

**Aristotle, *Metaphysics* Θ.8, 1050b6-28**

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**Abstract**

The standard interpretation of this passage sees Aristotle as claiming that if a thing is *F* eternally, its being *F* is not the exercise of any potentiality to be *F*, and as explicitly applying this claim to the heavenly bodies. This interpretation faces a number of difficulties: I shall offer a different reading which avoids these, and which brings out interesting connections between this passage and some arguments in Λ.6-7.

**Keywords**

Aristotle; *Metaphysics*; Theta; Lambda; potentiality; actuality; eternal substances; topical matter

It is a familiar problem that Aristotle's belief in the need for a Prime Unmoved Mover is apparently inconsistent with his belief that eternal things have no unrealised potentialities.<sup>1</sup> If the heavenly bodies (the stars and planets, and the spheres which carry them round) are always in motion, then (given the second belief) they can have no potentiality for being at rest; but then they would seem to stand in no need of an external cause of motion (which contradicts the first belief). This summary glosses over a number of complexities,<sup>2</sup> but I do

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<sup>1</sup> *Phys.* 3.4, 203b30, *Met.* Λ.6, 1071b12-21.

<sup>2</sup> For discussion see Judson forthcoming, Prologue to chs 6-7. Note that it is controversial

not think that Aristotle can, in the end, be acquitted of inconsistency.<sup>3</sup> The purpose of this paper, however, is to acquit him of the charge that, in a difficult passage in  $\Theta$ .8 (1050b6-28), he advances a yet stronger principle about eternal things—that if a thing is *F* eternally, its being *F* is not the exercise of any potentiality to be *F*—and applies this principle to the heavenly bodies.<sup>4</sup> On this understanding, a thing which is eternally *F* has no potentiality to

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whether or not 1050b4-6, at the end of  $\Theta$ .8's previous discussion of priority, refers to the Prime Mover at: see Burnyeat et al. 1984, 144; Makin 2006, 203-4; Bodnár 1997, 105-6 and n. 37. Even if there is no such reference, of course, it does not follow that  $\Theta$ .8 reflects the stage in Aristotle's thinking (visible in much of the *De Caelo*) in which he does not see the need for a Prime Unmoved Mover. See also pp. 21-2 below.

<sup>3</sup> Perhaps the least unpromising response for Aristotle to make without abandoning either of the two beliefs would be to hold that the first body has no natural capacity for rest *or* for motion: it has only the blank capacity for the its parts to be in this location and that (cf. Broadie 1993, 400; Makin 2006, xli and 215-16). Motion, on this view, is bestowed on it (neither forced on it, nor activated in it, since, on this view, neither motion nor rest are expressions of any of the sphere's own bodily capacities) by the sphere's soul, in emulation of the appropriate Unmoved Mover as the best way to realise this capacity. This seems quite desperate, however, and Aristotle would be better off simply dropping the belief that eternal things can have no unrealised potentialities. See also n. 31.

<sup>4</sup> After writing this paper I found the same conclusion defended in Frey 2015. The ways in which we defend it are very different, however. Frey bases his conclusion principally on general considerations (which I do not find persuasive) as to what Aristotle ought to say given the idea that the heavenly bodies have *natures*, while I focus largely on considerations internal to the chapter and its relation to  $\Lambda$ .6-7. We also differ in how we understand a number of important points within the  $\Theta$ .8 passage. Frey follows the standard view in taking the claim that actuality is prior to potentiality 'in a more proper way', for which Aristotle argues at 1050b6-19, to involve the same notion of 'priority in substance' which was deployed earlier in the chapter, albeit in a stricter sense: I argue against this reading, and take

be *F*. This charge is part of a common interpretation of this passage,<sup>5</sup> which I think faces a number of difficulties: I shall offer a different reading which avoids these, and which brings out interesting connections between this passage and some arguments in Λ.6-7.<sup>6</sup>

I divide the passage into two parts. At 1050b6-19 Aristotle writes:

<Actuality [ἐνέργεια]<sup>7</sup> is prior to potentiality> in a more proper way as well; for eternal

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the phrase to indicate that we are dealing with a new type of priority altogether. Frey puts no weight on Aristotle's distinction between being imperishably *F* and being imperishable without qualification, which I take to be fundamental. I think that Frey's understanding of Aristotle's claim that the substance of eternal things is ἐνέργεια—as meaning only that their capacities for being and for motion are necessarily or essentially exercised rather than contingently exercised—seriously underplays the significance of the claim.

<sup>5</sup> See Witt 2003, 89-94; Makin 2006, *ad loc.*; Beere 2009, 314-24; cf. Bodnár 1997, 106 (on Bodnár's view see below, n. 31).

<sup>6</sup> Connections between the appeals in the two passages to the idea that what has a potentiality can fail to be active (1050b10-11 and 1071b13-14 (cf. 1071b25-6)) have been noted, e.g., by Dancy 1981, Makin 2006, 211, and Beere 2009, 295ff. Note that 1072a3-4 ('thinking that potentiality is prior to activity, then, is in a way right and in a way not—we have said how') may be a reference to this section of Θ.8: see Judson forthcoming, *ad loc.*

