## **Aristotle and the Privation Theory of Evil**

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Though it conflicts with the standard narrative concerning the historical development of the privation theory of evil, it is nevertheless true that the notion that evil is not simply a privation but a privation of a due good has roots in Aristotle's *Metaphysics* Theta. This book is Aristotle's most complete account of being in the sense of actuality and potentiality, and its internal coherency and far reaching implications are often overlooked in commentaries on the *Metaphysics*, where most of the ink is spilled over books Zeta and Lambda. In this presentation I focus on *Metaphysics* Theta, chapter 9, draw upon some of the very fine work on this book of the *Metaphysics* which has been done in recent years, and try to lay out the case that a mature privation theory of evil is not simply compatible with Aristotle's metaphysics but deployed therein and with profound implications for other areas of his thought.

## I. The Standard Narrative

Before turning to the text of *Metaphysics* Theta 9, let's consider a few features of what I identify as the standard narrative. It is Plotinus himself who emphasizes the distance of his own account from Aristotle's when in *Ennead* II.4. 16, 3-8 he rejects the Aristotelian distinction between matter and privation. For Plotinus, matter itself *is* privation, and in *Ennead* I.8 matter is identified with evil. It is no secret that Aristotle maintains a notion of privation (*steresis*), and introduces it in *Physics* I.7 as one of the three principles (*archai*) of nature, describes its several senses in *Metaphysics* V.22 and examines it in the context of contrariety (*enantiōsin*) in

*Metaphysics* X.4. These treatments of privation and contrariety in Aristotle do not explicitly link privation with evil, as do Plotinus'. As a consequence, Plotinus is often seen as having taken a step beyond Aristotle by the couplings of, first, matter with privation, and then privation with evil.

But is this, in fact, an advance? I think not, for surely there is an advantage in recognizing the role of privation as a principle of change whose value is not necessarily negative. Consider, every healthy animal has the potential—expressible as a privation—for illness, but surely the privation of illness in a healthy animal is no evil. The courageous woman's privation of cowardiceness, similarly, is no evil. But even in the case of privations of some good qualities we should hold back from declaring in them some evil. Consider the case of privation applied to positive capacities: A native Greek speaker living in Greece who lacks the knowledge of Chinese would in some ways be benefitted by learning Chinese. However, there is something counterintuitive in designating her lack of Chinese as an evil. There are of course situations in which privations are indicative of some evil in a substance. The privation of sight in a dog is an evil. The privation of courage in a person is an evil. Yet, it is the very flexibility of Aristotle's notion of privation that proves its explanatory strength. Privation is deployed as one of the three principles of nature, 1 and it is only with the addition of other considerations, and in particular those having to do with the actualization proper to the nature of a given subject, that notions of good and bad come into play. We see then already the significance of Aristotle's analysis of what Charlotte Witt calls the "ways of being" of potentiality and actuality for investing Aristotelian metaphysics with what we today often think of in terms of a hierarchy of value.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Physics, I. 7, 191<sup>a</sup>12-22.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> See Charlotte Witt's rich text, *Ways of Being: Potentiality and Actuality in Aristotle's Metaphysics* (Cornell University Press, 2003), especially the third section of chapter 4 and chapter 5 for reflections on how Aristotle

Because of his development of the notion of privation, a typical interpretation is that Aristotle's treatment of evil is compatible with a privation theory of evil, but nevertheless that Aristotle lacks a metaphysical account of evil as a privation of a due good. The great French philosopher and theologian, Charles Journet, in his magisterial work on evil, Le Mal, makes that point this way: "The one [Greek thinker] who came closest to it [a privation theory of evil] and almost formulated it, without seeming to realize it or at least without wanting to make anything of it, was Aristotle, when he listed the various types of privation."<sup>3</sup> It is precisely this latter assumption I wish to challenge, for I think that there is evidence that Aristotle does indeed develop an argument that evil is not only a privation, but more precisely, a privation of a due good. To make this case, special attention will be paid to *Metaphysics* Theta 9 in which Aristotle argues that bad or evil (kakos) actualities are, 4 unlike all other actualities, always posterior to potentiality in both formula and substance. Though this passage is unique in the extent of its articulation of the status of evil actualities, it is not idiosyncratic but rather consistent with the whole of Aristotle's metaphysics and lends significant support to his synoptic vision of the goodness of the cosmic order and his teleological virtue theory.<sup>5</sup>

