WAYS OF BEING

Potentiality and Actuality in Aristotle's Metaphysics

Charlotte Witt

CORNELL UNIVERSITY PRESS
ITHACA & LONDON

CHAPTER 4

The Priority of Actuality

Whether Aristotle's defense of *dunamis* would convince a committed Megarian actualist, it clearly underlines the centrality of *dunamis* in the natural world, since (according to the Immobility Argument) all motion and change depend on it. And, the full inventory of powers discussed in *Metaphysics* IX (agent and passive, rational and nonrational, and nature) indicates the explanatory range of powers in Aristotle's thought. And finally, the distinction Aristotle draws between *dunamis* as power and *dunamis* as potentiality extends the reach of *dunamis* into his understanding of being. It emerged in the chapter 2 discussion of Aristotle's examples of being X potentially that *dunamis* is a relational notion with an important partner in the notion of being X actually. Thus far, however, it might seem that *dunamis* is the more important notion of the two for Aristotle. This appearance is deeply misleading. Aristotle thinks that actuality is not simply an equal, and equally important, partner to *dunamis*, but that it is both a prior and a better way of being, or so he claims in *Metaphysics* IX, chapters 8 and 9.

As I said in the Introduction, the priority of actuality in relation

to *dunamis* is the second major ontological thesis of *Metaphysics* IX. And, as we will see, many strands of Aristotle's discussion in *Metaphysics* IX come together in his argument for the priority of actuality. In particular we will see how Aristotle's dispositional analysis of powers, his discussion of rational and nonrational powers, and his distinction concerning the origin of powers come into play in his argument. Aristotle's argument for the priority of actuality establishes the thematic unity of book IX.

The scope of Aristotle's argument for the priority of actuality is importantly enlarged in the second part of chapter 8, where Aristotle explains the priority of eternal substances in relation to perishable substances. The addition of this argument allows us to see the relationship between potentiality and actuality as ordering reality as a whole for Aristotle, and not just one segment of it, the sublunar realm. The expansion of scope in Aristotle's priority argument supports my interpretive claim that the priority of actuality works in *Metaphysics* IX as the mechanism for ordering Aristotle's hierarchical view of being from top to bottom.

Aristotle's thesis that actuality is prior to potentiality requires unpacking. Let us begin with the range of Aristotle's argument for the priority of actuality. One issue concerns what sense of *dunamis* is under discussion. In chapter 8, Aristotle explicitly includes both powers (of all the types he distinguishes in *Metaphysics* IX) and nature in the scope of his claim that actuality is prior to potentiality:

> And I mean by *dunamis* not only that definite kind, which is said to be an origin of change in another thing or in the thing itself as other, but in general every origin of motion and rest. For nature, too, is in the same kind as *dunamis*; for it is a principle of movement—not in something else but in the thing itself as itself.
>
> (1049b5–11)

From this introductory passage it seems that Aristotle intends to argue for the priority of actuality in relation to his full inventory of powers, including nature. But what about the "new" or ontological sense of *dunamis*, which Aristotle does not explicitly mention in this text? If, as I claim, one strand of Aristotle's argument in *Metaphysics* IX is to establish the priority of being X actually in relation

to being X potentially, then his priority argument ought to include the "new" meaning of *dunamis*.

It is important to remember that Aristotle's distinction between powers and potentiality does not introduce a new class or kind of entities, but rather it introduces the idea that there are ways of being X by means of two kinds of examples. Recall that the distinction between ways of being is illustrated by powers as well as by the other kind of example that Aristotle uses: incomplete and complete substance. A power, like house building, exists potentially when it is inactive, and it exists actually when it is active. When an animal or an artifact is incomplete, it is potentially, and when it is complete, it is actually. For animals, the power responsible for this transition from incomplete to complete is nature. We can link together Aristotle's two kinds of examples; a complete substance whose powers are active is actually to the fullest extent. So, Aristotle's arguments for the priority of actuality in relation to powers and in relation to nature are ingredients of a general argument for the priority of being X actually in relation to being X potentially.

Aristotle argues that being X actually is prior to being X potentially in definition (*logos*) and in being (*ousia*), and in time (*Metaphysics* IX.8.1049b10–11). Priority in time is fairly straightforward; it is temporal and causal priority; priority in the order of generation (1050a2–3). Aristotle's prime example of the priority in time of actuality is the male parent, who exists prior to the process of generation of an offspring and is the active source of the generation.[1] There is a different way in which a *dunamis* is temporally prior to an actuality, and this is exemplified by an incomplete substance which exists potentially before it develops fully into a complete substance. This kind of temporal priority of *dunamis* is the only exception to Aristotle's general thesis of the priority of actuality.

Actuality is prior in definition to *dunamis* as well because we know what a *dunamis* is in terms of the actuality or activity toward which it is directed. The power of heat is to be defined in terms of the activity of heating. The power of house building is the ability to build a house. And, as we saw in chapter 3, Aristotle thinks that both nonrational powers like heat and rational powers like house building ought to be defined in terms of their activation conditions.