<sup>7</sup> Throughout 1050b6-28 (except for ἐνεργεί at 1050b22: see p. 16 below) I translate ἐνέργεια as 'actuality', whereas in the passages from Λ.6 and 7 quoted below I translate it as 'activity'; my argument does not hinge on these choices. In Θ.8, as often elsewhere, Aristotle uses ἐνέργεια as the correlative of potentiality (δύναμις), which suggests 'actuality' as the better translation, since clearly not every actuality (i.e. something's being actually *F*) is an activity. As we shall see, Aristotle's particular concern in Λ.6 is to argue for a principle whose substance is an *activity*. Aristotle does not, here or in general, trade on any confusion between 'actuality' and 'activity', however (see p. 11 below, and on the general point see

things are prior in substance [οὐσία] to perishable things, while nothing eternal is potentially. The reason is this. Every potentiality is at the same time a potentiality for the contradictory; for what is not able [τὸ μὴ δυνατόν] to obtain could not obtain in anything, but everything that is able <to obtain> can fail to be in actuality [ἐνεργεῖν]. So what is able to be can both be and not be; so the same thing is able both to be and not to be. And what is able to be can fail to be, and what can fail to be is perishable, either without qualification or in that way in which it is said that it can fail to be—either in respect of place or in respect of quantity or of quality (and *without qualification* is in respect of substance). So none of the things that are imperishable without qualification are potentially [δυνάμει] without qualification; but nothing prevents them <being potentially> in a certain respect, for example in respect of quality or location. So everything <which is imperishable> is in actuality [ἐνεργείᾳ]; nor are <any> of the things which are of necessity <potentially>—and yet these things are primary; for if these things were not, nothing would be.<sup>8</sup>

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Menn 1994). I translate δύναμις as ‘potentiality’—except for δυνάμει, which I translate as ‘potentially’—and τὸ δυνατόν as ‘what is able’ (I think that a good case can be made for translating this as ‘what has a potentiality’, but have used ‘what is able’ as a more neutral rendering).

<sup>8</sup> ἀλλὰ μὴν καὶ κυριωτέρως· τὰ μὲν γὰρ αἰδέια πρότερα τῆ οὐσίᾳ τῶν φθαρτῶν, ἔστι δ’ οὐθὲν δυνάμει αἰδέιον. λόγος δὲ ὅδε· πᾶσα δύναμις ἅμα τῆς ἀντιφάσεώς ἐστιν· τὸ μὲν γὰρ μὴ δυνατόν ὑπάρχειν οὐκ (10) ἂν ὑπάρξειεν οὐθενί, τὸ δυνατόν δὲ πᾶν ἐνδέχεται μὴ ἐνεργεῖν. τὸ ἄρα δυνατόν εἶναι ἐνδέχεται καὶ εἶναι καὶ μὴ εἶναι· τὸ αὐτὸ ἄρα δυνατόν καὶ εἶναι καὶ μὴ εἶναι. τὸ δὲ δυνατόν μὴ εἶναι ἐνδέχεται μὴ εἶναι· τὸ δὲ ἐνδεχόμενον μὴ εἶναι φθαρτόν, ἢ ἀπλῶς ἢ τοῦτο αὐτὸ ὃ λέγεται (15) ἐνδέχεσθαι μὴ εἶναι, ἢ κατὰ τόπον ἢ κατὰ τὸ ποσὸν ἢ ποιόν· ἀπλῶς δὲ τὸ κατ’ οὐσίαν. οὐθὲν ἄρα τῶν ἀφθάρτων ἀπλῶς δυνάμει ἔστιν ἀπλῶς (κατὰ τι δὲ οὐδὲν κωλύει, οἷον ποιὸν ἢ πού)· ἐνεργείᾳ ἄρα πάντα· οὐδὲ τῶν ἐξ ἀνάγκης ὄντων· καίτοι ταῦτα πρῶτα· εἰ γὰρ ταῦτα μὴ ἦν, οὐθὲν ἂν ἦν.

Aristotle calls this form of priority ‘priority in substance [οὐσία]’ (1050b7), an expression he had used for the priority at issue in the preceding section, 1050a4-b6; but he also calls it priority ‘in a more proper way’ (κυριωτέρως: b6). On the standard interpretation, the form of priority in question is either the exactly the same as the priority in substance discussed earlier—ontological priority—or is a related species of ontological priority. There are two main grounds for an interpretation of this kind: the repetition of the expression ‘(priority) in substance’ already noted, and the appearance of what seems to be an appeal to an ontological asymmetry in the argument for the new priority claim, at 1050b19: ‘if the eternal beings were not, nothing would be’.<sup>9</sup> On this reading Aristotle’s main concern is to establish that perishable things depend ontologically on—are posterior in being (εἶναι) to—imperishable things. Note that commentators differ over whether to understand ‘being’ in this context in terms of existence or in terms of a thing’s being what it (essentially) is.<sup>10</sup>

This interpretation faces some serious difficulties. (i) If the kind of priority in question is the same as the earlier one, what can Aristotle mean when he says ‘actuality is prior in a more proper way as well’ at 1050b6? Makin tentatively suggests that this somehow means only that *the case* for priority is more definitive or perspicuous.<sup>11</sup> This seems an implausible way to understand κυριωτέρως, and it seems to have the consequence that Aristotle is now downgrading the epistemic status of his earlier quite emphatic claim that actuality *in general* is prior in substance, since the present claim only involves the actuality of eternal things.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> εἰ γὰρ ταῦτα μὴ ἦν, οὐθὲν ἄν ἦν.

<sup>10</sup> See Peramatzis 2011, ch. 8. Peramatzis calls the corresponding asymmetries ‘existential priority’ and ‘priority in being’; he discusses the application of the distinction to this passage on pp. 291-9 (see below, n. 12, and p. 9). I use ‘being’ as a term of art in yet another sense, below, pp. 9ff.

<sup>11</sup> 2006, 208; he concedes that ‘[i]t is unclear why this is “a more proper way” (1050b6) in which actuality is prior in substance’.

