

Beere, Jonathan. *Doing and Being: An interpretation of Aristotle's Metaphysics Theta*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009, ISBN: 978-0-19-920670-4, 384 p.

The purpose of *Being and Doing: An Interpretation of Aristotle's Metaphysics Theta* is to explain the meaning and philosophical significance of Aristotle's claim that *energeia* has priority in being over capacity (*dynamis*). To this end, Beere argues that Aristotle had one single consistent concept in mind, although modern translations render 'energeia' in some contexts as 'activity' (e.g. pleasure is unimpeded activity, i.e. *energeia*) and in some other different contexts as 'actuality' (the infinite is not in actuality, i.e. *energeia*), as if the term stood for two different excluding concepts.

The book is structured as a philosophical study and commentary of book *Theta* of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. It is a commentary insofar as it explains and discusses one by one each chapter of *Metaphysics Theta*. It is a philosophical study insofar as it analyzes with a critical and historically charitable eye each concept and argument put forward by Aristotle. However, Beere does not hesitate to make philological points of philosophical relevance and to pursue Metaphysical issues beyond *Metaphysics Theta* and the *Metaphysics* into other areas of the Aristotelian *corpus*.

The book is divided into four parts and fourteen chapters devoted to the relationship between capacities and change (parts I and II/*Metaphysics Theta* 1 to 5), the concepts of being-in-capacity and being-in-*energeia* (part III/*Metaphysics Theta* 6 and 7), the priority of *energeia* over capacity, and the impact Aristotle's notion of *energeia* has on his conception of the good and bad (part IV/*Metaphysics Theta* 7 to 9).

In part I, *The Significance of Metaphysics Theta*, Beere reconstructs the historical background to *Metaphysics Theta*. He successfully shows that Plato's Battle of Gods and Giants in the *Sophist* is the historical antecedent to Aristotle's discussion on *energeia*.

According to Beere, one of the merits of *Metaphysics Theta* lies in superseding Plato by giving causal powers a prominent role in *Metaphysics* and *Philosophy*.

Part II, *Powers for action and Passion*, studies the Greek term ‘power’ (*dynamis*), in order to elucidate its philosophical sense in Aristotle. Beere provides seven relevant features a power has according to Aristotle:

(i) A power is inextricably connected to the notion of change (*kinêsis*) and consists in a capacity to change. (ii) Contrary to our modern intuitions, a power is a quality and is not, strictly speaking, a trigger of change, but a capacity to bring about a change in another thing or oneself as another thing.

(iii) It may appear that powers come in correlative pairs, e.g. the doctor’s power to heal and the patient’s power to be healed. However, the change a passive power is the causal basis of, is the very same change the correlative active power is the causal basis for.

(iv) Powers are for the sake of an end. Rational powers, in particular, are powers for either of two possible opposite results, and their agents do not possess *per se* the property they produce, though they come to have that property by means of understanding.

(v) A power, insofar it is an intrinsic property and a quality, is to be distinguished from both the state of affairs that occurs when it operates and the circumstances that determine its possibility of operating. Beere explains that this distinction allows Aristotle to solve the paradox imposed by the Megaric argument, which claims that: x cannot Φ when it is not Φ -ing because it lacks then the power to Φ ; x can Φ only when x is engaging in Φ -ing, that is to say, when all the necessary conditions for Φ -ing are met and the process of Φ -ing is going on.

The distinction between power, state of affairs, and circumstances prompts, in turn, two further distinctions: First, (vi) a distinction between (a) ‘being able’ and (b) ‘possibility’. (a) ‘ x being able to Φ ’ means that if the *energeia* for which x is said to have the capacity for belongs to it, nothing impossible (i.e. incompatible with necessary truths)

will follow. In contrast, 'x being possible to Φ ' simply means that x need not be realized. Beere argues that given this distinction and given that Aristotle doesn't take 'necessarily' and 'not possible' to be equivalent, he can consistently accept an inference from 'this is always so' to 'that is necessary so', but not an inference from 'this is not ever so' to 'this is necessarily not so'.

