



INTERNATIONAL PHILOSOPHICAL QUARTERLY

ISSN-0019-0365

VOL. XXII, NO. 2

Issue No. 86

JUNE 1982

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BRIEFER BOOK REVIEWS



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Energeia and Process in Aristotle

Frederick E. Ellrod

ARISTOTLE'S notion of *energeia*, extensively used in his discussions of act and potency, is of considerable importance in his metaphysics. Further, it has reappeared in recent action theory, since it seems to be involved in the difference between productive and nonproductive actions, the nature of perception, and the relation of states and performances.¹ This gives the concept a significance for current discussion, in addition to that of textual clarification.

In this connection it may be helpful to consider James P. Etzwiler's claim that a proper understanding of *energeia* should lead to a "process interpretation" of Aristotle.² I would like to suggest in this paper that, although an active conception of substance and reality may be indicated, it is not one that could be described as a "process interpretation."

I

George A. Blair pointed out some years ago that the etymology of *energeia* is intended to stress the active nature of something, since the term appears to be constructed from the active form of a word normally found in the middle deponent.³ Blair argues for a revision of the standard English translations of the word, as does Etzwiler,⁴ rendering it as "activity" rather than the conventional "actuality" (Etzwiler passes by Owens' use of "act" as having "a somewhat archaic ring to it"). Certainly, we must consider that which "*energeia*" denotes as "dynamic" rather than "static," at least in the usual English sense of "dynamic," meaning "active"

¹Cf. Anthony Kenny, *Action, Emotion and Will*, Studies in Philosophical Psychology (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963; New York: Humanities Press, 1963), esp. pp. 182-83, note; Gilbert Ryle, *Dilemmas* (Cambridge: University Press, 1954), ch. 7, pp. 102-103; Terry Penner, "Verbs and the Identity of Actions—A Philosophical Exercise in the Interpretation of Aristotle," in Oscar P. Wood and George Pitcher, eds., *Ryle, Modern Studies in Philosophy* (Garden City: Anchor Books, Doubleday 1970); and Daniel W. Graham, "States and Performances: Aristotle's Test," *Philosophical Quarterly*, 30 (1980), 117-30. A related application of the notion is treated in Frederick E. Ellrod III, "A Critique of Moore's Ethical Ontology," M.A. thesis, Catholic University of America, 1976.

²James P. Etzwiler, "Being as Activity in Aristotle: A Process Interpretation," *International Philosophical Quarterly*, 18 (1978), 311-34.

³George A. Blair, "The Meaning of 'Energeia' and 'Entelecheia' in Aristotle," *International Philosophical Quarterly*, 7 (1967), 104.

⁴See especially pp. 313-15.

⁵Etzwiler, p. 314. Penner, writing at about the same time as Blair, considers "activity" the usual translation, and argues instead for "actualization" (430-41). Kenny uses "operation," which seems synonymous with "activity" (p. 138, note). I will use either "act" or "activity" in this paper to translate *energeia*.

or “forceful.” This point is complicated by the etymology of “dynamic” itself; in Aristotle, of course, *dunamis* indicates the potential as *opposed* to the actual.⁶ It is necessary, however, to clarify exactly what the “dynamism” of *energeia* means.

As Blair points out and as Etzweiler emphasizes, Aristotle applies the term *energeia* to many sorts of reality, not restricting it to those which could plausibly fit the sense of “activity” in English. The examples given in the “definition” by example of *Metaphysics* IX.6, 1048a25–b17, are of act-potency relations of various types:⁷

statue/wood
 half-line/whole line
 one who thinks/one capable of thinking
 one who builds/one capable of building
 what is awake/what is asleep
 what is seeing/what is capable of seeing
 what is shaped/matter
 finished/unworked

While some of the items here correlative to *energeia* seem to be themselves acting, and others seem to be “brought into act” by something else, all of them are in fact not *actions* in the usual sense but rather things, *substances*: *one who* thinks, builds, is seeing. But in English “activity” would not normally mean a substance of this sort, but something *done* by a substance: thinking, building, seeing. (“Actuality,” or “act,” might apply to either, since both the thing and its doing are actual.)