Priority in being is ontological priority; it refers to the existential

dependency of being potentially on being actually. Priority in being differs from priority in time because it does not describe either a temporal or a causal relationship. And it differs from priority in definition because it is not simply priority for understanding or knowledge. In *Metaphysics* IX, chapter 8, Aristotle makes a general argument for the priority in being of actuality. Actuality is prior in being both in the case of his familiar examples of the distinction between ways of being something (inactive power to activity, and incomplete to complete substance) and in the case of perishable and eternal substances. But there are important differences in the argument that Aristotle gives in the two cases. The teleological relationship between being X potentially and being X actually plays a key role in his first argument, but not in the second, which relies on other materials, including the distinction between complete (seeing, thinking) and incomplete motions (losing weight, house building). I argued in chapter 2 that although the distinction between complete and incomplete motions appears right after Aristotle's examples of the distinction between being X actually and being X potentially (1048a37–b6), it is a mistake to interpret them in light of the difference between complete and incomplete motions. Rather, as we will see, the distinction has a role to play in Aristotle's argument for the priority in being of eternal beings in relation to perishable beings.

In chapter 2 I claimed that the relationship between being X potentially and being X actually is a teleological, or "for the sake of," relationship. I supported this claim by citing Aristotle's explanation of the priority in being of actuality, which uses teleological language. If we consider Aristotle's core examples, however, there are several difficulties with the claim that being potentially X is for the sake of being actually X. The first is that it is hard to see why Aristotle thinks that a capacity exists for the sake of its exercise, or an immature substance exists for the sake of a mature substance. What about capacities that lie dormant and are never exercised, as when someone decides never to pick up the viola again? Similarly, why think that an incomplete substance exists for the sake of a complete substance? What about an immature animal, a puppy, that does not survive to become a fully functioning mature dog?

The last question suggests a second difficulty with regard to the

idea that there is a teleological relationship between being X potentially and being X actually which arises in relation to incomplete and complete substance. I mentioned this difficulty in chapter 3, in connection with the parallel that Aristotle draws between artistic production and natural development. In artistic production, the incomplete statue exists for the sake of being complete because each stage of production occurs for the sake of the idea of the complete statue in the artist's mind. But, it is not entirely clear what the analogue to the idea of the statue (in the artist's mind) is in the case of natural development. In particular, it is difficult to see what stands to the incomplete natural being as the idea of the statue stands to the incomplete statue. What does the incomplete, developing animal, which exists potentially, exist for the sake of?

In section 1, I explain the three ways that being actually is prior to being potentiality. Because priority in time and in definition are relatively straightforward, I focus on the interpretation of priority in being. I argue that priority in being means existential or ontological priority. If A is prior in being to B, then A can exist without B, but B cannot exist without A. I offer an interpretation of the ontological priority of complete substances in nature that addresses the apparent problems raised by Aristotle's teleological explanation of it. In section 2, I explain what Aristotle describes as the priority of actuality in its most authoritative sense, which is the way in which eternal beings are prior to perishing beings. I address the question of whether Aristotle thinks that there is a teleological relationship between eternal and perishing substances parallel to the teleological tie between potentiality and actuality in the sublunar sphere of nature. I consider to what extent this text supports the idea of a universal teleology in Aristotle, an issue which will be important for the question of the purpose of Aristotle's hierarchical metaphysics, which I discuss in chapter 5.

Finally, in section 3, I discuss the presence of normative language in Aristotle's understanding of being, and, in particular, his argument that actuality or activity is better than *dunamis*. Taken together with the teleological relationship between matter and form, and the idea that a *telos* is both an end and a good for Aristotle, this argument raises the issue of the relationship between hierarchy (i.e.,

the priority of actuality) and norms in Aristotle's vision of nature and being. I conclude this chapter by suggesting that teleological, developmental theories of nature and being, like Aristotle's, are intrinsically hierarchical and intrinsically normative.

1. Three Kinds of Priority of Actuality

Aristotle distinguishes three kinds of priority relation between actuality and *dunamis*; actuality is prior in definition, in being, and, in one way, in time. The relationship between actuality and *dunamis* in time is complex. In one way, Aristotle tells us, an actuality is always temporally prior to a *dunamis*. "For from the potential being the actual being is always produced by an actual being; man from man, musician by musician; there is always a first mover, and the mover already exists actually" (1049b23–26). From another perspective, the *dunamis* is temporally prior: "I mean that to this particular man who now exists actually and to the corn and to the seeing subject, the matter and the seed and that which is capable of seeing, which are potentially a man and corn and seeing, but not yet actually so are prior in time" (1049b19–23). This double perspective on temporal priority is a prominent feature of Aristotle's biological writings because it is central to the way that he understands animal generation. There is always an actually existing male parent who initiates the generation, but the developing matter or fetus is potentially a man before it is a man actually. As we saw in chapter 2, Aristotle thinks that the fetus is potentially a man once it has an inner principle of development, and will develop into a man barring external intervention.

In chapter 3 we saw that Aristotle's inventory of powers differentiates among innate natural powers (sight), powers that come by practice (viola playing), and powers that require learning (medicine) (1047b31–35). The relevance of this distinction to the argument of *Metaphysics* IX is apparent here in his argument for the temporal and causal priority of actuality. Natural powers like sight originate through the process of reproduction, and are thus temporally and causally preceded by an actuality. In parallel manner, Aristotle tells

us, a potential musician (the student) is preceded by an actual musician (the teacher) (1049b26). But activity or actuality is prior to acquired powers in an additional way. Activity in the form of practice temporally precedes the formation of the ability to play an instrument, and the *dunamis* is formed through practice or activity. Also, the art of medicine is acquired gradually so that some actual knowledge will precede the formation of the *dunamis*. Hence, there is a double temporal and causal priority of actuality in the case of those powers that are acquired through practice or through learning.