<sup>12</sup> Michael Peramatzis has suggested to me in correspondence that Aristotle means that

Like most defenders of the standard interpretation, Makin takes the claim at 1050b19 to reflect a test for existential asymmetry and to indicate ontological priority. The problem is that this test for ontological priority gives the wrong result for the principal subjects of the earlier priority claim, immature organisms and adults—since an immature organism can exist without developing into a mature adult, but an adult cannot develop without there being an immature organism. If passing this test yields priority in substance in a more definitive way, Aristotle ought to reverse the conclusion of the earlier section.<sup>13</sup>

(ii) Beere suggests that ‘in a more proper way’ might mean that eternal things satisfy the same notion of priority in a stricter sense.<sup>14</sup> In this way he hopes to avoid the Scylla of thinking that the form of priority involved is exactly the same and (what he sees as) the Charybdis of taking it to be quite distinct. One would have expected Aristotle to introduce this point by saying, ‘*In the case of eternal things*, actuality is prior to potentiality in a stricter way’, rather than simply ἀλλὰ μὴν καὶ κυριωτέρως, which is much more naturally taken to continue the list of ways in which actuality is prior. In any case, what is this stricter sense?

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eternal things satisfy the same notion of priority in a stricter way. In a somewhat different argumentative context in Peramatzis 2011 (292-3) he suggests that the perishable beings which are prior in substance to other perishable beings might be prior in a ‘deficient way’, because there are ‘further claimants ... for the title of ontological priority’, namely potential beings such as immature organisms. But Aristotle’s earlier argument is, in effect, that these potential beings’ claims to the title are in fact invalid; so it is not clear that their existence makes actual beings’ priority in any way deficient. This aside, it seems to me to be hard to find a way of specifying what the stricter way is which does not either lead to the same sort of difficulties which I think Beere’s view faces in relation to different asymmetries of being (see pp. 7-9 below) or require a quite distinct sense of priority (the view I seek to defend).

<sup>13</sup> Makin seeks to defuse this objection (Makin 2003; 2006, 192-6), but not, in my view, successfully: see Peramatzis 2011, 278-86.

<sup>14</sup> 2009, 293-304 (cf. Frey 2015, 91).

Beere thinks that priority in substance<sup>15</sup> is a generic relation of ontological (in)dependence whose species are determined by their criteria. He takes the asymmetry claim at 1050b19 in the same way as Makin, and concludes that the stricter sense of ontological priority invoked in our present passage is one which requires satisfying what he calls ‘Plato’s criterion’—the test involving existential asymmetry (*X* can exist without *Y* existing, but not vice versa) which at *Met.* Δ.11, 1019a1-11 Aristotle ascribes to Plato as a test for priority ‘in substance and nature’. Θ.8’s earlier claim about priority in substance, by contrast, invokes a looser form of ontological priority which does not involve this criterion.<sup>16</sup> The same difficulty arises as for Makin’s view, that the ‘stricter’ test for ontological priority gives the wrong result for immature organisms and adults, so that one cannot regard the two types of priority

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<sup>15</sup> Beere calls it priority ‘in being’: both expressions translate Aristotle’s (τῆ) οὐσίᾳ.

<sup>16</sup> Beere thinks that at 1050a3-4 Aristotle refers to the looser form of priority in substance as ‘priority in *form and substance*’ (note this reading is not required by what Aristotle says: ‘actuality is prior in substance too, first because things posterior in coming to be are prior in form and substance’). He attempts to draw a parallel between the way this looser form is (in his view) specified here and the additional specifications given to the other two forms of priority discussed earlier in the chapter. ‘We saw that priority in account and priority in time were further explained as priority in account *and knowledge* and as priority in time *and genesis*. In each case, the additional term gave further explanation of what the priority in question amounted to. We expect the same pattern here’ (2009, 297). But in the other two cases, Beere thinks, the further explanation serves to alert us to the need to *exclude* a kind of priority irrelevant to the priority of actuality, so as to focus on ‘the priority in question’; whereas in this case it would serve to distinguish one species of the priority in question from another, *both* of which are relevant to the priority of actuality. It is, moreover, ‘priority in substance’ *simpliciter*, and not the expanded expression, which on this view refers to the stricter sense of the priority in question. The addition of ‘and form’ at 1050a3-4 cannot, I think, easily bear the weight which Beere places on it.

in substance as stricter and more relaxed species of the same form of priority.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Beere appeals to two passages outside Θ, *Phys.* 8.7, 260b17-19 and *Cat.* 12, in support of his view. The first of these seems if anything to show the opposite of what Beere wants to claim: ‘Aristotle there distinguishes a nameless sense of priority, specified by PLATO’S CRITERION, from priority in being (*ousia*)’ (2009, 298). If this passage is relevant to Θ.8, then (on Beere’s reading) either (i) ‘priority in *ousia*’ refers to the generic notion (or to the union of the two species)—and in this case Aristotle ought not to say, as he does ‘[there is a sense of priority, specified by Plato’s criterion], and there is also priority in substance’ (λέγεται δὲ πρότερον οὐ̄τε μὴ ὄντος οὐκ ἔσται τᾶλλα, ἐκεῖνο δὲ ἄνευ τῶν ἄλλων, καὶ τὸ τῷ χρόνῳ, καὶ τὸ κατ’ οὐσίαν)—or (ii) it refers to the priority of substance in the *strict* sense, which on Beere’s view is precisely the one specified by Plato’s criterion. If it shows anything, therefore, the *Physics* passage is evidence that Aristotle takes priority in substance not to involve satisfying Plato’s criterion. Beere’s second passage is *Cat.* 12: there Aristotle says that there are some cases where there is priority although there is no ontological asymmetry: his example is that of a state of affairs and the statement which truly describes it. Beere says that in this passage ‘it becomes clear that priority in being is ontological dependence, broadly construed’ (2009, 298). It is worth noting, however, that Aristotle does not use the expression ‘priority in οὐσία’ in *Cat.* 12 at all: he does not give the form of priority involving ontological asymmetry a name, but says ‘what does not reciprocate with respect to the implication of being <is prior>’ (δεύτερον δὲ τὸ μὴ ἀντιστρέφον κατὰ τὴν τοῦ εἶναι ἀκολουθήσιν: 14a30), and in relation to the other form of priority uses the expression ‘prior by nature’, an expression he has also just used for the fourth and least important form of priority. Moreover, he explicitly introduces this new form as one which seems to be a *further one* besides the ones already mentioned: οἱ μὲν οὖν λεγόμενοι τοῦ προτέρου τρόποι τοσοῦτοί εἰσιν. δόξειε δ’ ἂν καὶ παρὰ τοὺς εἰρημένους ἕτερος εἶναι προτέρου τρόπος (14b9-11). (Aristotle’s curious manner of proceeding (‘there are these four forms of priority—but there is also another one’) suggests that he may actually be *correcting* a Platonic or Academic account of ontological priority as a matter of satisfying Plato’s criterion—though, as Ana