The second distinction prompted by the distinction between power, state of affairs, and circumstances is (vii) a distinction between (a) innate non-rational powers and (b) non-innate rational powers such that: (a) an innate non-rational power to Φ does not need to be acquired by being active in Φ -ing in advance. Since an innate power is a power to bring about one result, it is exercised when what can act and what can be acted on meet in the appropriate way, and these condition is sufficient for the innate power to act. (b) A non-innate rational power to Φ , on the contrary, is acquired by being actively involved in Φ -ing in advance and involves habit, or rationality, or learning because it is a power of opposite results. In this case, the power itself does not determine which of the two opposite outcomes will result. It is a principle of motion endowed with knowledge and activated by desire that determines which of the two opposite outcomes will result. A feature common to both innate non-rational powers and non-innate rational powers is that none of them is a cause on its own account. Powers are simply involved in causation and need external circumstances in order to be exercised.

Part III, *Being-in-energeia and Being-in-capacity*, elucidates the complementary concepts of *energeia* and capacity. Beere points out that '*energeia*' is not registered before Aristotle and is a technical term etymologically related to the Greek adjective *energōs* (at work), which is derivative from *ergon* (work). Similarly, the concept *energeia* itself had no antecedent before Aristotle. What is more, *energeia* has no modern equivalent concept or composite of modern concepts. Beere suggests to stick to the etymology of the term and understand the concept as 'do something', i.e. as the exercise of a capacity to do something, more specifically, as the doing itself involved in the exercise of a capacity.

A further relevant feature of the term '*energeia*' is that it has two syntactic constructions: (a) It is either constructed with 'to be', in which case it is usually taken to mean actuality and to contrast with potentiality, or (b) it is used as a noun that means activity (something complete at any instant it occurs) in contrast to change (something incomplete at any instant it occurs). Additionally, *energeia* is to be distinguished not only from change, but also from actuality. Beere argues that in Aristotle's view change can neither be an *energeia* nor an actuality. Although *energeia* for Aristotle involves doing something and fulfilling a function (e.g. building a house), it does not necessarily involve change, for in some cases the fulfilling of a function is not an action (e.g. using knowledge to understand, i.e. contemplation). Nor can being in *energeia* for Aristotle be being in actuality, because things are in some cases actually active, while in some other cases they are potentially active or actually inactive. Consequently, *energeia* is closer to the notion of activity than to the modal notion of actuality.

Beere also thinks that it is misleading to associate the correlates 'being-in-capacity and being-in-*energeia*' to the correlates 'possibility and actuality'. The reason for that is that Aristotle had not in view propositions and truth bearers of (actual or possible) states of affairs, which is what possibility and actuality suggest. Being-in-capacity for Aristotle is rather a notion used to explain changes, and *energeia* is the complement of being-in-capacity in the sense that for an *x* to be in capacity F, is to specify a certain way of being F, such that *x* has the relevant capacities for being F, and those capacities are not being exercised.

A further reason why Beere thinks it is misleading to associate Aristotle's notion of *energeia* with actuality is that actuality nowadays plays a role in discussions of modality. 'Actuality' means in current English 'what is the case', and is contrasted with what is not the case but is possible. For Aristotle, however, *energeia* does not contrast with 'not actuality being F', i.e. 'not in fact being F', but with *dynamis*, which in the *corpus aristotelicum* is not a word for possibility. Beere concludes that 'actuality' is a

terribly misleading translation of '*energeia*', but accepts it as the best available English translation.

At this point one may expect Beere to reconstruct Aristotle's definition of *energeia*. Yet, he does not do that and even dissuades the reader from doing so. The fact is that Aristotle did not think such definition could be provided in view of the fact that there is not a single definite feature all cases of *energeia* have in common. What makes up the concept of *energeia* is rather a relationship of analogy to a paradigmatic case, which is the exercise of an active power, e.g. the art of house-building. In the particular case of the house-builder's power to build a house, (a) being-in-capacity is merely to have the power to engage in the *energeia* that consists in building a house, while (b) being in *energeia* is to have and be exercising the capacity to build a house. The *energeia* is the exercise of the capacity of house-building, and in this case it happens to coincide with turning something into a house and to involve the change of some material and not a change in the agent. In contrast, in analogical cases such as walking, the end of the *energeia* (i.e. waking) is just the *energeia* itself (i.e. waking itself) so that the *energeia* is its own end and therefore does not involve a change. This kind of disanalogy makes impossible to provide a single definition of *energeia*.