Blair suggests that according to Aristotle’s developed thought *forms* in general were not only “actualities” but “activities,” presumably including the substantial form; and Etzweiler concludes bluntly: “Substance is an activity, although admittedly in an analogous sense, as is seeing, waking, building, and moving—albeit an *abiding* activity.”⁸ If all forms, then, are *energeiai* or “activities,” we may say that *energeia* does in fact describe the actual in general, act as opposed to potency, the real: whatever has “complete reality” qualifies as *energeia*, as well as whatever possesses its end within itself.⁹

It is this striking notion, in which *everything* becomes an “activity,” which Etzweiler sees as Aristotle’s great contribution to metaphysics, making him a precursor of Whitehead and other process philosophers.¹⁰ If we take for granted this very wide application of the notion of *energeia*, we may still raise a question concerning Etzweiler’s connection of it with a process conception of being. Does this concept of *energeia* in fact refer to a “process”?

II

Etzweiler’s claim is made plausible by his identification of *energeia*, read as “activity,” with *change* or becoming. Citing Aristotle’s statement that the “chief sense”

⁶Cf. Blair, p. 113; Etzweiler, pp. 316, 322–23.

⁷Cf. Blair, pp. 107–108; Etzweiler, pp. 317–18.

⁸Blair, pp. 109, 111–12; Etzweiler, p. 318; cf. pp. 311–12, 324–25.

⁹Etzweiler, p. 318; Blair, p. 115. This assumes that Blair is correct about the equivalence of *energeia* and *entelecheia*.

¹⁰Etzweiler, pp. 333–34.

of *energeia* is motion. Etzweiler concludes that “*energeia* is a type of motion or process.”¹¹ But since even objects or things which we would normally call “substances” are *energeiai*, this means that “to be blunt, Aristotle actually conceives of realities as activities, as events or occurrences, as we might say now, not as ‘things’ or ‘objects.’” “‘Things’ he seems to say are really activities, events, processes.” “*Energeia* shares an important feature with motion: that they are both doings, occurrences, happenings.”¹² While in this last passage Etzweiler seems to conceive *energeia* as different from, not “a type of,” motion, it is clear that the stress is on the transient or passing nature of the realities in question. “Event” and “occurrence” in English suggest that which is temporary and ephemeral; “process,” even more, refers to that which does not abide, which either disappears or becomes something else. To be active is, on Etzweiler’s reading of Aristotle, to be becoming. Thus activity is contrasted primarily with that which is not only inactive but unchanging, not only “inert” but “static”: “The real is not composed of static, inert blocks of being. . . .”¹³ Thus if all realities (“actualities”) are activities, and all activities are motions or processes, then all realities are processes.

However, Aristotle claimed that motion is not the best example or perfect type of *energeia*, as Etzweiler recognizes: “Motion, because it is a process and not all finished at once, is an activity, but an incomplete one.”¹⁴ In the passage he quotes, *Physics* 201b27–32, Aristotle observes that “motion is thought to be a sort of activity.” Now this claim, that motion is a type of activity, seems to conflict directly with Etzweiler’s claim that activity is a type of motion, as well as with the passage cited above in which they merely “share an important feature.” The two cannot be species of each other. The correct interpretation would seem to be suggested by the passage from Aristotle with which Etzweiler introduces his earlier claim: “Activity in the strict sense is thought to be identical with movement.”¹⁵ If activity in one (“strict”) sense is the same as motion, it would seem that it has other senses not identical with motion, and thus that motion is a type of activity, not the other way around. This view is supported by Blair’s observation that the term *energeia* in its original definition “has no reference to change; the question in his [Aristotle’s] mind is not ‘How does A become B?’ but ‘When is a non-A an A? When it has the power to do what A does.’”¹⁶ While change may be an instance of *energeia*, “power and activity have more uses than mere references to processes.”¹⁷

If this is correct, then, we would expect to find some instances of *energeia*, “act” or “activity,” which are *not* processes, which do not inherently involve change. And in fact this is what we do find. Pleasure, for instance, as Aristotle tells us in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, is an activity, but not necessarily a process:

¹¹ Blair notes this on p. 106, quoting *Metaphysics* 1047a30–36 (incorrectly cited as 1074a); Etzweiler, on p. 314.

