

The Role of Potentiality in Aristotle's *Ethics*

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Abstract

What I will argue here is that the ethical potentiality of the human being that Aristotle cites in the *Nicomachean Ethics* refers to the general, rational capacity for someone to appropriate and develop their own specific, natural capacities which make them human; the name of this ability is called virtue, which, when expressed in actions, we call good. To separate out the concepts at work here demands an exegesis of the two kinds of *dunamis* in *Metaphysics Theta*, that is, *dunamis* as causal power of change and *dunamis* as a potential way of being for an existent capacity. Once we grasp this, we can clarify the nature of virtue as the active, complete state of a capacity in human being which defines their function even though it must be acquired, and it need not ever be actualized. The concepts of habit (*ethos*) and practical judgment (*phronesis*) give Aristotle the means to solve the problem of how such a potentiality is acquired and how it is actualized, and hence we will end with a discussion of them.

Keywords

Aristotle, potentiality, ethics, habit, virtue, actuality

In *Metaphysics Theta*, Aristotle argues for a new set of ontological categories, potentiality and actuality (*dunamis* and *energeia*). The specification of potentiality in its different forms, its conceptual justification against the Megarians and the wave of arguments for the priority of actuality all merge into a strong thesis: although one can never reduce potentiality in its various forms to actuality, the priority of actuality is fundamental.

Yet the relevance of the arguments in *Metaphysics Theta* extends beyond the ontological domain into practical philosophy as well. Aristotle uses frequent anthropological and ethical examples to mark the difference between potentiality and actuality, such as learning different crafts, the relation between adult and child and the meaning of a happy life. But what exactly is the dynamic between actuality and potentiality concerning human practice and thought? Aristotle's subsumption of all crafts (*techne*) and productive sciences (*poesis*) under rational capacities in Chapter 2 of *Metaphysics Theta* only complicates the problem. For the reason given is merely that they are 'origins of change in something else, or in the thing itself *qua* something else' (Aristotle, 2006, 1046b3). But if the origin is in the soul, as Aristotle writes, and if the agent is the soul, and the thing changed is also the soul, then it appears as if we are saying nothing. Instead of trying to think our way into ethics from the perspective of potentiality and

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actuality, perhaps we can think our way from within human practice out towards the metaphysics of *dunamis* and *energeia*.

In the first book of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle states that we must begin with the search for *the* good towards which all actions, inquiries, arts and intentions aim. Agreeing at first to call this happiness or well-being (*eudaimonia*), the common term for the ultimate good of life, Aristotle is quickly blocked by the conflicting interpretations which this term brings. To gain further determinacy about happiness as the highest good, he takes a detour by asking about the function, work or task (*ergon*) of human beings. The idea is that if we can first pin down the normative criteria for judging *how* a thing is supposed to be, then we can figure out when such a thing can be considered as existing *well*. The *ergon* argument, coming so early in Aristotle's ethical meditation, requires a subtle understanding of the relation between *dunamis* and *energeia*, an understanding that is explicitly given in the *Metaphysics* and only implicitly referenced here. For with this move, thinking the good as happiness requires thinking through the actualization of a function that may remain potential. This function of the human, that which specifies the human's being, is a kind of rational living, what Aristotle calls 'the activity of the soul according to reason' (Aristotle, 1984, 1098a8). Actualizing this function *completely* requires a certain way of being, a way of acting and thinking in unity that is excellent, noble and more precisely, *virtuous*.

But actualization is a relative term, to potentiality. We can only actualize what is potential within us. Being rational and acting virtuously are not immediately actual in the human soul at birth but are rather potential ways of being that can be actualized through proper training, education, experience and habituation. While the potentiality for reason distinguishes the specificity of the human soul, it must still be developed in order to exist as actual, and good habits must also be acquired through experience.¹ Yet how is it possible that what essentially defines the function is itself not immediately existent in humans? Do human beings have the potential not to be who they are? Or, to put it more starkly: do human beings have the potential *not* to have their own potentiality? If so, what kind of potentiality is this? The ethical enquiry to understand the kind of actualizations of reason and virtue required for humans to live a good life leads, hence, to a metaphysical enquiry into the nature and ways of being itself.

What I will argue here is that the ethical potentiality of the human being that Aristotle cites refers to the general, rational capacity for someone to appropriate and develop their own specific, natural capacities which make them human; the name of this ability is called virtue, which, when expressed in actions, we call good. To separate out the concepts at work here demands an exegesis of the two kinds of *dunamis* in *Metaphysics Theta*, that is, *dunamis* as causal power of change and *dunamis* as a potential way of being for an existent capacity. Once we grasp this, we can clarify the nature of virtue as the active, complete state of a capacity in human beings which defines their function *even though* it must be acquired, and it need not ever be actualized. The concepts of habit (*ethos*) and practical judgment (*phronesis*) give Aristotle the means to solve the problem of how such a potentiality is acquired and how it is actualized, and hence we will end with a discussion of them.

