

Being as Becoming: Aristotle's Metaphysics and its Contemporary Implications

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§1

One of the most striking and attractive things to contemporary readers of Aristotle may be his commitment to an analysis of the human *as a whole*. This is refreshing for those acquainted with the all-too-familiar twentieth century nominalist and reductionist “scientific” positions that tend to, in spurious fashion, reduce and eliminate all that cannot fit into contemporary “scientific” methodologies. Although the verification principle is the obvious example, but it is by no means the only one: philosophy as scientific must either reduce or eliminate.

For Aristotle, quite to the contrary, the human being cannot be dissociated from her context: a context of action, of propensities and of capabilities. The study of humanity cannot be possible without realizing that the rational animal has a determinate nature and history, and above all, value and purpose. Thus, we find in Aristotle a demand that the human being must be analyzed through its natural propensities, capabilities and possibilities. It is this triadic relation, between actuality, potentiality and activity, that is garnered through a thorough reading of Aristotle, and especially the central books of the *Metaphysics*.¹

§2

In stark relief, the common “scientific” image of philosophy (at least since Descartes) has privileged the analysis of what is *actual* to the exclusion of what is *potential*. Or, perhaps more accurately, the potential is minimalized to that (and only that) which can be explained and predicted by a nomological structure, viz., the laws of

¹ Books VII-IX of the *Metaphysics*.

physics. The human being, under the Cartesian paradigm, is nothing more than 'matter' which is in causal relation to other bits of 'matter.' To use Sellars nomenclature, the “scientific image” of man is brought into the primary, to the exclusion of “the manifest image.”² Perhaps most conspicuous in this conenction is the contemporary breakdown between the Anglo-Austrian “analytic” and Eurpoean “continental” styles of philosophy. The former take science as the paradigm of philosophical inquiry, the latter view this same paradigm as a problem of philosophy overstepping its bounds. Although it would be rash to say that all aspects of a scientific model should be eradicated in the philosophical tradition, I think a similar error is committed when taking science as the only model for philosophy, to the exclusion of genuine thinking. Such is the case in the contemporary distaste for metaphysics.

§3

Perhaps the height of this scientific-modeled philosophy is the philosophy of Rudolf Carnap.³ Carnap took the Frege-Russell logic to its dialectical limits in the *Aufbau*, by reducing all that is to auto-psychological sense impressions. The “construction theory” sought to replace the need for any metaphysics, and Carnap's goal was to reduce all that is, or could be, to a firm quasi-Cartesian foundation: that of first-order quantified logic. Once there was no need for metaphysics, all one needed to do is to remove all excess, in a sense 'trimming the fat' from philosophy. But Carnap's own

2 Wilfrid Sellars, “Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man.”

3 It is interesting to note that Carnap is Sellars principal target in the above cited paper.

project left an empty shell of the human, as scientific object, by *de facto* removing the cultural, the valuable, the political, and all discourse which cannot be translated into the arbitrary language of sense-impressions and the logical structure that inheres between them. What Carnap proposes, then, is a metaphysics of non-metaphysics.

§4

It has been the task of philosophers in the post-positivist *Weltanschauung*, to recover from this scientific 'hangover' left by the *Aufbau*. What this requires is a return to the fundamental meaning of human existence, not merely in terms of humanity as it is, as actuality, but also in terms of the possibilities and capabilities of that are of the essence of what it is to be human. Several thinkers in contemporary investigations have taken this challenge by making a return to Aristotle's teachings. This is the basis for recent interest as "virtue ethics" and "virtue epistemology," and (I would argue) the turn towards the temperate neo-pragmatism of Davidson, Rorty, Brandom and McDowell.⁴

§5

This paper will be mainly expository. I intend merely to draw out themes, to suggest the possibilities of what further research might follow. Here I wish merely to *suggest* an interpretation of the central books of the *Metaphysics*, VI-IX. I am not

⁴ See of instance, Sosa (1991) McDowell (1994). Although I do not intend to analyze here the benefits and drawbacks of bringing Aristotle back to ethics, or to epistemology, I do intend to argue generally that Aristotle still has a valuable place in the philosophy of the twentieth century. And in so doing, I shall refer liberally to contemporary doctrines throughout.

