

Selections from Joe Sachs's Introduction to His Translation of Aristotle's Metaphysics

(Sachs's extensive footnotes have been omitted from this selection.)

How and Why this Version Differs from Others

We cannot give an accurate summary of Aristotle's conclusions about the way things are unless we have some way to translate his characteristic vocabulary, but if our decision is to follow the prevalent habits of the most authoritative interpreters, those conclusions crumble away into nothing. By way of the usual translations, the central argument of the *Metaphysics* would be: being qua being is being per se in accordance with the categories, which in turn is primarily substance, but primary substance is form, while form is essence and essence is actuality. You might react to such verbiage in various ways. You might think, I am too ignorant and untrained to understand these things, and need an expert to explain them to me. Or you might think, Aristotle wrote gibberish. But if you have some acquaintance with the classical languages, you might begin to be suspicious that something has gone awry: Aristotle wrote Greek, didn't he? And while this argument doesn't sound much like English, it doesn't sound like Greek either, does it? In fact this argument appears to be written mostly in an odd sort of Latin, dressed up to look like English. Why do we need Latin to translate Greek into English at all?

At all the most crucial places, the usual translations of Aristotle abandon English and move toward Latin. They do this because earlier translations did the same. Those earlier translators did so because their principal access to Aristotle's meaning was through Latin commentaries. The result is jargon, but that seems not to make most of the professional scholars uncomfortable; after all, by perpetuating such inaccessible English texts, they create a demand for interpreters that only they can fill. I have criticized the current state of Aristotle-translating at length in the introduction to a recent translation of my own. There it seemed necessary to explain to those familiar with other translations the many departures they were about to encounter. Here a briefer justification may suffice: My aim is to give you in translation an experience as close as I can make it to reading the original. The original is written not for specialists but for generally educated people of any sort who are willing to think hard. Where Aristotle exploits the resources of the Greek language to capture his meaning, the translation will be in bad English; where he departs from Greek usage to coin new words and novel ways of saying things, the translation will be in worse English. From the point of view of a classicist, a good English translation of a classical author is one that finds, for every word or phrase in the original, some equivalent expression that reads smoothly in our language. This may be a good practice with some kinds of writing, but philosophic meaning cannot be captured in habitual uses of language. The point of view of a professional philosopher may, however, pay too much heed to the linguistic choices that have become habitual in modern philosophy and in the secondary literature, at the expense of faithfulness to the original.

The translation presented here is governed instead by the needs and purposes of the careful student. The feel of the classroom is everywhere in Aristotle's words, and has not been disdained here. In no case will the translation have a learned style; like the original, it will rely on the most ordinary contents of its own language, achieving the distinction its topics demand by recombining those simplest elements in unaccustomed ways. Some explanation will be necessary in footnotes, for the sake of cross references, to fill in what is absent where the text is elliptical, and to highlight important steps in the inquiry, but the translation is intended to reduce the amount of commentary needed. Wherever I think I know something that will enrich the reading of the text, I have noted it, but you should

never take these notes as authoritative if they conflict with any interpretation that seems better to you.

Three outstanding readers of Aristotle led me to see that a new way of translating him was necessary and possible. Jacob Klein, in his extraordinary brief essay "An Introduction to Aristotle," helped me begin to encounter Aristotle's thinking directly and genuinely. The same service had been performed for Klein a generation earlier by Martin Heidegger's lectures on Aristotle. In various writings, not primarily about Aristotle (as, for example, in the first few sections of *What is a Thing?*), Heidegger claims that the fundamental question of philosophy concerns the thinghood of things. This thought, when compared with "the substance of substances," began to unlock for me a way of getting at one of Aristotle's central ideas in intelligible, though unusual, English. Finally, Joseph Owens has exposed the absurdity of translating Aristotle's word *ousia* as "substance" and the inadequacy of translating his phrase *to ti en einai* as "essence." By Owens's account of the history of this use of the word "substance," it stems from a Latin word conceived as *negating* what Aristotle meant by *ousia* in the *Metaphysics*. It is much as if one were to take Thomas Aquinas's use of the word "objective" in a Kantian sense, or his use of "intentionality" in a Husserlian sense. Owens knows the Latin tradition well enough to escape from its distortions and mistakes.

But when Owens attempts to replace "substance" and "essence" with more accurate substitutes, he is not successful. To replace the latter he translates *ti en einai* what-IS-being, explained as meant to convey timelessness. Here it is rendered most fully as "what something keeps on being, in order to be at all," or more often as "what it is for it to be." This follows Owens's general interpretation that the main structure of Aristotle's phrase is not the articular infinitive *to einai*, complemented by *ti en* (the being-what-it-is of a thing), but a novel coinage of Aristotle's, an unambiguous transformation into the progressive aspect of the *ti esti* that Socrates was always in quest of (the what-it-enduringly-is). It differs from Owens's version in taking the *einai* as an infinitive of purpose ("in order to be at all"); with the infinitive so understood, Aristotle's phrase captures the meaning of the necessary-and-sufficient being of a thing, excluding not only what a thing is in a transient and incidental way, but also what it is in a partial and universal way, that is insufficient to make it what it is.

Thus, the way I understand *to ti en einai* departs from, but is rooted in, Owens's understanding of it. The same is true of my rendering *ousia* as "thinghood," when it is used in a general sense, and as "an independent thing" when it is used of singulars. I have heard two sorts of criticism of my use of the word thinghood in Aristotle's *Physics*. The one sort, that it occasions laughter or embarrassment, is a general instance of Heidegger's observation in *What is a Thing?* that philosophy is that at which thoughtless people laugh. Let the laughter or embarrassment subside, and then judge the meaning carried by the word, both on its own and in its context, on its merits. The other sort of criticism regrets the fact that thinghood is not as closely related to being as *ousia* is to *to on*. I too regret it, but when one cannot have everything, one must make choices. It seems probable that *ousia* is simply the participle *on* plus the noun ending *-sia*, with the nu-sigma rule applied to make it not grate on Greek ears.