## **II. The Central Text**

In *Metaphysics* Theta chapter 9 Aristotle claims that evil actualities, unlike other actualities, are not prior to the potentialities which give rise to them and that evil actualities do not abide. There are four questions which need to be addressed to begin to make sense of these

utilizes these ways of being to discover (or generate, depending on your assessment of its success) hierarchies of value.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Charles Journet, *The Meaning of Evil*, translated by Michael Barry (New York: P.J. Kenedy & Sons, 1962), p. 28.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> I don't see Nietzsche's distinction between good and evil as relevant in the case of Aristotle.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Ross considers the passage not just idiosyncratic but incoherent. See W. D. Ross (ed.), *Aristotle:* Metaphysics. *A Revised Text with Introduction and Commentary*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1924), vol. 2, 267-8.

claims. What prompts Aristotle to make these claims here? What precisely is Aristotle claiming? Is Aristotle's position on evil actualities consistent with his other principles? What are the implications of Aristotle's argument?

The first question is best addressed by turning to the preceding chapter. Aristotle argues in *Metaphysics* Theta 8 that actuality is prior to potentiality in account, time—at least in one sense of time, *and* substance or being (*ousia*).<sup>6</sup> Actuality is prior in account (or formula—the Greek is *logos* here) insofar as every potential is a potentiality for an actuality: we know a thing only when we know what it is for, and so only come to know potentialities by the actualities to which they are directed.<sup>7</sup> This notion of priority in account moves seamlessly into the reasons for Aristotle's contention that actuality is prior to potentiality in a certain respect of time. It is on the level of the species that temporal priority is necessary, rather than on the level of the individual.<sup>8</sup> For example, the individual boy is prior to the man in the sequence of growth, but the man is prior to the boy on the level of the species because it takes adults to produce boys. Aristotle attests the following to be the general principle at work in this example: "For from the potential the actual is always produced by an actual thing, e.g. man by man, musician by musician; there is always a first mover, and the mover already exists actually."

Aristotle employs this same principle to make sense of priority in being or substance. He claims, "[T]he things that are posterior in becoming are prior in form and in substance, e.g. man is prior to boy and human being to seed; for the one already has its form and the other has not." However, another dimension comes into this account of priority in substance, namely the telic,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Meta., IX.8, 1049<sup>b</sup>4-11.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Meta., IX.8, 1049<sup>b</sup>12-16.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> *Meta.*, IX.8, 1049<sup>b</sup>17-18.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> *Meta.*, IX. 8, 1049<sup>b</sup>24-26. The translations are Ross' from Jonathan Barnes (ed.), *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, vol. 2 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> *Meta.*, IX. 8, 1050<sup>a</sup>4-6.

and it is this which provides the significant development for making sense of Aristotle's evaluative distinctions in the following chapter. Aristotle divides his account of priority in substance into two parts, the first encompassing perishable substances and the second imperishable. His accounts for priority of actuality over potentiality in both divisions are explicitly teleological. The same division between perishable and imperishable substances is employed in the following chapter where Aristotle's claims about evil are made.

Regarding the first division Aristotle gives this general principle: "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 (*telos d' hē energeia*), and it is for the sake of this that the potentiality is acquired." Animals, for instance, have sight that they may see, and not vice versa. Human beings, as well, achieve perfection in their sciences, whether technical or theoretical, so that they may have the power to exercise those sciences. Whether human endeavors are directed towards products, or there are no products apart from the actuality, the end is the master of the potentialities that lead to it, and so Aristotle concludes: "Obviously, therefore, the substance or form is actuality (*hōste phaneron hoti hē ousia kai to eidos energeia*). From this argument it is obvious that actuality is prior in substance to potentiality; and as we have said, one actuality always precedes another in time right back to the actuality of the eternal prime mover."