Part III closes with a clarification of what makes an *x* be said to be in capacity F. At first blush two answers are possible: either constituents make an *x* said to be-in-capacity F, or it is processes that make an *x* said to be-in-capacity F. According to Beere, Aristotle favours processes. Beere points out that for Aristotle (i) all processes of generation derive from basic processes involving the basic elements earth, air, fire, and water, (ii) these basic elements are never said to be anything bodily in capacity, (iii) the notion of being in capacity only applies to things that change, and (iv) there are two fundamental and irreducible classes of beings in capacity: (a) Things that have an external principle of genesis (i.e. substances and changes produced by a craft) and (b) things that have an internal principle of genesis (i.e. natural changes). (a) In the case of things that have an external principle of genesis, an *x* is in capacity F, if and only if, if a

properly qualified artisan desires to make x F, then, if nothing external to x prevents, x becomes F. (b) In the case of things that have an internal principle of genesis, x is in capacity F through itself provided nothing external interferes, i.e. x is in capacity F if and only if x is such that if nothing interferes x will be F. For instance, a human being in capacity is the last stage in the generation of a human being after which the rest happens on its own. That is to say, a human being in capacity is the stage at which there is some material that lacks the human form but it is suitable for becoming a human being. In both cases, that of things that have an internal principle of genesis and that of things that have an external principle of genesis, an F in capacity is the starting point of the change that results in an F in *energeia*.

Part IV finally explains what it means, according to Aristotle, for *energeia* to be prior and superior to capacity. Beere starts by explaining the relationships between matter, change, and being-in-capacity. For Aristotle the matter of a composite substance is not what the composite is, it is just its material aspect. That aspect can be said to be a qualitative property in so far as it is properly specified by an adjective. This is exactly what the adjective *that-en* (*ekeininion*)—which has the same suffix as the Greek adjective wooden (*hylon*)—expresses. The connection between being *that-en* and being-in-capacity is the following: if y is x -en, then not only is y made of x but x is in capacity y , and x 's being in capacity y simply means that x is not in *energeia* y . For x to be in capacity y is for x to be able itself to become y , not for something that may be produced out of x to be able to become y . So for x to be in capacity y , it must be already ready to become y and not be in need of further transformation. It follows from this that the notion of being in capacity is not transitive: From x 's being-in-capacity y and y 's being-in-capacity z does not follow that x is in capacity z .

Energeia has priority over capacity in three different respects: (1) account, (2) time, and (3) being. (1) x is prior to y in account if the account of x does not involve the account of y , but the account of y involves the account of x . Priority in account obviously involves priority in knowledge. (2) Priority in time and genesis is not meant relative to

any point in time but to a process of genesis. Being F in *energeia* is temporally prior to being F in capacity not in the sense that each thing that is in capacity F was itself previously F in *energeia*, but in the sense that some case of being in *energeia* F precedes being in capacity F. This amounts to ontological dependence of capacity in *energeia* and ontological priority of *energeia* over capacity.

The reason *energeia* precedes capacity is that *energeia* determines capacity even if in a process of change *energeia* comes in sequential order after capacity and even if stages that are prior in being occur later in the process of change. That is so because it is *energeia* that determines the previous stages of the process and the process itself. In this interpretation, it is impossible that there be something that is in capacity φ -ing without there being something that is engaged in φ -ing. Capacities are forward looking, they are directed to a subsequent activity and activities are not directed to capacities. For that reason what is φ -ing determines what is able to φ and not vice versa. It follows that all capacities are for the sake of their corresponding *energeiai*, *energeiai* are posterior in genesis to their capacities, and what is posterior in genesis must be prior in being.

