

**Aristotle's Aspectual Ontology**

**Jacob Farris**

**Pennsylvania State University**

In a text entitled *Metaphysics* one expects to find a single systematic account of being that includes and explains the full diversity of beings. Yet, this is not to be found in Aristotle's lecture notes on ontology that were posthumously given that title. Aristotle argues that the task of ontology is not to grasp the totality that every being belongs to, since there can be no all-encompassing category. Instead, its proper task is to understand the thinghood of things,<sup>1</sup> which he undertakes by developing two different accounts of their being: one according to their *categorical being* and another according to their *dynamic-energetic being*. I argue that both types of being are interrelated, and even in certain respects inseparable from each other, but neither can be reduced to or derived from the other. Rather, they should be understood as equiprimordial aspects of all things, one disclosed by considering a thing as the bearer of essential properties and the other by considering the same thing as something capable and at work. Since categorical being explains the determinacy of things and dynamic-energetic being explains the unity of their form and material, both are required in order to explain the existence of individual things.

The nature of categorical being and dynamic-energetic being and their roles in Aristotle's ontology are matters of scholarly disagreement. Franz Brentano made a major contribution to this discussion with his first book, *On the Several Senses of Being in Aristotle* (1862), in which he argues that they are not merely within the mind's understanding according to Aristotle, but are rather extramental structures and relations that constitute beings as such. Brentano represents a widely held view that the categorical sense of being "is the most important of all" (Brentano, 49). In more recent years, however, this position has been powerfully challenged. For instance, Aryeh Kosman in his influential essay, *The Activity of Being: an Essay on Aristotle's Ontology* (2013), criticizes the habits of thought that have formed around the standard translation of *energeia* as "actuality" rather than, as he prefers, "activity." By overlooking the centrality of activity in Aristotle's ontology, he argues that past interpreters have misunderstood it as a theory of the static essences of inert things that underlie their changing incidental properties. In particular, they have missed how Aristotle explains the unity of things as something that they actively accomplish, so that their thinghood is "the complex union of potency and activity, a union best represented in the model of a power and its exercise" (Kosman, 240). Since the categories only exist concretely by belonging to a thing that is constituted by its activity of being, it is dynamic-energetic being, beings considered in terms of their

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1 I follow the translator Joe Sachs in rendering *ousia* as "thinghood" rather than "substance." As Aryeh Kosman (2013) argues, Aristotle uses the term in two ways, sometimes to refer to the things that primarily are and other times to that by virtue of which they are such things. As we might speak of weights and their weight, Aristotle speaks of substances and their substance (Kosman, 16). Kosman continues to use the term "substance" with this in mind, but the distinction between things and thinghood better foregrounds what Aristotle is seeking to understand: not a class of entities, "things" or "substances," but the principle that constitutes things as such.

activities and potencies, that is truly central to Aristotle's ontology.

While I agree with much of Kosman's argument against the standard interpretation of Aristotle, I think he goes too far in the opposite direction. The static construal of Aristotle's ontology is not so much wrong as it is incomplete. Building on the work of two other interpreters of Aristotle, Jiyuan Yu and Mark Sentesy, I argue below that *both* categorical being *and* dynamic-energetic being are ontologically basic in Aristotle's ontology. This is because the dynamic-energetic sense of being presupposes the categorical determinacy of things just as the categorical sense of being presupposes the dynamic-energetic unity of things. Neither are more fundamental than the other because both depend on each other. Together, they give us a picture of the world both insofar as it is static and determinate and insofar as it is changing and changeable, and of how these two fundamental aspects of being interrelate.

