Commentary on Heinaman

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Professor Heinaman seeks to undermine the widely held view that a *praxis*, the kind of action in which a virtue of character finds its primary realization, is an *energeia* (in the special, narrow sense in which *energeia* is contrasted with *kinesis*).¹ His arguments do establish that if a *praxis* is identified with a particular event and if the distinction between *energeiai* and *kineseis* is viewed as one that sorts events into two types according to their logical and temporal qualities, then it would be implausible to attribute to a *praxis* all of the logical and temporal qualities of an *energeia*. However, some adherents of the view in question might believe that he has failed to address the underlying motivation for the view and so has not decisively refuted it. Even if this is a vain hope, it may nevertheless be useful to explore why so many have found attractive the idea that an action chosen for its own sake has a special metaphysical status as an *energeia* because of this. I will formulate a defense of this claim that is quite different from the one which Heinaman discusses in order to assay the scope of his arguments. Heinaman’s arguments and those of the opponents he addresses presuppose that Aristotle holds what seems to be a distinctively modern view: the view that *praxeis* (and actions in general) are to be identified with particular events, understood as spatio-temporally locatable particulars. Yet this crucial claim goes undefended. In my discussion I will question whether this is the best way to construe Aristotle’s metaphysical commitments.

In Section I of his paper, Heinaman argues that *energeiai* or activities are events which have a variety of temporal and logical properties: (1) because an activity is temporally indivisible, it is *a fortiori* not divisible into specifically different stages; (2) there is no generation of an activity; (3) an activity is complete in that all of an activity exists whenever it exists; (4) it is possible both that an activity might exist at one moment and at no other time and that an activity might be continued indefinitely. Finally and most notoriously, there is the “tense test”: (5) if X-ing is an activity then it can be said that I have X-ed as soon as I X. In many cases, Heinaman observes, the action by which one performs a *praxis* does not have these properties. For example,
someone might act justly—thereby performing a praxis—by distributing goods. Heinaman assumes that, in that case, the action of distributing goods is identical to an event which is a kinesis or change. In addition, he assumes that if one performs a praxis by performing an action which is a change then the praxis could not be an energeia. An opponent might well complain that he has begged the question in Section I by relying on this assumption. Such an opponent might maintain that a praxis may be an energeia even if it is performed by producing a change.

In Section II Heinaman argues against an opponent who makes a more specific claim: that the praxis and the change by which it is performed are numerically distinct events. Against this sort of opponent two main arguments are given. First, Heinaman points out that since Aristotle defines each of the virtues of character as what is intermediate between excess and deficiency, he must presuppose that the very same action which is a praxis can be redescribed as something intermediate between excess and deficiency. If acting justly involves reaching the mean with regard to excess and deficiency in distributing goods, Heinaman reasons, then the descriptions “acting justly” and “distributing goods” must pick out the same action.

Another argument in Section II turns on the claim that Aristotle’s comments imply that an action which is in fact a praxis can be picked out under a description which does not entail that it is a praxis and that it is under that description that it is chosen by the agent for its own sake. Heinaman maintains, “(w)hen one justly does what is just, according to Aristotle, it is doing what is just that is chosen for its own sake. If that is what is chosen for its own sake, then it must be identical with the praxis that is chosen for its own sake. Hence, it is as ‘‘doing what is just’ that a praxis is chosen for its own sake” (p. 90). Furthermore, a person who does not have the virtue of justice and so could not exemplify it in action could nevertheless do what is just and could act justly. This point is buttressed with a fairly strong counterfactual claim about event essences: “Although acting justly and doing what is just are distinct types of action, it is not the case that when a person acts justly, there is an event which occurs which would not have occurred if he had merely done what is just. The difference between the two cases lies entirely in a difference in the state of the agent who performs the act” (p. 87).

I think this line of argument is effective against the particular opponent that Heinaman has in mind here. However, it is not obvious