Colloquium 7

Powers and Possibilities:
Aristotle vs. the Megarians

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Book IX of the *Metaphysics* explores Aristotle's complex notion of *dunamis*, a term that its translators have rendered as power, capacity, and potentiality.¹ In Book IX Aristotle uses words in the same family to express the notion of possibility (*δυνατός*) and impossibility (*ἀδύνατος*) as well. These concepts—powers, potentialities and possibilities—differ markedly from one another. Powers and capacities are abilities that an object has at present (given certain conditions) to enact or to suffer a change. For example, if an orange has the capacity to be squeezed, then, were it to be placed in a juicer, it would be crushed. In contrast, the potentialities that an object has require that the object undergo a change in order to gain the characteristic in question. The green orange is potentially ripe; it is not now ripe. It has the present potentiality to become ripe, to undergo a change, and to acquire that characteristic. Finally, possibilities are standardly held to modify states of affairs rather than objects. It is possible that the orange will not ripen, even though it (the orange) is potentially ripe.

Given these differences, we might well wonder whether Aristotle thinks that there is a relationship among these three concepts or whether Aristotle's use of a single term *dunamis* simply conflates them. Both Bonitz and Ross proposed interpretations according to which Aristotle distinguishes two senses of *dunamis*; however, each of their interpretations runs aground in different ways in Book IX chapter 3, Aristotle's debate with the Megarians over the necessity of *dunamis*.²

¹ For example, Ross uses all three translations of dunamis in his translation of Book ix of the Metaphysics (Barnes (ed.) 1984).
² Both Ross and Bonitz attempt to provide consistent interpretations of *dunamis* by distinguishing two senses of the term. They differ concerning what those two senses are. Ross thinks that Aristotle distinguished between a power of a substance which is a source of change in another thing (transeunt dunamis)
My paper examines this difficult, but crucial, text in order to tease out the systematic connections, and differences, that Aristotle saw among the powers, potentialities and possibilities of substances.

In another discussion of *dunamis*, Aristotle seems to address one part of our question by distinguishing *dunamis* in the sense of a power or origin of change in a substance from the related terms that denote possibility and impossibility. This tells us that powers and possibilities are distinct in meaning for Aristotle. But we still might wonder whether Aristotle thinks of the two as related in some important way. For example, he might think that a biconditional relationship holds between possibilities and powers or capacities. Further, we might wonder where the notion of potentiality fits in this picture. In particular, we might wonder how a substance’s potentialities are related to its current capacities and powers.

In this paper I approach these questions by way of the only text (to my knowledge) in which Aristotle explicitly argues for his concept of *dunamis*. The fact that Aristotle musters a series of arguments against the Megarian rejection of *dunamis* suggests two points. First, although Aristotle’s use of *dunamis* reflects its array of meanings in non-philosophical Greek, he did not simply rely upon ordinary usage to and a potentiality which is the capacity that a substance has to pass into a new state of itself (immanent dunamis). However, Ross acknowledges that Aristotle’s discussion in Book IX does not consistently maintain this distinction. Concerning Aristotle’s argument with the Megarians, Ross comments “It may be noted that though this discussion occurs in the section devoted to transeunt *dunamis*, it really refers to immanent *dunamis*, potentiality not power” (Ross, 1924, Vol. 1, cxxvi-cxxvii).

Bonitz holds that Aristotle distinguishes *dunamis* in the sense of a power to move from *dunamis* in the sense of possibility. (*Index Aristotelicus* s.v. *dunamis*) However, Bonitz also remarks that Aristotle does not maintain this distinction consistently. And, interestingly enough, he mentions just the passage we are interested in, and that Ross found problematic for his interpretation—Book IX, chapter 3. Bonitz thinks that while Aristotle should be talking about *dunamis* as power in Book IX, 3, he mixes in *dunamis* as potentiality which for Bonitz, is possibility. Hence, Aristotle’s debate with the Megarians proves problematic for both of their interpretations of *dunamis*.

In *Metaphysics* v 12, Aristotle distinguishes *dunamis* as the capacity to change another or to be changed from the modal notions possible and impossible (1019b22-32).

Ide argues that the biconditional relationship between capacities and possibilities was a thesis in early Aristotle and one that he gave up in *Metaphysics* IX. Ide concedes that it is present in chapters 3 and 4. See Ide 1992.