## **1. The Meaning of Being**

### ***1.1 Being is Not a Genus***

To understand Aristotle's analysis of the categorical and dynamic-energetic senses of being, it is first necessary to understand what he meant by "being." Aristotle defines ontology as the investigation of "being as being, both what it is and what belongs to it just by virtue of being" (*Met.* VI.1, 1026a32-33; *Aristotle's Metaphysics*, trans. 1999). This does not mean however that ontology studies what every being has in common with every other being, as one might study what every species of animal has in common with every other species of animal. According to Aristotle, the structure of classification rules this out. Definition requires both a genus and a differentia. For instance, when we define humans as "rational animals," we subsume them under a genus ("animal") and specify the differentia that makes them a unique species ("rational"). By classifying beings in this way, we can discover certain fundamental categories. For instance, humans are a kind of animal which is a kind of thing, and red is a kind of color which is a kind of quality. Aristotle lists eight such categories in *Metaphysics*: thing, quality, quantity, relation, action, passion, place, and time (*Met.* 5.7, 1017a25-28). He holds that these cannot be subsumed under a still higher category of being, but rather are the limits of generality because "it is not possible for either oneness or being to be a single genus of things. For it is necessary for each of the things that differentiate each genus to be and to be one" (*Met.* III.3, 998b22-25). If the eight categories are species of the genus "being," then they must possess some differentia from being; however, a property must satisfy two basic conditions to be a differentia: (1) it must not be one of the properties included in the genus that it is paired with (e.g., rationality is not included in the genus animal) and (2) it must in some sense exist (e.g., rationality is a property of humans). But no property can satisfy both conditions if paired with the genus "being" since either a property exists, in which case it cannot be a differentia *from being*, or it does not exist, in which case it cannot *be* a differentia from being. Therefore, whatever being is, it cannot be a single genus.

### ***1.2 The Four Senses of Being and the Primacy of Thinghood***

Instead of being a single genus, Aristotle holds that there are four different senses of being:

Being, spoken of simply, is meant in more than one way, of which one is incidental, another is as the true (and nonbeing as the false), and besides these there are the modes of predication

(such as what, of what sort, how much, where, and when something is, and anything else 'is' means in this way), and still besides all these being-potentially and being-at-work (*Met.* VI.2, 1026a34-b3).

To consider beings as beings, even "simply" or unqualifiedly, is to consider them in one of four ways: as categorical (e.g., "this human *is* a thing"), as incidental (e.g., "this human *is* pale"), as dynamic-energetic (e.g., "she *is* building a house"), and as alethic (e.g., "it *is* (true that it is) raining outside"). Although there are different modes of being, that does not mean that they lack unity since each is related to thinghood, similarly being a healthy heart and being a healthy meal have unity since each is related to being healthy. For it is some individual thing that is potent and at work and that makes judgements about it true or false. While not every categorical or incidental property falls under the category "thing," it is only by belonging to a thing that they exist (e.g., while red is a quality and not a thing, it cannot exist except as the redness of something). Therefore, each sense of being "*is* by means of this one, so that what is primary ... would be thinghood" (*Met.* VII.1, 1028a31-32). Since all four senses of being refer to things, thinghood is the common principle of all of them. Therefore, the question of ontology, "'what is being?,' is just this: what is thinghood?" (*Met.* VII.1 1028b24).

### ***1.3 The Incidental Sense of Being***

To determine the proper approach to ontology, Aristotle considers which of the four senses of being are relevant to it, beginning with incidental being. He describes incidental being as "what is neither always nor for the most part" (*Met.* VI.2, 106b32-33). For instance, pale humans are only incidentally pale because being pale does not follow necessarily from being human, nor does it follow characteristically or for the most part from being human (*Met.* VI.2, 1026b37-39). Hence, to consider things according to their incidental being is to consider the properties they have that follow neither necessarily nor characteristically from what they are in their own right. Aristotle sets this sense of being aside, since "it is clear that there is no knowledge of what is incidental, since all knowledge is of what is so always or for the most part" (*Met.* VI.4, 1027a20-22). In other words, the incidental being of things is too contingent and happenstantial to be treated by the science of being.

