Analogy and Motion in Theta 6
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In *Metaphysics* Theta 6 Aristotle introduces the ontological distinction between *energeia* and *dunamis* by means of the following examples:

- it is as (a) what is building to what is capable of building and (b) the waking to the sleeping, and (c) what is seeing to what has its eyes shut but has sight and (d) that which has been shaped out of the matter to the matter and (e) what has been worked up to the not thoroughly worked. Let actuality be set down as one side of this and let the potential be the other. (1048a37-1048b5)

Theta 6 is a crucial text for interpretations of the distinction between *dunamis* and *energeia*, an ontological distinction whose explication is the central purpose of Book Theta. (1045b32-35). The chapter contains many complexities of interpretation. One difficulty is that Aristotle neither defines nor characterizes the contrast between *dunamis* and *energeia* introduced in the chapter. Instead, he illustrates the distinction with several examples, and says that the distinction should be grasped by understanding the analogy among the examples. So, the examples are not merely a heuristic device to introduce the distinction, which is then explicitly characterized or defined. Rather, Aristotle says that the contrast he now wishes to draw between *dunamis* and *energeia* should be grasped, inductively, and by example. The analogy that holds among the examples is of particular importance in understanding Aristotle’s distinction. (1048b6-7)
The examples are of two types. The first three contrast the exercise of a power or capacity of a substance with the dormant power. These examples are concrete, and mention particular powers or abilities. In contrast, the last two illustrations of the distinction are described in general terms, although the language suggests that Aristotle has artifacts in mind. This suggestion is strengthened by an example given earlier in Theta 6, which mentions a statue of Hermes. (1048a33) What Aristotle seems to have in mind in this example is the relationship between matter (the wood) and the thing composed of the matter (the statue of Hermes). He says that the statue of Hermes is in the wood potentially. And, in Theta 7 Aristotle uses the example of a house in describing the condition governing potentiality for artifacts. (1049a8-11) In Theta 7 Aristotle also provides a condition governing potentiality for natural beings. (1049a 13-15) It is possible, therefore, that the abstract language used in the last two examples in Theta 6 is deliberate, and intended to include both artifacts and natural beings.

In this paper I address two difficulties facing the interpretation of Aristotle’s examples: the analogy problem and the problem of motion. There are connections between these problems, but it is useful to introduce them separately.

First, let’s consider the analogy problem. It is difficult to determine a basis for the analogy, which is meant to connect the examples. Aristotle summarizes the examples by saying “some are as motion to dunamis but others are as substance to some matter.” (1048b8-9) The summary statement divides the examples into two kinds, which are apparently different from one another. And, it is not immediately obvious what analogy might obtain between the two kinds of examples. The first contrasts a motion
like house-building with an agent power from which the motion originates; the second contrasts an artifact like a house with the materials that constitute it, and from which it was made. How is a motion like a substance or an agent power like constitutive matter? More precisely, how is the relationship between motion and power like the relationship between substance and matter? What is the basis of the analogy? This is the analogy problem.

Next, let’s consider the motion problem. Aristotle prefaces the examples with the comment that he is now interested in *dunamis* as it applies beyond the sphere of motion. But, if Aristotle is interested in exemplifying *dunamis* in a use that does not pertain to motion, why describe one kind of example in terms of motion as he does in the summary statement? And not only is motion mentioned in the summary statement, but one of Aristotle’s examples is familiar from the discussion of agent powers earlier in Book Theta (the ability to build a house). And, agent powers are defined as the origins of motion and change. (1046a10-11) The latter point raises a further question. Why does Aristotle use the example of an agent power to introduce a new ontological use of *dunamis*? The motion related examples and the mention of motion in the summary statement muddy the claim that Aristotle intends introduce a new distinction between potentiality and actuality in Theta 6.

Of course, the analogy problem and the motion problem do not exhaust the difficulties facing an adequate interpretation of Aristotle’s examples in Theta 6. But they are central questions that face any interpretation of Aristotle’s distinction between potentiality and actuality. Before I turn to my interpretation of Aristotle’s distinction
between *dunamis* and *energeia* and explain how it addresses these difficulties, it is useful to consider several alternative strategies of interpretation of Aristotle’s examples.