¹² Etzweiler, pp. 311, 312, 317.

¹³ Etzweiler, p. 312.

¹⁴ Etzweiler, p. 317. Cf. *Metaphysics* 1048b29.

¹⁵ Etzweiler, p. 314, citing *Metaphysics* 1047a32.

¹⁶ Blair, p. 105.

¹⁷ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1046a2, quoted in Blair, p. 111. W. D. Ross’s translation has: “potency and actuality extend beyond the cases that involve a reference to motion.” Cf. Fred D. Miller, “Did Aristotle Have the Concept of Identity?”, *Philosophical Review*, 82 (1973), 486, 488. Kenny holds that cases of *kinesis* are different from cases of *energeia* (173, 176, 178); I have assumed, with Penner (see pp. 427–28, 439–41) that there is at least one sense of *energeia* in which the two overlap.

... pleasures are not processes [*geneseis*] nor do they all involve process—they are activities [*energeiai*] and ends; nor do they arise when we are becoming something, but when we are exercising some faculty; ... [some people] think that activity is process, which it is not.¹⁸

We may enjoy something over a period of time, yet not *change* at all in our enjoyment, but merely continue to enjoy; this is an act, but not a transition, rather a persisting in being what one is. An activity may be complete and whole in itself, and thus require no change or progress.¹⁹ In the passage quoted above Aristotle is pointing out that pleasures are not processes in order to show that they are not *ipso facto* disqualified as candidates for the name of happiness, *eudaimonia*; it thus seems reasonable to assume that happiness, too, while not (as he later shows) a pleasure, is also not a process, giving us a second example of activity aside from process.²⁰

Equally important, however, is that act which, according to the interpretation of Blair and Etzweiler, constitutes substance. Etzweiler holds, as we have seen, that "Aristotle maintains that things not only perform actions; they *are* actions. They are events or happenings."²¹ If substance too is *energeia*, then one does have to say that it is in the same sense active, "dynamic," not merely inert; and this does run contrary to at least one view of substance. Blair notes that "it would seem that he [Aristotle] is trying to say that form is what matter, in a sense, does, since motion is the primary sense of *energeia*."²² But this does not necessarily mean that substance is therefore a process, since some *energeiai* are not processes.

What, within the class of *energeiai* or activities, would differentiate the process from the non-process? Presumably, *change*: a process is a becoming, an alteration from moment to moment, and a non-process would then be something which stays the same, in some respects at least (as in the example of pleasure above). But of course the very meaning of "substance" is that which "stands under" a change without itself changing, that which remains through accidental alteration. And Etzweiler, recognizing this, is forced to claim paradoxically that some processes do not change but remain: "Substance is an activity although admittedly in an analogous sense, as is seeing, waking, building, and moving—albeit an *abiding* activity." "Substance, one might say, is a kind of radical occurring or doing, that can be abiding."²³ The act of substance is precisely to abide, not to change. And this abidingness is not merely the continuity of a protracted action, as with pleasure, else pleasure too would be a substance: it is that stable continuity which serves as a foundation for other activities, for qualities, relations, and actions—all of which may be *energeiai*, but all of which are not necessarily processes.²⁴

We are left with a picture of substance which is *active*, yet *enduring*: a paradoxical

¹⁸ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. W. D. Ross, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941), 1153a9–17. Kenny discusses this on pp. 146–348.

¹⁹ See *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1173a29–b7, 1174a17–b7; Miller, pp. 489–90; Kenny, pp. 176–78. The same point is recalled by Ryle, in *Dilemmas*, ch. 7, pp. 102–103.

²⁰ See also Penner, p. 399.

²¹ Etzweiler, p. 324.

²² Blair, p. 109. Cf. p. 115.

²³ Etzweiler, pp. 318, 319. Cf. p. 334.