Potentiality and Actuality

As stated above, Aristotle's first definition of *dunamis* is that of the causal power to change something or to be changed by something, a power whose domain covers things with and without reason. A doctor's ability to heal and a fire's power to heat are both *dunamai* in this sense, even though the former ability originates in the soul while the second originates in the matter itself. Both *dunamai* are actualized by a set of causal conditions concerning the active and passive subjects of the encounter. Whether the cause

comes from someone's *choice* to act or from a natural reaction amongst chemicals is irrelevant. It is the power to change and be changed that is central here.² The difference between the two is rather that the rational power can produce contrary outcomes, whereas the irrational one can only produce one outcome. This is important not in order to categorically distinguish between two kinds of *dunamis*—that will occur through a different distinction—but rather to set up the priority of actuality which comes later in the argument. Since rational powers include possibly contradictory outcomes, a different relation to actuality is needed in order for the right outcome to come into being. This relation will be *knowledge*.³

Why does Aristotle provide an account of *dunamis* which centres on the capacity for change and knowledge? Firstly, it is to counter the Megarians, who argue that *dunamai* can only exist in their full actuality, and never as potential. A doctor is a doctor only while healing, a builder only while building, fire only while heating and so on. What this leaves out is the very possibility of a change of states, both physically and mentally. How does a building go from raw materials to complete form, how does a musician go from student to master? Aristotle argues that we need a specific concept such as *dunamis* to account for development, change and motion, or else we will be mired in a world of immobile, contradictory actualities.⁴

While refuting the Megarians, Aristotle casually remarks at the end of Chapter 3 that there are other meanings of actuality not related to change, but rather to the *fulfilment* which accords when non-beings transition into beings. For although non-beings can be thought about and desired, they do not change *per se*. Why?

Because while not being actually they will be actually. For some of the things which are not are potentially; but they are not because they are not in fulfillment. (Aristotle, 2006, 1047a35–1047b1)

Aristotle is beginning to defend a different kind of *dunamis* here, one which is no longer simply a description of a power to change or be changed, but rather one that characterizes a state of something's existence in relation to some criteria of fulfilment. This opening leads to Aristotle's rethinking of *dunamis* as one ontological mode of a capacity defined by its unfulfilled normative relation to its function.⁵

As Charlotte Witt (2003) argues in her *Ways of Being*, Aristotle's novelty in *Metaphysics Theta* lies in the new meaning he gives to *dunamis*. Witt fails to mention, however, the far-reaching consequences of this conceptual innovation in other fields of inquiry, particularly, in ethics and practical philosophy. But before we can explain these consequences, let us take up Witt's insight and separate out the new meaning of *dunamis* from the old. To do this, one must look to Chapters 6–8 of *Theta*, where Aristotle argues by means of analogical induction for this different meaning.

'But the potential is also spoken of differently' (Aristotle, 2006, 1048b30), Aristotle writes near the beginning of Chapter 6, differently than as a power for change. To bring this out, Aristotle gives us analogies that all display the same relation to each other: relations of latency and activity. They run as follows:

As what builds is to what can build, and what is awake to what is asleep, and what is seeing to what has closed eyes but has sight, [so is] what has been separated off from the matter to the matter, and what has been finished off to what is unwrought. Of these contrasts let the actuality be defined by the one part, the potential by the other. (Aristotle, 2006, 1048a37–b5)

In these senses, the contrast is not between an active power and its object, or a passive power and its agent, but between a latent capacity and its own actualization. Here, the division between potentiality and actuality *is internal to the capacity itself*. These capacities can even be the same ones that were

previously characterized as *dunamai*: craft-building, sight, medicine and so on. However, it is not their roles as agents of change that determines their meaning here, rather, it is their self-relation in terms of fulfilment.

There are two kinds of fulfilment being described here. One describes the case of powers that are fulfilled while in active use—such as the power to build while building, the power to see while seeing. The other describes the case of substances that are fulfilled when they are complete—such as raw materials when formed into a final structure. Powers not in use are inactive, latent, *potential*, powers in use are fulfilled, complete, *actual*. Both of these determinations of the meaning of potentiality and actuality turn on whether or not an essential function is fulfilled, and hence determining the *function* of the capacity is central. For instance, sight is an inactive power, but seeing is an active power. Seeing is prior to sight, not because we see temporally before we have the power to see, but because the *purpose* of the power to see is in the seeing itself.