**Strategy One: Divide the Examples**

One line of interpretation that simultaneously addresses both problems is to claim that only some of the examples in Theta 6 introduce a new use of *dunamis*. Only the examples that could reasonably be described as substance to some matter in the summary statement illustrate the new ontological distinction between *energeia* and *dunamis*. Those that are of motion to *dunamis*, in contrast, refer back to the earlier discussion of agent powers, and do not illustrate the new ontological distinction.

This strategy has distinct advantages. It might lessen the difficulty of trying to find an analogy between the two apparently quite different kinds of examples. It might also remove the difficulty of trying to square the mention of motion in the summary statement with Aristotle’s stated intention to introduce a use of *dunamis* that does not apply to motion. Finally, it removes the tension between the claim that Aristotle is introducing a new use of *dunamis* and the fact that some of his examples are familiar from earlier in Book Theta. As a general approach, therefore, there is much to be said for the idea that only some of the examples are intended by Aristotle to illustrate his new distinction.

Given these advantages it is worthwhile to take a closer look at the details. Scholars differ with regard to just which examples illustrate the new ontological distinction. Kosman and Menn agree that only those examples that accord with the description “as substance to matter” introduce the new ontological sense of *dunamis* and *energeia* in Theta 6, but they differ with regard to which examples those are.⁴ Menn
makes a complex developmental argument to support his view that examples (d) that
which has been shaped out of the matter to the matter and (e) what has been worked up to
the not thoroughly worked introduce Aristotle’s new ontological distinction in Theta 6. Kosman, in contrast, suggests that the clue to selecting the relevant examples lies in
another distinction found in Theta 6 between complete motions like living, and
incomplete motions, like learning (1048b18-35). Kosman argues that only the examples
that contrast a capacity with a complete motion (or energeia proper or actuality)
introduce the new distinction. In what follows I discuss these interpretations very
narrowly, only in relation to their proposed interpretations of Aristotle’s examples, and I
do not even begin to do justice to the complexity of their arguments.

Kosman stresses the difference between two senses of dunamis and energeia in
Book Theta: “The two distinctions are related in a straightforward manner: the one kind
of potentiality is correlated to and defined in terms of motion, the other correlated to and
defined in terms of energeia proper, or actuality.” Kosman’s interpretation depends
upon the distinction between motion and energeia proper, which Aristotle draws in the
second part of Book Theta chapter 6 following the presentation of the examples under
discussion. There Aristotle differentiates between incomplete and complete motions, or
between a kinesis like walking or building and an energeia like seeing or living.
Applying this distinction to the examples, Kosman thinks that only (a) – (c) introduce the
notion of actuality; (d) and (e) exemplify the dunamis-energeia pair associated with
motion. Kosman also points to an earlier example of energeia proper at 1048a34-5.
Kosman’s interpretation provides a clear answer to the motion problem; the examples
associated with motion are not intended by Aristotle to exemplify the new distinction
between *dunamis* and *erengeia*. Instead only those examples of *dunamis* paired with a complete motion or an *erengeia* proper introduce the new distinction, and only these examples fall under the heading matter to substance in the summary statement. Kosman interprets Aristotle as developing the idea of substance as activity in book Theta.

There are two difficulties with Kosman’s proposal. First, not all of the first three examples are of activities or complete motions, but Aristotle seems to introduce them as a group. Only seeing is a complete motion; house-building is an incomplete motion. It is hard to know whether to categorize waking as a motion or as an *erengeia* proper; it depends upon whether Aristotle is thinking of the process of waking (an incomplete motion) or the activity of being awake. But there is a more significant problem facing Kosman’s interpretation. Recently Burnyeat has made a compelling case that the text that distinguishes incomplete motion from *erengeia* proper (1048b18-35) was not written for Book Theta (or the *Metaphysics*), and does not fit into the argument of Theta either terminologically or philosophically. Instead, Burnyeat argues that the text is genuinely Aristotelian but taken from another work. Given Burnyeat’s argument there is good reason to question Kosman’s interpretation of Aristotle’s examples since it is based upon a distinction made in a text whose placement is in doubt and whose content is incompatible with the rest of Book Theta (and the *Metaphysics*).

