

Capacities: their Origins and Behaviours

Metaphysics Θ 5

A Return to Topic?

- * Ross (1924 vol 2, 248-9): ‘. . .chs. 3 and 4 on the Megarian heresy have been something of a digression.’
- * One general question: what is the relation of this chapter, if any, to the previous two chapters?
 - * Ross is right at least to this extent:
 - * Aristotle now revisits and indeed presses into service a distinction made in Θ 2 but ignored Θ in 3-4, namely the distinction between rational and non-rational powers.
 - * He similarly picks up on a point about paired capacities made there, teasing out a further implication.

The Main Claims of Θ 5

- * 1047b21: Some capacities are innate, some not; those which are not, which come into existence by habit or learning, require prior practice.
- * 1047b35: Non-rational capacities accrue of necessity when active powers are paired in suitable circumstances with their correlative passive powers.
- * 1048a7: This necessity does not obtain in the case of rational capacities.
- * 1048a21: One cannot simultaneously effect contraries, even if one has a (rational) power to effect either of them indifferently.

Capacities and their Origins

- * All capacities being either innate, like perception, or [acquired] by habit, like the capacity of flute playing, or by learning, like the capacity pertaining to the crafts, it is necessary in some cases to have prior practice, however many [are acquired] by habit or reason, but it is not necessary for those not of this sort as well as for those for being affected.
- * Ἀπασῶν δὲ τῶν δυνάμεων οὐσῶν τῶν μὲν συγγενῶν οἷον τῶν αἰσθήσεων, τῶν δὲ ἔθει οἷον τῆς τοῦ αὐλεῖν, τῶν δὲ μαθήσει οἷον τῆς τῶν τεχνῶν, τὰς μὲν ἀνάγκη προενεργήσαντας ἔχειν, ὅσαι ἔθει καὶ λόγῳ, τὰς δὲ μὴ τοιαύτας καὶ τὰς ἐπὶ τοῦ πάσχειν οὐκ ἀνάγκη. (1047b31-35)

Three into Two

- * There first appears a three-fold distinction, into powers:
 - * had innately, or congenitally
 - * acquired by habit
 - * acquired by learning
- * This then folds into a bi-partite distinction:
 - * those innate (not acquired)
 - * the acquired (whether by habit or learning).
- * The acquired, however acquired, require prior practice (προενεργήσαντας)
- * To the non-acquired one may then add passive powers, neither of which require prior practice.

Prior Practice?

- * There seems to be something insalubrious about this requirement: ‘prior practice’ (προενεργήσαντας) seems to involve ‘prior’ (προ-) activity or actualizing (ενεργέω).
- * To put a point on it: to actualize or activate a power or capacity, one must possess the power or capacity.
 - * I, lacking the power to levitate, or, for that matter, to speak Russian, cannot practice doing so in advance, in the second case at least not without some other prior actuality.
 - * The easy fake-it-‘till-you-make-it principle is not uncontroversially applied.
 - * This is especially so—looking somewhat forward—given the priority of actuality.

An Aristotelian Response?

* *EN* ii 4 (1105a17-b1)

- * The question might be asked, what we mean by saying that we must become just by doing just acts, and temperate by doing temperate acts; for if men do just and temperate acts, they are already just and temperate, exactly as, if they do [20] what is grammatical or musical they are proficient in grammar and music.
- * Or is this not true even of the arts? It is possible to do something grammatical either by chance or under the guidance of another. A man will be proficient in grammar, then, only when he has both done something grammatical and done it grammatically; and this means doing it in accordance with the grammatical [25] knowledge in himself.
- * Again, the case of the arts and that of the excellences are not similar; for the products of the arts have their goodness in themselves, so that it is enough that they should have a certain character, but if the acts that are in accordance with the excellences have themselves a certain character it does not follow that they are done [30] justly or temperately. The agent also must be in a certain condition when he does them; in the first place he must have knowledge, secondly he must choose the acts, and choose them for their own sakes, and thirdly his action must proceed from a [1105b1] firm and unchangeable character.

Genetic vs. Principled Approaches

- * Genetic: one tells a story the plausibility of which derives from its familiarity.
 - * Little Dinu sat down at the keyboard, pressed middle C when instructed, and then away. . .
- * Principled: one explains how the exercise of a capacity predates its possession, or one explains why the possession of one capacity develops from the exercise of a different capacity.
 - * This, in a humble way, might induce us to rethink what προενεργέω means.
 - * In any event, there seems a problem here: how, in general, can I exercise a capacity in advance of possessing it?

A Heuristic Argument

1. Nec., one makes actual a capacity Δ only if (a) one possesses Δ or (b) Δ is a passive capacity to which one is categorially paired.
2. Hence, if one does not possess a capacity Δ , one cannot make Δ actual unless it is a passive capacity to which one is categorially paired.
3. At least some non-innate capacities are active capacities (e.g. playing the piano).
4. One acquires a non-innate active capacity Δ only if one can actualizes Δ in advance.
5. Yet one cannot actualize a capacity Δ before one has acquired it.
6. Hence, one cannot acquire any non-innate active capacity.
7. Never the less, we do possess some active capacities non-innately (witness Dinu).
8. Hence, we have acquired some non-innate capacities that we cannot acquire.