Priority in definition is different from priority in time. Aristotle is not pointing to a causal relationship, or to a temporal priority between actuality and *dunamis*. Rather, he is pointing to the fact that we specify the content of a given *dunamis* in relation to the activity or actuality of which it is the cause or origin. "I mean by 'capable of building' that which can build, and by 'capable of seeing' that which can see, and by 'visible' that which can be seen" (1049b14–16). As I remarked in chapter 3, Aristotle prepares the ground for this priority argument in his discussion of how to define rational and nonrational powers. What a power is, is to be specified in relation to the conditions which necessarily activate it. Aristotle does not explicitly discuss the definitional priority of complete substances in relation to incomplete substances, but it makes sense to say that a fetus is defined as potentially human, or in relation to the actuality, the complete or mature human being, and not the other way around.

What does Aristotle mean when he says that actuality is prior to *dunamis* in being? He does not provide a definition of priority in being in our text; elsewhere, however, he gives the following definition:

> A is prior in being to B if A can exist without B but B cannot exist without A.[2]

Let us call this kind of priority "ontological priority." The priority in being of actuality claims that what is actually can exist independently of what is potentially, but what is potentially cannot exist independently of what is actually. Actualities are ontologically independent, and potentialities are ontologically dependent on

them.[3] In *Metaphysics* IX, chapter 8, priority in being is discussed at 1050a4–b6 (Text A) in relation to our familiar examples of being X potentially and being X actually, and it is also attributed to eternal beings in relation to perishing beings at 1050b6–28 (Text B). It is fair to say that Aristotle devotes most of his attention in chapter 8 to explaining and justifying the priority in being, or ontological priority, of actuality.

It is relatively uncontroversial that priority in being means ontological priority in Text B, but some scholars have found it implausible to understand priority in being as ontological priority in Text A. The implausibility arises from the nature of Aristotle's argument in support of his claim that actualities are prior in being to potentialities in Text A. After we have considered Aristotle's reasons for attributing ontological priority to actuality, we will consider, and reject, the strongest alternative interpretation of priority in being in Text A, which is to understand it as explanatory priority. In this view, Aristotle would be saying that potentialities exist for the sake of those actualities that explain their existence.[4] In contrast, I argue that priority in being means ontological priority in both Text A and Text B.

Aristotle's explanation for the ontological priority of actuality in Text A is twofold. One point turns on the presence of form, and the other point turns on a teleological relationship that holds between potentialities and actualities. Aristotle illustrates each point using both kinds of examples that he used to introduce the distinction between being X potentially and being X actually earlier in *Metaphysics* IX, chapter 6.

> But it [actuality] is also prior in being; first, because the things that are posterior in becoming are prior in form and in being, for example, man is prior to boy and human being to seed; for the one already has its form, and the other has not. Secondly, because everything that comes to be moves towards a principle, that is, an end. For that for the sake of which a thing is, is its principle and the becoming is for the sake of the end; and the actuality is the end and it is for the sake of this that the potentiality is acquired. For animals do not see in order that they have sight, but they have sight that they may see.
>
> (1054a4–11)

In this text Aristotle justifies the ontological priority of actuality by pointing to two factors: the absence of form in incomplete beings and its presence in complete beings, and the teleological directedness connecting inactive powers and their exercise. Let us begin with the role of form. His examples are extremely interesting because he says man is prior to boy, and human being is prior to seed because the latter two lack their form.[5] Man and human being are prior in form and being to boy and seed, even though they are posterior in the order of generation. The man and human being in question here are clearly the actualities that are posterior in time to the potentialities (boy, seed), and not the actualities that are prior in time.

Aristotle gives this example to illustrate and to justify the ontological priority of actuality. So we know that he thinks that boys are ontologically dependent on adult humans, and that adult humans are not ontologically dependent on boys. What could this mean? It does not mean that boys are causally dependent on the actual human beings that generate them. The actuality at issue here is temporally posterior to the boy in the order of becoming. Priority in time and priority in being are not the same. That is, Aristotle is interested in exploring the priority in being of the actualities, or complete beings, which are posterior to the potentialities, or incomplete beings, in time or in the order of generation.

Aristotle says here what we would expect, given his functional notion of form, that boys and seed lack the human form, which mature human beings have. But, what does it mean to say that they lack the human form? It means that they are not able to perform the full range of life functions typical and essential to that form. There is a problem with the identity of incomplete substances, their being, given that they cannot perform their typical or essential functions. Here Aristotle supplies a solution to the paradox of identity by telling us that their identity or being is dependent on the being of mature exemplars of their kind. Immature substances lack their form or principle of identity, but they have an identity relative to a mature substance. A boy is potentially a man. This relationship is one of ontological dependence in that being potentially a man is what the boy is. This ontological dependency turns on the differing

relationship that a boy and a man have to the human form; it is the difference between being potentially human and being actually human; between lacking and having the human form.

In chapter 3 I argued that Aristotle is interested in rational powers because of the complex role that form plays in their definitions and exercise. Both the definition of the power, and its goal, are specified in the form. In a rational power, the form preexists in the soul of the agent, and hence it can preexist as a goal of the production. I said that Aristotle is interested in the role of form in rational powers in part because of the parallel he draws with the operation of form in nature. But, I also pointed out that there are important differences between rational powers and potentiality in nature. One important difference concerns the *location* of the form that preexists, and acts as a goal, in the development of incomplete natural substances.