Menn classifies Aristotle’s examples in precisely the opposite manner to Kosman. Aristotle illustrates the new sense of *dunamis* and *erergeia* by means of the last two examples in Theta 6. It is a “deeper” sense of the terms than that illustrated by the first three examples. According to Menn, Aristotle uses these examples to illustrate the distinction between being potentially and being actually where the potentiality for being
is grounded in existing causal powers. The new distinction is ontological, and not concerned primarily with motion. In this way Menn’s interpretation negotiates the motion problem.

Even though only the last two examples introduce Aristotle’s new ontological distinction Menn thinks that Aristotle does draw an analogy between the two kinds of examples. On Menn’s interpretation the analogy is based on the predication relationship. He points to a text in Theta 7 where Aristotle compares the relationship between accidents and subjects to the relationship between substance and matter. Just as accidents are predicated of subjects so, too, is substance (form) predicated of matter. Although this text follows a discussion of when something exists potentially, and thus could be relevant to interpreting Aristotle’s examples, there is no obvious connection between the discussion of predication and potentiality. Further, the relationship between accidents and a subject is not a good fit for the relationship between a capacity and its exercise, or between an inactive and an active subject. And examples (d) and (e) do not contrast form with matter, which would be required on the “predication” interpretation of the analogy among Aristotle’s examples. Hence, Menn’s interpretation has the advantage of avoiding the motion problem, but the proposed analogy between the two kinds of examples is not convincing.

In addition to difficulties with particular interpretations that split the examples, there are also reasons to prefer an inclusionary interpretation that reads all the examples as analogically related exemplars of a new contrast. The summary statement is most naturally read as referring back to the list of examples, and grouping them roughly into two kinds. And the two kinds are themselves described as analogically related to one
another. (1048b7-8) Moreover, Aristotle’s introductory remarks, immediately before the examples, suggest that the examples that follow—all of them—introduce a new use of *dunamis*, a use different from the one associated with motion. (1048a27-30) There is nothing in Aristotle’s framing of the examples to indicate that only some of them illustrate his new use of *dunamis*. On the contrary, both his prefatory comments and his summary statement favor an inclusionary interpretation of the examples.

**Strategy Two: Reframe the Purpose of Aristotle’s Examples**

In an original and important paper Frede has argued for a reconsideration of the context and purpose of Aristotle’s examples.¹⁰ Does Aristotle intend to introduce a new, ontological distinction between *dunamis* and *energeia* with any or all of the examples in Theta 6? Perhaps Theta 6 does not introduce any new ontological item or distinction. Perhaps, instead, it offers a new perspective on agent and passive powers (and their resultant motions or activities), which are to be viewed as evidence of the reality of the agent. Frede places the Theta 6 discussion against a Platonic-Stoic tradition “according to which something which does something or other to something, or something which has something done to it, must clearly be real, must have a certain degree of reality” ¹¹ When Aristotle says that he is now discussing *dunamis* as it applies beyond the sphere of motion, perhaps he means that we should consider causal powers (agent and passive) and their correlative motions and activities from an ontological perspective, as a “mark of the real” ¹²

According to this view when Aristotle says that the sense of potentiality and actuality he is now interested in extends beyond the sphere of motion, he means that it includes motions plus other instances: activities and substantial forms.¹³ This addresses
the motion problem by denying that Aristotle intends to exclude motions from his examples. There is no problem with Aristotle mentioning examples of agent powers, and the motions and activities they cause, because Aristotle does not intend with the examples to introduce a new ontological distinction. Rather, we are to consider familiar examples with an ontological eye. What the examples illustrate is the reality conferring benefits of the possession of causal powers for motions and activities to the agents that have them. Only real things have powers to move, to be moved, or to be active. The corresponding actualities—motions, activities—confer a (higher) degree of reality on the agent by their presence. This interpretation deals with the problem of motion by reorienting Aristotle’s project. Rather than see Aristotle as introducing an ontological use of potentiality and actuality in Theta 6, which is distinct from and contrasted with their use in relation to motion, he is extending the use from motions to other instances.

What is the basis of the analogy between the two kinds of examples in the summary statement?