breaking new ground, nor am I dealing with the secondary literature extensively.⁵ The first section deals with the question of “being” (ousia). At the risk of ‘tipping my hand,’ the argument is that there exists in Aristotle two notions of being 1) a linguistic and 2) an ontological one. The former is given to us by the Categories, and the second by the Metaphysics. I argue against conflating the two. Section II deals with the question of becoming. I differentiate the two senses of potency in Metaphysics IX, the former a notion of potency as motion, which is consistent with the scientific model of philosophy I have discussed. The latter is a more ontologically rich sense of possibility, describing being in terms of *becoming*. And finally, in conclusion, I intend to draw a moral which ties the philosophy of Aristotle to contemporary debates in Anglo-Austrian “analytic” philosophy and its treatment (or perhaps dismissal) not only of Aristotle, but of “metaphysics”⁶ as the science of being *qua* being.

I

§6

The question of being plays a prominent role in Aristotle's corpus. Indeed, the first few books of the Metaphysics are an attempt to justify the fact that there can be a science of being *qua* being. For Aristotle, any experiential knowledge (and thus current phenomenalist sensation theories of knowledge) are not true knowledge; those who have experiential knowledge know only the particulars. It is the domain of the theoretical and artistic types of knowledge that know *universals*, especially the principles and causes that

5 My interpretation is influenced by Charlotte Witt (1989) and (2003), and my general picture of Aristotle has been influenced by John Anton (1996).

6 Of course, this was not Aristotle's original title.

relate to a specific domain.⁷ But the knowledge of causes and principles are directly related to a given science; knowledge of the cause of a given disease, and the fact that a certain treatment will cause health is knowledge, but specifically knowledge restricted to the domain of medicine. Albeit that the understanding of principles is knowledge, it is the understanding of *first* principles that constitutes the knowledge of metaphysics.⁸

It is telling that Aristotle does not include the categorical being (quality, quantity, relation, etc.) as the object of the science of being *qua* being. Taking Aristotle seriously, we must include the two things and only those two things (viz., causes and first principles) as an true understanding of being.⁹ Thus, although some take Aristotle's doctrine of primary and secondary *ousia* in the Categories as the true understanding of being, I find this insufficient.¹⁰

Thus for science taken as a whole, there is a triadic distinction of knowledge that is available: 1) a knowledge of particulars, which is not true knowledge, 2) knowledge of universals and causes within a given science, which is limited to the domain of that science, and 3) knowledge of universals (causes and first principles) which are a member of *all* sciences, viz., the science of philosophy. The first is the most basic, most insufficient. The last is the most powerful. Thus, metaphysics is the science of science.

7 cf: I, i

8 This is outlined in I, i-ii

9 As I shall demonstrate later, Aristotle includes a third notion in Book IX, that of potency and complete reality. It is this last that appears that tells us what being is in its true form.

10 I shall have more to say about this below.

§7

There are at least two separate accounts of being (*ousia*), one in the *Categories*, and the other in the *Metaphysics*.¹¹ John Anton has argued, convincingly, that the doctrine of the *Categories* is not an ontological theory, but rather a *linguistic* theory:

My view is that the doctrine of the categories is one which deals with the rules of correct and ultimate types of assertions, *kataphaseis*, on the ground that the genera or types of such assertions are in correspondance and agreement with the ontology of the γένη τών όντων. Failure to keep *onta* and *kategoriai* apart leads (a) to a narrow view of the doctrine of categories . . . and (b) to the error of redundancy which seems to result from identifying the genera of categories with the genera of being.¹²

Albeit that all true assertions must be answerable to what is (that is, with the ontology of being), the question that concerns the *Categories* is what we can *say* about being, not what beings there are. Thus, one must be careful not to conflate the grammatical structure of language (the verb 'to be') with the ontological structure of the world (being).

§8

Aristotle was careful not to make this error. He makes clear in the *Metaphysics* that “[t]here are many senses in which a thing may be said to 'be.'”¹³ Clearly this is the case. In Book Δ, Aristotle identifies four: 1) as accident¹⁴ 2) as essence¹⁵ 3) as truth (predication)¹⁶ and 4) as potentiality and actuality¹⁷. But Aristotle further elaborates that

11 Whether or not the two are separate doctrines or not is problematized by Wedin (2000), especially Ch. IV.

12 Anton (1996) p. 137

13 1003a 33 This is Aristotle's infamous *legati pollachos*.

