

## ARISTOTLE, METAPHYSICS, BOOK NINE

### READING ONE

We have spoken, then, about the first being to which all the other categories of being are brought back; that is, about substance, for the other beings (how much and how and the others thus said) are said according to the thought of substance. For all have the thought of substance as we said in the first discourses. And since *being* is said in one way as what or how or how much, and in another way by ability and act and by doing, we will now determine about ability and act; and first about the ability which is said most properly, although not the most useful towards what we want now. For ability and act are in more than those said only according to motion. But having spoken about this, we shall in our determinations of act show the other kinds of ability.

It has been determined by us elsewhere that *ability* and *to be able* are said in many ways. Let us leave aside whichever of these are called abilities equivocally. For some are said by a certain likeness, as in geometry we call something possible or impossible for being or not being in some way. But whichever are said toward the same form are all beginnings and are said towards one that is first which is the beginning of change in another as other. Another is the ability to undergo, a beginning in the one undergoing of being changed when acted upon by another as other. And another is the firm disposition not to undergo change toward the worse and corruption by being acted upon by another as other. The thought of the first ability is in all these definitions. Again, these abilities are said to be of only acting upon or undergoing, or of doing so well, so that also in these definitions exist in some way the definitions of the above abilities.

It is clear, then, that in a way there is one ability of acting upon and undergoing for it is able in one having the ability to undergo and the other in another by itself. But in another way it is other. For the one is in the thing undergoing. Because it has a beginning and the matter is a beginning, the thing acted upon undergoes, and another by another. For that which is oily can be burnt, and that which yields thus can be crushed; and likewise in the others. But the other is in the maker; for example, heat and the art of building are present, one in the heater and the other in the builder. And so, in so far as a thing has grown into one, it undergoes nothing from itself; for it is one and not other.

And inability (and unable) is the lack which is contrary to such an ability, so that every ability is opposed to an inability of the same and according to the same. Lack is said in many ways: the not having and what is apt to have if it does not, either wholly or when it is apt and either wholly or in some other way. And in some, if it is naturally apt to have, but does not have it by force, it is said to be lacking.

## READING TWO

Since some such beginnings are present in soulless things, and others in those having soul, and in soul, and in the part of the soul having reason, it is clear that some abilities will be without reason and some with reason. Wherefore all the arts and making sciences are abilities. For they are beginnings able to produce change in another as other.

And all those with reason are the same of contraries, but those without reason are one of one; for example, heat is only of heating, but the medical art is both of disease and health.

The cause is that knowledge of reason is thought, and the same thought shows the thing and its lack, except not in the same way. In some way, it is of both and in another way it is more of what belongs. Therefore, such knowledge of reason must be of contraries, but of one as such and of the other not as such. For the thought is of one as such, but of the other in a way by accident. For it shows the contrary by negation and by taking away. For lack is the first contrary and is itself the taking away of the other.

Now since contraries do not come to be in the same thing, but the knowledge of reason is an ability in having thought and the soul has a beginning of motion, therefore, while the wholesome makes only health and the heater only heat and the chilling only coldness, the one with the knowledge of reason can make both. For the thought is for both, though not in the same way, and it is in a soul which has a beginning of motion. Thus the soul will move both from the same beginning joining them to the same. Whence it makes the possible by reason contrary to what is possible without reason. For they are contained in one beginning which is thought.

It is clear also that the ability of only acting upon or undergoing follows the ability of doing so well, but the latter does not always follow the former.

For it is necessary that the one making well also make, but he who just makes something does not necessarily make well.

### READING THREE

There are some who say, as the Megarians do, that a thing is able to act only when it is acting, and when it is not acting it is not able; for example, that he who is not building is not able to build, but only the one building, when he is building, and likewise in others.

It is not hard to see the absurd things that follow upon such opinions. For it is clear that a man will not be a builder unless he is building; for to be a builder is to be able to build. And likewise in the other arts. If, then, it is impossible to have such arts if one has not at some time learnt and acquired them and not to have them if one has not sometime lost them, either by forgetfulness or by some undergoing or by time (for it cannot be by the thing being destroyed for it always is); when a man pauses, he will not have the art. And how will he get it right away when he builds again?

And likewise with regard to soulless things. For nothing will be either cold or hot or sweet or sensible at all when no one is sensing. So they will have to assert the position of Protagoras.

