

# ARISTOTLE, HEIDEGGER, AND THE MEGARIANS

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**Abstract.** This paper examines Aristotle’s analysis of unenacted capacities to show the role they play in his discovery of the concept of actuality. I first argue that Aristotle begins *Metaphysics IX* by focusing on active and passive capacities, after which I discuss Aristotle’s confrontation with the Megarians, the philosophers who maintain that a capacity is present only insofar as it is being enacted. Using Heidegger’s interpretation as a guide, I show that Aristotle’s rejection of the Megarian position leads him to propose that presence cannot be confined to activity. I also argue that this provides the context for Aristotle to realize that the relation between capacity and activity can be generalized as the relation between two ways of being.

**Keywords:** Aristotle; Heidegger; capacity; activity; potentiality; actuality

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The goal of this paper is to examine Aristotle’s analysis of unenacted capacities to show the role they play in his discovery of the concept of actuality. I first argue that Aristotle begins *Metaphysics IX* with a discussion of active and passive capacities and that he understands activity as their mutual enactment. I then examine Aristotle’s confrontation with the Megarians, the philosophers according to whom a capacity is present only in the course of an activity. I show that Aristotle’s rejection of the Megarian position leads him to widen the scope of presence to incorporate inactivity as a way of being present and that this provides the context for Aristotle to realize that the relation between capacity and activity can be conceptualized as the two ways in which *anything* can be said to exist.

The paper opens with an analysis of what Aristotle calls the “less useful” senses of δύνανμις and ἐνέργεια, which I translate as “capacity” and “activity.” I show that Aristotle understands capacity as the enabling condition of an action or passion and activity as the mutual enactment of these capacities. I then examine the

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view held by the Megarians, the philosophers who maintain that a capacity exists only insofar as it is being enacted, that is to say, only in the course of an activity. My discussion here relies heavily on Heidegger's interpretation of *Metaphysics* IX. In Heidegger's view, the Megarians maintain that a capacity is present if it is enacted, whereas Aristotle maintains that a capacity is present if it is possessed (according to Aristotle, for example, a builder does not cease to be a builder while resting). This "having," Heidegger argues, is a form of being present, even though it is a form of being present that the Megarians fail to realize.

Aristotle's confrontation with the Megarian philosophers also includes a discussion of the ontological status of perception. Here, too, there is an agent (the perceptible object) and a patient (the perceiver). And just as the builder retains his capacity to build while resting, the perceptible object retains its capacity to act even during inactivity, that is to say, even when unperceived. Once again, then, this demonstrates the necessity for the kind of presence that need not be confined to activity, the kind of presence that the Megarians deny is possible.

The final objective of the paper is to use the interpretations advanced by Heidegger and Stephen Menn to discuss Aristotle's transition from the activity sense of ἐνέργεια to the actuality sense of the term. As we shall see, when the question concerning the ontological status of unenacted capacities forces Aristotle to widen the scope of presence to incorporate inactivity as a way of being present, Aristotle comes to realize that the relation that obtains between capacity and activity can be generalized as the ways in which *anything* can be said to exist. Namely, some things are said to exist in the manner of capacity, whereas others are said to exist in the manner of activity. What Aristotle comes to realize, I will argue, is that the relation between activity and its enabling condition can be generalized into any kind of presence and its enabling condition, the latter of which correspond to the two ways of being, which Heidegger and Menn identify specifically as an Aristotelian discovery.

## 2. CAPACITY AND ACTIVITY

The central books of the *Metaphysics* treat the four general senses of being,<sup>1</sup> and the ninth book of this work is devoted to an analysis of being in the manner of δύναμις and ἐνέργεια.<sup>2</sup> These terms are often translated as potentiality and actuality, but since their meaning is precisely what is at stake, let us leave them untranslated for now. In *Metaphysics* IX, Aristotle first examines what he calls the

<sup>1</sup> The four general senses of being are (i) accidental being, (ii) being as said of the categories, (iii) being in the sense of δύναμις and ἐνέργεια, and (iv) being as truth; see, for example, *Metaphysics* V.7, 1017a7–1017b9 and VI.2, 1026a33–1026b2. See also Brentano, *On the Several Senses of Being in Aristotle*, 6–8/3–5, and Heidegger, GA 33: 11–18/8–14 (in quoting Brentano and Heidegger, I cite the page numbers of the German text followed by the page numbers of the English translation).

<sup>2</sup> Note, however, that being as truth makes a reappearance at the end of *Metaphysics* IX. It is usually maintained that while *Metaphysics* VI.4 treats the truth of composites, *Metaphysics* IX.10 treats the truth of simples. For Heidegger's interpretation of Aristotle's account of truth, see especially GA 31: 73–109/51–76.

