42. On the Meaning of the Word "Activity" in Contrast to Motion

In sensing, the organs are affected, but their make-up and the sensing activity are not affected. Aristotle's concept of "activity" (energeia) is basic for him.

Take for example your radio. You need it to be "affected" by the incoming signal, but you need this not to affect the matter-and-form arrangement that makes your radio work. So in one way the signal has to make a change in your radio; in every other way it must not change the radio. The radio's capacity for its activity needs to continue unchanged. If your radio stopped working just when you were listening to a politician you despise, you might joke that he broke your radio. But you would certainly know that its capacity for its activity is not something that can be affected in that way. But a radio is an artificially made thing. It does not determine its activity, the designers do. It does not generate itself by its own activities, as living things generate their bodies from embryos and reproduction, feeding, and growth.

The concept of "activity" in contrast to motion is fundamental to Aristotle. Without it, or something like it, he could not maintain that we are (and live among) living things which act from themselves. A science of the living in living things would be impossible.

Aristotle has three terms where we have only two. He has "rest," "motion,"and also "activity." An internally arising, self-ordering activity is more active (more determinative) than the changes it makes, yet it does not change. It may be better to translate "energeia" as "energy" despite so many centuries between, since in our usage an "energy" can be present without itself changing, whereas in English an "activity" without change can seem puzzling.

In philosophy one has to become accustomed to ways of thinking that change what the words usually mean, rather than assuming that everything can be said in the usual usage of words. There is no English word whose usual use means what Aristotle means. One needs at least a phrase to say that for him "an activity can

exist alone" and is in fact the only thing that can. (Motion requires a body.) Our English word "energy" might be used for what he means by "energeia" if we try to say that in English "an energy can exist independently regardless of whatever else exists." We have difficulty imagining an activity if it doesn't act on something but we can imagine an energy that exists as such by itself.

In Aristotle's concept, "an energeia" is also an active organizing. In classical Western science "energy" doesn't organize anything but in modern physics it does. But most people still unconsciously assume the classical physics according to which nature does not make order and laws. It only "obeys" laws. Who makes the laws? The scientists do. In Western history it was God who made the laws which nature only obeyed. In our sciences nature still only obeys, but now nothing actively makes the laws. In the modern view nature is only organized, but does not do active organizing, lawing. In Aristotle's view nature determines; it is not only determined.

Let us not try here to decide the issue. Rather, let us try to grasp how Aristotle's view differs from our ususal approach. For Aristotle activity (or energy) is something that actively exists. But it can seem to be no more than just a regular "pattern." With modern habits we are comfortable with the idea that the bodies and motions of nature are lawfully organized by regular patterns even though we assume that nature is not doing the organizing. The motions of bodies which we observe just happen to fit into abstract patterns which we take to be just thoughts. To Aristotle it seems observable that nature organizes itself. It consists of selforganizing activities. Living things not only move and change; they enact their own organizing of their moves and changes.

Motion is always unfinished, always still potential (Physics III-1, 201a10 and Metaphysics XI-9, 1065b21). As long as the motion is happening, it is on the way to somewhere, hence not complete. A motion is never fully actual at any point. It is always from....to. When it is complete, it has stopped.

Aristotle defines motion (including change) as "incomplete activity," or "activity of the incomplete." In contrast, activity is both complete and ongoing, the energy of the complete. Activity is the energeia of the tetelesmenon (III-7, 431a6). ἡ γὰρ

κίνησις τοῦ ἀτελοῦς ἐνέργεια, ἡ δ' ἁπλῶς ἐνέργεια ἑτέρα, ἡ τοῦ τετελεσμένου.

For example, growth is ongoing change, always incomplete until it stops. But nutrizing is complete at any point.

Or, for example, the ball you are seeing is not yet here, rather only on the way to your side of the court, but your seeing is complete all the while.

The activity is not to be equated with the changes which it enacts. The activity is the internally arising structuring and enacting of the changes. For example, the activity of digesting is fully ongoing in each moment. “Fully ongoing” means that the phases are happening as organized by the unchanging activity. The food from lunch is going through changes, but unless you have digestive trouble, the activity of digestion is fully ongoing at any moment or period of time.

There is change in what we sense. What affects the organ changes, but these changes don't change the activity of sensing. If hearing a really deafening noise does change the activity of hearing, this change could not be called "hearing." It was not one of those changes which are enacted by the unchanging activity of hearing.

The change that an ulcer makes is not one of the changes organized by the digesting activity. Digestion's own changes don't change the stomach in a way that would change the capacity for the digesting activity, whereas ulcers do.

Not only motions but also the absences of motion are organized by energeia. Consider the rests in music. During a rest there is no motion, but the musical activity is going on. It determines where the rests come, their length, and their effects in the music. The composer's sense of the whole piece has actively created the spots where the rests must come. Some changes happen only for a short period, others like the heart pounding goes on all the time. But the constant ongoingness of living activity is not the constant heart-pounding. It is rather the functional organizing which determines that the heart must pound all the time whereas other parts must act only briefly at certain stages. The whole chain of motions and changes does not itself change. So we can grasp how activity differs from motion:

Activity is the self-organizing functioning which organizes both motions and absences of motions.

For example, in a watercolor, perhaps the clouds are just white space. The painter has moved no paint there, yet the art-activity has made it into a cloud. We might scoff: It's the surrounding paint that makes it have the form of the cloud. In Western science everything is explained by the bodies and motions themselves. It is the same acidic action, whether it eats into the food or the stomach. Of course, we moderns also distinguish between digestion and ulcers, but the difference seems to fall into an "unscientific" merely wishful realm of "values," which is excluded by our science. It seems to make no scientific difference whether acid works within digestion or changes and harms it. Nature doesn't organize itself. Living things don't selfdetermine their living. They are only affected by chemical and physical impacts. It is considered accidental that certain functions are performed and living happens.

For Aristotle, living substances exist as self-organizing "activities" (with the potentiality for enacting them from inside, and the necessary matter). Energeia is a higher-order concept which explains what generates and connects the physical and chemical changes. He is just as interested in the latter as our scientists are, but for him the unchanging activities are what chiefly exists and determines what the changes have to be, and why they are as they are.

Throughout Aristotle's works, activity is prior. Activity creates or activates all the things. Bodies continue only as long as their internal heat activity holds them together.

43. On the Senses Not Sensing Themselves (417 B 20)