### ***1.4 The Alethic Sense of Being***

Next, Aristotle considers alethic being or being as truth. This sense of being is a matter of "combining and separating ... for truth has the affirmation in the case of a combination and the denial in the case of separation, while the false has the contradictory of this division" (*Met.* VI.4, 1027b19-23). We describe single states of affairs in the world with statements that combine subject and predicate terms with "is" or separate them with "is not," for instance when we say, "it is raining outside" or "it is not raining outside." Although we make judgements about things in the world by combining and separating terms that are nominally distinct, this does not mean that things themselves are combinations and separations of distinct components, for "the intertwining and dividing are in thinking but not in things" (*Met.* VI.4, 1027b30). If the judgement "the horse is running" is true, it is not because two originally separate components — a horse and an activity of running — are being mixed together; rather, it is because the thing itself is the coincidence of both as a concrete individual (a running horse). Since alethic being

presupposes the existence of individual things as a condition for the truth or falsity of judgements, it cannot explain them. Therefore, “both being as what is incidental and being as what is true must be set aside” as constituting thinghood (*Met.* VI.4, 1027b4-5).

## **2. The Categorical Being of Things**

### ***2.1 The Categorical Sense of Being***

After setting the incidental and alethic senses of being aside, Aristotle turns to the categorical sense of being. Beings considered categorically are bearers of essential properties, which, unlike incidental properties, do follow necessarily and generically from what they inherently are. These properties are determined by identifying the genera beings fall under and the differentiae that mark them off as distinct species, for these make up what they fundamentally are. For instance, a human being who loses their pale color by getting a tan would remain human, but a being who lacks by nature rationality or animality would not be human. Since “for each thing to be is what is said of it in its own right” (*Met.* VII.4, 1029b14-15), this sense of being is relevant to ontology. Aristotle sets the agenda for his inquiry into the categorical being of things by reviewing the ordinary interpretations of thinghood: “the thinghood of each thing seems to be what it keeps on being in order to be at all, but also seems to be the universal, and the general class, and, fourth, what underlies these” (*Met.* VI.3, 1028b34-36). He proceeds to consider whether thinghood is indeed any of these, beginning with the last possibility.

### ***2.2 Thinghood is Form***

The thinghood of a thing underlies its incidental properties, it is in some sense an underlying thing. Yet it remains unclear whether it is the form of a thing, its material, or the composite of both that underlies them. Aristotle clarifies these distinctions with an example, “By the material, I mean, for instance, bronze, by the form, the shape or the look, and by what is made out of these, the statue” (*Met.* VII.3, 1029a3-5). Although material underlies a thing’s form, Aristotle argues that it cannot be thinghood. For “in its own right” material “is not [said] to be either something or so much or anything else by which being is made definite” but rather “something to which each of these is attributed” (*Met.* VII.3, 1029a20-22). Consider Aristotle’s example of a statue: its “look,” that is, its determinate shape makes it some definite recognizable thing. This shape makes something else underlying it, bronze, into that thing. The bronze serves as the material of the statue only because it is indeterminate relative to it, lacking in itself the properties that make it a statue specifically. Therefore, it is the form and not the material that makes something exactly what it is. Since “to be separate and a *this* seem to belong to an independent thing most of all” (*Met.* VII.3, 1029a27-32), and a thing is some definite *this* because of its form, “The form and what is made out of both seem to be the thinghood more than would the material” (*Met.* VII.3, 1029a29-30). The form-material composite cannot be thinghood either since it is only some determinate thing because of its form (*Met.* VII.3, 1029a30-32). This leaves only one option: the thinghood of things is their form.

### ***2.3 Thinghood is a Species***

Next, Aristotle considers whether thinghood is a genus or a species. For instance, is the form of a human being their animality and their rationality, or just the former? To answer this he considers the

conditions for proper definitions, which held to be possible “only if the statement articulates some primary thing, and things of this kind are all those that are not articulated by attributing one thing to another. Therefore there will be no what-it-is-for-it-to-be belonging to anything that is not a species” (*Met.* VII.4, 1030a26-31). The definition of an essence does not attribute one thing to something else, but rather articulates what one thing is in its own right. The definition of a genus such as “animal,” however, is a mere abstraction that articulates no concrete existence unless it is attributed to something else, namely, one of its species. The definition of a species by contrast does not need to attribute one thing to another in order to articulate a primary thing. For instance, when a human being is defined as a rational animal, there is no need to then attribute this human being to something else in order to articulate the essence of something concrete.

