these activities are concerned with things that can also be otherwise [*endexómēna állos éxein*]. The shift in Heidegger to prioritization of possibility over actuality corresponds both to prioritization of the contingent over the necessary, and to the prioritization of praxis over theory as the human way of coming to know. For Aristotle, the objects of the highest form of knowledge — God, the cosmos, form — are necessary, actual, eternal and the object of theoretical knowledge; for Heidegger, the fundament of knowledge — each individual human being — is above all mortal, thus contingent. Furthermore, for Heidegger, each human being is, as we will see, involved in a process of self-actualization through the discovery and exploitation of possibility.

Science, *epistēmē*, treats the universal and the necessary, so that the science of being qua being must treat the universal and necessary aspect of beings; this comes down to the study of actuality, or form. In book Delta and again in Epsilon of the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle gives a definition of “being” that shows four senses of the term. It means: 1) accidental being [*katà sumbebēkós*] as opposed to being in itself [*kath’hautó*]; 2) being according to the figures of the categories; 3) being in the sense of being true; and 4) being as actual being and potential being (1017a 8–1017b 9; 1026a 33–1026b 2). It emerges that neither accidental being nor being in the sense of being true is the object of the primary science with which the *Metaphysics* is concerned. As Aristotle clearly specifies in Epsilon (1027b 35): “*tò mèn hos sumbebēkòs kai tò hos alēthès òn aphetéon*” [we may dismiss the sense of being as accidental and as truth].² That which is accidental and contingent and admits of no ground can be the subject of no science, whether practical, productive, or theoretical, since “all scientific knowledge is of that which is always or usually so” (1027a 21–2). Science studies the actual, the necessary; the accidental is contingent and merely potential.

In the discussion of being as accident in Epsilon, Aristotle says that to be *katà sumbebēkós* refers, first of all, to an attribute that is not part of the essence of an *ousía* — an attribute that is not *kath’hautó* — and which is therefore particular and not universal.³ Now grounds can be given only for that which occurs necessarily and always in the same way: they must refer to a universal. Accidental attributes, as non-universal, admit of no grounds, and since science is the clarification of grounds, accidents cannot belong to a science. Secondly, a subject can be said to be accidental, if its ground is also

accidental (1027a 9–10). There is no possible ground of the purely accidental event, for example, of cold weather during the dog days, or of the purely contingent phenomenon such as the whiteness of the cultured person. Only the actual and necessary has scientific grounds.

Being in the sense of being true [*hos alēthēs*] is also eliminated from the study of the primary science. The recognition of something as either true or as false is dependent upon: 1) a connection and division (*súnthesis* and *diaíresis*) of concepts in an apophatic statement, and 2) the affirmation or denial of the truth of the resultant prediction. The judgement of the truth or falsity of the predication is itself dependent upon whether or not it mirrors the way that things are in the world. Concerning the mental process of *súnthesis* and *diaíresis*, Aristotle writes “falsity and truth are not in things — the good, for example, being true, and the bad false — but in thought” (1027b 26–8). Being as truth, since it occurs and exists only in thought, is not a real quality intrinsic to the being of things, but a judgement concerning the correspondence of a predication to reality.⁴

The *Metaphysics* treats being as act and potency, and being according to the figures of the categories as fundamental to the science of being *qua* being. Being according to the figures of the categories is treated in some detail in Zeta (1028a 10–1028b 8). “Being” means first the what of a thing [*tí esti*], and then the quality, quantity, relation, and all the other categories. The “what” or *ousía* is the primary sense of being, since none of the other categories can be said to be if *ousía* is not. Thus “it is by reason of *ousía* that each of [the other categories] is” (1028a 28). Here we see that it is the “what it is”, the unchanging form of the individual *ousía* that is the prime object of study; the other categories, as contingent, or as merely potential, are secondary.

Ousía is the *hupokeímenon* or substrate; the secondary categories (quality, quantity and the like) can be studied only in relation to the primary category, *ousía*, since their existence, separate from *ousía*, is accidental. The particular manifestations of the categories bring out the individual character of an *ousía* (one, green, now); the formal character of the categories (quantity, quality, time) make it possible to understand an *ousía* according to its species and genus. Being according to the categories is primarily *ousía*, the prime focus of the science of being *qua* being. However, the other categories, as essential attributes of *ousía*, are necessary to the study of being *qua* being, insofar as they define *ousía* on the level of species. The study of *ousía* is admitted in the primary science precisely because that science studies the universal, the necessary, that which cannot be otherwise; actuality precedes potentiality in the order of knowledge.

<http://www.springer.com/978-1-4020-0627-2>

Life Energies, Forces and the Shaping of Life: Vital,
Existential

Book I

Tymieniecka, A.-T. (Ed.)

2002, XXXIV, 398 p., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-1-4020-0627-2