We are faced with a dilemma. The form that is the goal of substantial development does not preexist in the incomplete substance. If it did preexist, then the substance would not be incomplete, and would be able to perform the full range of typical and essential functions. But the form that is the goal of substantial development also does not preexist in the complete substance that is the outcome of this process, for the complete substance does not, as yet, exist. Indeed, it might never exist. But, if this is right, then it is hard to see how the boy is ontologically dependent on the man, since the man—and the man's form—does not now exist. But if A is prior in substance to B, then A can exist without B, but B cannot exist without A. In our example, however, the "A" (the man) does not yet exist, so the man could not be prior in substance to the boy.

How does priority in substance apply to incomplete and complete substances, like boy and man, to use Aristotle's own examples? The rough idea is that if we view a boy as an entity en route toward its end, as being for the sake of its end, then two conditions obtain: (a) the boy does not have his end; (b) nonetheless, the end must exist. Indeed, the existence of the child, since it exists for the sake of its end, is dependent on the existence of the end. And what is that end? For Aristotle, the mature human being, the entity having the form, is the end of the child, that for the sake of which the child exists,

that which must exist, if the child exists. The reverse dependency does not hold. The adult has its form and does not exist for the sake of or toward something else, at least not something else with its own form.[6] The existence of the man does not depend on the existence of the boy.

If, as I have suggested, the boy exists for the sake of the man, and the boy lacks the form which the man has, it is reasonable to think that the form is in the man. The boy exists for the sake of being a man, but it is unclear what form or actuality the boy, who exists potentially, is dependent on. Is the form in the man who the boy will become? This seems implausible, for that man doesn't exist at present, and, indeed, might never exist.[7] A more plausible alternative is to think that although the boy exists for the sake of the man, the boy is ontologically dependent on the type or species he will realize, rather than the token or individual he might become.[8] In this view, the end or actuality in question is the species—in our example, the human species. Aristotelian species, in turn, are ontologically dependent on the existence of their individual members. Ultimately, then, the boy in our example is ontologically dependent on the existence of human beings.[9]

A boy, in this view, is a human being potentially; he exists for the sake of an end which is being an actual human being. What does this mean? It means that the boy's form or essence is the human essence, but that he is not able to perform the array of typical or essential functions that constitute it. If being human did not actually exist, then the boy could not be potentially human, or, in other words, he would not exist, where "exist" means *exist as what he is.* But the reverse ontological dependency does not hold; the existence of a mature man does not depend on the existence of a boy.[10] Hence, the priority in being (interpreted as ontological priority) of being X actually in relation to being X potentially can be interpreted to fit with Aristotle's first examples and first explanation in Text A.

It is useful now to consider Aristotle's second justification of the ontological priority of actuality—the teleological justification, which he illustrates using examples of the relationship between inactive powers and their activity. "For animals do not see in order that they may have sight, but they have sight in order that they may

see. And similarly men have the art of building that they may build, and theoretical science that they may theorize" (1050a10–14). He also mentions matter and form: "Further, matter is potentially because it can come into the form, but whenever it is actually, then it is in the form" (1050a15–17).

Sight and seeing, an inactive power and its exercise, is one of Aristotle's core examples of the distinction between potentiality and actuality. In chapter 2 I emphasized one feature of this example, which is that it does not meet the different object requirement governing active and passive powers. I also mentioned that Aristotle thought that there was a teleological relationship between abilities and their exercise. Here Aristotle uses the teleological relationship to establish the ontological priority of activities like seeing. But why think that the ability to see exists for the sake of its exercise? Even if it did, why think that this teleological relationship explains or justifies the claim that the ability to see is ontologically dependent on the activity of seeing, but that the activity of seeing is not ontologically dependent on the ability to see?

There is a partial answer to these questions in Aristotle's view that not all activities require the existence of powers. Aristotle thinks that it is possible to have activities without any correlate powers or potentialities. He does not think that in principle every activity must be paired with an inactive power or ability. Eternal, imperishable beings exist actually and not potentially (*Metaphysics* IX.8.1050b6–8).[11] Being actively or actually is not intrinsically a relational way of being dependent on the existence of a *dunamis*. Every *dunamis*, in contrast, is paired with, directed toward, an activity or actuality. This is because the being of every *dunamis* is relational; every *dunamis* is or exists for the sake of an actuality. That is, to be a potential X is to be a being that is for the sake of being actually X. Just as we saw that an incomplete substance exists in relation to a complete substance (but not the other way around) so, too, every power exists for the sake of its activity, but not the other way around. Finally, matter is or exists potentially in relation to form, but not the other way around.

The teleological, or "for the sake of," relationship here has an ontological twist. It describes the relational way of being that inactive

powers, incomplete substances, and matter have which makes them ontologically dependent on the existence of activities, mature substance, and form. But the reverse ontological dependency does not obtain, for Aristotle countenances actualities, activities, and forms that are not related to, or ontologically dependent on, any corresponding *dunamis*. As we will see later in this chapter, the sun and the stars are continuously active, in a way that does not require any correlative *dunamis* or inactive power (1050b22–28).

In my interpretation, what is crucial about the teleological relationship for Aristotle's thesis of the ontological priority of actuality is that it establishes a one-way ontological dependence of what is potentially X on what is actually X. It is useful at this point to consider an important, alternative interpretation of what Aristotle means by priority in being, which turns on an alternative understanding of what Aristotle means by priority in being in Text A. In the alternative view, priority in being is explanatory priority. In this interpretation, Aristotle is simply reiterating a point that he makes frequently in his biological writings that explanation in terms of final causes is prior to explanation in terms of matter and material causes.