“kinetic” senses of δύναμις and ἐνέργεια, adding that these are “not the most useful” (οὐ χρησιμωτάτη) for our present purposes, because our chief goal is to acquire an understanding of the δύναμις and ἐνέργεια that “extend further than the mere sphere of motion” (*Met.* IX.1, 1045b36–1046a2).<sup>3</sup> While commentators seldom agree on the interpretation of book IX,<sup>4</sup> they agree minimally that Aristotle is trying to distinguish between the δύναμις and ἐνέργεια in respect of motion and the δύναμις and ἐνέργεια that extend further, whatever these expressions may turn out to mean. More precisely, most commentators maintain that the Aristotelian text involves a distinction between (i) the δύναμις in respect of motion, (ii) the ἐνέργεια in respect of motion, (iii) the δύναμις that extends further, and (iv) the ἐνέργεια that extends further.<sup>5</sup> In a seminal paper that I think contains many important insights, Stephen Menn refers to (i) as “capacity,” (ii) as “activity,” (iii) as “potentiality,” and (iv) as “actuality” (“The Origins of Aristotle’s Concept of Ἐνέργεια: Ἐνέργεια and Δύναμις,” henceforth “Origins”). Because I will also adopt this terminology, it is important for us to gain a precise understanding of these terms.

Let us begin our analysis with a discussion of capacity and activity. In a nutshell, Aristotle explains capacity as the enabling condition (ἀρχή) of an action or of a passion and activity as the mutual enactment of these two capacities.<sup>6</sup> But why does Aristotle begin by examining the δύναμις pertaining to the categories of action and passion? According to Stephen Menn, it is this kind of δύναμις that Aristotle inherits from past philosophers, and especially from Plato (“Origins,” 104–5). What is at issue here are the one hand the capacity to do and on the other hand the capacity to suffer, which correspond, as the Stranger in the *Sophist* puts it, to the δύναμις εἴτ’ εἰς τὸ ποιεῖν εἴτ’ εἰς τὸ παθεῖν (247d8–e1).<sup>7</sup> For example, the builder has a capacity to effect change on the wooden beams, just as the wooden beams have a capacity to undergo the change carried out by the builder. Likewise, the teacher has a capacity to teach her students, just as the students have a capacity to be taught.

This raises the question: why does Aristotle identify this kind of δύναμις as δύναμις κατὰ κίνησιν, in other words, as δύναμις in respect of motion? To phrase the question differently, what is “kinetic” about action and passion? A number of

<sup>3</sup> For Heidegger’s analysis of the “kinetic” (κατὰ κίνησιν) and the further-extending (ἐπὶ πλέον) senses of δύναμις and ἐνέργεια, see GA 33: 49–56/40–46. Note also that for translations of Aristotle, I follow Barnes (ed.), *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*.

<sup>4</sup> One source of disagreement has to do with the relation of book IX to earlier books of the *Metaphysics*; another has to do with the relation between the kinetic and the further-extending senses of δύναμις and ἐνέργεια. For a discussion of the relation of book IX to earlier books of the *Metaphysics*, see Witt, *Ways of Being*, 1–4. For a discussion of the argument structure of book IX, see Makin, *Aristotle: Metaphysics Book Θ*, Introduction, §1 and Beere, *Doing and Being*, 19–29.

<sup>5</sup> Even so, there is much room for disagreement; see, for example, Witt, *Ways of Being*, 131, n. 1.

<sup>6</sup> As Menn puts it, “[Plato says] that the active and passive powers must always be exercised simultaneously. Aristotle builds on this discussion in Plato, but he prefers to say ... that the two powers have brought into existence a single ἐνέργεια or κίνησις with two aspects (like the road from Athens to Thebes, that may be considered from either direction)” (“Origins,” 110). See also note 11 below.

<sup>7</sup> For Heidegger’s reading of this *Sophist* passage, see GA 19: 474–76/328–30.

commentators adopt an interpretation that I believe sheds light on this question. For example, Aquinas argues in his commentary on the *Metaphysics* for the identity of motion to action and passion: “For there is some subject of each of them, namely, of quality, quantity, when, where, and also of motion, in which are included both action and being acted upon” (*In VII Metaphysicorum*, lect. 3, n. 1315). Elsewhere he writes, “For it is clear that both action and passion are motion; for each is the same as motion” (*In III Physicorum*, lect. 5, n. 310). Similarly, according to Brentano (*On the Several Senses of Being in Aristotle*, 133/87), motion is at least factually identical to the categories of action and passion (*reell identisch mit einem ποιεῖν sowohl als πάσχειν*). Stephen Menn adds the following:

We can best interpret Aristotle’s analogy [in *Metaphysics* IX.6] between κίνησις and οὐσία if we recognize that κίνησις, like οὐσία, is the name of a category: although it is not on the canonical list of categories in the *Categories*, Aristotle clearly refers to a category of κίνησις in *Metaphysics* 1029b22–25, 1054a4–6, 1069a21–22, and 1071a1–2: this is what is elsewhere divided into the categories of ποιεῖν and πάσχειν. (“Origins,” 107)

The idea here is that there are several passages in Aristotle’s works that treat κίνησις as one of the categories. What is more, there are yet other passages that divide κίνησις into κινεῖν and κινεῖσθαι, thus drawing a distinction between the active and the passive forms of the verb. In one such passage, Aristotle writes: “For being, as we have divided it in other works, signifies now what a thing is, now quality, now quantity, now time, and again some of it consists in κινεῖσθαι and κινεῖν (*Eudemian Ethics* I.8, 1217b27–29).<sup>8</sup> What can we conclude from these? The fact (i) that there are several passages that include κίνησις among the categories, (ii) that there are yet others that include κινεῖν and κινεῖσθαι, and (iii) that in none of these passages κίνησις, κινεῖν, or κινεῖσθαι coexist with the categories of ποιεῖν and πάσχειν lend support to the line of commentary according to which κίνησις is used as a joint name for the categories of action and passion.<sup>9</sup> Another virtue of this line of interpretation is that it is consistent with Aristotle’s own statement that there is no motion of the doer (ποιοῦν) or the sufferer (πάσχον) because there is no motion of motion (*Met.* XI.12, 1068a8–16).<sup>10</sup>

In sum, what Aristotle has in mind with the phrase “δύναμις in respect of motion” is simply the kind of δύναμις that serves as the enabling condition for

<sup>8</sup> The bifurcation of κίνησις into κινεῖν and κινεῖσθαι can also be found in other passages. In *Metaphysics* IX.6, for example, Aristotle mentions κίνησις in 1048a25 and κινεῖν and κινεῖσθαι in 1048a28–29.

<sup>9</sup> For a thorough exploration of these issues, see Menn, “Origins,” where the bifurcation of κίνησις into ποιεῖν and πάσχειν (or into κινεῖν and κινεῖσθαι) is discussed in further detail.

<sup>10</sup> Note also that this interpretation is *not* inconsistent with the idea that there are four motions (generation/corruption, alteration, growth/diminution, locomotion) that in turn pertain to four different categories (substance, quality, quantity, place). The categories just mentioned are those where the *effect* of the motion is felt—which effect is felt precisely because the joint activity of action and passion gives rise to a change in one of these four categories.

some action or the enabling condition for some passion. It is not surprising, therefore, that the subsequent text rephrases this kind of δύναμις as δύναμις τοῦ ποιεῖν καὶ πάσχειν. I will refer to these simply as active and passive capacities: the capacity to *do* something or the capacity to *undergo* something. Insofar as we understand capacity as the kind of δύναμις pertaining to the categories of action and passion, its corresponding ἐνέργεια is to be understood as the *enactment* of these capacities. For example, the currently inactive teacher has a capacity for teaching, and if she begins teaching her students, this would mean that the formerly dormant capacity is now being enacted. Similarly, the students have a capacity for being taught, a capacity that they retain even when they are asleep or engaged in some other activity, but if at one point they go to class and pay attention to their teacher, what is at issue would be the enactment of a capacity that was latent earlier. Simply put, capacity is the δύναμις for some doing or suffering, while activity is the enactment of these capacities.

Here, however, one may rightly wonder whether there is a sense in which the distinction between action and passion is merely a matter of perspective. This is an interesting question to consider because it is not as if there are two different things going on, for example, when the teacher is teaching and the students are being taught.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, when we say that the builder is building or that the wooden beams are being built, what is under discussion are simply two different explanations of the same process from opposite poles. But note the following: the capacity to do is in each case a different capacity from the capacity to undergo (for otherwise it would be the same thing to be a teacher and a student), even though the corresponding *activity* is one and the same. If so, a capacity is either a δύναμις for some action or a δύναμις for some passion, which are not identical to each other, whereas an activity (in other words, the ἐνέργεια κατὰ κίνησιν) is the joint and simultaneous exercise of these capacities.

It need not take much effort, then, to realize that there is a disanalogy between activity and capacity: namely, whereas there is *one* activity, there are *two* related capacities. One capacity is in the builder; the other is in that which is built.<sup>12</sup> The activity, once again, is the *mutual enactment* of these capacities, namely, the mutual enactment of the capacity for action and the capacity for passion. For example, the builder has a capacity to effect change on the wooden beams, just as the wooden beams have a capacity to undergo the change carried out by the builder, yet their enactment is one and the same: the activity of building. In other

<sup>11</sup> Anton Ford claims that “action and passion are two aspects of a single material reality, a transaction between the agent and patient” (“Action and Passion,” 15). As Mary L. Gill puts it, “Action and passion are one in the way that the road from Athens to Thebes and the road from Thebes to Athens are one” (*Aristotle on Substance: The Paradox of Unity*, 205). It is worth to point out that the Aristotelian passage that Gill refers to is *Physics* III.3, 202a18–21, which in turn bears considerable resemblance to Heraclitus Fr. 60 (δὸς ἄνω κάτω μία καὶ ὄντη).