This reference to the eternal prime mover brings us to the other division, that dealing with imperishable substance. Aristotle contends that eternal things are, so to speak, *super* prior, "for eternal things are prior in substance to perishable things, and no eternal thing exists

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> I struggle to find a precise way to refer to the distinctions between good and bad actualities Aristotle makes. They are not moral categories. Neither are they exactly value distinctions. Nevertheless, "evaluative distinctions" is the best I have come up with so far.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> Meta., IX. 8, 1050<sup>a</sup>7-10.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> Meta., IX. 8, 1050<sup>b</sup>1-6.

potentially."<sup>14</sup> The lack of any potentiality is the mark of the eternal things' superiority. All perishable things contain potentialities, and potentialities are always potentialities for contraries. It is precisely this potentiality for contraries that opens up the possibility for evil, as we will soon see. In their substance, or without qualification (*haplos*), which Aristotle contends amounts to the same thing, <sup>15</sup> imperishable things lack potentiality, even if all but one of them moves accidentally. All such beings then, Aristotle insists, "exist actually (*energeia ara panta*)."<sup>16</sup> With the principle in place that what grounds the claim to priority in substance is the actuality of those substances, whether it is an actuality that governs a process of completion in a perishable thing, or an actuality that simply abides, we have now the key for making sense of Aristotle's evaluative claims in the next chapter.

To answer the second question, what precisely does Aristotle mean by the evaluative claims he makes in Theta 9, we turn to that text. Like in the case of his considerations of priority in substance, Aristotle divides his observations on goodness and evil between perishable and imperishable substances.<sup>17</sup> Here, first, is the passage addressing perishable substances:

That the good actuality (*spoudaias energeia*) is better and more valuable (*beltiōn kai timiōtera*) than the good potentiality (*spoudaias dunameōs*) is evident from the following argument. Everything of which we say that it can do something, is alike capable of contraries, e.g. that of which we say that it can be healthy is the same as that which can be ill, and has both potentialities at once; for one and the same potentiality is a potentiality for health and illness, for rest and motion, for building and throwing down, for being built and being thrown down. The capacity for contraries is present at the same

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> *Meta.* IX. 8, 1050<sup>b</sup>6-7.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> *Meta.* IX. 8, 1050<sup>b</sup>16.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> *Meta*. IX. 8, 1050<sup>b</sup>18.

Jonathan Beere encapsulates this point well in his *Doing and Being: An Interpretation of Aristotle's* Metaphysics *Theta* (Oxford University Press, 2012), when condensing his conclusions on Theta 9 in the following way: "Conclusion 1: The *energeia* of an excellent capacity is better than the capacity. Conclusion 2: The *energeia* of a bad capacity is worse than the capacity. Conclusion 3: There is nothing bad over and above the things. Conclusion 4: Among eternal things, there is nothing bad (or in any way defective or imperfect). The conclusions form two pairs. Conclusions 1 and 2 concern badness among perishable things, which are not principles. Conclusions 3 and 4 concern principles, which are eternal. Conclusion 3 is primarily negative; it is a criticism of rival theories. Conclusion 4 is positive, a constraint on any theory of principles and a crucial contribution to Aristotle's own." (p. 333).

time; but contraries cannot be present at the same time, and the actualities also cannot be present at the same time, e.g. health and illness. Therefore one of them must be the good, but the capacity is both the contraries alike, or neither; the actuality, then, is better ( $h\bar{e}$  ara energeia belti $\bar{o}n$ ). And in the case of bad things ( $t\bar{o}n$   $kak\bar{o}n$ ), the end or actuality (to telos kai  $t\bar{e}n$  energeian) must be worse (cheiron) than the potentiality; for that which can is both contraries alike. <sup>18</sup>

In their insightful case for the coherency of Theta 9 Katz and Polansky take note of the significance of Aristotle's use of "better" and "more honorable," seeing in them an interpretive key for the claim to the passage's coherency. <sup>19</sup> They argue that "better" is indicative of being "more for its own sake," and "more honorable," (or as Ross translates *timiōtera*, more valuable), indicates being more of an end. <sup>20</sup> That seems to me to be just right, and for the reasons we have already seen as binding on priority in substance in the arguments from Theta 8. That is to say, what constitutes priority in substance or being (*ousia*) is the *energeia*, the actuality of the being.