The word *ousia* is used by Aristotle in two ways, and "beingness" conveys neither of them. Lassie is an *ousia*, and the *ousia* of Lassie is dog. To call her a beingness makes no sort of sense in English; she is a being, but this is the natural translation of *on*, which Aristotle uses more widely, for anything at all that is, including the color white. But not even in its general employment is the meaning of *ousia* captured by beingness. Lassie's beingness could mean the fact that she is, or it could ask in general about her way of being, but *ousia* in this usage names only one particular way of being. It is the first of the eight ways of attributing being (the so-called "categories") listed in the *Metaphysics*, but

while it is called *ousia* in the second of those lists, in the first it is called the *ti esti*, the "what it is" of something. Beingness does not match up with the what, just as being-what-it-is does not have the same meaning as what-it-is-for-it-to-be. Lassie's being a dog is not the same thing as dog, and the latter is what she is.

One way that ancient Greek differs from English is in having no word for thing, in the emphatic sense of the English word. There is a word (*chrema*) that means a thing used up or consumed, another (*pragma*) that means a thing of interest or concern or a thing done, and a third (*hekaston*) that refers to each instance of a general kind, but most often things in any sense are signified by the neuter ending on an adjective or article. None of these ways of speaking singles out the emphatic character of that which stands on its own and can be pointed to, which is thus independent of what surrounds it as well as of what apprehends it, but the combination of those two notions (*tode ti te kai choriston*) is exactly the way Aristotle characterizes *ousia* (1017b 27, 1029a 27--28). In so doing, I submit, he names the independent thing in its thinghood. Owens would have us think of this as "the entity in its entity" (pp. 149--154), but it is instructive to see that, in the argument that precedes this suggestion, Owens himself, spontaneously reaching for a way in English to denote that which is independent of the knower, repeatedly chooses and italicizes the word *thing*. This is a vigorous and effective use of the English language. It is so simple and straightforward that no one needs to have it explained. This is exactly the way Aristotle uses the Greek language. In speaking of thinghood I am imitating Aristotle by doing as Owens does, not as he says to do.

The question of the thinghood of things turns out, for Aristotle, to be the question of the manner of being of forms. The material of things is what might have come to be any of a variety of things, while the composite of form and material is an effect derived from some cause. The cause must in some way reside in the form. But while the composite thing exists as something perceptible and particular, and the material is separate from it only in thought and as a universal, some third way of being must belong to whatever is at work as causing the many things of any kind to be what they are. In the first part of this introduction we have seen that this way of being is what Aristotle calls *being-at-work*. It is clear that Aristotle's word for being-at-work (*energeia*) must be at the center of his philosophic vocabulary, and that its meaning must be at the heart of all his thinking. What resources do we have to get at that meaning? Not only does Aristotle not define the word, he says in Book IX, Chapter 6 that it has no definition. Its meaning is at the limit of definition and explanation, and has nothing of greater defining or explanatory power to which it can be referred. Motion in the *Physics*, soul in *On the Soul*, and both form and being in the *Metaphysics*, are ultimately understood as kinds of being-at-work, and even the notions of virtue and character, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, depend on it. Without a grasp of what he means by being-at-work, then, one cannot get hold of any important idea in any of Aristotle's writings. Aristotle invents a second word, being-at-work-staying-itself (*entelecheia*), converging with it in meaning, to sharpen and clarify his use of being-at-work, and he gives an array of examples in which we are meant to "see at a glance, by means of analogy," what it means (1048a 39).

The seeing that Aristotle calls on us to do demands that we come alive to the world in a way that can launch us toward philosophic questioning. No one can do it for us. But a thoughtless translation of the word that names what we are asked to see can deprive us of any chance to begin. In the usual translations *energeia* crumbles away to nothing as "actuality." Any hope of recapturing it through its near-synonym is lost, since these translations render *entelecheia* also as "actuality." Does this word give you any hint that Aristotle is responding to the call made to the philosopher by the Eleatic Stranger in Plato's *Sophist* (249 C--D) to approach being by thinking rest and motion together? Does it convey a stable condition that can be achieved only by ceaseless activity? Does it describe a motion that leads nowhere but back into itself? The Latin word *actualitas* may

have performed those services for a reader of Latin, but its English cognate means nothing that remotely suggests them.

The idea of being-at-work pervades Aristotle's thinking. His characteristic vocabulary emphasizes it everywhere. He chooses a common noun (*energeia*) built on the root *erg* that signifies work. He finds the same meaning in the common verb *echein* that means to be by continuing or holding on in some way, and attaches it to an adjective (*enteles*) that signifies completeness, to form the coinage *entelecheia*, which redoubles its meaning by punning on a common word (*endelecheia*) that means continuity or persistence. He remakes Socrates's favorite question *ti esti* (what is it?) by changing the verb to the past tense (*en*), in which alone its progressive aspect can be made unambiguous. And he chooses for the primary explanatory word in his ethical writings the noun *hexis* made from *echein*, to signify an enduring state of character that is also an active condition. His language pulses with this dynamic conception of being, and guides a way of seeing the world as organizing itself into every instance of identity it presents. For the reader open to philosophy, these words of Aristotle are what Homer called "winged words," shafts that traverse the distance between people and lodge in the place where understanding is possible.