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An Interpretation of  
Aristotle's *Metaphysics* Theta

JONATHAN BEERE

# Doing and Being

*An Interpretation of Aristotle's  
Metaphysics Theta*

JONATHAN BEERE

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## DOING AND BEING

*Doing and Being* confronts the problem of how to understand two central concepts of Aristotle's philosophy: *energeia* and *dunamis*. While these terms seem ambiguous between actuality/potentiality and activity/capacity, Aristotle did not intend them to be so. Through a careful and detailed reading of *Metaphysics* Theta, Beere argues that we can solve the problem by rejecting both 'actuality' and 'activity' as translations of *energeia*, and by working out an analogical conception of *energeia*. This approach enables Beere to discern a hitherto unnoticed connection between Plato's *Sophist* and Aristotle's *Metaphysics* Theta, and to give satisfying interpretations of the major claims that Aristotle makes in *Metaphysics* Theta: the claim that *energeia* is prior in being to capacity (Theta 8) and the claim that any eternal principle must be perfectly good (Theta 9).

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*To my parents*

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In fact, the world is full of hopeful analogies and handsome dubious eggs called possibilities.

— George Eliot, *Middlemarch*

As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame;  
As tumbled over rim in roundy wells  
Stones ring; like each tucked string tells, each hung bell's  
Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name;  
Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:  
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;  
Selves—goes itself; *myself* it speaks and spells;  
Crying *What I do is me: for that I came.*

— Gerard Manley Hopkins

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PART I  
THE SIGNIFICANCE OF  
*METAPHYSICS* THETA





# 1

## Peace between the Gods and Giants

### 1.1 INTRODUCTION

The ninth book of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*—Book Theta—is a compelling work of philosophy. It develops a theory of causal powers, and then distinguishes two ways of being: being-in-capacity and being-in-*energeia* (where *energeia* is, as a first gloss, the exercise of a capacity). The discussion culminates in a challenging and controversial claim: *energeia* has priority in being over capacity (*dunamis*). My primary goal is to explain this claim: its meaning, its justification, and its philosophical import.

The claim is obviously not easy to understand, but the difficulties are much greater than one might have expected. There are a variety of reasons for this. The most interesting and important reason is that the concept of *energeia* is radically foreign to us.

We can approach the foreignness of *energeia* by way of some ordinary English words. There are, on the one hand, words for *doing* such as 'act,' 'action,' and 'activity,' and on the other hand, the words 'actual,' 'actually,' and 'actuality,' which are connected with *being*. All these words come from the Latin *actus*, which itself is a form of a word for doing (*ago, agere*). The connection among these words is not a historical accident, but a linguistic fossil of Aristotle's thought. The Latin phrase *in actu* was used to translate the Greek term '*energeia*,' which first became a central philosophical concept in Aristotle's work. There are no recorded uses of the term before Aristotle. This is part of the reason why I leave '*energeia*' (a linguistic innovation) untranslated, while translating its complement, *dunamis* (an ordinary Greek word), as 'capacity.'

'Activity' and 'actuality' are even now the two standard translations of '*energeia*.' Sometimes, '*energeia*' can be translated only by a word for doing like 'activity,' while 'actuality' and related words yield absurdity. For instance, when Aristotle says that pleasure is unimpeded *energeia*, he must mean that it is unimpeded activity, not unimpeded actuality.<sup>1</sup> Other times, '*energeia*' can be translated only by a word like 'actuality,' while 'activity' yields absurdity. For instance, when Aristotle denies that the infinite has

<sup>1</sup> *Nicomachean Ethics* VII.12 1153a12–15.