One difficulty that remains, however, is that of making sense of what precisely Aristotle means by a *spoudaias dounameōs*, a good potentiality. If, as Aristotle explicitly argues in the passage, every potentiality is a potentiality for contraries, what sense does it make to speak of a *good* potentiality? Does this suggest a distinction from a *bad* potentiality? But should it not follow from the claim that every potentiality is a potentiality for contraries that it is only the actualities which ought to be designated as good or bad, and the potentialities regarded as evaluatively neutral?

I think there are two tacks that can be taken to deal with this set of concerns, depending on the type of potentiality in question. In both cases, the notion of actuality provides the final

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> *Meta*. Theta 9, 1051<sup>a</sup>4-17.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> "'Better' here apparently means more for its own sake, since the good potentiality is for the sake of the actuality.... That being more honorable follows from being more and end ultimately proves key to interpreting the argument correctly, since being more end-like also entails having priority in *ousia*." (Emily Catherine Katz and Ronald Polansky, "The Bad is Last But Does not Last: Aristotle's *Metaphysics* Θ 9," *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 31 (2006): 233-242), 234.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> Katz and Polansky cite in note 6 of their article as additional passages in support of this use of *timiōtera* the following: 983<sup>a</sup>4-5, <sup>b</sup>32-3, 1026<sup>a</sup>21, 1064<sup>b</sup>4-5, 1074<sup>b</sup>21, <sup>b</sup>26, <sup>b</sup>30, and 1075<sup>b</sup>20-1. For the use of *beltiōn* in connection to end they reference *NE* I. 1, and especially 1094<sup>a</sup>5-6.

normative standard for assessment for the following reasons: Aristotle has already dedicated a great deal of space in his *Metaphysics* to thinking through substance, *ousia*, as an essence in the sense of *to ti ēn einai*. The "what it was to be" of a substance is a treatment of substance which is explicitly telic. A substance is, so to speak, the what it is intrinsically for.<sup>21</sup> If I am right in applying the arguments to this effect from earlier portions of the text to the Theta 9 passage, what makes an actuality good is precisely its degree of achievement of the *telos* that is definitive of a given substance, and what makes a bad actuality bad is the degree to which it thwarts the achievement of the *telos* definitive of a given substance.

To see how this principle is at work in thinking about different potentialities, it is best to bring to mind some contraries which Aristotle focuses on at length in his *Nicomachean Ethics*: virtues, and their contraries, the vices. <sup>22</sup> Virtues and vices are actualities of potentialities in at least two senses, one less evaluatively determined, and the other more evaluatively determined. By "less evaluatively determined" I mean that the potentiality can more readily be seen as conducive to either good or bad actualities, and by "more evaluatively determined" I mean that a potentiality is less conducive to development into one or another actuality. The point of this distinction in potentialities is to try to do justice to Aristotle's treatment while bringing some synthesis between Ross and Beere's claims that some potentialities are evaluatively neutral, <sup>23</sup> and Katz and Polansky's claim that no potentiality is ever neutral. I think Katz and Polansky are right to argue that every potentiality is ultimately linked to a telos that is in whole or part completive of a thing's nature. This, in fact, is precisely what enables us to evaluate *all* 

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> Perhaps this argument is in need of much more extensive defense. The claim is not controversial, but is it sufficiently familiar?

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> Beere similarly emphasizes the virtues and vices as prime examples for thinking of different sorts of potentiality on pp. 342-344 of his *Doing and Being*, cited above.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> For Ross, see his *Aristotle*: Metaphysics, cited above, vol. 2, p. 268. For Beere's claims to this effect, see *Doing and Being*, cited above, pp. 335-337.

