Aristotle on Good and Bad Actualities

Owen Goldin
Marquette University, owen.goldin@marquette.edu

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This paper is a discussion of one of the more neglected passages in the central books of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, Θ 9 1051a4-19. In this passage Aristotle makes some assertions concerning relations that hold among potentialities and actualities, both good and bad. These assertions seem to be made as an afterthought, and their relation to the analysis of potentiality and actuality that precedes is unclear. I shall argue that in this passage Aristotle is in effect providing a metaphysical foundation for the normative component of a teleological analysis of composite substance.

I consider certain difficulties in reconciling the text with the account of potentiality and actuality presented earlier in *Metaphysics* Θ. I then briefly explore some of the implications that this passage has for our understanding of Aristotelian teleology.

In *Metaphysics* Θ 9, 1051a4-19, Aristotle writes:

It is clear from the following considerations that the actuality is better and more valuable (καὶ βέλτιόν τινα καὶ
tυμητικότερον) than the good (πάντωσας) potentiality. Whatever

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1 This paper is an expansion and revision of a paper presented to the Metaphysical Society of America, at Notre Dame University, March 13, 1993. I thank all of those who responded to that version in public and in private. Special thanks are due to David O'Connor, for the probing insights and challenges of his prepared comment.
correlated. In what sense is a potentiality good? Is Aristotle talking about a potentiality for a good? Or is he talking about an ability or disposition that is good insofar as it is especially conducive to its correlative actuality? As so often, the conclusion for which Aristotle is arguing becomes clear only by tracing the course of the argument.

II

This argument begins by with the assertion that whenever a potentiality for some X inheres in a subject, the potentiality for the contrary of X likewise inheres in that subject. Aristotle presents the example of a living body. By virtue of being a living body, it has both the potentiality for good health and the potentiality for bad health. But on what basis is Aristotle able to say that all potentialities work in the same way? Aristotle's reasons are presented in the previous chapter, Θ 8, in which he argues that actuality is prior to potentiality on the grounds that the necessary eternal motions, on which all other motions depend, involve no potentiality. This is so, he says, because "everything which is potentially admits of not being in actuality" (Τὸ δυνατὸν δὲ πᾶν ἐνδεχόμεν ἐν ἐνεργεῖν); accordingly, potential beings are perishable (1050b10-11). Here δυνατὸν does not have the sense of the logically possible, that which is not impossible. Rather, it denotes a metaphysical

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2 The reliance on this earlier argument is an indication that the argument of Θ 9 is not an unrelated observation simply tacked onto Metaph. Θ, as may first appear.
potentiality to heat but not to chill, and the cold has a potentiality to chill but not to heat, one with an art has the potentiality to produce both the product of that art and its contrary. This point, familiar from Plato's *Republic* (I 333E - 334B)* is explained by the fact that one with an art has an account by virtue of which one understands the cause of the coming-to-be of the product of that art. One would be in a position to ensure that the product of that art would be absent through the purposeful withholding or removal of the cause of that product. Because not every subject is such as can accept the product of that art, being deficient in respect to the product of that art is a contrary, not a contradictory, to having that product. This is why a rational potentiality such as an art is correlative to contraries.

Hence rational potentialities stand in contrast to nonrational potentialities, each of which is correlative to one and only one effect. Aristotle elsewhere makes clear that if a nonrational potentiality is brought together with an object on which it can produce its effect, it is just that effect, not its opposite, that will be produced (*Metaph. Θ* 5 1048a6-7). But if an artisan and that on which the artisan can work are brought together, it is not necessarily the case that the product of the

*Cf. Meno 87e-88d and Ion 531d-532b.*
Returning to Θ 9, we see that one of Aristotle's examples of a single potentiality that is a potentiality for contraries is indeed an instance of a rational potentiality: the potentiality that allows one to build a house is that which allows one to demolish a house. (This is explained by the fact that one must know the cause of the internal coherence and stability of a house in order to build one. With such a knowledge its coherence and stability can be easily removed.) But how are the other examples to be accounted for?

We note that when Aristotle states the principle that every potentiality is the principle of only one change, he concentrates on those principles that he takes to be potentialities in the strict sense of the term: principles of motion or change in something else or in a thing itself insofar as it is something else. These are the active potentialities, such as heat, cold, or the soul. In Θ 1 Aristotle distinguishes these from passive potentialities. A passive potentiality is that feature of a substrate that is the principle of its being acted upon and changed, were it to come into requisite contact with the

longer exists, expect "potentially." Such a move does make a positive step in resolving some of the ontological difficulties of the central books. On this see M. L. Gill, Aristotle on Substance: the Paradox of Unity (Princeton, 1989). But it involves problems of its own, insofar as it threatens the Aristotelian solution to the problem of coming-to-be and passing away: it becomes unclear exactly how there is a truly persistent substrate. Aristotle is not always consistent on the question of the pre-existence and survival of matter as such. Accordingly, this passage alone does not tell against the thesis that within Metaph. Θ , the contrary to an actualized form is simply the privation of that form within the matter that accepts the form.
anything internal to the subject about to be heated or cooled. There is no metaphysical principle of being heated apart from that of being cooled. This will also be the case for those passive potentialities correlative to complex actualities, such as health and disease.