14 1017a 9-23

15 1017a 23-30

16 1017a 30-35

17 1017a 35 - b 10

all the senses in which we ordinarily mean by being, have one common source, which is “the substratum,” primary ousia.¹⁸ Ousia occurs as primary in the Categories; it is the common theme which is prior to, and involves, all other nine categories. The linguistic categorical usage *describes* the motley collection of things which are said to be. For quantity, quality, relation, etc. to be applicable to individuals it must first mean that they are, that they have *ousia*.¹⁹ But that does not mean that a complete description of the essence of a thing is given by a simple conjunction of predicates, which would follow from taking categorical being as “ontological types.” Indeed, such experiential accounts of knowledge are directly confronted by Aristotle in the Metaphysics.

§9

Thus, although it is tempting to read the qualities, relations, etc. of a given object as in some way characteristic of the being of the thing, I think it is clear that for Aristotle that this is *not* being. In his infamous defense of the law of non-contradiction, he discusses one such objection to the philosophy of his predecessors insofar as they took sensation, or actuality, to be knowledge of the object:

. . . while they were inquiring into the truth of that which is, they thought, 'that which is' was identical with the sensible world; in this, however, there is largely present the nature of the indeterminate, of that which exists in the peculiar sense which we have explained; and therefore, *while they speak plausibly, they do not say what is true.*²⁰

18 Ousia is often translated “being” or “substance.” I will try to leave it untranslated where possible.

19 2b 5-6

20 1010a 1-5, emphasis mine.

Although Aristotle conceded that there is truth in the verbal act of attributing certain specific qualities to the object, he stops short of permitting this to be an adequate account of being *qua* being. Part of Aristotle's argument here is that the object as actual is never stable, but always in the process of change (potentiality). It is characteristic of changing things that what is actual at time *t*, will not be at time *t'*. Indeed, such prediction of what is at time *t'* is given by a knowledge of the object at time *t*, and a knowledge of what the object *has the capacity to become*. And, if and when qualities do change, to attribute different qualities to the same object does not require a change in the essence of the object, but rather, the essence of the object is given by a knowledge of what the object has the capabilities of being.

§10

In *Metaphysics VII*, Aristotle talks of the determination of beings (*ousia*) in terms of particularity, quality and quantity: “In one sense, the 'being' meant is 'what it is' or a 'this,' and in another sense it means a quality of quantity or one of the other things that are predicated as these are.”²¹ These particular and actual qualities, as definite descriptions, are indicative verbally of what the being is, in its actuality. Later, in *Metaphysics IX*, he makes a separate yet related distinction: “. . . 'being' is in one way divided into individual thing, quality, and quantity, and is in another way distinguished in respect of potency and complete reality, and of function.” Although the “scientific” model of philosophy treats possibilities in terms of causal powers to effect motion (efficient causes) it excludes the *telos*, the direction that is characteristic of human intentional activity (final causes). The

21 1028a 12-14

entelecheia, or complete reality of humanity, includes not only an understanding of what the human is in actuality, and how we can talk about it, but also requires a knowledge of what the human has the potential to become, and to which end this serves. This requires a discussion of what is possible, and that to which humanity tends to strive (the *telos*).²² It is to this latter sense I shall now turn.

II

§11

An understanding of Aristotle's hylomorphism divides that which is into matter and form. Matter is the substratum, the thing which exists independently of linguistic definition. But things are, only insofar as they are a mix of both matter and form. To use a common Aristotelean example, take the brazen statue. It is both matter (brass) and form (statue). However, it defies reason to think that this specific hunk of brass has always existed in this form. The process of change, of becoming, is intricately tied to Aristotle's notion of form. Of course, it is the same matter that previously existed in the mine, and also later on the artisan's bench, but only recently did it come to be a statue, its most recent form. It is human purposive activity that has created this form. But as the philosophy of actuality would object, the changes can be given by a complete description by physics, a lengthy list of which hammer blows at such-and-such position, with such-

²² It is telling in this respect that the word *entelecheia* includes the word “*telos*” within it. The complete reality of the human being carries with it its own end. This is one of the more important lessons of the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

and-such force, at such-and-such angle, that were required to create a statue with a given form.