But, indeed, neither will anything have sense if it is not sensing or active. If, then, that is blind which has not sight though it would naturally have it, when it would naturally have it and when it still exists, the same will be blind many times in the day, and deaf too.

Again, if that which lacks ability is impossible, that which has not come to be will not be able to come to be. But the one saying that what is impossible to come to be, either is or will be, is speaking falsely. For the impossible means this. Therefore these thoughts take away both motion and becoming. For the standing will always stand, and the sitting will always sit. For it will not stand up if it is sitting because to stand up is impossible for what is unable to stand up.

If then such things cannot be said, it is clear that ability and act are other. But these thoughts make ability and act the same. Whence, it is no small thing they are seeking to take away. Thus, something is able to be when it is not and able not to be when it is. And likewise in the other

predicates: being able to walk and not walk, and being able not to walk and walk.

And that is possible in which, if the act of which it is said to have the ability exists, nothing will be impossible. I say, for example, if a thing is able to sit and it happens to sit, there will be nothing impossible in sitting belonging to it. And likewise if it is moved or moves or stands or stops or is or comes to be or is not or does not come to be.

The word *act*, which is placed upon perfection and upon other things, has come most of all from motions. For act seems to be especially motion. Hence, we do not attribute motion to what does not exist, but other predicates; for example, non-beings are understood and desired, but not moved. And this is because non-beings in act would be in act. For some non-beings are in ability, but they do not exist because they are not in act.

If the able is that which has been said, to which something follows, it is clear that it cannot be true to say that the able is this, but will not be, so that the things unable to be would escape. I say, for example, if someone (who does not think that there is the unable to be) should say the diagonal is able to be measured, but will not be measured because nothing prevents a thing able to be or come to be, neither to be nor come to be. But from the laid down, it is necessary that, if we suppose that which is not, but is able to be, to be or to have come to be, there will be nothing impossible. But it will happen: for to be measured is impossible. For the false and the impossible are not the same. It is false that you stand now, but not impossible.

At the same time it is clear that, if A being, it is necessary for B to be, then when A is possible, B also must be possible. For if it need not be possible, there is nothing to prevent its not being possible. Now let A be possible. Then, when A was able to be, if A is laid down to be, nothing impossible to be would happen. Therefore, B necessarily is. But it was impossible. Let it be impossible then. If then B is impossible A must also be. But the first was supposed impossible; therefore also the second. If, then, A is possible, B also will be possible - if they are such that, A being, B necessarily must be. If, then, A and B being thus, B was notpossible [able to be], neither would A and B be as has been laid down. And if A being possible, necessarily B is possible [able to be] And if when A is possible, B must be possible; then if A is, necessarily also B is. For to say that B must be possible, if A is possible, means this, that if A was, both when and how it was able to be, B also must then and in that way be.

## FOURTH READING

All abilities are either inborn, such as the senses, or by use [custom], such as that of playing the flute, or by learning, such as that of the arts. Whichever are by use or learning we must acquire by doing something before, but this is not necessary with those not such and those for undergoing.

Since that which is able has an ability for something and at some time and in some way and whatever other things are necessarily added in the definition; and since some things can move by reason and their abilities are with reason and some are without reason and the abilities without reason; those abilities must be in a thing with soul while the latter can be in both.

As regards abilities of the latter kind, when the one that acts upon and the one that undergoes meet as they are able, the one must act and the other be acted on. But with the former ability, this is not necessary.

For all these are something one productive of one, but those are of contraries, so that it would make contraries at the same time. But this is impossible.

Necessarily therefore there is something other which determines. I say this is desire or choice. For whichever of two things is chiefly desired, it will make, when it is present as it is able, and near the undergoing. Therefore everything which has an ability with reason, when it desires that for which it has an ability and as it has it, necessarily makes this. And it has the ability in question when the undergoing is present and it is thus. If not, it will not be able to make.

To add *nothing outside preventing* is no longer necessary. For it has the ability as it is the ability to make. This is not in every way, but things being thus, in which is taken away outside things preventing. For these would take away some things included in the definition.

And so even if one has a wish, or a desire, to do two things or contrary things at the same time, one will not do them. For one does not thus have an ability for them, nor is it an ability for making both at the same time, since it will make that for which it is thus an ability.