<sup>12</sup> Note that these correspond, respectively, to the *causa efficiens* and the *causa materialis*.

words, whereas the capacity to build and the capacity to be built are separate capacities, their activity is mutual and identical.

Obvious as this may seem, the distinction between capacity and activity was not universally adopted. The Aristotelian text tells us that the Megarian philosophers objected to such a distinction, arguing instead that a capacity is present only in the course of activity, in which case, for instance, the builder *can* build only when he is currently engaged in the process of building (1046b29–32).<sup>13</sup> If so, there would be no distinction between “can do” and “is doing,” just as there would be no distinction between “can suffer” and “is suffering.” Aristotle says that there *is* a distinction between “can do” and “is doing,” and likewise a distinction between “can suffer” and “is suffering,” in such a way that the former (“can do” and “can suffer”) can be present even when the latter (“is doing” and “is suffering”) are absent. For example, the builder may be not building but rather resting, yet still – i.e., even now, when the builder is resting – he *can* build. This would entail for such cases that there *is* a capacity, that is to say, that a capacity is present. However, this would be another way of saying that being present is not confined to being in activity, that a thing can be present even when remaining inactive.<sup>14</sup> Does the concept of inactive presence involve a contradiction in terms? This is what is at stake in the Aristotelian text under discussion. In what follows, we will take a closer look at this question in light of Heidegger’s analysis of Aristotle’s confrontation with the Megarian philosophers.

### 3. THE MEGARIAN VIEW

What is the ontological status of a capacity that is not currently being enacted? Aristotle suggests that the Megarian philosophers deny “absence” as a way of being and argue instead that something “is” only insofar as it is present (1046b29–32). According to Aristotle, on the other hand, there may be different ways in which something can be absent, and in fact his unstated thesis is that the Megarians fail to distinguish sufficiently between the different ways in which something can be absent. Heidegger understands Aristotle as arguing that we must

<sup>13</sup> It is important to stress that I use the word “presence” without its temporal connotations. Heidegger’s temporal interpretation of presence, although important and very interesting, is too vast a subject to cover adequately in the confines of this paper. For a good discussion of this issue, see Francisco J. Gonzalez, “Whose Metaphysics of Presence? Heidegger’s Interpretation of *Energeia* and *Dunamis* in Aristotle,” according to whom Heidegger is wrong to ascribe to Plato and Aristotle a metaphysics of presence, and Joseph P. Carter, “Heidegger’s *Sein zum Tode* as Radicalization of Aristotle’s Definition of *Kinēsis*,” according to whom Gonzalez “misses the nuances of Heidegger’s arguments” (498).

<sup>14</sup> As Nahum Brown puts it, “Heidegger states explicitly that Aristotle’s task at [*Metaphysics*] 9.3 is to understand the actuality of disengagement, in effect, to come to terms with an actuality that is not at work, a stillness, a silence, an inactivity” (“Aristotle and Heidegger: Potentiality in Excess of Actuality,” 206).

distinguish between the qualified and unqualified forms of absence, that a qualified form of absence cannot be interpreted as “pure negation.”<sup>15</sup> The absence of the enactment of a capacity is a qualified form of absence that cannot be construed as pure negation, for although the enactment may be absent, this would not change the fact *something is actual* nevertheless as a dormant capacity.<sup>16</sup> The builder retains his capacity to build houses even when he is not currently engaged in the process of building. In other words, the builder would possess the capacity for building houses even while resting, for a mere *cessation* of the practice of his art would not entail the *loss* of the art.<sup>17</sup>

This, then, is the crux of Aristotle’s rejoinder to the Megarian philosophers. Aristotle claims, namely, that the Megarians fail to come to terms with the impossible consequences of identifying cessation with loss.<sup>18</sup> As he puts it:

There are some who say, as the Megaric school does, that a thing can act only when it is acting, and when it is not acting it cannot act, e.g., he who is not building cannot build, but only he who is building, when he is building; and so in all other cases. It is not hard to see the absurdities that attend this view. For it is clear that on this view a man will not be a builder unless he is building (for to be a builder is to be able to build), and so with the other arts. If, then, it is impossible to have such arts if one has not at some time learnt and acquired them, and it is then impossible not to have them if one has not sometime lost them (either by forgetfulness or by some accident or by time . . . ), a man will not have the art when he has ceased to use it, and yet he may immediately build again; how then will he have got the art? (1046b29–1047a4)