potentialities by their *good* actualities; *bad* actualities, similarly, are revealed as such because of the good actualities. Nevertheless, Aristotle's language of potentialities as potentialities for contraries lends itself to regarding potentialities as, so to speak, being "zero" points that can move in either a positive or negative direction. This mathematical approach to potentiality is what I think Ross and Beere are applying in their respective descriptions of some potentialities as neutral. That approach, however, is partial at best, for it fails to apply just the sort of evaluative framework in which priority in substance is emphasized, and so fails to recognize the extent to which Aristotle's designation of some actualities as bad is an account in which badness is understood precisely as a deprivation of the good actuality that ought to be present in the thing.<sup>24</sup>

Regarding the less evaluatively determined potentialities, consider the moral education of the young. Aristotle assumes that youth, though varying in individual natural virtues, <sup>25</sup> nevertheless all have a similar set of underlying potentialities that can be shaped in such a way as to make progress toward either virtue or vice. It is this underlying set of potentialities that Aristotle points to when he argues that the quality of moral education his audience has received makes all the difference in whether they will benefit from his theorizing on the happy life. <sup>26</sup> We find then a whole set of powers proper to the native equipment of the human being which can aptly be regarded as on the one hand potentialities that *ought* to be shaped into virtues if the youth is to achieve her perfection, but which, on the other, nevertheless are potentialities for virtue *and* for vice.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> Owen Goldin, "Aristotle on Good and Bad Actualities," *The Journal of Neoplatonic Studies*, 2:1 (1993): 126-150, writes of Theta 9: "The text is clear evidence that those actualities that are bad in a nontheoretical way are privations of certain "good" actualities. Of any good/bad pair, one must be the privation and one must be a positive form. And it is clear that Aristotle accepts without question the general thesis that badness, when it exists, is caused by some kind of privation. Aristotle follows the Platonists in rejecting metaphysical Manicheism."(144); and, "Badness is simply the privation of some actuality that is good."(149).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> Nicomachean Ethics, VI.13, 1144<sup>b</sup>1-29.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup> Nicomachean Ethics, II.1, 1103<sup>b</sup>6-26; also, I.3, 1094<sup>b</sup>29-1095a12; and, I.4, 1095<sup>b</sup>1-8.

Now, consider the case of an adult. Adults have characters that are already more or less set. Each feature of an adult's character is already a significant actualization of the underlying potentialities native to a human being. These actualized potentialities are, however, often latent. I don't just mean that they are not used when humans sleep, but also that most of them are not directly operative in any given action. To give an example, a courageous woman remains courageous even when she is acting temperately and not courageously. I don't doubt, of course, that her courage is relevant in some way to her temperance, since to deny that would be to undermine the unity of the virtues. Nevertheless, it is not her courage that is actualized into action in her selection of sides for dinner. In the act of eating just the right amount of food, at the right time, and in the right manner it is this woman's actualized potentiality of temperance that is still further actualized into an action, while the actualized potentiality of her courage remains latent. Moreover, virtues are just the sort of actualized potentialities which cannot be further actualized in a manner contrary to their actualized natures—they are already good actualities, even if not fully realized. This is the metaphysical basis for Aristotle's claims that one cannot misuse a virtue—there is no way to act badly and virtuously, 27 and to think there is is both to have misunderstood Aristotle on the virtues and to have failed to appreciate his metaphysics of potentiality and actuality. This example gives us, I think, a way to think about good potentialities—the virtues, as well as bad potentialities—the vices, while at the same time recognizing that those good or bad potentialities are themselves the actualizations of potentialities that underlie them and which are evaluatively less solidified but still fundamentally good. In other words, the "less" and "more" here with respect to potentiality refers to the degree to which that potentiality is itself already actualized to a degree.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup> Nicomachean Ethics, II.6, 1106<sup>a</sup>14-23.