A Principled Response

- * Aristotle does not require that one possessing a non-innate capacity Δ will actualized Δ before having acquired Δ .
- * Rather, one must have been active in advance of its acquisition.
 - * Here, then, one may have actualized an innate capacity Δ^* by way of coming to acquire Δ , where Δ^* needed no prior acquisition.
 - * So, e.g., one can actualize one's innate capacity to move one's fingers in front of acquiring the capacity to play the piano.
 - * Or, again, one can exercise one's innate rational capacity to perceive in advance of coming to construct geometrical proofs.
- * There seems to be some reason to be precise here, since Aristotle will come to insist rather strongly on the priority of actuality to potentiality along several dimensions.

Rational Capacities Redux

- * For all these [scil. the non-rational potentialities] are all productive of one thing, but those [scil. the rational capacities] produce contrary effects, so that they would produce contrary effects at the same time; but this is impossible. It is necessary, then, that something else is controlling; I mean by this, desire or decision. For whichever of these one desires authoritatively [or in a controlling manner], this one will do whenever one is so as to be able and draws near what is affected. Consequently, everything which has a rational potentiality, when it desires that for which it has a potentiality and in the circumstances in which it has it, must do this.
- * αὐται μὲν γὰρ πάσαι μία ἐνὸς ποιητική, ἐκείναι δὲ τῶν ἐναντίων, ὥστε ἅμα ποιήσῃ τὰ ἐναντία· τοῦτο δὲ ἀδύνατον. ἀνάγκη ἄρα ἕτερόν τι εἶναι τὸ κύριον· λέγω δὲ τοῦτο ὄρεξιν ἢ προαίρεσιν. ὁποτέρου γὰρ ἂν ὀρέγηται κυρίως, τοῦτο ποιήσῃ ὅταν ὡς δύναται ὑπάρχη καὶ πλησιάζῃ τῷ παθητικῷ· ὥστε τὸ δυνατόν κατὰ λόγον ἅπαν ἀνάγκη, ὅταν ὀρέγηται οὐ ἔχει τὴν δύναμιν καὶ ὡς ἔχει, τοῦτο ποιεῖν. (*Met.* 1048a8-14).

Something Else Controlling

1. Were there not something else controlling (ἕτερόν τι εἶναι τὸ κύριον), rational capacities would proceed as do one-way capacities.
2. One way capacities eventuate in actuality of necessity whenever a paired passive power is present to an actualizing condition. [The combustible will ignite when present to fire.]
3. So, were there not something else controlling, rational capacities would eventuate in actuality of necessity whenever a paired passive power were present to them.
4. Rational capacities are two-way capacities.
5. Two-way capacities simultaneously have contrary passive powers present to them.
6. So, were there not something else controlling, rational capacities would eventuate simultaneously in contrary actualisations. [One would go left and go right simultaneously.]
7. That's impossible.
8. So, in the case of rational powers, there is something else controlling (ἕτερόν τι εἶναι τὸ κύριον).

Something Else?

- * It is necessary, then, that what is authoritative [or controlling] is something else. I mean by this: desire or decision. For whichever of these one desires authoritatively [or in a controlling manner], this one will do whenever is so as to be able and draws near what is affected.
- * ἀνάγκη ἄρα ἕτερόν τι εἶναι τὸ κύριον· λέγω δὲ τοῦτο ὄρεξιν ἢ προαίρεσιν. ὁποτέρου γὰρ ἂν ὀρέγῃται κυρίως, τοῦτο ποιήσῃ ὅταν ὡς δύναται ὑπάρχη καὶ πλησιάσῃ τῷ παθητικῷ.

Two Claims

- * Control Necessity (CN): The (narrowly individuated) capacity itself cannot be controlling; there must be something else.
 - * This something else is desire (ὄρεξις) or decision (προαίρεσις).
- * Control Sufficiency (CS): This something else *is* controlling; there is no further factor required or indeed permissible.
 - * This is not stated or entailed, though it is evidently implied by Aristotle's diction.

CN

- * Control Necessity (CN): The (narrowly individuated) capacity itself cannot be controlling; there must be something else.
- * This something else is desire or decision.
- * So much evidently presupposes some version, however mild, of the Principle of Sufficient Reason.
- * Or, more narrowly, of the causal priority of actuality over potentiality, to the effect that only something in actuality can make it the case that what is potentially ϕ comes to be actually ϕ .
- * So much does not yet, however, require the Principle of Causal Synonymy: only what is actually ϕ can make what is potentially ϕ in actuality.
- * $\square[(\text{if } x \text{ is or has } \Delta\phi \ \& \ x \text{ becomes } E\phi) \rightarrow ((\exists y) (Ey\phi \ \& \ \Pi yx\phi))]$

CS

- * Control Sufficiency (CS): This something else *is* controlling; there is no further factor required or indeed permissible.
- * Necessarily, if an agent and what is to be affected are suitably disposed and related in the right way, then if the agent decides, both the action and effect will accrue.
 - * If S decides that x will be ϕ , then when S and x are suitably disposed to one another and related in the right way, x will be ϕ .
 - * This too will need to be narrowly specified.

A Tension between CN and CS?

- * CN evidently rests upon some version of the PSR or the causal priority of the actual over the potential.
- * As perfectly general, these principles seem to apply to desire (ὄρεξις) or decision (προαίρεσις).
- * How, then, do they retain their status as authoritative (or controlling; κύριον)?
 - * After all, a move from not deciding to deciding seems precisely a move from potentially deciding to actually deciding.