Let us try to unpack Aristotle’s argument. Assume, for example, that a builder has been building for a couple of hours and that he is currently taking a few minutes off. Now, even after such a brief period of rest, how can he return to the practice of his trade, if the cessation of the practice of the art would thereby entail the loss of the art? Clearly, Aristotle thinks, cessation and loss are different, the latter of which is also possible but is no trivial thing. According to Aristotle, the *loss* of the art is possible if, say, the builder’s capacity to build houses is hampered

<sup>15</sup> To put it in Heidegger’s words, “The Megarians comprehend the ‘non’ as pure negation [*bloße Negation*]*—*rather than as a distinctive privation [*eigentümliche Privation*]” (GA 33: 210/180). What Heidegger has in mind is the privation of activity, but the same can be said about matter, where what is at issue is the privation of substantial form. For further discussion, see Unlu, “Aristotle on Ontological Priority,” 141ff.

<sup>16</sup> As Heidegger puts it, an unenacted capacity is already “actual, even though not enacted” (GA 33: 173/149). Note that I translate *Vermögen* (both here and elsewhere) as “capacity” (instead of “capability”), which is my only deviance from the English translation of the work by Brogan and Warnek.

<sup>17</sup> See GA 33: 182–92/156–65.

<sup>18</sup> For a defense of the Megarian view, see Nicolai Hartmann, “The Megarian and the Aristotelian Concept of Possibility: A Contribution to the History of the Ontological Problem of Modality.”

by *decades* of inactivity, in which process the (once) builder may have forgot the tricks of the trade and may have therefore become unskilled.<sup>19</sup> However, this is by no means and in no way similar to taking a few minutes off, in which case what is at issue would not be the loss of the art but a mere cessation of its enactment.<sup>20</sup>

In Heidegger's view, the disagreement between Aristotle and the Megarians lies in the fact that "the Megarians comprehend the essence of presence *too narrowly*" (GA 33: 185/159). Leaving aside Heidegger's temporal interpretation of the concept of presence,<sup>21</sup> one of the points that Heidegger is trying to stress is that the Megarian philosophers are wrong to confine presence to activity. The Megarians are mistaken because ἐνέργεια κατὰ κίνησιν is *not* the only kind of ἐνέργεια. According to Heidegger, Aristotle holds that a capacity is present if it is possessed, whereas the Megarians hold that a capacity is present if it is enacted. This "having," Heidegger argues, is a form of being, and is therefore a form of being present, although it is a form of being present that the Megarians fail to realize. As he puts it,

To be capable of something surely means *to have* the δύναμις, and the corresponding not-having implies not being capable. This having and not-having holds the secret to the actuality and non-actuality of δύναμις. Is having thus comprehended as a kind of being? (GA 33: 177/151).

In Heidegger's view, the kind of having (ἔχειν) under discussion here is to be understood as "having and holding, namely as holding oneself in readiness, holding the *capacity itself in readiness*" (GA 33: 219/188).<sup>22</sup> Hence, it is not only *activities* (building, teaching, and so on) that are present. What is also present is what may be called *being in a certain condition*. This is not surprising once we remind ourselves that, in one sense of the term, ἔχειν means to be in a particular state and that the derived noun ἔξις is often translated simply as "state." Of course, it is more difficult to ascribe presence to a state because, at least on the face of it, it seems as if there is nothing "at work" (ἐνεργεῖν) here. Assume, for example, that a person has a piece of knowledge that she is not currently putting to use. There seems to be no justification to assume that there is a difference between this person who has the knowledge and another who lacks it altogether. Since both of these people are inactive (by assumption), it is not obvious whether and how we can distinguish between them. As has been explained, however, Aristotle insists on the necessity of

<sup>19</sup> Aristotle explicitly mentions forgetting (λήθη) as one of the ways in which such "unlearning" is possible (1047a1).

<sup>20</sup> Rudolf Bernet writes in the same vein that "since the acquisition (*Einübung*) of a new capacity is so arduous and requires so much effort on our parts, it is certain that once acquired, its possession cannot be limited to practicing or exercising it (*Ausübung*) at some moment or other" ("Heidegger on Aristotle: *dunamis* as Force and Drive," 64).

<sup>21</sup> See note 13 above.

<sup>22</sup> For Heidegger's analysis of Aristotle's concepts of ἔχειν and ἔξις, see especially GA 18: 172–91/116–29.



drawing such a distinction, for any attempt to identify inactivity with unqualified absence would lead to impossible conclusions.