“In both cases it is claimed that a potentiality is realized and that, given this realization, the object in question has achieved a certain degree of reality, namely, actuality. And the basis for this uniform use is the fact that the form of the house is the analogue of the act of building a house in that it is related to the matter of a house and to a house in the way in which the act of building is related to the ability to build and the builder . . . What gives the actual house its actuality is the form, just as the act of building gives the actual builder his actuality.” 14
For Frede, there are three terms to the analogy: a potentiality, an actuality and an object: the ability to build, building and the builder or the matter, the form and the house. One difficulty with this explanation of the analogy Aristotle finds among the examples is that the three terms of the interpretation do not correspond to the two terms in Aristotle’s examples, and in the summary statement. The structure of the interpretation does not map onto the structure of Aristotle’s analogy. Also, given Frede’s interpretation of the analogy among the examples, we would expect Aristotle to contrast form with matter in examples (d) and (e) since Frede pairs form with activity and matter with capacity. But instead Aristotle contrasts a completed thing with either the matter that constitutes it or an earlier stage of its completion. Still, Frede’s interpretation has the great strength of providing an inclusionary interpretation of Aristotle’s examples that defuses the motion problem.

* Dunamis and Energeia as Ways of Being

I have argued elsewhere in favor of an inclusionary interpretation of Aristotle’s examples in Theta 6.\(^\text{15}\) Aristotle’s examples of *dunamis* and *energeia* can all be interpreted as different ways of being X or of realizing X, where X can be either a power or function of a substance, or an artifact or natural being functionally defined. There is an obvious relationship between these two cases because some of the powers or functions of substances will reappear as elements in the functional definition of the substances. The notion of function or work is crucial to understanding the analogy among Aristotle’s examples of being F potentially and being F actually. Aristotle tips us off to this in the opening passage of Book Theta where he says that being is distinguished between *dunamis* and *energeia* and according to function (*kata to ergon*) (1045b33-34). As the
exercise of a power (or function) is to the inactive power (or function) so is a functionally complete being to a functionally incomplete being. As seeing is to the power of sight so is an adult male human being to a human baby. As house-building is to the power to build (or the art of building) so is a house to the materials that constitute it. And I argued further that in drawing this distinction, Aristotle is not referring to the motions that babies undergo to become men, or in the motions that cause the faculty of sight to be active. No, he is contrasting two different ways of being human, of realizing that complex function, exemplified by babies and men, and two different ways of realizing the ability to see as exemplified by the dormant ability to see and active seeing. Similarly, building materials are a house potentially (they potentially function as a house) and the house is actually--functionally--a house.

My interpretation differentiates between the agent and passive powers of substances that feature in Aristotle’s explanation of what motion is, and the ontological distinction between being x potentially and being x actually that is introduced by means of examples in *Metaphysics* Theta 6. In *Physics* Book III, ch. 1 Aristotle says that the passive power of materials to become a house (the materials “buildability”) is activated under certain circumstances and results in the motion of building. When the building motion ends, the matter’s “buildability” likewise is exhausted. The building materials are not described as potentially the house, but as having the passive power of being buildable. And that power is used up in the motion of building, and is gone when the house exists. I differentiate between the passive power of buildability possessed by some materials, and the materials as potentially constituting a substance. In Book Theta, chapter 7 Aristotle proposes a potentiality condition for artifacts and natural beings.
Aristotle’s question in this text is not: When does something have the dispositional properties (agent or passive powers) to become x, but rather when is something x potentially? Aristotle gives two conditions for being x potentially, one for artifacts like houses, and one for natural beings. Of artifacts, he says “there is potentially a house, if nothing in the thing acted on--the matter- prevents it from becoming a house, and if there is nothing which must be added or taken away or changed.” (1049a8-11) The matter is potentially a house when it needs no alteration to be made into a house. This condition is met by the building materials from the beginning of the building process to the end, assuming that the materials are ready to be used. During the process of building the house, the bricks and other materials are potentially a house. In relation to the completed, fully worked house, which is actually, the materials (which now constitute that house) are also potentially the house because they function as parts of the house only in relation to the whole house.