Therefore, the thinghood of things is a species, not a genus.

#### ***2.4 Thinghood is Particular***

Finally, Aristotle considers whether thinghood is the manner in which particular things exist or a universal beyond them. He approaches this question by evaluating the Platonic account of the Forms, according to which the true being of things are absolute and timeless essences that transcend all particulars. For instance, while a particular human being may be good, the form of the good is something else that exists over and above them. If this is correct, then the thinghood of things is a universal, not their particular manner of being. However, Aristotle disagrees with the Platonic account, “for there is knowledge of anything only when we recognize what it is for it to be” (*Met.* VII.6, 1031b6-7). In other words, the question “what is x-ness?” is simply the question “what is it to be x?,” and therefore it makes no sense to distinguish between goodness and being good. After all, if they are separable, then goodness would not be good (*Met.* VII.6, 1031b5-11). But that would be absurd, “therefore the good and being-good must be one thing” (*Met.* VII.6, 1031b11-12). This means that the thinghood of things is particular, not universal.

#### ***2.5 The Problem of Unity***

In sum, the thinghood of things is their form, which is both their species and their particular manner of being. Together these explain why things can be legitimately treated as separate and specific subjects of predicates that correspond to their essential properties. They are determinate because of their form, they admit of proper definitions because they are a concrete species, and they are independent things since their essence coincides with their particular being. Yet, none of these can explain the feature of things that makes their properties belong to them in the first place: their unity. According to Aristotle, things cannot be reduced to a heap of distinct parts but rather are individual wholes. For example:

The semicircle is defined by means of the circle, and also the finger by means of the whole, since a finger is a certain sort of part of a human being. And so all those things that are parts in the sense of material and into which something divides up as into material are derivative from the whole (*Met.* VII.10, 1035a18-b15).

The material parts of things are what they are only by belonging to the whole as a finger is and functions as such only in relation to the whole human being, in separation from which it is a finger in name only. So the question arises how the material parts of a thing belong to the whole; for instance, “Why are

these things here, say bricks and stones, a house?” (*Met.* VII.17 1041a28-29). In particular, “What is being sought is the responsible thing by means of which the material is something, and this is the form” (*Met.* VII.17, 1041b8-9). Somehow the material parts of a thing are unified with the form as a complete whole thing. However, considering things according to their categorical being cannot explain the unity of form and material since this mode of consideration opposes the two as different basic features of each thing. To explain the unity of things, Aristotle turns to the remaining sense of being: dynamic-energetic being. So “What one ought to say thinghood is, and of what sort it is, let us speak about again, *as though making another start*” (*Met.* VII.17, 1041a6-7; my emphasis).

### **3. The Dynamic-Energetic Being of Things**

#### ***3.1 The Dynamic-Energetic Sense of Being***

To consider things according to their dynamic-energetic being is not to consider them as bearers of essential properties but instead as things that are capable and at work. The Greek terms *dunamis* and *energeia* used by Aristotle are usually translated as “potentiality” and “actuality” respectively but these primarily modal terms do not quite capture their meaning. As Yu (2003) explains with respect to *energeia*, “*Ergon* means act, work, or function, and hence *energeia* has a strong connotation of ‘activity’ or ‘function.’ To say that a thing is actual in the strict sense means that it acts, or it is doing something” (Yu, *The Structure of Being in Aristotle’s ‘Metaphysics’*, 14). To be energetically is not exactly to be actual but to be actively or to be at work. *Dunamis* is not exactly modal potentiality either but is rather “*a source of change* in some other thing or in the same thing as other” (*Met.* IX.1, 1046a11-12), that is, a source of change by which one thing changes another thing or changes itself. A *dunamis* is the activation conditions of a change which consist of a certain set of relations of reciprocal effect, for “something is potential both by means of its own potency to be acted upon and by something else’s potency to be acted upon by it” (*Met.* IX.1, 1046a21-23). For instance, the activation conditions of a violinist’s potency to play a violin are partly satisfied by the active contribution of something else, her violin. While in a sense it is the human being who acts on the violin in the activity of violin-playing, the violin-playing itself is the work of both, and the source for this activity is a shared potency for violin-playing that precedes and grounds the causal agent-patient relationship between them. Sentesy (2020) explains the situation as follows:

Saying that a rubber band is defined by how fingers pull and release it misses exactly what makes it a rubber band, namely, the way it responds to stretching by pulling itself back together [...] [T]he agent-patient relationship is not the fundamental character of sources, but a derivative feature. (Sentesy, 89)

While change involves one thing affecting or being affected by another, it is their shared potency to whose activation each contributes, that makes change possible. Therefore, “The basis of agent-patient relationships ... is not force, but mutual affection” (Sentesy, 89). In this way, while the perspective of categorical being discloses things as separate subjects, the perspective of dynamic-energetic being discloses them as relational beings.

#### ***3.2 The Irreducibility of Change***

Although change, as the activation of potency, belongs to dynamic-energetic being, this does not mean that it does not exhibit the determinacy of categorical being. Rather, change is categorically determinate, for “what changes always changes either in thinghood, or in account, or in quality, or in place” (*Ph.* III.1, 200b33; *Aristotle's Physics: a Guided Study*, trans. 1995). Yet this does not mean that dynamic-energetic being can be collapsed into categorical being. Sentesy explains:

Potency and being-at-work are *not properties*, and this is because they are neither said to be *in* a thing as properties are, nor are they said *of* it [...]. For us, properties are more or less what we can say truthfully about something, so for us this includes potency and actuality. But for Aristotle, potencies and activities are not essential or accidental properties that categorical beings could ever have, because they are not properties at all: they are a way of understanding beings in and through how they operate. (Sentesy, 53-54)

When we understand beings according to their dynamic-energetic being, we do not grasp them in terms of their static properties but rather in terms of their activities and potencies. We cannot do so by considering what is within or said of them as independent subjects, in part because their potencies and activities only exist in relation to others. Since dynamic-energetic being is shot through with categorical determinacy, it can be difficult to distinguish the activities and potencies of a thing from its properties. But the deficiencies of categorical descriptions of change can be illustrated with the following example from Sentesy: “If I say ‘at 1:00 the runner was at Marathon, at 2:15 he was between Marathon and Athens, and at 3:35 he was in Athens,’ I have described the static properties of an object; no motion-like being has been articulated” (Sentesy, 74). Such a description only articulates the static properties of subjects at different points in the process of change, but it fails to describe the activity of running as such. In order to articulate the activities of dynamic beings, they must be described in dynamic-energetic terms.

### **3.3 The Two Primary Kinds of Change**

According to Aristotle, there are two primary kinds of change: motion and being-at-work. The former kind is a change from one thing into something else, or, in other words, an alteration. For instance, “losing weight, for the thing that is losing weight, when it is doing so, is in motion in that way, although that for the sake of which the motion takes place is not present” (*Met.* IX.6, 1048b20-23). Other motions include learning something, walking somewhere, and building something. Such changes have an end-point, and cease once they arrive there. Here “end” does not refer to a temporal end but to a condition of fulfilment or completion. In this sense, the end of housebuilding is the completed house, not the moment in time when housebuilding stops. Since a motion ceases when its end-point is reached, a motion and its completion are mutually exclusive conditions.

By contrast, being-at-work is a kind of change that is immediately complete and stays complete as long as it persists. For instance, “One has seen and at the same time is seeing the same thing” (*Met.* IX.6, 1048b25-26). Here “has seen” does not refer to a completed act of seeing but rather to the *exercise* of a capacity. The exercise of a capacity does not alter the capacity, but rather changes it into being itself actively and completely. For instance, although our capacity for perception “follows from being moved and acted upon” (*Soul.* II.5, 416b18; *On the Soul and on Memory and Recollection*, trans. 2001) by perceptible

particulars, this affection does not *alter* what we are *qua* beings capable of perception just as a thinking being is not changed into something else by thinking (*Soul.* II.5, 417b9-10). An affection that activates a capacity is not a kind of alteration but is instead “a passing over into being oneself, namely into being-at-work-staying-oneself” (*Soul.* II.5 417b8). Therefore, being-at-work does not change a capacity into something else, but rather changes it into being and staying itself completely.