## READING FIVE

Since the ability said according to motion has been considered, let us determine about act, what it is and how it is. And the able at the same time will become clear to those dividing, that we call able not only what is apt to move another or to be moved by another, either simply or in some way, but also otherwise for which we have gone through the others in our investigation.

Act, then, is the existence of a thing not in the way in which we say in ability. We say in ability as Hermes is in the wood and the half in the whole because it might be taken from, and knowing the man not considering if he was able to consider. But the other in act.

What we wish to say is clear in the particulars by induction. And one should not seek a definition of everything, but see together in the proportion: as the one housebuilding is to the housebuilder, and the awake to the sleeping, and the seeing to that which has its eyes shut but has sight, and that which has been formed out of the matter to the matter, and that which has been worked up to the unworked. Let one part of the difference be distinguished as the act and the other as the able.

But all things are not said to be in act in the same way, but in proportion, as this in that or towards that, so another in another or towards another. For some are as motion to ability and others as substance to matter.

But also the unlimited and the empty, and whatever is such, are said to be in ability and in act otherwise than many other things, such as the seeing or the walking or the seen. For at some time, these can be said simply to be true: the seen that it is seen while at another time it is able to be seen. But the unlimited is not thus in ability so that it will be separated in act, but in knowledge. For the division never ending ensures that this act is in ability, but not that it is separated.

Since of the acts [actions] which have a limit, none is an end, but are about the end; for example, the parts themselves when one is making them thin are in movement in this way, not existing that for the sake of which is the movement, this is not an act or not a perfect act, for it is not an end; but act is that in which the end is; for example, at the same time we are judging and have judged, are understanding and have understood, while one is not learning and has learned, or is becoming healthy and is healthy. At the

same time we are living well and have lived well, and are happy and have been happy. If not, it would have to cease as when one becomes healthy, but now it is not so, but one lives and has lived. Of these then, some should be called motions, but the others acts. For every movement is incomplete: thinning, learning, walking, housebuilding. These are movements, and imperfect. For it is not true that at the same time a thing is walking and has walked, or is building and has built, or is coming to be and has come to be, or is being moved and has been moved, but other. But the same has seen and is seeing, and understands and has understood. The latter I call an *act* and the former, a *movement*.

Let it be clear then from these things, and such as them, what and how it is to be in act.

## READING SIX

It should be determined when each thing is in ability and when not. For it is not at just any time. For example, is earth in ability a man? Or not, but more when it has already become seed, and perhaps not even then.

Thus, not everything can be healed by the medical art or by luck, but there is something which is able, and this is healthy in ability. And the determination of that which comes to be in act by reason from being in ability is having willed it to come to be and nothing outside preventing and there being nothing in the healed which prevents it. Likewise, the house is in ability, if there is nothing in this matter which prevents it from becoming a house, and there is nothing which ought to come before, or be taken away, or be changed. This is a house in ability. And likewise in others of which the beginning is outside. And in those having the beginning in themselves, nothing outside preventing, it will be through itself. For example, the seed is not yet. For it must be in another and change. But when through its own beginning it is such, already it is this in ability. But that has need of another beginning, just as earth is not yet a statue in ability - but changing it will be copper.

It seems that when we call a thing not this, but made of that material (for example, the box not wood, but wooden; and wood is not earth but earthen; and again the earth if it is not another, but made of another material) that other thing is always in ability simply what is after. For example, a box is not earthen nor earth, but wooden, for this is a box in ability and this is the matter of a box, wood in general of a box in general, and this wood of this box. And if something is first which no longer by

another is said to be made of a material, this is the first matter. For example, if earth is airy and air is not fire but fiery, fire is the first matter not being a this something. For the said of or subject differ by this, by being a this something or not being. For example, the subject of undergoings is a man, and body and soul, but the passion, the musical and white. For when the musical has come to be, the subject is called, when the art of music comes to be present in it, not music but musical, and the man is not whiteness but white, and not the act of waking or motion, but walking or moving, which is like made of that material.

Whatever are thus, the last is substance. But whatever are not thus, but the predicate is some form and this something, the last is matter and material substance. And it happens rightly to be said derivatively what is made of a material and the undergoings. For both are undetermined. When a thing then should be said to be in ability, and when not, has been said.

## READING SEVEN

Since it has been determined in how many ways *before* is said, it is clear that act is before ability. And I mean by ability, not only that definite kind which is said to be a beginning of change in another as other, but in general every beginning of movement or of rest. For nature is in the same genus as ability; for it is a beginning of motion, but not in another, but in the same as the same. Act is before all such both in definition and in substance. And in time it is in this way, but not in that.