There are three important considerations against the idea that priority in being simply means explanatory priority. First, there is scant textual basis for this interpretation. Where Aristotle defines priority in being, he often—though not always—explains it in terms of ontological, and not explanatory, priority. Moreover, priority in being uncontroversially means ontological priority later in *Metaphysics* IX, chapter 8 (in Text B), so that Aristotle would have had to change the meaning of prior in being from explanatory priority to ontological priority in mid-argument with no signal. The internal coherence of *Metaphysics* IX, chapter 8, which uncontroversially contains a continuous argument that actuality is prior to potentiality, is undercut by the explanatory interpretation of priority in being.

Finally, in his biological writings, where Aristotle does explain priority in being in terms of explanatory priority, he connects explanatory priority with priority in time and definition. But, if explanatory priority just is priority in time and definition, as a passage

from the biological writings suggests, then we cannot consider explanatory priority to be a third kind of priority different from priority in time and definition.[12] Hence, since Text A in chapter 8 requires a third kind of priority, we should not understand priority in being to be explanatory priority.

Priority in being is ontological priority. Actualities can exist independently of potentialities, but potentialities cannot exist independently of actualities. I mentioned earlier that Aristotle thought that it was possible to have activities which are continuous and not dependent for existence on any *dunamis*. For example, Aristotle tells us in Text B that eternal beings are pure actualities that exist independently of any correlative potentiality (1050b6–8). Every power, in contrast, exists "for the sake of" or in relation to an activity. For this reason, Aristotle holds that actuality is prior in being to potentiality.

There is one complexity left to consider in our discussion of priority in being in Text A. Agent powers like house building exist not only for the sake of their being active, but also for the sake of the product that results from their activity: a house. In contrast, a power like sight exists only for the sake of seeing. A *dunamis* like house building, which results in a product, is explained in relation to that product. "Where, then, the result is something apart from the exercise, the actuality is in the thing that is being made, e.g. the act of building is in the thing that is being built because the activity is in the house" (1050a30–32). A *dunamis* like the capacity to see, in contrast, exists in relation to the act of seeing, which is in the agent (1050a34–36). In one case the activity is in the agent (seeing), and in the other case it is in the product (house building). But, once this complexity of location is noted by Aristotle, he asserts that in both cases the activity is prior in being to the power.

It is worth thinking about the distinction between complete motions, like seeing, and incomplete motions, like house building, a bit more. In chapter 2, I said that this distinction was not crucial to Aristotle's examples of the "new" or ontological meaning of *dunamis* introduced in *Metaphysics* IX, chapter 6. And, indeed, Aristotle uses both the power of sight and the power of house building to illustrate the "new" use of *dunamis*. However, as we have just

seen, the distinction plays a role in Aristotle's argument for the priority in being of actuality in Text A because of the question concerning the location of the activity that is prior in being to the power.

The distinction also plays an important role in Aristotle's argument for the priority in being of eternal substances in relation to perishable substances in Text B. Aristotle's eternal substances engage in complete motions (like seeing) rather than incomplete motions (like house building). Complete motions are complete at every moment; incomplete motions are processes toward completion. Complete motions need not involve any potentiality or matter; but incomplete motions necessarily do so (1050b22–28). Aristotle's distinction between incomplete and complete motions will come into play in his argument for ontological priority of eternal substances in relation to perishable substances in Text B.

Priority in being connects eternal substances to perishing substances, according to Aristotle's argument in the second half of *Metaphysics* IX, chapter 8. Aristotle's argument is an important piece of his hierarchical structuring of being by means of the distinction between potentiality and actuality, and it is importantly different from the teleological justification we have just been considering.

2. Eternal and Perishable Substances

Thus far we have been considering a network of ontological dependencies that bind together matter to form, incomplete substance to complete substance, and an inactive power to its activity. These ontological dependencies rest ultimately on the teleological relationship between being X potentially and being X actually. Midway through Aristotle's argument for the priority of actuality, in Text B, two new classes of entities are introduced: eternal and perishable substances. "But actuality is prior in a stricter sense also; for eternal things are prior in being to perishable things, and no eternal thing exists potentially" (1050b7–9).

This expansion of the ontological priority of actuality to include

eternal beings in relation to perishable beings raises two important issues. First, what exactly is the relationship of priority in being in Text B? Is it a relationship of ontological dependence? And if it is, does Aristotle hold that perishable substances are ontologically dependent on eternal substances because they exist for the sake of the latter (the teleological justification) or for some other reason?

The question of how Aristotle justifies a relationship of ontological dependency between perishable beings and eternal beings is important because, if it is based on a teleological relationship, then this text supports the view that Aristotle espoused a universal metaphysical teleology. If Aristotle provides a different kind of justification for the priority in being of eternal beings in relation to perishable beings, then this text does not support the attribution of a universal teleology to Aristotle. This issue will become important in chapter 5 in relation to the question of how to interpret the normative claims that are woven into Aristotle's theory of potentiality and actuality, and the related question of how we should interpret their political implications.[13]

Aristotle draws a contrast between eternal, imperishable, and necessary beings, which are actualities, and perishable beings, which are contingent. Perishable beings are capable of being and capable of not being. Aristotle says of eternal, imperishable, and necessary beings, "For if these did not exist, nothing would exist" (1050b19). Given the context of Aristotle's statement, it is clear that he is asserting the ontological independence of eternal beings and the ontological dependence of perishable beings on them. That is, priority in being in this context means just what it did earlier; eternal beings (actualities) are ontologically prior to perishable beings (potentialities). Eternal beings can exist without perishable beings, but perishable beings cannot exist without eternal beings.