A second, and in some ways more pressing interpretative challenge is addressing how to rectify the claim to priority in substance with respect to actuality over potentiality that Aristotle has made in Theta 8 with the claim that bad actualities are *not* prior to potentialities in the passage quoted at length above. If we regard the Theta 8 claim to be what Beere calls "unrestricted," which is to say as applying to every actuality whether good or bad, then we have a genuine contradiction here.<sup>28</sup> However, if the claim is to be regarded as "restricted," that is, applying only to a range of actualities, then we find a relatively easy path to reconciling the passages.<sup>29</sup>

What I think of as the principle of interpretative charity—that if there is a way to reconcile passages from an author which on their surface can be seen as in conflict with each other, one ought to follow it—ought to be applied to these passages. When the apparent conflict is found in contiguous chapters of the same work, the principle ought to be applied all the more readily. With this principle in mind, we see can recognize Theta 9 as qualifying the apparent claim to unrestricted priority in actuality of substance with an argument that this priority does not apply in the case of evil actualities to be no stretch at all, but in fact a further application of the argument from priority. For, as we have already seen, actuality in being or substance is precisely an actuality with respect to the achievement of the telos of that substance. Bad actualities fail in this sort of priority precisely because of their privation with respect to the telos in question. They are, in fact, posterior to the *good* potentialities which are good precisely because of their dependency on the good actualities towards which they incline. With respect to priority, bad actualities are third in line as a consequence of the absolute priority of good actualities—a point

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup> Beere, *Doing and Being*, cited above, p. 330.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>29</sup> Beere is careful to look at the arguments in favor of both positions, but sides with the "restricted" claim. Katz and Polansky lay out a more pithy set of observations to the effect that the natural way of reading the connection between Theta 8 and 9 is to see the latter as a progression from the former (Katz and Polansky, cited above, 237-241).

that comes through clearly at the end of the passage quoted above and worth reminding ourselves of here: "And in the case of bad things  $(t\bar{o}n \ kak\bar{o}n)$ , the end or actuality  $(to \ telos \ kai \ t\bar{e}n$  energeian) must be worse (cheiron) than the potentiality."

The consideration of good and bad actualities with respect to imperishable substances bears this analysis out as well. The following quotation begins where the long quotation above broke off:

Clearly, then, the bad does not exist apart from bad things (*ouk esti to kakon para ta pragmata*); for the bad is in its nature (*tēi phusei to kakon*) posterior to the potentiality. And therefore we may also say that in the things which are from the beginning (*en tois ech archēs*), i.e. in eternal things (*tois aidios*), there is nothing bad (*kakon*), nothing defective *hamartēma*), nothing perverted (*diephtharmenon*) (for perversion (*diaphthora*) is something bad).<sup>30</sup>

There are two claims of especial importance in this passage, the first concerns the existential status of evil, and the second the evaluative status of eternal things. The claim that evil cannot exist apart from evil things proves to be a part of the justificatory premises for why eternal things cannot have anything perverted in them,<sup>31</sup> and both claims taken together make evident the sophistication of Aristotle's privation theory of evil.

Regarding the existential status of evil, Aristotle presents the claim that the bad does not exist apart from bad things as following from the claim that the bad actuality must be worse than, and posterior to, the good potentiality. What is the argument implied in this claim that this is taken to be so obvious by Aristotle? First, he seems to assume it to be obvious that there are, so to speak, no free floating potentialities. Every potentiality is a potentiality of a being. Second, Aristotle has already established in the first part of Theta 9 that every evil actuality is posterior to

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>30</sup> Meta., IX. 9, 1051<sup>a</sup>18-21.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>31</sup> This I take to be the point of Katz and Polanky's observations that, "[Aristotle] must yet show that the established priority of actuality to potentiality does not extend to *evil* actualities, and consequently that there are no *eternal* evil principles, for eternal evil beings would have to have priority in *ousia*." ("The Bad is Last but does not Last: Aristotle's *Metaphysics*  $\Theta$  9," *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 31 (2006): 233-242; pp. 233-4).

potentiality. These evil actualities are worse than the potentialities they actualize, but they are, again, actualizations of those potentialities. Therefore, these bad actualizations must belong to beings and cannot exist apart from them. In addition, we have already seen in Aristotle's comments on imperishable substance from Theta 8 that such substances lack potentiality altogether. Not only, then, must eternal substances be absolutely prior to all potentiality, and since all bad actualities are posterior to potentialities they are therefore prior to all bad actualities, but it is impossible that an eternal substance be anything but fully actual. For these reasons it is impossible that there be some bad which exists apart from bad things.