How does my interpretation address the motion problem? In my view, none of the examples of energeia and dunamis are of motions in relation to dunamis. But, if that is right then how should we understand Aristotle’s summary statement? And, surely some of Aristotle’s examples are of motions in relation to dunamis. Consider the example: “what is building to what is capable of building” (1048a37) Isn’t building a motion that originates in an agent power? Dunamis in the sense of agent power is the origin of motion and change according to Aristotle’s definition in the first chapter of Theta. (1046a10-11) The house-building power is the origin of the motion of house-building. House-building is an example of a causal power, and causal powers are at work in nature and in the social world as origins of motion and change. How can an example
of an agent causal power like house-building serve to introduce an ontological use of *dunamis* different from its use to refer to causal powers? Not only does Aristotle’s summary statement include a category that explicitly mentions motion, but also one of his examples seems to be a motion.

In my earlier discussion I ruled out one approach Aristotle’s examples, which is to read them (as Kosman does) in relation to the distinction between complete and incomplete motions found in the second part of Theta 6. Complete motions are called activities or actualities (or *energeia* proper). One might read Aristotle as contrasting activities with motions, and as equating actuality with activity. This strategy is not entirely successful, however, even in its own terms, since it does not address the example of house-building, which is an incomplete motion, and not an actuality. Moreover, as I mentioned earlier, there is reason to doubt the placement of the text containing this distinction, and its compatibility with Aristotelian doctrine and terminology in the *Metaphysics*.

My approach to these examples takes off from a consideration of Aristotle’s philosophical motivation as we find it in Book Theta. Why would it be important for Aristotle to introduce an ontological distinction between an inactive power and its activity (whether that activity is a complete motion (seeing) or an incomplete motion (house-building))? I think the answer lies with the challenge of Megarian actualism that Aristotle argues against at some length in Theta 3. The Megarians hold that a power or *dunamis* exists only when it is active, when it is inactive, the power no longer exists. The Megarian challenge is ontological and significant. It is ontological because it concerns the question of the existence of inactive *dunamis*. It is significant because the existence
of inactive *dunamis* and its dependence on activity is a central Aristotelian thesis, argued for in Book Theta, chapter 8.

Aristotle’s response to Megarian actualism is to draw an ontological distinction between being a power *dunamei* and being a power *energeia*. It is an ontological response in that it provides a way of being for inactive powers and a different way of being for those powers when they are active. It is a perfectly general distinction and not restricted to any subset of powers. In particular it makes no difference whether the power is the origin of a complete motion or an incomplete motion. What is being contrasted is not a power and the resultant motion or activity of which the power is the origin. Rather, it is two ways of being of the power itself. Powers exist both when they are active and when they are inactive, but their way of being differs.

Given this understanding of Aristotle’s examples of inactive powers and their exercise it is not hard to explain how it is that he might describe them collectively as instances of the relationship between *kinesis* and *dunamis* in the summary statement. The term *kinesis* in this context refers both to activities like seeing and to motions like housebuilding. It would be natural for Aristotle to lump together these examples with this phrase. But what Aristotle uses the examples to illustrate is not the causal relationship between a power and the resultant motion or activity of which it is the origin, but rather the dual mode of being of the power itself. In this way we can interpret both Aristotle’s examples, and his description of them, as consistent with the programmatic statement that the new use of *dunamis* extends beyond the sphere of motion. It is possible to give an ontological reading of these examples, which is consistent with Aristotle’s summary statement.
But what analogy holds among the examples? As I mentioned earlier, one clue comes at the beginning of Book Theta where Aristotle describes the purpose of the book:

And since being is in one way divided into what, quality, and quantity,

And is in another way distinguished according to potentiality and actuality,

i.e. according to function, let us distinguish potentiality and actuality.

(1045b 32-35)

Here we find Aristotle linking his project of distinguishing potentiality and actuality to the notion of work or function. Aristotle inserts the notion of a function in relation to the terms potentiality and actuality right from the outset.

