Rubber bands

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Aristotle's view that wisdom is knowledge of being as such might appear to twenty-first century wisdom-seekers as a powerful but radically foreign idea. Jonathan Breece's monograph, Doing and Being: An interpretation of Aristotle's Metaphysics, does us a great service through some of the most formidable of Aristotle's arguments on the nature of being, recontextualizing them within the broader context of Aristotle's thought, and showing their relevance to questions Plato was the first to raise.

Breece's book is most timely: it engages with a core philosophical question in Aristotelian which is of enormous relevance to us today. A familiar, non-Aristotelian example might help to illustrate the question. Consider an elastic band. What is it to be elastic? Is it to have the capacity to stretch. Whether the band is ever stretched or not, it is elastic, so stretching enters the very definition of its elasticity. Contemporary metaphysicians talk about a relation of 'determination' between the property (elasticity) and its (potential) manifestation (stretching), and the nature of such a relation is a very challenging philosophical problem, much debated at present. Breece helps us make progress with it by examining Aristotle's views on the matter, elucidating them with great ingenuity and excellent scholarship.

The question is: what is the difference between an existing power, such as elasticity, that is not being exercised, and a power that is being exercised? The solution Breece pursues on behalf of Aristotle is that at least for some properties there are two ways of having them, and then two ways of being qualified by them, through merely having the power but not exercising it, and through exercising that power. As Breece would like to put it, the rubber band at rest is in its capacity elastic, through having the capacity to stretch; when stretching it exercises that capacity, thus it is in 'energetic' elastic. "Energetic" was a word coined by Aristotle, and Breece has reasons for leaving it untransliterated.

Being in capacity elastic and being in energetic elastic are ways in which the band is elastic. Two sets of questions arise from Breece's reconstruction of Aristotle's view. They point to two aspects of Aristotle's account that seem to diverge from one another. Firstly, how is the difference between a power in capacity and a power in exercise accounted for by the property belonging in two different ways to the subject? In what way does a property, say being a house-builder (an Aristotelian example), belong to the house-builder in capacity? If there is a single term, house-building, that belongs to someone who is house-building, how does this term, house-building, belong to them when he is not house-building? Both his states are of course related to house-building, since the power itself is defined in terms of it. But if the potentiality of the house-building power (when not being exercised) is to be understood as a way in which house-building belongs to the house-builder, more needs to be explained than his becoming qualified as a house-builder. How is it that house-building qualifies the house-builder by belonging to him even when it is not occurring? If Aristotle answers this question, we need further explanation to understand him.

Secondly, how do the states of being in capacity and being in energetic relate to each other? The key insight for Breece is that "being in capacity has the energetic as part of its essence: what it is to be in capacity F is partly a matter of what it is to be in energetic F." This seems to be a different approach to the explanation of what a power in potentiality is. The focus now is on the difference in the constitution of the states of being in capacity F and being in energetic F, rather than on the way that F belongs to the subject.

What, furthermore, is the ontological relation between these two states, when being in capacity has the energetic as part of its essence? Is the case of a boy, being in capacity a man has being a man as part of its essence; namely, what it is to be a man is part of what it is to be a boy. In the boy then a man is potential, because he has only part of the essence of a man? If so, how does the presence of a part of the essence generate potentiality for the whole essence? Not all these questions are answered in Breece's monograph, but this is not a complaint, given the steepness of the metaphysical difficulties it addresses. This book is an enormously valuable contribution to the field of Aristotelian studies. It brings us closer to obtaining Aristotle's wisdom.