²⁴ In discussing productive action, Etzweiler attempts to identify the product with the activity of production, which Aristotle says is "in" the product (p. 320). Aristotle, however, makes it clear that among ends, "some are activities, others are products *apart from* the activities that produce them" (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1094a3–5, emphasis added).

picture, but perhaps not so paradoxical if we recall how it is that a human being actually "stands," actively resisting the force of gravity. Our conclusion, then, suggests that Etzweiler is mistaken in thinking of the abiding of substance as necessarily inert and undynamic; in linking the permanent with the inactive; in failing to conceive of a being whose constitution as well as whose action is "dynamic."²⁵

It should be noted that the continuity of substance need not be its *only* "activity" (and here, perhaps, "act" may in fact be the better translation, since it may cover both the abiding and the changing, both the thing and its action).²⁶ The becoming of a substance may also be an act, an *energeia*. But another category of act may be represented by action, or *praxis*, as in speaking or flute-playing; Hannah Arendt seems to consider this the whole meaning of *energeia*.²⁷ Pleasure and happiness, as described above, may belong to this category, although the point is disputed.²⁸ In any case, Aristotle's denial that these things are processes, though they are *energeiai*, would suffice to show that not all *energeiai* are thought of as processes.

III

The notion of the *unchanging but active* is sufficiently clear in Aristotle to be noted by Etzweiler against the grain of his argument: "That which is wholly active is immutable precisely because it is not in process to further completion."²⁹ What, then, is the point of calling Aristotle's view a "process" view of being? It would certainly be useful to characterize such a view as a "dynamic" view (again prescinding from etymology), or an "active" view; but it seems hard to escape the sense of *change* in the word "process," which makes it a misleading characterization of *all* being according to Aristotle.

The answer may be that Etzweiler has taken the only two possible alternatives to be "object" (static, inactive) and "process" (active, dynamic); this is the contrast that reappears in his discussion.³⁰ If my argument is correct, then this disjunction is maintained at the cost of missing Aristotle's real metaphysical insight, which is that there is another possibility, a middle ground: the object which abides yet is active, the enduring "thing" which is not frozen but flexible in its enduring, as when substantial identity persists during accidental change. If subsisting is itself active, as Blair argues, then the transition from being to doing is not as drastic as it might seem when substances are conceived of as static: in the case of the singer singing or the listener enjoying we have "being-at-work," reduced neither to the inert being nor to the unsupported work. While Etzweiler opposes such a formulation,³¹ it seems clearly superior to the one in which changes, actions, qualities, and substances are all re-

²⁵ We may note here in passing that Etzweiler's view of substance tends also to force him toward the view that substance (which is "activity") is also *power* (pp. 324-25), i.e., that ability which is *not* at the moment active; or, in effect, that the power in act and the power not in act are the same, both identical to "substance."

²⁶ Cf. Penner, p. 430.

²⁷ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 206. For a related point, cf. Matthew J. Kelly, "St. Thomas and Transeunt Causality," *New Scholasticism*, 54 (1980), 42-43, where "perfection" seems to play the same role as does "act" or *energeia* here.

²⁸ Penner, pp. 399, 403.

²⁹ Etzweiler, p. 321; cf. p. 331, and Blair, p. 106.

³⁰ Cf., for example, pp. 319, 322, 328, 331.

³¹ Etzweiler, pp. 312, 314, 316.

ferred to as "processes" or "events," as long as it is kept in mind that a "substance" or "thing" is not *per se* dead and inactive.

In what sense, then, are we to take Aristotle's assertion that the chief or primary sense of *energeia* is motion? While an extensive textual analysis of Aristotle's meaning cannot be undertaken here, two related observations may be made. The first is that according to Blair's interpretation of the *Protrepticus* passage in which *energeia* is first defined, Aristotle compares it to motion not in the sense of transition from one state to another, but in that of a continuing state, waking: "he uses 'motion' *kinesis* as the synonym for *energeia*, and *not* for the change that precedes this motion (i.e. the transition from potency to activity)."³² This suggests that the "motion" to which *energeia* is compared is in this case not that of alteration, but that of local motion, "motion" in the usual English sense, which is one meaning of *kinesis*.