The human, also, is a mix of matter and form. The body is the matter, and the soul the form. But clearly, the human being is not stable, she learns, grows and changes. Although the matter is constantly the same, the form is in a constant state of development. Who I am, as I define myself, is this form. Thus matter is that which is potential (*dunamis*), that which can come to be, while form corresponds with the actual (*entelecheia*), what is. This is a primary premise of Aristotle's analysis of the human being *as rational animal*, in contrast to the merely nutritive and sensitive faculties of other animals, that the human has an innate capacity for action: to change the world to his or her whim (*techne*) is the ability to move from sheer possibility to actuality. The philosophy of actuality has no need for such intentional or hylomorphic language, and since it cannot be reduced, it must be eliminated.

§12

As form and matter work together as a unity, and so too, do actuality and possibility. There are two senses of possibility in Book IX of the *Metaphysics*, 1) potency as motion²³, and 2) a stronger ontological sense of potentiality as becoming.²⁴ The plan of discussion is announced in the first paragraph of Book IX, i: “. . . first let us explain potency in the strictest sense, which is, however, not the most useful for our present purpose. For potency and actuality extend beyond the cases that involve a reference to

23 IX, i-v

24 IX, vi-ix

motion.”²⁵ By the former, passive sense of *dunamis* is that which the scientific model of philosophy would have us believe, that the world is made of matter in causal relation. That is to say, it is a merely passive, causal relation. The latter sense, a rich ontological sense of purposive activity, and involves “desire or will” (*orexis*).²⁶ The former sense is a necessary condition of the latter, but the latter is irreducible to the former.

§13

Aristotle takes pains to distinguish the rational from irrational powers. Conveniently, the former type of potentiality falls on the side of the irrational, while the latter on the side of the rational. An easy way to understand the difference between the two types of potencies is, given in contemporary terms, that some powers are *normative*. Normativity has recently become a central topic in epistemology and semantic theory, but Aristotle should be credited with the very first position of this type. Take, for instance, the practice of medicine. A doctor has the power to heal, but at the same time has the power to injure. One of the central aspects of rational powers is that they admit contraries. Contrast this with, say, a hot coal. The coal has the power to heat, but only to heat. Insofar as the coal has the potential to heat, it is an irrational power. It does not permit the allowance of potential contraries, the coal cannot cool; it can heat only by its nature.

The human being has both the causal and normative potentialities. Rational potentials, such as thought and language, show sharp juxtaposition with the causal,

25 1045b 34-6

26 1048a 11

irrational powers. The former are those of physical processes, such as perception, for one cannot see better or worse. The linguistic reporting role of perception, however, is a normative endeavor.

§14

The connection between being as potentiality, in contrast with the mere causal account of power of movement (*kinesis*), has a conceptual tie to activity (*energeia*). It is the activity of the human animal that allows it to flourish, to make possibilities into actualities. Aristotle takes some time in Book Θ to refute the doctrine of the Megarians, for whom actuality and potentiality are conflated. According to Aristotle, it is false to think of potentiality as requiring actuality, such that you are a builder only in the process of building. A builder has the potential to build even when not actually building.

But, Aristotle also attempts to make clear that actuality is prior to potentiality, in three ways: in definition, in time, and in substance. It should be obvious that temporally actuality must proceed potentiality, likewise with mere lexical definition, but how so in substance? This is due to the fact that 1) there must exist a substance in order for potency to exist at all, and 2) there must be actually existing capacities in the person in order for potency to create actualities from potentialities.²⁷ Consider the case of the builder. In order for someone to be a builder requires first, that there actually exists a person who might build. Secondly, it requires an actually existing ability for building, the capacity to build. Although an existing person may actually be, he or she might not be a builder without the capacity to build. It is not until both conditions are fulfilled that one can say

²⁷ IX, viii

that one *is* a builder. So not only does activity bring the potential to the actual, but actuality constrains the potential activity. It is this double movement which is characteristic of Aristotle's notion of being as becoming.²⁸

§15

It should be clear from the preceding discussion that the former sense of potential, that of motion (*kinesis*), is insufficient for several reasons that Aristotle lays down in his critique of the Megarians in *Metaphysics IX*, 3-4. It is only the latter sense which gives us a rich ontological understanding of being as becoming. That is to say, philosophy misses the point when discussing what is actual to the exclusion of what is potential, or taking about the way the thing is in exclusion of the ways that it can be said for something to be. Although actuality is prior to potentiality in an interesting way, both work to enrich the other. Aristotle lays down here a formula wherein potency and capabilities are ontologically rich, in the sense of activities that come to complete reality (*entelecheia*) toward a specific end (*telos*) through purposive human activity (*energeia*).