The same difficulty arises the other way round, as it were, if we suppose that priority in substance involves an asymmetry in things being what they (essentially) are, rather than in their existence. The claim that, for Aristotle, adults are prior in this way to immature organisms seems entirely plausible: but it is not at all obvious that the heavenly bodies are prior in this way to perishable beings.<sup>18</sup>

We can avoid these difficulties if we take Aristotle to be introducing a new form of priority—and hence to mean something different by ‘priority in substance’ here—and to have something quite different in mind when he says ‘if these things were not, nothing would be’. I suggest that in speaking of ‘priority in substance’ he is using the notion of ‘the substance of *X*’ to which he appeals in *Λ.6*, 1071b12-21, where he contrasts substances whose ‘substance is δύναμις’ and those whose ‘substance is ἐνέργεια’. What Aristotle has in mind is the question of what the fundamental ground is of a thing’s *being the substance that it is*. In this sense, a thing’s substance is δύναμις if its being the substance that it is (let us call this its being, for short) is an exercise or realisation of one or more potentialities, or depends on such an exercise or realisation. Thus the being (so defined) of a house might be thought of as its possession of a certain structure, or as its serving the function of a protection for people and possessions:<sup>19</sup> in either case, its being is grounded in potentialities—the potentialities of its

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Laura Edelhoff reminded me, Aristotle does make use of Plato’s criterion, or something like it, earlier in the *Categories*, to establish that certain relatives are prior to their correlatives (7, 7b15ff.) Thus I think that there is little reason to see being prior ‘in the more proper way’ in our passage as a stricter species of ontological priority.

<sup>18</sup> Peramatzis considers this objection (2011, 291-9), and makes a good case for the idea that the Prime Mover is prior in being what it (essentially) is to the other Unmoved Movers; but he does not in my view show how the heavenly bodies are prior in this way to sublunary beings.

<sup>19</sup> Or it might be held to be both, in the sense that the structure might be definable only in

matter to be structured in certain ways. This connection with *matter* as the ground, in this sense, is brought out at 1050b27's remark about the substance of perishable things: ἡ γὰρ οὐσία ὕλη καὶ δύναμις οὐσα ('the substance, which is matter and potentiality'). The substance of a human being, too, is in this sense δύναμις and matter. The being of a human being might be to engage in the activities which define a human: these activities are the exercise of the corresponding capacities. Or it might be the possession of these capacities—but, as with the house, the possession of these is itself the realisation of certain potentialities of its matter.<sup>20</sup> I shall continue to speak of this notion as that of 'the substance of *X*'; but it is important to note that it is an open question whether it is the same notion as the one we find in *Met. Z*, where 'the substance of *X*' is something like 'the thing which makes *X* the thing it is'. Whether one sees the present notion of 'the substance of *X*' as a quite different usage from that one will depend on whether one thinks that substantial forms are matter-involving.<sup>21</sup> If they are not, then to hold that a perishable substance's substance in the *Z* sense is (its) form, and in the *Λ* sense is potentiality, will be to give compatible answers to two different questions, not incompatible answers to the same question. If substantial forms do involve matter, then to hold that a perishable substance's substance in the *Z* sense is (its) form, and in the *Λ* sense is potentiality, will be to give essentially the same answer to the same question.

In *Λ.6* (1071b12-22) Aristotle is interested in a very special contrast case—the Unmoved Movers. For reasons which need not concern us here, Aristotle thinks that their being must consist in engaging in an *activity*—thinking<sup>22</sup>—and he argues that their substance must be

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terms of the protective function.

<sup>20</sup> For this reason, engaging in the activities is also grounded in these potentialities.

<sup>21</sup> For discussion of this issue see, e.g., Frede 1990; Ferejohn 1994; Lennox 2008; Peramatzis 2011, chs 5-6.

<sup>22</sup> Although the passage focuses on causing eternal continuous motion, I think that the activity in question is theoretical thinking, and not the willing of such change (*contra* Broadie

ἐνέργεια, not δύναμις:

Yet if there is something which can cause change or act upon things, but is not active in some way, there will be no change; for that which has a potentiality can fail to be active. Nor will it help, then, even if we posit substances which are eternal—as do those who posit the Forms—without some principle in them which has the potentiality to cause change. Yet not even this will be sufficient, nor will another substance besides the Forms; for unless it is active there will be no change. Again, it will not be sufficient if it is active but its substance is potentiality; for there will not be eternal change, since that which is potentially can fail to be. There must, therefore, be a principle of this sort, whose substance is activity.<sup>23</sup>

In this passage, as I have said, it is crucial that the relevant ἐνέργεια is an activity. The concept of a substance whose substance is ἐνέργεια does not require this, however. It could in principle apply in the case of a substance whose being was an actuality, but not an activity: what is required is only that this actuality is neither the exercise or realisation of a potentiality, nor is otherwise grounded in a potentiality. We have just such a case in Θ.8, as we shall see.