Understanding motion and being-at-work enable us to describe things insofar as they are active and changing, in a way that categorical descriptions cannot. Considered according to his categorical being, to say that “Socrates is a human being” is to say that his essential form consists of the properties that constitute the species “human.” By contrast, considered according to his dynamic-energetic being, to say that “Socrates is a human being” is to say, as Witt (1989) elucidates, either that he “is exercising his capacity for being human” or that he “has fully achieved that set of capacities which a mature human being has” (Witt, *Hylomorphism in Aristotle*, 147). It is only in the terms of process and end-point or capacity and exercise that we can articulate Socrates insofar as he is changing.

### ***3.4 The Dynamic-Energetic Unity of Form and Material***

So, how does the dynamic-energetic sense of being explain the unity of things? The answer lies in considering material and form according to their dynamic-energetic being. In this context, Aristotle redefines material as “that which, while not being actively a *this*, is a *this* potentially” (*Met.* VIII.1, 1042a28). Whereas material is a potency to be something more determinate than it is in and by itself, form is the being-at-work of that potency. For instance, Aristotle says that those who define a house as bricks and lumber “describe the house in potency” (*Met.* VIII.2, 1043a15), whereas those who define it as “a sheltering enclosure for possessions and living bodies ... describe its being-at-work” (*Met.* VIII.2, 1043a17-18) and those who combine both accounts define it as the “sort of thinghood that is made out of these” (*Met.* VIII.2, 1043a19). The latter describe a house as bricks and lumber whose capacity to be a single sheltering enclosure to be living bodies is being exercised, which was activated with the aid of its housebuilders and continues to be at work in relation to its occupants and environment. Since form is the exercise of the potential of the material, which is simply a capacity to be some *this*, the form of a thing is no longer something other than its material but rather is its ongoing activation.

Yu makes the crucial point that when material and form are not associated with potency and being-at-work, “form and matter are contingently related” (Yu, 62 ). Considered categorically, the shape and structure of a house is only contingently related to whatever parts happens to serve as its material. As far as the form is concerned, it makes no difference whatsoever whether these bricks and lumber or those bricks and lumber instantiate it. Yet, “when they are associated, form and matter are related necessarily” (Yu, 62). Here the form of a house is the activation of *just these* bricks and lumber, and not *those* bricks and lumber. Since “There is one thing that is material and one that is form, and the former has being as potency and the latter as being-at-work, the thing sought after,” namely, the explanation of how the form-material composite is unified, “*would no longer seem to be an impasse*” (*Met.* VIII.6, 1045a21-23; my emphasis).

## **4. Conclusion**



Instead of giving us a single theory of everything, Aristotle's *Metaphysics* presents us with a non-systematic account of two interrelated yet irreducibly fundamental aspects of being: the world insofar as it consists of objects bearing static essential properties and the world insofar as it is potent and at work, and therefore changing and changeable. The former, categorical being, can explain the determinacy of things as separate beings constituted by their specific form but it cannot explain the unity of things because of the rigid distinction it draws between their form and their material parts. The latter, dynamic-energetic being, can explain the unity of things that categorical being presupposes, as the exercise of a capacity to be something definite, but it also presupposes categorical being in that change is only possible in and through the categorical properties of things. So while both aspects of being are bound up with each other, neither can be collapsed into the other. Together they give us a picture of all things *both* insofar as they are fundamentally static and independent *and* insofar as they are fundamentally changing and relational. At the intersection between these two fundamental aspects of their being, things are constituted as such by their determinacy and unity. In this way, Aristotle completes the task of ontology – the explanation of thinghood – by means of an account of the irreducibly multiple aspects of being.

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