My claim is that Aristotle’s analogy among the examples in Theta 6 is based on the notion of a function or work. But how well does this claim fit Aristotle’s examples? Pretty clearly examples (a) – (c) fit the proposal well. They are all examples of capacities or functions and their active realizations. A function or capacity of a substance exists in two ways, has two ways of being. It can be inactive and it can be active. But how does the idea of a function apply to the last two examples? As I noted earlier the language of examples (d) and (e) suggest that Aristotle is thinking of an artifact. Applied to artifacts example (d) contrasts matter with the artifact it composes and example (e) contrasts two stages of completion of an artifact. Artifacts have functional definitions and essences according to Aristotle. So, what these examples exemplify are different stages in production of a functionally defined entity. A function or a capacity can exist in different ways. In the matter, the function exists potentially, in a completed object it exists actually.
Does Aristotle have a functional notion of definition? Aristotle’s discussion of definition and essence is complex, and resists easy summary. However, it is clear that Aristotle often favors functional definitions of artifacts. (Metaph. vii. 10 1035b17) Of particular relevance for my interpretation is this text, which combines the notions of potentiality and actuality with a functional definition:

And so, in defining, those who define a house as stones, bricks, and timbers, are speaking of the potential house, for these are the matter; but those who define it as a covering for bodies and chattel . . speak of the actuality.

(Metaph. viii. 2 1043a14-19)

Aristotle also often favors functional definitions of natural beings like animals and plants. (Metaph. vii,10 1036b30) The De Anima describes soul in functional terms, as the origin of a series of life functions, from nutrition to contemplation. And the biological writings draw a connection between soul and the form and definition of plants and animals. Since, Aristotle gives a potentiality condition for both artifacts and natural beings in Theta 7, and since we can find evidence of a functional notion of definition of natural beings, it is reasonable to include both artifacts and natural beings in the proposed interpretation.

My proposal that the analogy linking Aristotle’s examples is based on the notion of function or work exploits an ambiguity in these terms. On the one hand, the idea of a function or work refers to the ability of something to do something. Abilities of something to do something can be present in an artifact or natural being to varying degrees. On the one hand, both the matter and the house-under-construction are
potentially the house in the sense that the function has been realized in the matter to
different degrees. On the other hand, a function, or ability— it self -- is either at work, or
not. We can connect Aristotle’s two kinds of examples of being x potentially and being x
actually in the following way. An incomplete natural being e.g., a baby, is potentially
until it develops the full range of powers associated with being human. But even when it
has that full range of powers, and it can think and reproduce, it still exists potentially in
that it is not actively engaged in those activities. It is only when a natural substance is
both complete with regard to its powers, and actively using them that it exists actually to
the highest degree. Being x potentially and being x actually admit of degrees. But there
is a limit; a being that is continuously exercising its fully completed and perfect powers is
actually to the fullest extent.

The interpretation of Aristotle’s examples in Theta 6 contains many difficulties.
In this paper I have isolated two problems— motion and analogy-- and considered various
approaches to resolving them. And I have also proposed that interpreting the examples as
illustrating a distinction between two ways of being allows us to address both problems
successfully. This is a modest result as there are many other difficulties of interpretation
surrounding the examples, and alternative frameworks of interpretation within which to
situate them.
Aristotle prefaces these examples with a shorter grouping of three: “we say that potentially, for instance, a statue of Hermes is in the block of wood and the half-line is in the whole, because it might be separated out, and even the man who is not studying we call a man of science if he is capable of studying. Otherwise, actually.” (1048a 31-34)

These examples do not require separate treatment in relation to the issues I address in this paper. The Hermes/block of wood example is useful, however, because it gives us a concrete instance of an example of type (d) which is described in abstract language.


5 “Substance, Being and Energeia” p.121; p. 132-33.

6 See ““ vs. : A Much Read Passage in (but not of) Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*” forthcoming in *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*.


9 For a discussion of the problems of using predication to understand the relationship between potentiality (matter) and actuality (form) see Witt 1989, 126-142. One problem is that potentiality is teleologically directed toward actuality but the predication relationship is non-teleological.


12 Ibid

13 Like Kosman Frede uses the distinction between incomplete and complete motions to interpret Aristotle’s examples and the distinction between potentiality and actuality; complete motions are actualities in a higher degree than, and more real than, incomplete motions. This part of Frede’s view is problematic given that the text that contrasts incomplete and complete motions is not securely positioned in Theta 6. See footnote 4.