I suggest that Aristotle's assertion that the same potentiality is correlated to contrary actualities holds for both rational potentialities and passive potentialities. One may well ask why Aristotle does not come out and say this, if this is indeed his meaning. Why does he not explicitly assert that this principle does not hold for the remaining logical possibility, that of two active potentialities, correlated to contrary actualities?

I propose that this is because, in the last analysis, Aristotle does not admit that such a case is metaphysically possible. Whenever there is a pair of contrary actualities, there be a real metaphysical principle of causation for only one of these. For only one actuality is there a real active potentiality by virtue of which this actuality emerges. The other actuality is merely what is predicated of the substrate when this substrate does not stand in the required relation to such potentiality, or when the active potentiality is in some way otherwise prevented from doing its work. Granted, Aristotle could have been more clear and explicit on the premises of his reasoning. But an argument is available for this conclusion that rests on premises all of which would have been accepted by
the potentialities standing in a certain relation is not met, Y will be inherent in X. To return to the example of health, the matter of a sapling has the potentiality attaining the final cause of being a tree, that is, being all and doing all that is involved in being a mature, flourishing tree. We can call this goal the healthy life of the tree. (Health is the permanent state by virtue of which this life is led; it in turn comes about through the living of a healthy life.) The active potentiality is the form of the tree, its soul, already within the sapling. If the sapling is not given enough water or light, it will be unable to fully meet this goal. The tree's active potentiality will be prevented from standing in the appropriate relation to its passive potentiality. To that extent it will have predicated of it the contrary of the "healthy life," that is, it will be living unhealthily.

In such a case there is no need to posit an active potentiality for the contrary of X. Those agencies that do seem to be actively responsible for the contrary of X (such as drought or logging, in the case of the tree) can be understood as having their causal power because they make impossible the proper functioning on S of the active potentialities for X.

It should therefore be no surprise that in the argument being considered Aristotle omits considering the possibility of two different potentialities, each directed toward one of a pair of contrary actualities.
our passage is said to not be as good or valuable as the actuality, must be understood as good insofar as it is a potentiality for some good. Second, the neutrality of the potentiality in respect to goodness or badness is contrasted with the case of actualities, because in that case, Aristotle says, one must be good and the other bad. This is a rather strong claim. Will not many actualities be neutral in respect to goodness and badness? We need to return to this point.

Aristotle concludes by inferring that "it is therefore clear that there is no badness apart from things. For the bad is posterior in nature to the potentiality." What does this mean, and on what grounds is it argued?

First, what problem is this meant to address? In the previous chapter, Aristotle had argued that actuality is prior to potentiality in λόγος, in time, and in οὐσία. But if this is so, a problem arises in the cases of good actualities that are correlative to contrary bad actualities. For, as we have seen, in the case of rational potentialities and nonrational passive potentialities, a good actuality and its contrary, a bad actuality, share one and the same potentiality. It would appear, then, that both the good and the bad actualities share the status of priority in λόγος, time, and οὐσία to the potentiality to which they are both correlated. This would entail a kind of metaphysical Manicheism, according to which both good and bad principles are implicit in a complete account of a potentiality, temporarily precede its coming-to-be, and are implicitly present...
art (which in turn is posterior to actual health both in time and in essence) must already exist before it is employed to make patients unhealthy. Hence we have the temporal priority of the potentiality, as well as priority in $\phi\delta\lambda\alpha$, taken either in the sense of definitional essence or in the sense of reality.

The situation of nonrational potentialities correlated with good or bad actualities is simpler. Since the good actuality $X$ and the bad actuality $Y$ are contraries, there will be the same passive potentiality for each. $Y$ is simply the absence of $X$ in the subject $S$, which is such as to admit of $X$. $Y$ is therefore conceptually and metaphysically derivative on $S$, which is defined as that with the potentiality for $X$. Likewise, as we have seen, Aristotle would be led to deny the existence of a separate active nonrational potentiality for $Y$. $Y$, the bad actuality, is simply what one has when the relevant nonrational passive potentiality for $X$, the good actuality, is not actualized. In the case of active nonrational potentialities, too, the bad actuality will be metaphysically and conceptually posterior to the single potentiality involved.

We have seen evidence for attributing to Aristotle the view that, with possible exceptions at the elemental level, all contraries are such that one is a positive attribute and the other the privation of that attribute. The actualized privation has no contrary with any independent ontological status. Certain such privations are called "bad" insofar as they are contrary to
of the opposition often appears to not exist at all. For while there is something divine and good and desired, we say that on the one hand the contrary to this exists, and on the other hand, that there exists that which by nature desires and craves this, according to its nature. But for them it turns out that the contrary craves its perishing. Yet the form cannot desire itself, since there is no need, nor can the opposite desire the form, since contraries are destructive of each other. But that which desires the form is matter, just as the female might desire the male, or the ugly might desire the beautiful. But in this case, the matter would be female or ugly only accidentally. (192al2-25)

There is a great deal going on in this famous passage. Three main questions present themselves. First, exactly what is the argument against the Platonists, stripped of metaphorical embellishment and normative talk? Second, what sense can be given to the apparent identification of all actualities as good? Third, do the roles played by goodness and badness in this passage lend support to the interpretation of good and bad actualities, sketched above?