The broad outline of Aristotle's argument at 1050b6-19, on this reading, is as follows:

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1993).

<sup>23</sup> ἀλλὰ μὴν εἴ ἔστι κινητικὸν ἢ ποιητικόν, μὴ ἐνεργοῦν δέ τι, οὐκ ἔστι κίνησις· ἐνδέχεται γὰρ τὸ δύνάμιν ἔχον μὴ ἐνεργεῖν. οὐθὲν ἄρα ὄφελος οὐδ' ἐὰν οὐσίας ποιήσωμεν αἰ- (15) δίους, ὥσπερ οἱ τὰ εἶδη, εἰ μὴ τις δυναμένη ἐνέσται ἀρχὴ μεταβάλλειν· οὐ τοίνυν οὐδ' αὐτὴ ἰκανή, οὐδ' ἄλλη οὐσία παρὰ τὰ εἶδη· εἰ γὰρ μὴ ἐνεργήσει, οὐκ ἔστι κίνησις. ἔτι οὐδ' εἰ ἐνεργήσει, ἢ δ' οὐσία αὐτῆς δύναμις· οὐ γὰρ ἔστι κίνησις αἰδῖος· ἐνδέχεται γὰρ τὸ δυνάμει ὄν μὴ εἶναι. δεῖ (20) ἄρα εἶναι ἀρχὴν τοιαύτην ἥς ἢ οὐσία ἐνέργεια.

(1) The substance of perishable things is potentiality, but that of eternal things is actuality.

(2) Eternal things are prior to perishable things, because without the former the latter would not be.

Therefore (3) things whose nature is actuality are prior to things whose substance is potentiality.

So (4) actuality is prior to potentiality.<sup>24</sup>

In what sense is the priority of actuality argued for here a new one? As we have seen, the standard interpretation takes premiss (2) to invoke Θ.8's earlier idea of priority 'in substance', with its appeal to dependence and independence of being: since eternal things are actualities, and eternal things are prior in substance to perishable things, (certain) actualities are prior in substance to perishable things. I take premiss (2) to be concerned, instead, with dependence involving efficient causation.<sup>25</sup> Efficient causation has already been invoked in the notion of 'priority in time' (1049b17-1050a3); but that was the causation of one thing by another thing which preceded it in time (as, for example, one human being is begotten by another, pre-existing one, and so on back in time). When Aristotle argues for a 'First Mover' in *Phys.* 8 and Λ.6-7, however, he is not thinking of the first member of a causal series of this sort—for Aristotle there is no such thing—but of a causal series which does not rely on

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<sup>24</sup> There is a highly compressed rehearsal of just this argument at *Int.* 13, 23a21-6: 'It is clear from what has been said that what is of necessity is in accordance with ἐνέργεια [κατ' ἐνέργειαν]; so that, if the eternal things are prior, then also ἐνέργεια is prior to potentiality. Some things are ἐνέργεια without potentiality (e.g. the primary substances), others with potentiality (these are prior by nature but posterior in time <to the potentiality>); and others are never ἐνέργεια but only potentialities.'

<sup>25</sup> The point is not that the sentence 'if these things were not, nothing would be' means something different, but that what determines the sort of priority at issue is what explains its being true. I am grateful to Ana Laura Edelhoff for helping to clarify this point.

temporal succession. Thus when he argues in Λ.6-7 that actuality (or activity) is prior to potentiality in the sense that everything has a cause (the First Mover) which is itself not in any way potential, he is claiming for actuality a form of efficient causal priority which is distinct from Θ.8's priority in time.<sup>26</sup> Part of his argument there is that without such a cause 'none of the things which are will be' (1071b25): the most that might follow is not, of course, that *nothing* would exist, but that the ordered world of sublunary natural things (perhaps any change at all) would not: and this is probably all that Aristotle means. In any case, we should take premiss (2) of the Θ argument in the same way—as about the causal dependence of other things on actuality. If there were no heavenly bodies, then nothing would change: this seems to allow the existence of the four sublunary elements (perhaps even of inorganic compounds),<sup>27</sup> but in an unchanging state; nothing else, and in particular none of the natural, perishable substances with which we are familiar, would exist. Note that the Θ argument is concerned with this chain of causal dependence *one stage down* from the Unmoved Mover(s)—with the heavenly bodies. This does not undermine the claim about the dependence of perishable things, since the causal role of the Unmoved Mover(s) in producing motion is of course mediated by the heavenly bodies.<sup>28</sup>

If this is the form of priority with which our passage is concerned, why is it priority 'in a more proper way'? I suggest that this is because it is a key structural feature of the whole natural world. This world is composed of changing beings of two kinds, those whose substance is potentiality and those whose substance is actuality, and all of the former kind depend (in terms of efficient causation) for their existence upon some or all of the latter.

I shall now consider premiss (1). Why is the substance of eternal things actuality? More

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<sup>26</sup> For a defence of the view that the Prime Mover is an efficient cause as well as a final cause see Judson 1994, 164-7; Frede 2000, 43-7; Berti 2000.

<sup>27</sup> These are controversial issues which I shall not address.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Λ.6-7, 1072a9-27.

particularly, why is the substance of changeable eternal substances actuality?<sup>29</sup> Aristotle draws heavily on a distinction between ‘being imperishable without qualification’ and ‘being imperishable in respect of place, quality, etc.’. This reflects the distinction he standardly draws between ‘coming to be without qualification’ (also glossed as ‘coming to be in respect of substance’), which signifies ‘coming into existence’ or ‘coming to be what a thing essentially is’, and ‘coming to be in respect of place’, ‘coming to be in respect of quality’, etc., which refer to change of place, alteration, etc.<sup>30</sup> Aristotle explicitly acknowledges that an eternal thing’s being imperishable without qualification, and hence its not having a potentiality to be, are quite compatible with its possessing potentialities, if it is able to change in some respect: ‘nothing prevents them being potentially in a certain respect, for example in respect of quality or location’ (1050b17-18).<sup>31</sup> This acknowledgement would be pointless in

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<sup>29</sup> As we have seen, Aristotle thinks that the other class of eternal substances, the unchangeable Unmoved Movers, simply are activities of thinking.