We can now see more clearly what Aristotle believes to be the oversight of the Megarian school. The Megarians confine presence to activity, which, however, is a wrong move precisely because being in a certain condition is a way of being present that is not an activity. For example, there *are* builders that are currently inactive. On the flip side, the wooden beams in the field “have” the correct material characteristics for the task at hand without necessarily being in the process of undergoing motion. The joint activity of the builder and the wooden beams is anchored in qualities that the builder and the wooden beams respectively possess, but the cessation of their mutual activity by no means entails the annihilation of the qualities in question. Both the inactive builder and the wooden beams at rest continue to possess the very qualities that enable them to take part in the activity of building. Thus, the mere cessation of some activity would in no way entail the destruction of its enabling conditions. In other words, the presence of the enabling conditions of an activity is independent of the presence of the activity that emerges from these.

#### 4. THE ONTOLOGY OF PERCEPTION

Aristotle’s confrontation with the Megarian philosophers includes a discussion of the question concerning the ontological status of perception. According to Thomas Johansen, it “is to strengthen this argument for the presence of [unenacted capacities] that Aristotle brings in the sense objects” (*Aristotle on the Sense Organs*, 260).<sup>23</sup> The analysis of perception pertains to this argument because what takes place during the process of building is similar to what takes place during perception.<sup>24</sup> In both cases, there is an agent (the builder or the perceptible object) and a patient (the wooden beams or the perceiver). And just as the builder retains his capacity to build while resting, the perceptible object retains its capacity to act even during inactivity. Once again, then, what is at issue is the kind of presence that transcends activity, the kind of presence that the Megarians deny is possible. We have already seen that a capacity is present even in the absence of the activity that it enables. This brings us to one of the oldest questions in philosophy: does the tree that falls in the forest without anyone noticing nevertheless make a sound? In Aristotle’s view, there is a sense in which the answer is no; it is only when the

<sup>23</sup> Cf. GA 33: 193/166.

<sup>24</sup> There is, of course, one sense in which perceiving is unlike building: in *Metaphysics* IX.6, 1048b17–36 and *Nicomachean Ethics* X.4, 1174a14–23, Aristotle states that there are some activities (such as living, perceiving, thinking) that contain their ends within, which stand in contrast to yet other activities (such as learning, walking, building) that don’t. Note, however, that the distinction between end-inclusive and end-exclusive activities, although important, is not pertinent to our present concerns.

capacity of the agent and that of the patient *come together* that an activity can take place.<sup>25</sup> In the absence of the patient, the activity would lose one of its enabling conditions, in which case the activity would cease to exist. To take another example, no perception of red would take place in the absence of a perceiver, for the perception of red requires both a thing that acts (the red object) and a thing that suffers (the perceiving subject).

But what happens to the redness of the red object when this object is not being perceived? In other words, what can we say about the presence of sensible qualities in the absence of the activity of perception? According to the Megarian philosophers, Aristotle says, “nothing will be either cold or hot or sweet or perceptible at all if people are not perceiving it” (1047a4–6). Aquinas comments that if the Megarian view were true, sensible qualities would have existence only when they are being sensed (*In IX Metaphysicorum*, lect. 3, n. 1800). From Aristotle’s perspective, the Megarians are wrong precisely because a capacity may be present even in the absence of the activity it enables. The presence ascribed to a dormant capacity can only be conceptualized as “inactive presence.” According to Aristotle, therefore, regardless of whether we are talking about an active capacity (δύναμις τοῦ ποιῆν) or a passive capacity (δύναμις τοῦ πάσχειν),<sup>26</sup> what is at issue is a capacity that continues to exist even when it is not being enacted. This is precisely the reason, for example, that the soul cannot be construed as an activity. Different kinds of soul enable different kinds of activities: the vegetative soul enables, among other things, the digestion of food, just as the sensitive soul enables perception and the rational soul enables thinking. But the soul is not dependent on the activity that it enables, in the sense that a cessation (or at least a temporary cessation) of the activity cannot be identified with the absence of the kind of soul that enables this activity.

Because the Megarians deny the actuality of capacity in general, they are forced to deny the presence of the perceptible object and of the perceiving subject while no perception is taking place. Let us focus on the former. Heidegger writes that the question here is whether there can “be” a perceptible object at all. As he puts it:

What does this call for? Nothing less than such a being which itself and from out of itself, prior to all being perceived, is empowered (δυνατόν) to be perceived. This perceptible being—that is, a being with the ability to be perceived—must “be” as this being with this ability, that is, it must “be” actual, if a perceiving and becoming manifest is to occur at all. . . . If the Megarian thesis holds, then the actuality of such a being, the perceptible as

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Hartmann, “The Megarian and the Aristotelian Concept of Possibility: A Contribution to the History of the Ontological Problem of Modality,” according to whom Aristotle is confused on this point.