It is clear that it is before in definition. For what is first able is able in that it can act. For example, I say the builder is able to build and he who has sight is able to see and the visible is able to be seen. And the same can be said in others, so that necessarily the definition of one exists before the definition of the other and the knowledge of one before the knowledge of the other.

In time it is before in this way: the same in kind acts before, but not in number. I mean this: that the matter and the seed and the visible which are in ability the man and the grain and the seeing, but not in act, are before in time this man and this grain and this seeing now existing in act, but before in time to these are other beings in act, from which these come to be. For always from what is in ability comes to be what is in act by what is in act, as man from man and the knower from knower, there being always a first mover - for the mover is already in act. It has been said in the discourses



about substance that everything which comes to be, comes to be from something and by something. And this is the same in kind.

Whence it seem impossible to be a housebuilder without having built anything, or a harpist never having played the harp. For the one learning to play the harp learns to play the harp by playing it. And likewise the others.

Whence the sophistical refutation arises that one not having the knowledge will do that of which it is the knowledge. For the one learning does not have it.

But since, of that which is coming to be, something has come to be, and generally, the moving has moved somewhat (this is clear in the books about motion), so he who is learning must, it seems, have something of knowledge. Here too, then, it is clear that act is thus before ability in generation and in time.

## READING EIGHT

But it is also [before] in substance. First, because what are after in becoming are before in form and substance, as man is before boy and human being before seed. For the one already has the form and the other does not.

And because everything that comes to be goes toward a beginning and end (because that for the sake of which is a beginning, and the becoming is for the sake of the end), but the act is the end and the ability is taken for the sake of this.

For animals do not see in order that they may have sight, but they have sight so they may see.

And likewise, men have the art of building so that they may build, and looking knowledge so they may look. But they do not look so they may have looking knowledge, except those learning. And these do not look except imperfectly or because they look not out of any need.

Further, matter is in ability so that it may come to form. And when it is in act, then it is in form. And likewise in the others, and those whose end is motion. Hence, as teachers showing [their pupils] acting, think they have achieved the end, so nature likewise.

For if it does not come to be thus, Pauson will be the Hermes. For it will not be clear whether the knowledge is within or without, as in that. For the doing is the end, and the act is the doing. Whence also the word *act* is said by doing and is extended to perfection [the form].

But in some, the use is last; for example, seeing of sight, and nothing other comes to be from the operation. But from some [acts] something comes to be, as from the art of housebuilding a house besides the housebuilding. Yet none the less here the act is the end while there it is more the end than the ability. For the act of building is in the thing that is being built, and at the same time it comes to be and is as the house. In those things where there is something other which comes to be besides the use, the act of these is in the thing that is being made; for example, the act of building is in the thing that is being built and that of weaving in the thing that is being woven, and likewise in all others, and in general the motion is in the moved. But where there is no product apart from the act, the act is in these; for example, seeing is in the one who sees and looking is in the looker and life is in the soul (whence also happiness, for it is a certain life)

Thus, it is clear that the substance and the form is act. By this argument, it is clear that act is before ability in substance. And as we have said, one act always precedes another in time right back to the eternal first mover.

## READING NINE

But also more masterly. For eternal things are before corruptible things in substance, but no eternal thing is in ability.

The reason is this: every ability is of a contradiction at the same time. For what is not able to belong will never belong to anything, but everything which is able may not act. Therefore what is able to be, may both be and not be. The same therefore is able to be and not be. But what is able not to be may not be And what may not be is corruptible, either simply, or in that same way in which it is said that it can not be, according to place or according to how much or how. But simply, according to substance.

Nothing incorruptible simply, then, is in ability simply. But nothing prevents it from being so in some way, as how or where. All therefore are in act.

Nor are any of the necessary beings. And these are the first [things]. For if these were not, nothing would be.

Nor, if something is eternally moved, it is not moved according to ability except hither thither. For nothing prevents matter of this kind belonging to it.

And so the sun and the stars and the whole heaven are ever active, and there is no fear that they may sometime stand still, which those [thinking] about nature fear. Nor do they tire doing this. For motion is not for them about the ability of contradiction as it is for corruptible things. so that the continuity of the movement should be laborious. For the cause of this is substance as matter and ability, not act.