Regarding the evaluative status of evil, we see now that badness *is* only to the extent that it is a defect or perversion of some substance that *ought* to be good. Badness is the present failure of a good substance to achieve its *to ti ēn einai*, to achieve the telos that is definitive of its nature. Rather, in its nature, and note Aristotle's use of *phusis* in his claim that the "bad is in its nature posterior to potentiality," the bad is in the realm of change, of potentiality. It is and can only be in the realm of perishable substance and has no part to play at all in the imperishable realm of substance. Indeed it is the very nature of evil, as Aristotle tells us in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, not only to corrupt its host being but to destroy even itself. Corruption and destruction are the hallmarks of evil. Contrarily, amongst the eternal things, there is, as Aristotle says, nothing bad, nothing defective, nothing perverted. There is in the realm of eternal substance, in other words, no privations of a due good. Perfection and permanence are the hallmarks of goodness.

One last point should be mentioned in settling concerns about the consistency of this chapter with other principles of Aristotle. At the end of Theta 9 Aristotle reminds us that it is only by means of actuality that we can have knowledge of potentialities. "Obviously, therefore,

<sup>32</sup> NE, IV. 5, 1126a10-12. Journet calls attention to this on p. 63 of *The Nature of Evil*, cited above.

the potentially existing relations are discovered by being brought to actuality (the reason being that thinking is the actuality of thought (aition de hoti noësis hē energeia);<sup>33</sup> so that potentiality is discovered from actuality . . . . "34 Applying what Aristotle has argued above in this chapter, it seems obvious that this concluding observation does not apply in the case of bad actualities. If that were not the case, Aristotle would be inconsistent in his application of the qualification to the restricted claim that actuality is prior in definition, time, and substance, and in fact contradicting himself. The concluding reminder serves to indicate again how it is that we come to know bad actualities to be bad. To wit, good actualities are good because they are perfective in the case of perishable substances, and perfections in the case of imperishable substances, of being. It is from them that we grasp good potentialities. Every potentiality is a good potentiality, even if some are more definite because already actualized to a higher degree than others, because every potentiality is revealed by the good actuality which is its perfection. Nevertheless, every good potentiality is still a potentiality for contraries, and it is possible that it be actualized badly. The state of being actualized badly is precisely the state of privation of the good actuality, and it is that privation which makes bad actualities posterior to every potentiality. We can only know, then, bad actualities to be bad actualities because of the good actualities.<sup>35</sup>

It is a good interpretive actuality for us to read Theta 9 as consistent with Theta 8. The way to do this, we have discovered, is to recognize that Theta 9 qualifies and elaborates on Theta

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>33</sup> I don't see the justification for Ross's inclusion of "of thought" at the end of this clause. From the immediately prior paragraph it is clear that Aristotle is talking about how the various parts of mathematical entities are grasped. Thinking them expresses their actuality, and from that activity of thinking them we grasp their parts and properties.

<sup>34</sup> *Meta.*, IX. 9, 1051<sup>a</sup>29-31.

Beere, in *Doing and Being*, writes "The badness is authentic: it does not merely appear bad to us, because of our local or distorted perspective on the world. And the badness is intelligible. Badness is essentially deviation from the norms embodied in capacities, but the explanatory role of capacities gives Aristotle a variety of resources for explaining how it is that our world, despite depending on a good principle, is not perfect." (351)

8 precisely by treating evil actualities as privations in perishable substances of the good that ought to be present in a perishable substance.

## **III. Conclusion: Some Implications**

We can finally turn to the last question proposed at the beginning of the last section: What are the implications of Aristotle's arguments in Theta 9? We have already had occasion to consider one in our analysis of the central texts, and that is the extent to which Aristotle's treatment of potentiality and actuality grounds his teleological ethics. Indeed, the very bases for the repeated claims that vices are to be avoided and virtues acquired rest on the insight that vices are perversions of the virtues that a person ought to have. To be sure, the same set of potentialities are actualized whether a person is vicious or virtuous, but the one set of traits are badly actualized potentialities which dispose us to evil activities, and the other are well actualized potentialities which dispose us to good activities. It is the well actualized potentialties, and even more their activities, which perfect our nature and bring us closer to the imitation of the altogether actualized being, God. It is the perfectly actual being of God who is presented as the norm and measure of our best and most noble activity in the Nicomachean Ethics, 36 and as the norm and measure of our every good and noble activity in the Eudemian Ethics.<sup>37</sup> In short, Aristotle's treatment of potentiality and actuality in the *Metaphysics* supplies the foundation for his treatment of virtue, vice, and happiness in his ethical writings.