What is Aristotle's argument or explanation for the priority in being of eternal beings? And, in particular, does it turn on a teleological relationship between perishable and eternal beings as it did in Text A? To answer the second question first, Aristotle does not argue that the priority in substance of eternal beings is grounded in a teleological relationship between perishable beings and eternal beings. Indeed, not only does he not use a teleological justification for

the ontological priority of eternal beings, he does not even claim here that there is a teleological relationship between the two classes of beings.[14] Perishable beings are not described as existing for the sake of eternal beings.

Aristotle's reason for asserting the ontological priority of eternal beings in relation to perishing beings is not stated completely in Text B.[15] The relationship of ontological priority states (1) that eternal beings can exist without perishable beings and (2) that perishable beings cannot exist without eternal beings. Aristotle does provide an argument for (1) in Text B, but we do not find a clearly stated argument for (2) in Text B. Aristotle's argument for (1) uses materials discussed earlier in *Metaphysics* IX. In particular, he uses the connection between power and possibility stated in his argument against the Megarians, and he also uses the distinction between complete and incomplete motions.

Text B opens with the assertion that eternal things are prior in being to perishable things (1050b5–6). After a stretch of argument/explanation, Text B closes with the assertion that if eternal beings did not exist, then nothing would exist (1050b19). This is equivalent to claim (2). It is reasonable to assume that the stretch of argument/explanation in between is meant to support claim (2). Instead, we find an argument/explanation that most clearly supports the idea of the independent existence of eternal beings, which is roughly equivalent to claim (1). So what we find in Text B is an assertion of the priority in being of eternal beings in relation to perishing beings, and an argument for one part of that assertion. I will speculate on why Aristotle might have thought that the existence of perishable beings is dependent on the existence of eternal beings. But first let us consider what he says about the independent existence of eternal beings. Aristotle argues that the existence of eternal beings is independent of the existence of perishable beings, by arguing that eternal beings are actually. His argument that identifies eternal beings with actuality turns on a connection between potentiality and contingency. "That then which is potentially may either be or not be; the same thing, then, is capable both of being and of not being" (1050b11–12). And, using the modal implications between *dunamis* and possibility that first appeared in the Immobility

Argument against the Megarians, he explains further that something which is capable of not being may possibly not be. But things which may possibly not be, contingent beings, are perishable beings. Therefore, eternal beings, which always exist, are not contingent. Hence, they do not exist potentially, but rather actually.

Aristotle supports one side of his ontological priority claim by arguing that eternal beings are actually and are necessary beings, and contrasting them with perishing beings, which are potentially and are contingent beings. He further claims that without eternal beings no contingent beings would exist. The most plausible interpretation of this claim is that he is imagining a realm of purely contingent beings, which, given enough time, might all cease to exist. If this interpretation is plausible, then it also allows us to understand what Aristotle might mean in calling this priority in being—*kurioteros*—or more authoritative than the earlier attribution of priority in being in Text A. In Text B, Aristotle asserts the categorical and absolute ontological dependence of all perishable beings, which exist potentially, on eternal beings, which exist actually, rather than the comparative, relational differentiation between being potentially X and being actually X that holds among perishable beings.

It is important to underline that Aristotle's argument in *Metaphysics* IX, chapter 8, should be read as a whole and as intending to establish the general proposition that being X actually is prior to being X potentially.[16] In particular, Aristotle argues that the ontological priority of actuality holds both within the sphere of perishable beings, and between that sphere and the realm of eternal actualities. Hence, we can think of Aristotle's cosmos as ordered in terms of ontological dependence from bottom to top by means of the contrast on a continuum of different degrees of being X potentially and being X actually. As matter is potentially in relation to form, so is incomplete substance in relation to complete substance, and so, too, is complete substance with inactive powers in relation to complete substance in full activity. Finally, we can use the same continuum to place perishable substances in relation to eternal substances—another instance of the relationship between being X potentially and being X actually.

Aristotle's eternal substances are actually; they are engaged in an activity which does not presuppose *dunamis* at all, or at least none

that impedes the continuity and ease of their activity (1050b19–27). In contrast, Aristotle tells us, are the agent powers of perishable beings. These powers are always powers for opposites, and hence their operation is laborious, unreliable, and fitful. Recalling his earlier distinction between rational and nonrational powers, Aristotle points out that rational powers are always dual outcome, whereas nonrational powers like earth and fire have opposite effects only by being present or absent. Here it is also useful to recall Aristotle's distinction between motions (or incomplete motions) like house building and activities (or complete motions) like seeing and thinking. Aristotle says that perishable beings like fire "imitate" eternal beings because they are continuously active and have their activity "in themselves" (1050b28–30). The activities of fire and earth, like the activity of seeing, are in the agent, not in another object. The activities of Aristotle's eternal beings are complete motions, like seeing, not incomplete motions, like house building.

Aristotle's attribution of priority in being, understood as ontological priority, to eternal beings in relation to perishable beings has yielded several interesting results. First, it strengthens my interpretation of priority in being as ontological priority in Text A rather than as explanatory priority. It is implausible to think that Aristotle uses priority in being in two very different senses in a continuous stretch of text on a single subject matter without signaling the change. Second, Aristotle does not provide a teleological justification for the priority in being of eternal beings, which means that this text does not provide evidence of a universal or global teleology. Rather, there is a conspicuous shift away from teleological language to modal language as the text moves from considering the relationship of potentiality to actuality in the realm of perishable substances to the relationship between perishable substances and eternal substances.