And the things which are in change, such as earth and fire, imitate incorruptibles. For these also always act. For they have motion through themselves and in themselves.

But of the other abilities, those with reason, from what has been determined, are all of contradiction. For what is able to move thus is also able, not thus. But those without reason will be the same of contradiction by their presence or absence.

If, then, there are natures or substances such as those in arguments call the Forms, there must be something much more knowing than knowledge itself and something more moved than motion [itself]. For these are more acts, but those, the abilities for them. It is clear, then, that act is before ability and every beginning of change.

## READING TEN

That the act is also better and more honorable than the good ability is clear from these things. Whatever is said according to ability is capable of contraries; for example, it is the same which is able to be healthy and at the same time [able] to be sick. For there is the same ability for being healthy and sick, for being at rest and in motion, for building and knocking down, for being built and falling down. The ability for contraries, then, exists at the same time; but contraries cannot exist at the same time, and the acts also cannot exist at the same time; for example, to be healthy and to be sick. Therefore, while the good must be one of them, the ability is both alike, or neither. The act, therefore, is better.

It is necessary also that in bad things, the end and the act is worse than the ability. For it is the same that is able to be both contraries.

It is clear, therefore, that the bad does not exist apart from things. For the bad is after ability by nature.

And therefore in the things which are from the beginning and the eternal things, there is nothing bad, neither failure nor the corrupted (for corruption is bad).

And the geometrical figures are found by act. For we find by dividing. If they were already divided, they would have been clear. But now they exist in ability. Why are the angles of the triangle equal to two right angles? Because the angles about one point are equal to two right angles. If, then, the line parallel to the side had been already drawn, it would have been clear right away to any one seeing it. Why is every angle in a semicircle a right angle? If three lines are equal, the two which are the base, and the straight line from the center, it is clear to the one seeing who knows that [a former theorem] Thus, it is clear that it is found by what are in ability being led into act. The cause is that understanding is an act so that the ability is [known] from act and therefore in making they know. For the individual act is after in generation.

## READING ELEVEN

Since *being* and *nonbeing* are said according to the figures of predicates, but also by ability or act of these or contraries, this being is chiefly true or false.

This is in things to be put together or divided. So he thinks truly who thinks the divided to be divided and the put together to be put together, but he think falsely who is in the contrary or the things. When is or is not what is called true or false? What we say should be investigated. It is not because we think truly that you are white, that you are white, but because you are white, we who say this speak truly.

If, then, some things are always put together and unable to be divided, and others are always divided and unable to be put together while others can be contraries for being is to be put together and be one while non-being is

not to be put together, but to be many. The same opinion and the same thought about contingent things becomes false and true, and happens to be sometimes true and sometimes false. But about things unable to be otherwise, it does not become sometimes true and at other times false, but the same are always true or false.

But about things not put together, what is it to be or not to be and the true and the false? For it is not put together so as to be when it is put together, but not to be when it is divided, like the wood is white or the diameter incommensurable. Nor will true and false belong still in the same way as in those. Or just as true is not the same in these, so neither is to be.

But true or false is as follows: to grasp [or understand] and say is true (affirmation and saying are not the same), and not to grasp is ignorance. For it is not possible to be deceived about the what it is except by accident. Likewise, it is not possible to be deceived about the substances not put together.

And all exist in act, not in ability. For otherwise they would have come to be and ceased to be; but now being itself does not come to be, nor is it corrupted, for it would have come to be from something. Whatever things, then, are a what itself and in act, about these it is not possible to be deceived, but either one understands or not. But the what it is is sought about them, if they are such or not.

As regards being as true and non-being as false, one is thus: if it is put together, it is true, and if it is not put together, it is false; in the other one, if it is a being, it is thus. If it is not thus, it is not; but the true is to understand these. The false is not, nor is there deception, but ignorance. And not as blindness. For blindness is as if one was wholly lacking the ability to understand.

It is clear also that there is no deception about unchangeable things according to when, if someone takes them to be unchangeable. For example, if we think the triangle does not change, it would not be thought that sometimes it has [angles equal to] two right angles and sometimes not. For it would change [But it can be thought] that one has and another does not. For example, we may think that no even number is prime, or that some are and some are not. But about one number not even this. For no longer is it thought that one is and another is not. But one thinks truly or falsely that it is always thus.