An interesting point Beere emphasizes is that the interaction of a capacity with its environment constitutes some resistant to its exercise. That makes the exercise of a capacity laborious and dooms the capacity to wear out. In Aristotle's view, capacities necessarily wear out. However, Aristotle also thinks that it is impossible for eternal things to perish, for their perishing would contradict a necessary truth. Aristotle in fact thinks that whatever is responsible (*aition*) for there being eternal things cannot be contingent, it must be necessarily responsible for there being eternal things, and therefore eternal things must necessarily be eternal. For this reason, eternal moving things never exercise a capacity to move (even if they are in capacity moving from A to B before doing so in *energeia*). And since eternal moving things do not have a capacity, they cannot wear out. Indeed, if *per impossible* there were a capacity that is necessarily exercised, it would be identical with its own *energeia* and there would not be a distinction between capacity and *energeia*.

The book finishes with an inquiry on the consequences Aristotle's argument for the superiority of *energeia* has on his understanding of goodness and the bad itself. Aristotle does not think the bad itself is something over and above bad things, for at the level of principles (i.e. eternal things) there is nothing either bad, erring, or corrupted. For this reason, *energeiai* are good *per se* and the bad is not prior but posterior in nature to the capacity that produces it.

One may here detect a possible contradiction in Aristotle's theory. Aristotle had concluded (*Theta* 8) that *energeia* is prior in being to capacity, and (*Theta* 9) that there are bad things that have capacities that are for the sake of bad *energeia*, so that bad *energeia* is posterior in generation and prior in being. Yet, this appears to contradict his definition of badness, according to which the bad is posterior in being to capacity. The contradiction dissolves as soon as one qualifies the assumption that every capacity straightforwardly is for the sake of the corresponding *energeia*. Rational powers and excellent capacities are of opposites and for that reason they can be exercised as to bring about their proper end provided they are correctly exercised. Yet, when they are misused, they can be exercised so as to bring about another end. The proper end of medicine and its capacity, for instance, is being healthy. Nevertheless medicine can be used to make people sick. This use, however, does not qualify medicine as a bad thing because it is external factors (e.g. defectiveness of the capacity itself, or some other natures) that prevent medicine from achieving its end. Nature itself, contrary to rational powers, simply cannot be misused so as to bring about a result contrary to its proper end. One may still argue against Aristotle that some capacities are for the sake of a bad end (e.g. counterfeit money, the iron maiden) and are therefore straightforwardly bad. One may even argue that vices are capacities. According to Beere, Aristotle can counter argue that in the case of bad things the capacity to do bad depends on the capacity to acquire a good capacity, and therefore badness is posterior in nature to a capacity that is for the sake of something good. As for vices, Aristotle can claim that the capacity to develop into a

vicious or virtuous person is itself posterior to virtuous activity. Consequently, all kind of vicious activity is posterior to both virtuous activity and the capacity for virtuous activity.

This book stands out for its philosophical engagement and historical awareness, and it goes without saying that it unquestionable supersedes the existing literature on the topic, e.g. Charlotte Witt's *Ways of Being: Potentiality and Actuality In Aristotle's Metaphysics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), and complements Stephen Makin's commentary *Aristotle Metaphysics Book Theta* (Oxford: Oxford Clarendon Press, 2006). It should also be remarked that Beere's contribution is not limited to the interpretation of *Metaphysics Theta*. His analysis and conclusions have a bearing on the whole of the *Metaphysics* and many areas of the Aristotelian *corpus* where the notions of *energeia*, power, and being-in-capacity play a role. Beere's elucidation of Aristotle's theory of *energeia* in *Metaphysics Theta* invites us to rethink Aristotle's Metaphysical notions of matter and form, as well as Aristotle's theory of human action and responsibility, not to mention aspects of his *Physics*, *Biology*, and theory of elements. This book is not only a must for specialists in Ancient Philosophy, but for all those interested in the *Metaphysics* of Powers, an issue that has lately become dominant in the current Philosophical milieu and onto which Aristotle can shed a refreshing light.

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