On Aristotle's account, the Eleatic argument that nothing comes from nothing convinced the Platonists that there needs to be something underlying change, which is not the same as the end good.
hand, Aristotle insists that, unlike that of the Platonists, "we say that the contrary . . . exists" (Τὸ μὴν ἐναντίον φαίνεται, 192a17-18). Were this not so, Aristotle would not have been taking pains to argue that it, along with the substrate, must be counted as a principle of change. It is rather the Platonists who move from the "malignance" of the privation to its non-being. What sense can be made of such an inference?

The answer can be only speculative, since the first explicit Platonic argument identifying evil and nonbeing seems to be that of Plotinus (Ennead 2.4), who employs the Aristotelian conceptual machinery of matter, potentiality, and actuality to argue for this conclusion. But we can be reminded that, at least in the metaphysics of the Republic, it is the form of the Good that is ultimately responsible for all being. This is, as Santas has shown, "the form of being a form, the form of Being, in the strict sense. It would follow that any being, in the strict sense, would be good, and hence productive of good. So to the extent to which something is malignant, it is not!"

We might be tempted to read Aristotle's talk of goodness in a metaphysical context as a kind of superstitious Platonism. But Aristotle does not argue in this way. He joins the Platonists in calling the positive term of change something "divine, good, and desired." His argument is only that we need

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to be good. The point being made is that it is not ugliness as such that becomes beautiful, but whatever it is that is ugly. It is not badness as such that becomes good, but whatever it is that is bad.

In order to understand how this is so, we need only consider desire, as it emerges in our human lives. We want what it is that we do not have, but do not utterly lose our identity were we to succeed. In support of this reading of the passage as developing a metaphor is the fact that, within his biological and psychological writings, Aristotle is clear that desire (ὀρέγον), in the strict sense, is a faculty possessed only by animals (DA II 3 414a29-b16). But there are many substrates of change that are not animals. So in saying that something is good we are saying that there is some substrate which is related to it as is the substrate of desire towards the object or attribute desired. One version of such an account would posit goodness as nothing but the object of desire (cf. NE I 1 1094a1-3). Any ascription of goodness would thereby be dependent on the speaker's interests, or desires. Goodness as such would have no independent ontological status. When we call something good we are simply saying that we, the speakers, have a certain potentiality of desire directed towards it, or we are indulging in a bit of harmless anthropomorphizing in ascribing such desire to some other substrate.

We will return to this issue shortly. This text, alone, is neutral between these two readings. But whichever is correct,
In regard to this second question, there appear to be two main alternatives. According to the first, goodness is a real irreducible attribute of things; a complete account of something that is good will need to mention its goodness, in addition to all of its other attributes. On the other account, the goodness of a being is to be identified with some other characteristic of that being, which can be accounted for in non-normative language. Such an account was suggested by Balme and has been fully argued for by Gotthelf. According to this account, the good of a being is simply the actualization of all of its irreducible potentialities, determined by that being's form. So if teleological explanation proceeds by showing how some attribute or activity is for the sake of an organism's good, it in effect shows how this attribute or activity either makes possible or facilitates the activities in which that organism can by nature engage.

The two sets problems are to a certain extent interrelated. If a complete explanation of the activities and characteristics can in principle be given by identifying the underlying material stuffs and their natural characteristics, both form as such and

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comes about on account of some "irreducible potentiality."

One of the results of the present paper is that a careful consideration of those few texts in which Aristotle does consider the relationships that hold among goodness, badness, potentiality, and actuality shows that this objection is unfounded.18 Badness is simply the privation of some actuality that is good.

The refutation of this objection does not in itself clinch the case that there is nothing metaphysically involved in goodness other than actuality as such. There is another key objection, which I am not able to here address. This is that Aristotle sets up a hierarchy of actualities, so that some are of more value or have a greater share of the divine than others. Is this simply an extension of the metaphor of the scale of nature, by which some beings have greater complexity and a quantitatively greater range of actualities than others?19 Or is the high regard in which Aristotle holds those actualities that involve awareness, continuity, and eternity a sign of an irreducibly normative element within his ontology? A third possibility, which we cannot dismiss out of hand, is that Aristotle never gave sustained attention to this issue, to which we, living in the

18 In "The Place of the Good," pp. 116-117, Gotthelf defends himself against Kahn's criticism by pointing out imprecisions in Kahn's expression of the objection, but does not directly address the question of the metaphysical status of good and bad actualities as such.

19 This is the suggestion of Gotthelf, "The Place," p. 128.