<sup>30</sup> See ̸.2, 1069b9-13.

<sup>31</sup> Bodnár claims that in 1050b6-19 Aristotle is only concerned with the immaterial Unmoved Movers, and that the heavenly bodies are not introduced until b20ff. (1997, 106; cf. 107). This, however, requires Aristotle to be saying that nothing prevents the *Unmoved Movers* from having two-way potentialities in respect of place or quality, which is hardly his view. Bodnár uses this claim about the structure of the passage to support the suggestion that Aristotle accepts that things which are eternally *F* have a potentiality to be *F*, but denies that this is a two-way potentiality. When Aristotle says that ‘for the motion is not for them related to the potentiality for the contradictory’, Bodnár thinks he means not that the heavenly spheres have no potentiality, but that they have a ‘blank capacity’ to move in a circle: their potentiality is not ‘for the contradictory’ because no determinate realisation of this capacity is the contradictory of any other realisation. The suggestion does not avoid the key difficulty, however, that if the spheres cannot but move in a circle, the Unmoved Mover is not required to explain why they *move*. (When Aristotle talks of eternal beings in our passage I think he only has the heavenly bodies in mind; but with a few adjustments my interpretation would be

the present context unless Aristotle thinks that, for a heavenly body, being the substance that it is does *not* include its actually moving in the way that it does—it must therefore be a matter of its having the spherical structure and size that it does (and, perhaps, in consequence, the capacity—however this is to be construed—to be in motion<sup>32</sup>). This view of what it is to be a heavenly body seems a direct consequence of Aristotle’s subsequent denial that these bodies have matter for generation together with his insistence that they have topical matter.<sup>33</sup>

Aristotle’s argument for (1) is, therefore, something like this:

- (i) Having a potentiality for being, or for being *F*, involves being able to fail to be (or to be *F*).
- (ii) Eternal things are imperishable [sc. without qualification].
- (iii) So they cannot be able to fail to be without qualification.
- So (iv) they cannot have a potentiality to be.
- (v) So their being—unlike that of perishable things—is not the exercise of a potentiality.

This argument does not rely on any general principle that if a thing is eternally *F* (i.e. *F* for all time) it is imperishably *F*. It does rely on the premiss that things which exist eternally do

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compatible with the idea that he has the Unmoved Movers in mind as well.)

<sup>32</sup> For all that has been said, this capacity might be part of the heavenly bodies’ essence, or a necessary consequence of possession of that essence.

<sup>33</sup> See 1050b21-2 (discussed below) and ̸.2, 1069b9-11. Note that this account is entirely compatible with the view that the heavenly bodies’ motion is *necessary*: the need for an external unmoved cause of their motion means that we should distinguish what is necessary because of their own natures, and what is necessary *tout court*, given the existence of the Unmoved Movers. Note in addition that the stars, planets and the heavenly spheres also *think*. It is a delicate question—and one on which Aristotle is silent—whether this thinking is (like ours) the exercise of a capacity, or not (like the Unmoved Movers’).

so of necessity, but Aristotle has independent grounds for this: there is in his cosmology and metaphysics nothing on which their existence depends—nothing to which it is due and nothing which can interfere with it.<sup>34</sup>

What is now the standard interpretation, however, takes Aristotle to equate ‘eternally *F*’ with ‘imperishably *F*’, and to apply the argument not only to being without qualification but to being with respect to place, quality, etc. If this were right, he would, after all, be deploying the view that something which is eternally *F* (for any value of *F*) has no potentiality to be *F*.<sup>35</sup> This interpretation may be based in part upon the thought that Aristotle is committed to something close to this view by his denial that eternal things can have unrealised potentialities; but it is also based on a common reading of the second part of the passage, 1050b20-8, because on this reading Aristotle applies just this principle to the motion of the heavenly bodies:

Nor then is motion <potentially>, if there is some eternal motion; nor if there is something which is moved eternally, is it moved in accordance with potentiality [κατὰ δύναμιν] except for whence and whither; for nothing prevents it having matter for this. That is why the sun and the stars and the entire heaven are always active [ἐνεργεῖ],<sup>36</sup> and there is no fear that they might at some time stop, which those who write on nature fear. Nor do they tire in doing this; for the motion is not for them related to the potentiality for the contradictory, as it is for perishable things, so that the continuity of the motion involves effort; for the cause of this [i.e. involving effort] is the substance, which is matter and potentiality, not actuality [ἐνέργεια].<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> This seems good evidence against the view advanced by Bodnár that the Unmoved Mover sustains the *existence* of the heavenly bodies as well as their motion (1997, 110).

<sup>35</sup> See, e.g., Makin 2006, *ad loc.*; Beere 2009, 314-24.

<sup>36</sup> The translation ‘active’ seems unavoidable here.

<sup>37</sup> οὐδὲ δὴ κίνησις, εἴ τις ἐστὶν αἴδιος· οὐδ’ εἴ τι κινούμενον αἴδιον, οὐκ ἔστι κατὰ δύναμιν

Thus Makin and Beere take Aristotle to be maintaining that bodies which move eternally do not thereby exercise any potentiality. This interpretation too leads to a number of difficulties.

(i) On this reading Aristotle’s application of his argument to *motion* comes out of the blue:

his concern throughout has been with eternal substances, as the references to being imperishable in respect of substance but perishable with respect to place, quality, etc., show.