Third, and most important, both the use of modal language and the central importance of the idea of continuous activity that never lapses into mere inactive *dunamis* connect Aristotle's argument for the ontological priority of eternal beings to his argument against Megarian actualism. We can now read the argument in chapter 1 in a new light. The connection between Aristotelian powers and modality that played a central role in the Immobility Argument is

confirmed by the reappearance of these concepts in his argument for the priority of eternal substances. Moreover, Aristotle's argument for the ontological priority of eternal substances in relation to perishable substances, based as it is on the priority of continuous activity, reveals the sense in which Aristotle's understanding of being is itself a kind of actualism.

3. Ontological Priority and Value

Aristotle's discussion of the ontological priority of eternal substances in relation to perishable substances prepares the ground for his fairly startling introduction of normative language in *Metaphysics* IX, chapter 9. "That the actuality is also better and more valuable than the good potency is evident from the following argument" (1051a4–5). Aristotle's argument for this claim uses the now familiar idea that a *dunamis* is the capacity for contraries; a doctor can produce health or illness, but not at the same time. Actualities, in contrast, are not dual outcome. Hence, good actualities are better than potentialities. Thinking and seeing are good activities with no contrary outcomes. The first instance of normative language, therefore, is comparative; the good actuality is better than the good *dunamis* because the latter can also result in something bad.

Later Aristotle says, "And therefore we may also say that in the things which are from the beginning, i.e. in eternal things, there is nothing bad, nothing defective, nothing perverted (for perversion is something bad)" (1051a19–22). Here the normative language is categorical rather than comparative. And the contrast class is obviously perishable things, which can be bad or defective. I will have more to say about the ways in which perishable things, like animals, can be bad and/or defective in chapter 5.

This text suggests two important points. First, Aristotle intermixes normative language in his metaphysical theory. That is, whereas we might want to separate metaphysics and metaphysical categories from norms and values, Aristotle does not. Moreover, although Aristotle argues for the thesis that actuality is better than or more valuable than *dunamis*, he does not seem to think that the in-

termingling of metaphysics and norms in itself requires any justification. Second, the norms that attach to actuality in relation to potentiality, or to eternal substances, reflect his hierarchical metaphysics. To put the point another way, what is prior in being turns out also to be what is better and more valuable, and what is neither bad nor defective.

I claimed in the introduction that the intrinsic normativity of Aristotle's metaphysics is best understood in relation to the ontological distinction between potentiality and actuality and not in relation to the distinction between substance and the other categories of being. As we have seen in this chapter, Aristotle's distinction between different ways of being X, and his general argument for the priority of being X actually, grounds a normative hierarchy as well as a hierarchy of being.

Another aspect of Aristotle's attachment of norms to his ontological hierarchy is also worthy of comment. Aristotle contrasts eternal beings with perishable beings on the grounds that eternal beings are not defective or perverted. The obvious implication is that among perishable beings, there are defective or perverted exemplars. The normative dimension of Aristotle's ontology allows that some perishable beings are defective, and this idea invites further scrutiny. Is Aristotle thinking of individuals or kinds which are defective or perverted? And, in either case, what does it mean to apply the label "defective" to a natural individual or kind?

In the next chapter I will develop several points. I will show in greater detail the way that Aristotle's normative language tracks his hierarchical metaphysics. I will argue that it is Aristotle's hierarchical and normative metaphysics that sets the stage for, and invites, the gender associations that surround his hylomorphic account of substance. I discuss to what extent it is true to say that hylomorphism is a gendered theory, and how firmly the gender associations with matter and form are embedded in Aristotle's theory. And I will explain the range and meaning of Aristotle's idea that some individuals and kinds are "deformed" or "incomplete." In particular, I will explore the puzzling Aristotelian position that women (or female animals) are deformed or incomplete by placing it in the context of his application of these labels both to whole species of animals and

to certain individuals. In my view, these evaluations make best sense when interpreted against the theoretical backdrop of Aristotle's distinction between potentiality and actuality. For this distinction allows that there are different ways of being X, which, in turn, allows for defective or incomplete exemplars and kinds of animals.

Chapter 4: The Priority of Actuality

1. In *Generation of Animals* the male parent is the active principle of the generation, and the female parent is the passive principle, a division of labor that fits Aristotle's distinction between active and passive powers.
2. My definition of priority in being is a paraphrase from *Metaphysics* v.11.1019a1–14. There Aristotle labels it priority "κατὰ φύσιν καὶ ὐσίαν." Aristotle's discussion of the existence of mathematical objects in *Metaphysics* xii.2. 1077a36–b4 also connects the idea of priority in being with ontological independence. In this text Aristotle contrasts priority in definition with priority in being. An attribute, for example, may be prior in definition to a compound entity (white may be prior in definition to white man) but not prior in being because it cannot exist separately from the compound. In *Physics* viii.7.260b17–19, however, Aristotle calls ontological priority "priority in nature" and contrasts it with priority in being. It is fair to say that there is some instability in Aristotle's use of the phrase "priority in being." My proposed interpretation is based both on the clearest and most explicit explanation of the term given in the *Metaphysics*, and on internal evidence in *Metaphysics* ix, chapter 8, that Aristotle uses the phrase to label ontological priority.
3. I am aware of only one other passage that explicitly discusses priority relations that conceivably could be used to interpret what Aristotle means by "priority in being" in our text. It occurs in *Categories*, chapter 12, 14b10–13: "For of things that reciprocate as to implication of existence, that which is in some way the cause of the other's existence might reasonably be called prior by nature." If we use this text to explain priority in being of actuality, Aristotle would be claiming that potentialities and actualities mutually imply the existence of each other, and that actualities cause the existence of potentialities. We ought not use this text because it conflates priority in being and priority in time without providing an independent meaning for priority in being. Aristotle's explanation of the priority in time of actualities in relation to potentialities points precisely to the fact that a generation of a human being requires an existing mature human being, an actuality. The mutual implication of existence is also a part of priority in time, since an existing mature human being is preceded in time by a child. And so on. It is also worth noting that Aristotle's example in the *Categories* of this kind of priority is peculiar (he claims that facts are prior in nature to the true sentences they "cause"), and has no plausible relationship to the examples discussed in our text.