<sup>26</sup> The way we phrase things in English gives the false impression that the perceiver is the agent and what is perceived is the patient, whereas for Aristotle the reverse is the case; see, for example, *De Anima* II.11, 424a1.

such, is undermined. How so? If the actuality of that which is empowered and capable of something lies in its enactment, then the perceptible as such “is” actual if and only if and precisely only so long as it is perceived. . . . [The Megarians] must in general deny the possibility of a being that is in and of itself present, since this can be granted only with the acknowledgement that the being present of something that is perceptible does not remain singularly dependent upon the enactment of perception. . . . The actuality of what is present as the actuality of something self-reliant then still remains intelligible only if it can be shown that the actuality of what is perceptible as such does not lie in enactment of perception. (GA 33: 200–201/171–72)

The kind of ontology advanced by the Megarian philosophers force them to a theory of mind that is similar to what we would now characterize as phenomenism. What is at stake here is the possibility of the existence of, as Heidegger puts it, “beings as they are in themselves, as unperceived, as not formed in a perception” (GA 33: 199/171).<sup>27</sup> A few pages later, Heidegger adds that “if the actuality of that which is capable as such lies in its enactment, and thus if the perceptibility of what is perceptible lies in its being perceived, then there would be no perceptible being, nothing of the sort that we could also simply represent as self-reliant in itself” (GA 33: 204/175). In fact, according to Heidegger, “*the self-sufficient actuality of what is perceptible*” is experienced precisely in its “*no-longer-enactment and not-yet-enactment*” (GA 33: 206/177; emphasis in the original). To put this differently, the kind of presence that is not confined to activity is most visible in the case of *latent* capacities. This is why Heidegger says of *Metaphysics* IX.3 that it is “in this chapter [that] we come across the genuine preparation for and the grounding of the transition from δύναμις καὶ ἐνέργεια κατὰ κίνησιν to ἐνέργεια καὶ δύναμις ἐπὶ πλεόν” (GA 33: 175/150). In other words, *Metaphysics* IX.3 provides the transition (*Übergang*) from the more familiar to the less familiar senses of δύναμις and ἐνέργεια because it is the question concerning the ontological status of a capacity when this capacity is not being enacted that leads us to conceptualize the kind of presence that can incorporate inactivity as a way of being present. If so, it is precisely unenacted capacities that facilitate the discovery of actuality in contradistinction to activity. In the next section, we will take a closer look at the question of what this discovery amounts to.

## 5. FROM ΕΝΕΡΓΕΙΑ AS ACTIVITY TO ΕΝΕΡΓΕΙΑ AS ACTUALITY

To retrace the steps already taken in the course of our discussion, ἐνέργεια is thought first of all as activity, which is the more familiar sense of the term, but on closer inspection it becomes clear that ἐνέργεια cannot be confined to the domain

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Heidegger’s discussion of the *Ding an sich*: “Kant, for instance, speaks of the ‘thing in itself’ as something distinct from the ‘thing for us’, that is as ‘appearance’. A thing in itself is something that is not accessible to us human beings by way of experience . . .” (GA 41, 5/4).

of activity. It becomes clear, in other words, that in order to account for the presence of capacities that are not currently being enacted, we need a conception of ἐνέργεια that can also incorporate being in a particular state (ἔξις). This corresponds to the discovery of the kind of presence that incorporates inactivity as a way of being present. But the kind of presence ascribed to a state, which belongs under the category of quality,<sup>28</sup> is quite different from the kind of presence ascribed to an activity. In fact, what ties together the two kinds of presence is their analogical structure. Activity is to *its* enabling condition, for example, as a state is to *its* enabling condition. A state is not an activity, but there is a sense in which it resembles one. In fact, Aristotle's novel insight is precisely that "something resembling activity" exists in *all* categories. More precisely, Aristotle's point is that the relation that obtains between capacity and activity can be conceptualized as the "two ways of being," that is to say, the two ways in which *anything* can be said to exist—namely, some things are said to exist in the manner of capacity, whereas others are said to exist in the manner of activity.

It is important to note here that activity is "a" being, whereas being present in the manner of activity is a "way" of being.<sup>29</sup> In contradistinction to capacity and activity, which can be identified as beings (*Seiende*) in the ordinary sense, we must use the terms "potentiality" and "actuality" to signify the two ways in which any being can be said to exist. The latter are not beings in the ordinary sense precisely because of their transcategorical nature.<sup>30</sup> Whereas ἐνέργεια in the sense of activity is confined to the categories of action and passion, one cannot similarly point out the category under which all actualities belong. The actualities from different categories are one by analogy (ἐν κατ' ἀναλογία). As Aristotle puts it,

[W]e must not seek a definition of everything but be content to grasp the analogy, – that as that which is building is to that which is capable of building, so is the waking to the sleeping, and that which is seeing to that which has its eyes shut but has sight, and that which is shaped out of the matter to the matter, and that which has been wrought to the unwrought. Let actuality be defined by one member of this antithesis, and the potential by the other. But all things are not said in the same sense to exist actually, but only by analogy. (1048a36–1048b7)

Once again, what ties together actualities from different categories is their analogical structure: activity is to its enabling condition, for example, as substance is to its enabling condition, as quality is to its enabling condition, as quantity is to its enabling condition, and so on. In a word, everything that is actual stands in the same kind of relation to its enabling condition. Aristotle begins his inquiry with the

<sup>28</sup> See, for example, *Cat.* 8b27.