(ii) By the same token, if we were to take the linkage to be the idea that an eternal *motion* is imperishable without qualification, we would still face the difficulty that motion is not the

sort of thing which can be the owner of a potentiality, so it should not be the change which is said to be or not to be potentially.<sup>38</sup>

(iii) If a heavenly body’s circular motion is intrinsically necessary because the motion is eternal and is therefore not the exercise of a potentiality, it is hard to see how Aristotle could be so breezy in ascribing potentiality and matter for ‘whence and whither’ to the subject of that necessary motion: ‘if there is something which is moved eternally, it is not moved in accordance with potentiality *except for whence and whither; for*

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κινούμενον ἀλλ’ ἢ ποθὲν ποί (τούτου δ’ ὕλην οὐδὲν κωλύει ὑπάρχειν), διὸ ἀεὶ ἐνεργεῖ ἥλιος καὶ ἄστρα καὶ ὄλος ὁ οὐρανός, καὶ οὐ φοβερὸν μὴ ποτε στή, ὃ φοβοῦνται οἱ περὶ φύσεως. οὐδὲ κάμνει τοῦτο δρῶντα· οὐ (25) γὰρ περὶ τὴν δύναμιν τῆς ἀντιφάσεως αὐτοῖς, οἷον τοῖς φθαρτοῖς, ἢ κίνησις, ὥστε ἐπίπονον εἶναι τὴν συνέχειαν τῆς κινήσεως· ἢ γὰρ οὐσία ὕλη καὶ δύναμις οὐσα, οὐκ ἐνέργεια, αἰτία τούτου.

<sup>38</sup> The anonymous reader for *Phronesis* suggested that there might be a parallel with Aristotle’s claims that a division, or a Hermes, is potentially: neither of these can be the owner of a potentiality. But these are claims that the item in question, while not being in actuality, nonetheless *is* in a certain way—potentially. While being potentially in this sense is being in virtue of the potentialities of something (the line or the block of marble), it is contrasted with being actually (compare *Phys.* 3’s discussion of the way in which the infinite is); so it is a very different claim from the claim that something is actually *F* in virtue of an exercise of its own potentiality: that is why the latter does and the former does not involve the ascription of a potentiality to the item in question.

*nothing prevents it having matter for this*' (1050b21-2; cf. b17-18, quoted above). If, as we might expect, this potentiality is for the change of location of the heavenly body's parts, this is a straightforward inconsistency. It might seem as if we could avoid inconsistency by supposing that the potentiality in question is for something which is not *continuously* the case, and so, strictly speaking, not the case throughout all time, and so not the case eternally: it might be a potentiality for the parts to be moving from *A* to *B* and from *B* to *A*,<sup>39</sup> or for the parts to occupy different locations.<sup>40</sup> If this is Aristotle's view, however, it is striking that he is silent on what is (on the general interpretation under consideration) a key distinction. What is more, this move does not seem to address the fundamental problem: if a heavenly body's *motion* is not the exercise of a potentiality, what role is left for the exercise of a potentiality to be moving from *A* to *B* or to be in this or that location? If, on the other hand, the exercise of a potentiality of one of these sorts *is* required for the motion to take place, then it is hard to see what is left of the claim that the motion is not the exercise of a potentiality. Put another way, the present interpretation aligns being *F* for all time with being *F* imperishably, and aligns that with not being the exercise of a potentiality. But the heavenly body does not merely move, but moves with the speed, direction and angle that it does for all time, and hence imperishably, and hence (on this view) in a way which is not the exercise of a potentiality. This activity is therefore sufficient for the parts of the body to move from *A* to *B* and to occupy different locations. The only things not fixed by the sphere's activity are whether a given part is at *A*, or is moving from *A* to *B*, at, say, 10 o'clock rather than 2 o'clock. It is very hard to imagine that this is what the exercise of topical matter is supposed to account for. (iv) This interpretation has Aristotle explicitly denying that the heavenly bodies' being in motion is the exercise of a capacity, and this is in uncomfortably obvious conflict with the idea that their being in motion requires the activity of one or more Unmoved Movers.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> So Ross 1924, II, 265; Beere 2009, 319.

<sup>40</sup> So Broadie 1993, 400, and Makin 2006, xli and 215-16.

<sup>41</sup> See *Phys.* 8 and ̸.6. To apply the terms of the latter discussion, this interpretation seems

It is possible to read 1050b20-8 in another way, however, which removes these difficulties, and which leaves room for—and may even appeal to—the Unmoved Mover. On this way of understanding the passage, Aristotle is principally dwelling on the difference established at 1050b6-19 between the matter possessed by perishable things—which is matter for (and so essentially involves the potentiality for) coming and ceasing to be—and the topical matter of the eternally existing heavenly bodies. The line of thought in the first sentence of the passage (1050b20-2), on this reading, is mirrored in Λ.7, at 1072b4-10:

Now if something is moved, it can also be otherwise than it is, so that the primary motion is indeed in actuality [ἐνεργείᾳ], in that it is moved; but in this way it can be otherwise—i.e. in respect of place—even though it cannot be otherwise in respect of substance. But since there is something which causes motion but is itself unmoved, and which exists in actuality [ἐνεργείᾳ], this thing cannot in any way be otherwise.<sup>42</sup>

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to commit Aristotle to the idea that the heavenly bodies' motion is an ἐνέργεια which (partly) constitutes their substance, whereas at 1071b19-23 he ascribes the idea of a thing's substance being ἐνέργεια to the immaterial originating cause of their being in motion—the Unmoved Mover(s). As I have already noted, of course, it must be conceded that the full set of Aristotle's views of the heavenly bodies' potentialities may well contain some inconsistency somewhere: see pp. 1-2 and n. 31.

