

Actuality and Potentiality

Aristotle's *Metaphysics* Θ

Starting Late

- * Let us start late, with the French priest and scientist Pierre Gassendi (1592-1655).
- * When confronted with Aristotle's account of change:
 - * 'Motion (*kinêsis*) is the actuality (*entelecheia*) of what is in potentiality *qua* such' (ἡ τοῦ δυνάμει ὄντος ἐντελέχεια, ἣ τοιοῦτον, κίνησις ἐστίν; *Physics* iii 1, 201a10-11)
- * Gassendi grew positively dyspeptic:
 - * Great God! Is there any stomach strong enough to digest that? The explanation of a familiar thing was requested, but this is so complicated that nothing is clear anymore ... The need for definitions of the words in the definitions will go on *ad infinitum* (Gassendi, *Exercises against the Aristotelians* [1624], II, 2, 4)

Aristotle's Deployment

- * Gassendi has a point: Aristotle deploys two obscure terms, one of which he simply made up (*entelecheia*, ἐντελέχεια), to explicate something familiar, viz. change.
- * So, unless these technical terms are clear, Aristotle's definition is simply the dodge of a deluded obscurantist.
- * What, after all, are we to make of this made-up word *entelecheia* (ἐντελέχεια)?
 - * It won't help to say that in many cases it's more or less synonymous with another word, *energeia* (ἐνέργεια).
 - * After all, Aristotle made up that one too.
 - * Worse, after making it up, he uses it in more than one way, sometimes, as we have seen, using it to *define* change (κίνησις), but in other places, evidently including in *Metaphysics* Θ, *contrastively* with change (κίνησις), prompting still more dyspepsia:
 - * 'I have not seen any good explanation of why Aristotle should have introduced a new word of his own, and then used it in the two apparently very different ways, which force translators into different renderings in each case. Certainly, it can be confusing.' —Bostock (2000, 150)
- * All is not lost: this is the topic of *Metaphysics* Θ.

Three Questions about Θ

- * What is its relation to the rest of the *Metaphysics*?
- * Why does it show up where it does?
- * What is its main concern?
 - * Why should this concern be our concern?
- * What are its main divisions?
 - * Are these divisions sensible divisions?

The Place of Θ in the *Metaphysics* (I)

- * *Metaphysics* Θ follows an intensive analysis of primary being (*ousia*) conducted in E, Z, and H.
- * These investigations are *categorical*: they pursue, in line with the announcement of a science of being *qua* being in *Metaphysics* Γ , a programme of determining what features all beings (*onta*), simply as beings, and not as beings of this or that sort, have or must have.
- * Evidently, one thing all beings have in common is that they be suitably related to primary being, which Aristotle denominates as *ousia*, or *protê ousia*.
- * ‘Indeed, what was sought of old and is sought at present and always, and what is always a matter of difficulty, namely what is being? (*ti to on*) is this: what is being [or substance]? (*tis hê ousia*) (*Met.* 1028b2-4).

The Place of Θ in the *Metaphysics* (II)

- * Being, spoken of unqualifiedly, is spoken of in many ways, (i) one of which was the co-incidental, (ii) another was as true (with non-being as the false), and beyond these there are (iii) the schemes of the categories (e.g. what something is, quality, quantity, place, time, and if anything signifies something else in this sort of way); and further beyond all these (iv) as in potentiality and actuality. (*Met.* E 2, 1026a33–b2).
- * Ἀλλ' ἐπεὶ τὸ ὄν τὸ ἀπλῶς λεγόμενον λέγεται πολλαχῶς, ὧν ἓν μὲν ἦν τὸ κατὰ συμβεβηκός, ἕτερον δὲ τὸ ὡς ἀληθές, καὶ τὸ μὴ ὄν ὡς τὸ ψεῦδος, παρὰ ταῦτα δ' ἐστὶ τὰ σχήματα τῆς κατηγορίας (οἷον τὸ μὲν τί, τὸ δὲ ποιόν, τὸ δὲ ποσόν, τὸ δὲ πού, τὸ δὲ ποτέ, καὶ εἴ τι ἄλλο σημαίνει τὸν τρόπον τοῦτον), ἔτι παρὰ ταῦτα πάντα τὸ δυνάμει καὶ ἐνεργείᾳ.

The Place of Θ in the *Metaphysics* (III)

- * We have been seeking the principles and causes (*archai* and *aitia*) of beings, just in so far as they are beings.
- * We think that this involves determining the *per se* features of being; and we further think this involves (at least) the following:
 - * Beings are as beings logically circumscribed.
 - * *Metaphysics* Γ : All beings *qua* beings are subject to the PNC.
 - * *Metaphysics* Z and H : Beings are as beings categorially delineated; as a consequence, all beings in non-primary categories have a form of essential dependence on primary being.
 - * *Metaphysics* Θ : Beings are as beings modally enmeshed.
 - * On this approach, then, *Metaphysics* Θ is simply carrying out the task set in *Metaphysics* Γ , which in turn engages the course of aporiae set in *Metaphysics* B .

Modal Enmeshment

- * The picture, then, is this:
 - * All being arrives swaddled in modality.
 - * So, it is not possible for there to be some being, some *on*, which is such that it is not in actuality or in potentiality.
 - * All beings, simply as beings, are beings either in actuality or potentiality.
 - * So, looked at predicatively, for any arbitrary being (any *on*), we can know of it that it is for some range of ϕ , ϕ in actuality or ϕ in potentiality.
 - * We should want to know, then, in the conduct of first philosophy, what it is for a being, any being, just as a being, to be ϕ in *actuality* or ϕ in *potentiality*.
 - * This is the topic of *Metaphysics* Θ.

The Main Concern of Θ

- * To learn of modal enmeshment, we must learn of modality.
- * The modalities of being are potentiality and actuality.
- * If what we have said so far is true, this is reasonable—and necessary for discharging our inquiry into being *qua* being.