4. T.H. Irwin gives a clear statement of the explanatory priority interpretation as follows: "He [Aristotle] claims that actuality is prior in substance to potentiality because potentiality is for the sake of actuality; we have sight for the sake of seeing and not the other way round, and similarly 'the matter is potential because it might reach the form' (1050a15), not the other way round. The traits and activities that explain teleologically the structure and composition of some body are the actuality for which the body has the potentiality, and they are the form for which the body is the matter." See Irwin's *Aristotle's First Principles* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988): 237. Other commentators, including Aquinas and Ross, also favor interpreting priority in being as explanatory priority in Text A. For a discussion, see Christos Y. Panayides, "Aristotle on the Priority of Actuality in Substance," *Ancient Philosophy* 19 (1999): 330–331.
5. Aristotle's precise vocabulary is worth noting. He contrasts a παῖς (boy) with an ἀνὴρ (a mature male human) being rather than with ἄνθρωπος, a word frequently used to name the human species (1050a5–7). Does the use of ἀνὴρ make it wrong to call a boy potentially human as I do on the grounds that the form the boy lacks is the mature male form rather than the human form? It does not because the logic of the point is clear. He treats the boy and the seed in a parallel fashion; each exists potentially and for the same reason—i. e. each lacks its form. It is extremely unlikely that the forms are different. And, even if Aristotle were saying that the boy lacks the form of the mature male, the main point of the example is still the same—namely, that immature entities lack the form they will later realize as their forms. This text does suggest the issue, which I discuss in chapter 5, of Aristotle's tendency to equate the human form with the male form. That slippage may be occurring in this text; by "male," Aristotle just means "human."
6. In some texts, Aristotle does posit a teleological relationship between eternal and perishable substances, but he does not hold that eternal substances have the forms of perishable substances. Rather, the natural substances are directed toward the eternal because they desire to be eternal—to have a nature other than they do have (*De Anima* 415a22).
7. In "Aristotle on the Priority of Actuality in Substance" Christos Panayides suggests that Aristotle's example ought to be interpreted as contrasting a boy with the man he will develop into. If this suggestion is correct, then it would be difficult to interpret this example as illustrating the priority in substance of actuality understood as ontological priority. While I think that this interpretation of the example is initially possible, I think that the temporal word "already" at 1050a6 in-

dicates that we are to contrast a boy (who lacks the form) with a man (who already has the form). But the man who *already* has the form would at the very least already have to exist.

8. In a discussion of three paradoxes of becoming in *Metaphysics* VII, chapter 2, G.E.L. Owen interprets Aristotle as holding that in the statement "a seed becomes a tree" the phrase "a tree" does not refer to a particular individual, but to the form or nature. See "Particular and General" in *Logic, Science and Dialectic* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1986).
9. For a more complete discussion of this issue, see my paper "The Priority of Actuality in Aristotle" in *Unity, Identity, and Explanation*, edited by T. Scaltsas, D. Charles, and M.L. Gill (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994).
10. Aristotle does think that the boy is temporally prior to the man in one sense of temporal priority. But temporal priority is not priority in being. The text of chapter 8 requires the two priorities to have distinct meanings.
11. I expand on this point in section 3.
12. In two texts in the biology Aristotle contrasts the order of genesis and the order of being. In nature, what is prior in development is posterior in being, and what is prior in being is posterior in development (*Generation of Animals* II.6.742a18–22; *Parts of Animals* II.1.646a25–b10). Where Aristotle elaborates on what he means by priority in being (in the second text cited), he explains it in terms of priority in time and definition. If he differentiates between priority in substance or being, and both priority in time and in definition in *Metaphysics* IX, chapter 8, however, then we need to understand priority in being in a different way. Since Aristotle defines priority in being in a different way in other texts, it is open to us to use them to interpret what he means here. See endnote 2 for texts where priority in being means existential or ontological priority.
13. In particular, this issue bears on the question of whether Aristotle believed that all beings were knit together into a hierarchy of instrumental relations, as Susan Moller Okin has argued in her feminist criticism of Aristotelian hylomorphism.
14. It is important to underscore the scope of my claim, which is that Aristotle does not claim in this argument that perishable beings exist for the sake of eternal beings and hence are ontologically dependent on them. Elsewhere, of course, Aristotle describes the motive force of the unmoved mover as like an object of desire, which is a slightly different kind of teleological relationship to the one he describes in Text A.
15. In *Notes on Eta and Theta*, Burnyeat et al. comment on the lack of