<sup>42</sup> εἰ μὲν οὖν τι κινεῖται, ἐνδέχεται (5) ἄλλως ἔχειν, ὡσθ' ἡ φορὰ ἡ πρώτη καὶ ἐνεργεία ἐστὶν ἣ κινεῖται· ταύτη δὲ ἐνδέχεται ἄλλως ἔχειν, κατὰ τόπον, καὶ εἰ μὴ κατ' οὐσίαν· ἐπεὶ δὲ ἔστι τι κινουὺν αὐτὸ ἀκίνητον ὄν, ἐνεργείᾳ ὄν, τοῦτο οὐκ ἐνδέχεται ἄλλως ἔχειν οὐδαμῶς. The text here may be slightly corrupt, but the overall sense is not in doubt. At b5-6 I read ὡσθ' ἡ φορὰ ἡ πρώτη καὶ ἐνεργεία ἐστὶν ἣ κινεῖται· ταύτη δὲ ἐνδέχεται ἄλλως ἔχειν rather than Jaeger's ὡσθ' ἡ φορὰ ἡ πρώτη εἰ καὶ ἐνεργεία ἐστὶν, ἣ κινεῖται ταύτη γε ἐνδέχεται ἄλλως ἔχειν (with Fazzo 2012, 284-7, but with slightly different punctuation; see also Laks 2000, 209 and 228-30, Judson forthcoming, Notes on the Text, and for a different view,

The first thing to notice about this is that ‘the primary motion’ at b5 is clearly a metonymy for ‘the subject of the primary motion’: being moved and being able to be otherwise are attributes of this subject, not of the primary motion itself (compare the immediately preceding sentence: ‘if something is moved, it can also be otherwise than it is’). Aristotle is contrasting the subject of the primary eternal motion—the outermost heavenly sphere—with the Unmoved Mover. This sphere ‘can be otherwise in respect of place’, not in the sense that it can change its location, but in the sense that its parts can. The phrase ‘it cannot be otherwise in respect of substance’ is equivalent to ‘it is imperishable in respect of substance’, which we have encountered in  $\Theta$ .8, and Aristotle means that it is incapable of not being (i.e. of failing to exist, or of failing to be what it essentially is). This is very close to the line of thought about the heavenly bodies in general which I have suggested we should detect at 1050b6-20. By contrast, the Unmoved Mover not only causes motion without transmitting it, but is not subject to any sort of change—and hence, implicitly, is able to be the ultimate principle while the outermost heavenly sphere is not.

We should read 1050b20-28 as based on the same the line of thought. Here is a paraphrase:

Nor then is eternal change <the attribute of something which *is* potentially>: the potentiality of something which is moved eternally, in accordance with which that thing is moved, is only the potentiality for motion—topical matter—not the sort of potentiality which perishable things have, which is (not only for motion but also) for coming and ceasing to be. That is why the sun and the stars and the entire heaven are always active, and there is no fear that they might stop [i.e. because they are always there to be acted on by their Unmoved Mover(s)]; for their motion is related to ‘topical’ potentiality, not the potentiality for existing or not existing. They do not tire in moving because they do not expend energy on continuing to exist and resisting decay: and this

is because their existing is not the exercise of a potentiality—the substance of the spheres is actuality not potentiality [this recaps the first part of the passage; cf. also 1050b2-3], whereas the substance of perishable things is potentiality. [Alternatively: They are tireless because their motion is due to something (i.e. the Prime Mover) whose substance is actuality, whereas the substance of perishable things is potentiality.]

Taking ‘change, if there is some eternal change’ as a metonymy for ‘the *subject* of any eternal change’, which, as we have seen, has a clear parallel at 1072b5, removes difficulties (i) and (ii). Difficulties (iii) and (iv) simply do not arise, as Aristotle is not, on this reading, claiming that heavenly bodies lack any potentiality for motion, nor that they are ‘imperishable with respect to motion’. The claims that there should be no fear that the heavenly bodies might stop, and that they do not tire in moving, are something of a problem on any account. On the interpretation I am opposing, they are based on the claim that the heavenly bodies’ motion is not the exercise of a potentiality. This interpretation once again faces the difficulty posed for it by topical matter: *something* about the heavenly bodies’ motion is the exercise of a potentiality, and so there should still be a fear that it might stop. On my reading, Aristotle is taking it for granted that continuous, friction-free rotation within the same spherical location does not involve effort—though it does, obviously, require continuous activation by the Unmoved Mover(s). What would involve effort for the heavenly bodies would be having to sustain their existence—of keeping destruction and decay at bay—if *that* were the exercise of a potentiality. I have to concede that this is not best put in terms of a fear that the sun, etc. should *stop*: perhaps Aristotle is thinking principally of the visible heavenly bodies which are carried round by the heavenly spheres,<sup>43</sup> and is thinking that the former would stop if the latter ceased to exist. As regards the final sentence (b27-8), I prefer the second of the two readings, since it makes a better point, and captures nicely the difference between what Aristotle should say about the effortlessness of heavenly motion once he has decided on the need for the Unmoved Movers, and what he said about it before

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<sup>43</sup> For discussion of some of the complexities within this idea, see Judson 2015, 172-3.

that in *Cael.* 2.1; but nothing hinges on this choice.

The readings I have offered of 1050b6-19 and b20-28 have significant exegetical advantages over the standard interpretations. They have philosophical advantages too, insofar as they connect actuality's being prior 'in a more proper way' with other parts of Aristotle's metaphysics—in particular, with what one might call the grand cosmic structure which Aristotle reveals in Λ.6-7, where he argues that the everyday world of perishable beings is causally dependent on the ἐνέργεια of eternal beings, and ultimately on that of the Prime Unmoved Mover.<sup>44</sup>

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