§16

Let me summarize here what I think Aristotle is up to in the middle books of the *Metaphysics*, and how I think it is important for contemporary philosophy. Being is said in four ways, according to the lexicon, as 1) accidental, 2) essential, 3) assertive, and 4)

²⁸ Heidegger can be read in very similar ways, and indeed he gives credit to Aristotle for a great deal of his intellectual development.

involving potentialities and actualities. One must be careful to avoid interpreting the fourth with the other three, since the first three are categorical, and the last is ontological. Likewise the investigation of being involves not only causes and first principles, but also the capacities and possibilities that are entailed by the thing being that thing it is. Although human bodies, trivially, operate in the mechanical level as the objects of physics, it is insufficient to analyze the human being as an object like any other. But in a more full sense, humans are agents, with capacities and desires, that act toward specific goals. It is the activity of the human being that creates the world in a very specific sense, taking sheer possibility and making it actual.

III

§17

So what implications can be drawn for such an analysis? This question can be perhaps best analyzed in the history of early twentieth century thought, but its historical antecedents run deep. It is the style of scientific philosophy, inaugurated by Descartes, which shows the first hostility to that of Aristotle. Descartes sought to revise Aristotelean metaphysics as practiced by the Scholastics, to bring philosophy in harmony with physical science. The inquiry into being must take a back seat to method, in this sense, and the active notion of being as becoming was replaced by an analysis of what is in terms of actuality. What is real, for Descartes, is only three things: the mental, the physical, and God. The world as it is can be described in terms of causal properties, and the human body is no different. The mind merely categorizes and instructs the body, in

this sense. But, it is possible that the mind should exist although nothing else exists, if deceived by some evil genius. In this sense, the human being can be removed entirely from context and still know (or perhaps, know falsely). But what this damages is the double movement of potentiality an actuality. Actuality must inform the potential, and the potential must be able to be made actual. But potentiality for Descartes has withered to a sense of logical possibility, not the rich ontological treatment that Aristotle gives it.

§18

Kant completed this turn. Kant's 'Copernicean revolution' characteristically inverted the field of epistemology, instead of viewing the mind as conforming to objects, he instead viewed objects as conforming to the mind.²⁹ By reversing the priority of the mind, Kant's philosophy no longer allowed objects to be as they are, in terms of their intrinsic capacities and potentialities. Instead of letting the objects be the objects they are, they became standardized and minimalized, to that which is garnered through receptivity of sense datum and tempered by the static categories. In so doing, Kant reverted to a categorical understanding of being, contrary to Aristotle's lessons. The human subject became an object like all others, to be studied through scientific means alone.

As I have argued elsewhere, the history of early analytic philosophy has been under the spell of Kant. The 'scientific' philosophy that denies the validity into questions of being, or indeed, blocking a more rich ontological understanding of humanity and the world of which humans are part. Thus, the turn back to Aristotle, whose legacy has been

²⁹ Critique of Pure Reason (B xvi)

under attack since the days of Descartes, now seems not only viable but more so important.

§19

Enter Russell. His brand of strict empiricism and reductionism was tempting to those for whom the scientific philosophy had bewitched. I have already talked about the errors that Aristotle diagnoses with contemporary phenomenism, and this brand of empiricism. The history of twentieth century philosophy, up to and including Quine, was enflamed with this error. Carnap, the thinker who brought this “scientific” modeled philosophy to its dialectical limit, thus argued against the metaphysical. It was to be replaced by the 'construction theory' based on Russell's logic, to the exclusion of the very things that separate human beings from the objects that surround them: value, politics, art, culture, and an understanding of being. Carnap, in so doing, moved logic beyond a tool for the understanding of language, to a method for dismissing a properly ontological understanding of the world. In using a normative tool to dismiss the normative, Carnap commits an error. But more so, the logic of the early twentieth century was viewed as scientific itself. It was considered a tool to access the former, causal notion of potentiality as a mere power. A more rich understanding of logic, language and thought was to return to philosophy in the work of such thinkers as Sosa, McDowell and Brandom.³⁰

³⁰ Due to lack of space I shall not recount their positions here. I shall save that for a later draft of this paper.

§20

The past thirty years of analytic philosophy have seen a resurgence of interest in Aristotle. Perhaps he has a great deal to offer post-positivist thinkers, insofar as (according to my interpretation) he has worked out the errors that were to be committed some two thousand years before they were.

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