The second observation is that the way in which the "motion" sense of *energeia* is primary might still be that of the order of knowledge rather than the order of reality. It might be that we first come to know *energeia* through motion, although it is not in fact the most ontologically basic of the types of *energeia*; just as a modern physicist might say that while macroscopic phenomena are first in our experience, they are really less fundamental than subatomic particles. Thus Aristotle might consistently say that the *energeia* of motion comes first in our experience, but in reality motion, as an accident, depends on the existence of a substance (another type of *energeia*) which moves.³³

If this suggestion is correct, then the two observations converge to indicate that for Aristotle motion is the most evident and salient case of *energeia*, and thus, since *energeia* cannot be defined but only displayed by example,³⁴ the case on which our knowledge is based. If so, then motion might still be the case with which we first become acquainted and which continues to play a key role in our knowledge of *energeia*, while in reality the primary case would be that of substance. Local motion would be said, plausibly enough, to be the most *prominently* active of all *energeiai*, while the "activity" of substance is more fundamental but more deeply hidden.

IV

If my argument has been correct, then Aristotle's use of *energeia* does not indicate a "process" conception of being, for "process" would suggest becoming or alteration and *energeia* does not always mean this. Change is an *energeia*, but not every *energeia* is a change. Instead, the insight we should draw from Aristotle's usage is very nearly the reverse: even unchanging realities may be *active* in some sense, "energetic" rather than dead and inert; the subsisting of substance is to be regarded as an *achievement* (a "doing") rather than as mere inertial persistence. Etzweiler has claimed that since all reality is dynamic, all reality is change or "process"; instead, I suggest, since all reality is dynamic but all reality is not changing, there must be a

³² Blair, p. 106.

³³ This suggestion would be that "motion" is not only the temporally *original* sense (since Blair [p. 107] states that such a restricted sense is excluded by the Greek), but that "motion" is also the sense from which our knowledge is basically drawn even after the term has been extended to other uses.

³⁴ See Blair, pp. 107-108.

dynamism that is *not* change, a stable activity (like a "standing wave") which is constantly re-enacted but remains the same.³⁵

Aristotle's many examples for *energeia*, remarked by Blair and Etzweiler,³⁶ include both stable and processive things, both productive actions and those which have no tangible product. This breadth of application suggests that *energeia* extends to actuality in beings generally, to all categories of reality, all ways of being actual; that it represents the *act of being*, either being simply or being in a certain way. If this is so, then even the word "activity," which in English suggests that which some *thing* *does*, may be misleading as a translation of *energeia*, for the activity a being performs is not itself a subsisting or independent reality, while the being performing it, a substance, often is. We might then wish to reserve the term "activity," with its non-substantial connotation, for a doing without a product, such as action (*praxis*), and to use simply "act" for *energeia* in general, as in the usage of Owens noted by Etzweiler,³⁷ or perhaps "actualization," as suggested by Penner. In this terminology, all beings (in the widest possible sense) are "act," but not all are "activity."

Blair and Etzweiler have reminded us of the "dynamic" nature of all being, the active and positive "energy" which is hidden in the inert-sounding categories of substance, quality, or state. In doing so they have helped to counter the tendency to take substances as inert or inactive. This is achieved, however, not by a process interpretation, but by an "act" interpretation, not only of substance but of all being.³⁸

³⁵ This formulation is reminiscent of the contention by Aquinas, among others, that each (created) being must be "conserved," or *re-enacted*, by the power of God in each moment. See his *Summa Theologica*, Part I, Question 104, Art. 1. In this case the most central and "energetic" of all acts, *energeiai*, would be the act of being or existence, *actus essendi*.

³⁶ Blair, pp. 107-108; Etzweiler, pp. 318-19. See also Kenny, pp. 182-83, notes.

³⁷ Etzweiler, pp. 313-14.

³⁸ This paper was produced using the facilities of the CUA Computer Center.