Neo-platonic logic and Aristotelian logic - II

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The two concepts of δύναμις

In *Metaphysics* Δ Aristotle distinguished two senses of δύναμις, that of potentiality or possibility, and that of power in the active sense. He admitted that the first depended on the second; but in the questions we are concerned with he made no further use of the active sense; at the end of the lectures on substance, Z-Θ, the subject of δύναμις and ἐνέργεια falls into place without any suggestion that they are both ἐνέργειαι. The active sense is historically the older one; and the conception of natural qualities as powers, common among the Pre-Socratics, was revived by the Stoa. Its use by the Neoplatonists owes more to Stoicism than to Platonism. In place of the δύναμις - ἐνέργεια relation we tend to find Plato using that of appearance and reality. Plotinus’s use of the ‘power’ and ‘product’ pair, while combined with the Platonic pair, is derived from two sources. The first is Plato’s manner of speaking about the Soul, where, it may be added, Plato notoriously left unsolved the problem of the One and the Many. If the individuality of the world-soul and of human and divine souls is to be preserved, the One cannot stand to the Many as essence to its instances or appearances nor as a mass to its parts. The second source is theology. Aristotle had excluded all potentiality from God, and the Stoics and Neoplatonists were able to extend a second, quite other, notion of δύναμις to God – as though room had been left for this – and so seem to make no absolute break with Aristotelianism. In the *De Mundo* (probably 1st. century A.D.) we find the interesting distinction between God’s δύναμις and God’s ὄσσια, a distinction which opens the door, as Heinze pointed out, to a theory of hypostases instead of pantheism. It is Plotinus who gives the notion a logical application, when he wants to explain the Platonic genus, which we have seen him restore against Aristotle’s denial of it.

1 Notice the term δύναμις γονῆς (in nature), Procl. *El. theor.* 152; *In Plat. theor.* p. 134.16 Portus.
3 397b19-20; for δύναμις cf. also 398a2-3, b8-16.
4 *Lehre vom Logos* 174.
The Neoplatonic theory of δύναμις is not a matter of merely reversing the Aristotelian order and placing activity where Aristotle had placed potentiality. Aristotle’s ἐνέργεια was complete in itself: Plotinus’s δύναμις is always accompanied by a δύναμις or ἐνέργεια ποιητική. The same distinction that the author of De Mundo applied to God is applied to the Plotinian Soul, whose ἐνέργεια is its ὀσία, while its ἐνέργεια ποιητική is the δύναμις τῶν λόγων.¹ This mention of the λόγος ἐν τῇ ψυχῇ brings the second kind of post-Platonic universal, the immanent form, into connection with the first or transcendent kind represented by pure ὀσία. A separation of the one from the other would be quite foreign to Plotinus’s thought. He corrects, as it were, his own famous simile of light, by saying that the productive activity – the light which leaves the surface of the body – is only an image of the essence within, the ‘non-flowing activity’. There is no ἀπόστασις.² Therefore it is no philosophy of evolution, and conversely the producer has no need of its product. The point of view of Proclus is identical. A Hegelianising interpretation like that of Erdmann, who claims that Proclus is approaching an evolutionary theory, is mistaken.³ On the contrary, he takes the new theory of δύναμις to its logical conclusion. It is divided according to its degree into ‘perfect’ and ‘imperfect’ power.⁴ Matter can then be made equivalent to the lowest degree of imperfect power: δύναμις δὲ [the Aristotelian conception] ἡ ὑλή τὰ πάντα καθόσον ἐκ τῆς πρῶτης ὑπόστασιν δυνάμεως [the Neoplatonic conception], ἀλλ’ ἐκεῖ μὲν γεννητικὴ τῶν πάντων ἡ δύναμις, ἡ δὲ τῆς ὑλῆς δύναμις ἀκέλεης καὶ τῆς τῶν πάντων κατ’ ἐνέργειαν ὑποστάσεως ἐνδέης.⁵ All this may be primarily metaphysics: as a reaction to the Aristotelian theory of δύναμις its importance in the history of logic has been brought out in A. Faust’s fine work. His thesis was the development, from the Pre-Socratics, through Aristotle, the Stoics and Neoplatonists, of the mediaeval notion of purely logical potentiality, or possibility; and he pointed out that this notion depends on the absence of what may be called prior conditions; Aristotelian matter would be such a condition, but in Neoplatonism it is reduced to a minimum by being shifted into the source of the potentiality itself.⁶

Plotinus’s criticism of definition by genus and differentia committed him to providing, by means of his new δύναμις-concept, an alternative version of the genus-species relation. In Ennead VI 2, 19 the aporia is raised, How do the five genera of Being make species? Characteristically,

¹ VI 2.5.
² IV 5.7.
³ Grundris der Gesch. der Philos. I § 130.2.
⁴ El. theor. 78.
⁵ In Plat. theor. 134-33-38.