<sup>29</sup> See also Witt, *Ways of Being*, 3.

<sup>30</sup> By beings in the ordinary sense, what I have in mind is anything that falls under a single category—unlike, for example, "actuality" and "truth." See also note 1 above for the fourfold division of the senses of being.

more familiar relation between activity and its enabling condition (i.e., the relation between activity and capacity), but then this model is used a stepping-stone to develop – arguably for the first time in the history of philosophy – the concepts of potentiality and actuality. According to Stephen Menn, for example, whereas the capacity-activity distinction “is originally Platonic . . . it is only Aristotle” who develops a potentiality-actuality distinction (“Origins,” 104). In a similar vein, Heidegger writes the following:

We broach now the most difficult phenomenon within Greek—and especially Aristotelian—ontology: the ὄν δυνάμει καὶ ἐνεργείᾳ. Aristotle was the first to disclose these characters of Being, and he thereby achieved a fundamental advance beyond Platonic ontology. (GA 22: 315/232, n. 1 of the Bröcker transcription)

Despite their differences, Menn and Heidegger would agree that it is the question concerning the presence of unenacted capacities that compels Aristotle to widen the scope of the concept of ἐνεργεία to incorporate inactivity as a way of being present. The teacher has a capacity to teach not only when she is currently engaged in the activity of teaching (for this would be needlessly restrictive) but rather insofar as she retains a knowledge of the subjects that she had once mastered. Similarly, a thing is perceptible not only when it is currently being perceived but insofar as it simply “is” as a thing in itself. This allows Aristotle to realize that the familiar relation between capacity and activity can be construed as a *general relation* that obtains between two manners in which anything may be said to exist, which is another way of saying that any single thing – for example, a substance, a quality, a quantity, and so on – exists either in the manner of a capacity (exists potentially) or in the manner of an activity (exists actually). As Menn puts it,

When Aristotle speaks of τὸ ὄν δυνάμει [i.e., being in the manner of a capacity], he is not referring back to an already established adverbial sense of δυνάμει; he must be referring to some available sense of the noun δύναμις, and using the concept of δύναμις to draw out the deeper conception of being δυνάμει as a way of being. (“Origins,” 74)

What Menn says about the relation between capacity (δύναμις) and potentiality (τὸ ὄν δυνάμει) can also be said about the relation between activity (ἐνεργεία) and actuality (τὸ ὄν ἐνεργείᾳ). In fact, Menn’s point is more generally that Aristotle exploits the already-familiar senses of δύναμις and ἐνεργεία, using these terms in the dative case – as adverbial datives – to qualify being. Hence, it is the familiar senses of the terms that enable the “use of these concepts to describe two ways of being” (Menn, “Origins,” 89). Menn maintains that this is an Aristotelian discovery, that what is at issue here is the discovery of the ways of being. Heidegger holds a similar view. As he puts it,

And just this exposition of δύναμις and ἐνέργεια ἐπὶ πλεόν is the decisive, basic discovery of the entirety of Aristotelian philosophy; δύναμις and ἐνέργεια, taken singularly, obtain for the first time through philosophical inquiry an essentially other, higher meaning. (GA 33: 51/42)

What is being claimed here is that the higher meaning of δύναμις and ἐνέργεια, which can be identified as the two ways of being, must be thought of as the basic discovery of Aristotelian philosophy, and in Heidegger's view, it is in virtue of this discovery that Aristotle was able to achieve "a fundamental advance beyond Platonic ontology." Regardless of whether Heidegger and Menn are correct in identifying potentiality and actuality specifically as an Aristotelian discovery,<sup>31</sup> it is evident at least that these correspond to the "more useful" senses of δύναμις and ἐνέργεια, whose meanings are unveiled in the course of *Metaphysics IX*. To conclude, let us retrace our steps one last time: when the question concerning the ontological status of unenacted capacities forces Aristotle to widen the scope of presence to incorporate inactivity as a way of being present, Aristotle comes to realize that the relation that obtains between capacity and activity can be generalized as the ways in which *anything* can be said to exist. Aristotle thus exploits the more familiar but less useful senses of δύναμις and ἐνέργεια, using these terms in a novel way to qualify being, as a result of which they can be identified as the two ways of being known as potentiality and actuality.

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<sup>31</sup> For an extended argument for this claim, see Menn, "Origins," 81ff.

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