This talk of God brings us to a second major implication of Aristotle's treatment of potentiality and actuality, especially in chapters 8 and 9 of Theta, and one of more immediate concern to a central task of the Metaphysics. What, in effect, Aristotle's principles achieve is the

<sup>36</sup> *Nicomachean Ethics*, X. 7, 1177<sup>b</sup>30-1178<sup>a</sup>8; and 8, 1178<sup>b</sup>8-32. <sup>37</sup> *Eudemian Ethics*, VII. 15, 1249<sup>b</sup>10-23.

basis upon which Aristotle can conclusively argue in Lambda 10 of the Metaphysics that the governing principle of the entire universe is, and must be, good. 38 This hallmark of Aristotle's theology requires the arguments of Theta 9 for its defense.<sup>39</sup> Consider first Aristotle's claims regarding the goodness of both the universe and its governor:

We must consider also in which of two ways the nature of the universe (tou holou phusis) contains the good or the highest good (to agathon kai to ariston), whether as something separate and by itself, or as the order of the parts. Is it not in both ways, like with an army?<sup>40</sup> For the good is found both in the order and in the leader, and more in the latter; for he does not depend on the order but it depends on him. And all things are ordered together somehow, but not all alike, —both fishes and fowls and plants; and the world is not such that one thing has nothing to do with another, but they are connected. For all are ordered together to one end.<sup>41</sup>

I do not think it an interpretative stretch to see the overarching argumentation of the *Metaphysics* converging on this passage. It is the governor of the world, thought thinking thought, which brings order to all things, and that order is super-concentrated in this being's actuality, in this being's goodness. Those arguments to the effect that evil can neither exist on its own or be found amongst the eternal beings are essential to the establishment of the principle of the goodness of the first being.

Rather than rehash his *Metaphysics* in the remainder of the ultimate chapter from book Lambda, Aristotle is content to mention some of the inadequacies of accounts of the universe that fail to appreciate the order of actuality, that is goodness, in the universe, or the goodness of its governor. These polemical remarks include a reference to a group of thinkers, which seems to include Plato and his followers, which "is right in saying that it [the Good] is a principle, but how

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>38</sup> Beere takes not of this in *Doing and Being*, pp. 328-329 and 348-352.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>39</sup> Aristotle announces theology as a central task of his *Metaphysics*, as the science concerned with God and with what God knows, in *Meta*. I. 2, 982<sup>b</sup>29-983<sup>a</sup>11.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>40</sup> I have modified Ross' "Probably in both ways, as an army does." The Greek is a rhetorical interrogative whose implicit answer seems obvious and which is stronger than Ross's "Probably": "ē amphoterōs hōsper strateuma?" <sup>41</sup> *Meta*. XII. 10, 1075<sup>a</sup>11-18.

the good is a principle they do not say—whether as end or as mover or as form."<sup>42</sup> We are all familiar with Aristotle's rejection of the Platonist univocal account of the Good, 43 but too often we fail to appreciate the fact that Aristotle himself has a theory of the good as ultimate principle. The best good, for Aristotle, is an eternal and perfect substance, and its nature is the source of all goodness in the universe. The lines of dependency, even participation, that all beings have on this first being are traced through inquiry into substance, especially in terms of the ways of being potentially and actually. In such an inquiry one indeed encounters beings which fail to be properly ordered, fail to be good, fail to be actualized in the way they ought to be. Such failures, such defects, such privations of the good actualities that ought to mark those beings can ultimately be understood as such only by having experienced and reflected upon the universe as good.

 <sup>&</sup>lt;sup>42</sup> Meta. XII. 10, 1075<sup>a</sup>38-1075<sup>b</sup>2.
 <sup>43</sup> Nicomachean Ethics, I. 6.