The adult human being is a completely actual being, but a child is incomplete and hence, potential. Why? Not because the adult exists before the baby, but because the being of a child is defined in relation to the essential functions of the fully developed human. What is the essential *ergon* of humans? As already mentioned, it is rational living, and the best kind of rational living is accomplished through virtuous activity. The child cannot exercise its rational faculties yet, nor can it live virtuously, and hence it is only potentially a fully developed human. If this is true, then everything turns on how a child can progress from this incomplete state to a more complete one, a progression dealt with explicitly in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Humans, although fully actual, can nevertheless have inactive powers. Only when an actual human being actualizes their essential power are they fully complete. This activity of the soul according to the human's essential function, which is reason, when utilized excellently, is the life of happiness.

Hence, we see the difference between two modes of a capacity's being, it's being *potentially* in an inactive state and it's being *actually* in its very activity. If we identify the function of the capacity through its *actualization*, then the actuality is always ontologically prior, no matter the chronological development. Yet, a problem arises. If the actuality is prior, which Aristotle argues for in three different ways in Chapter 8, then how do capacities get *created* or *acquired* in the first place? Piano players must learn the capacity to play before it is actualized, as well as carpenters and their wood-working ability, swimmers and their swimming ability and so on. Aristotle argues that the apparent sophisticated puzzle contains its own solution.⁶

It is by actual *practice* or *learning* that such capacities are acquired, but in this process, they are not *fully actualized* yet. The swimmer learns to swim by swimming, but that doesn't mean she is an Olympic swimmer all of a sudden. Implicitly, *degrees of being* are invoked here, normative degrees of excellence which take knowledge, habit, practice and virtue as criteria. But even granted this scale of existence, there must be an *ur-actuality* for the possibility of capacities to develop in the first place. When Aristotle discusses the dependence of possibility on actuality in Chapters 2 and 3, and when he writes that 'the learner too must perhaps have something of this knowledge' (Aristotle, 2006, 1050a1), I believe this is what he is getting at. The child, the builder and the swimmer must already possess the *actual* ability to receive and learn new abilities, including the abilities to reason, think, develop and flourish. This second nature, one could say along with McDowell, is not unnatural but the very realizations of our nature itself.

This new meaning of potentiality that Aristotle defends—the potentiality of a capacity to exist while not in use and the potentiality for a being to exist in a lesser degree than its essential function allows—are ultimately employed to justify the priority of actuality. The temporal and logical arguments for this priority are not nearly as novel as the final argument for priority in substance or ontological priority. What makes this important here is its direct relation to natural organisms and teleological structures.

Although some actual capacities can arrive posterior in time to their potential states, such as living well is to living or contemplating is to the ability to contemplate, actuality is ontologically prior to potentiality because the actualized existence is the normative goal by which to judge the capacity at all. As Aristotle writes:

For the functioning [*ergon*] is the end [*telos*], and the actuality [*energeia*] the functioning [*ergon*]; and that is why the name ‘actuality’ [*energeia*] is employed with respect to the functioning [*ergon*] and points towards the fulfillment [*entelechan*]. (Aristotle, 2006, 1050a22–24)⁷

The actuality of the function is also its goal, and hence this is why the actuality of living well, living in the most complete state, is the goal of living at all. But for this to occur, then the whole set of rational capacities that defines the human must not only be fully developed but *fully in use* as well. This is no longer an ontological question but an ethical inquiry into the proper acquisition and best use of the human being’s own capacities. To solve this question, one must first know how to ask it correctly. Aristotle hits the mark exactly by asking, *what is virtue?*

Ethics and Virtue

Now that we have an adequate understanding of potentiality and actuality, we can return our gaze to the field of human practice so as to illuminate what was previously left obscure. To take up where we left off, how are we to understand the claim that happiness is an actualization of the proper function of humans? In Book I of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle arrives at this conclusion by first separating out the *differentia specifica* of the human being. Neither simply exhibiting a life of nutrition, nor just a life of sensation, the human being is the only creature able to truly *act*. But this idea of action does not signify only bodily movement, for all creatures act in that sense, but rather some kind of action according to principles. Aristotle writes:

There remains, then, the life of *action* of a being who has reason. Of that which has reason, (a) one part has reason in the sense that it may obey reason, (b) the other part has it in the sense that it possesses reason or in the sense that it is *thinking*. Since we speak of part (b), too, in two senses, let us confine ourselves to the life with reason in activity, for it is this sense which is thought to be more important. (Aristotle, 1984, 1098a4–7)

The life of the human being is uniquely expressed in their rationally structured activity. This ‘life with reason in activity’ is not just the expression of a capacity that can be an origin for change in something else or itself—the first meaning of *dunamis*—but rather we can now understand it as the fulfilment of a latent power that was socially, historically achieved. Aristotle continues:

Accordingly, if the function of a man is an activity of the soul according to reason or not without reason... and if so, then we posit the function of a man to be a certain kind of life, namely, activity or *actions* of the soul with reason, and of a virtuous man we posit these to be well and nobly done; so since each thing is performed well according to its proper virtue, then the good for a man turns out to be an activity of the soul according to virtue, and if the virtues are many, then according to the best and most complete virtue. And we should add, ‘in a complete life’. (Aristotle, 1984, 1098a7–20)

The function of the human being as rationally structured activity is the result of a *certain* kind of life, one in which actions themselves are marks of reason and not simply reflexes or impulses. To realize this in the most complete way, the way towards happiness requires adopting certain virtues; these virtues are to

social and ethical practice what natural capacities are to biological life. In other words, virtues function as capacities for the realization not of the sensory being of the human but of their ethical being, human *character*. Happiness, *eudaimonia*, can then be intelligibly described as the complete actualization of the virtues.

But first, one must acquire virtues, these practico-rational capacities. How does one go about that? Are they found in nature like raw materials? Are they learned? Do they develop naturally? In Book II of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle begins to answer these questions. First, he separates out intellectual virtues from character or ethical virtues, stating that the former require teaching, experience and time, whereas the latter require habit (*ethos*), although they are not mere habits. We will discuss intellectual virtues later with an analysis of *phronesis*, but here let us focus on the acquisition of character virtues.

Natural capacities, according to Aristotle, pre-exist their use. Sight, hearing and all the senses are *dynamai* that properly exist before their use, albeit in an inactive state.

Of things which come to us by nature, we first bring along the powers (*dunamis*) and later exhibit the corresponding activities ... we used the power [of sensation] after we possessed it, we did not come to possess it after using it. (Aristotle, 1984, 1103a26, 1103a30)

These natural capacities exist as potential in the human being before their actualization through use, but only through their actualization can we judge them as having been possessed as potential. Their functions retroactively determine their possession. No habit or training is needed for these. Ethical capacities or virtues, however, are acquired by means of practice. ‘We acquire them as a result of prior activities’, Aristotle writes, ‘we become just by doing what is just, temperate by doing what is temperate, and brave by doing brave deeds’ (Aristotle, 1984, 1103a32–b2).⁸ These capacities are not possessed at birth, but rather socially inculcated through practice, repetition and activity. We are receptive to virtue, but not identical with it.

This apparently common-sensical position hides deep paradoxes to anyone unfamiliar with the priority of actuality arguments in *Metaphysics Theta*. For how can people acquire ethical capacities through practice without knowing what these capacities are and how to practice them? How does one ‘do just things’ before knowing what it is to be just? For Aristotle, the actualization of the potential capacity to act justly is a result of the actual acquiring of this capacity through experience with others who initiate one into what we can call, following Sellars and McDowell, the space of ethical reason.⁹ This situational experience with others is formative from youth; one follows patterns of action, repeats, understands and internalizes not the actions of others but the *rationality* of the actions of others.¹⁰

This initiation process is itself the result of an actual capacity present by nature in humans to receive new potential capacities. The potentialities one forms within comes from actualizations without, but our own self is already actually attuned to accept such actualizations.¹¹ Aristotle confirms this, placing these virtues both at the limit and the core of our natural, rational being when he writes that, ‘virtues arise in us neither by nature nor contrary to nature, but by our nature, we can receive them and perfect them by habituation’ (Aristotle, 1984, 1103a25).

The process of habituation is not simply a rote mechanism of learning. It includes the *self-conscious* knowledge of what one is doing. This self-consciousness acts on the soul like form does on matter for Aristotle. It renders the potential actual, completes what is incomplete and organizes what is indeterminate. This self-constraint frees one from haphazard instincts to act according to reason, hence fulfilling the function of humans. In metaphysical terms, we can describe this process as the soul’s escalation up the scale of being from an incomplete to a complete substance. This formative process occurs in degrees, and hence human ethical character is itself *more or less* complete; it is a task to be accomplished in time, in

which a self is formed, tested, adjusted, reflected and liberated. The ultimate endpoint is not a static position but itself an activity that confirms the very completeness of one's character in all one's actions. This cannot be prescribed or simply given; it is freely chosen under given conditions. It is the actualization of a historically produced potentiality, one which defines the being of human. This determinate realization of human essentiality is the freedom inseparable from reason.¹²

Reason and Practical Judgment

To understand the specific reason adequate to our ethical character, we must turn to the second kind of virtue, intellectual virtues. Once learned habits have established the proper ethical ends of action in specific situations, intellectual capacities attune oneself to the proper means for accomplishing this. The result, virtuous action, is also called *true action*. Truthful action is a result of choice fused with reason. But which kind of reason? There are five ways that the rational soul discloses truth for Aristotle, these are through art (*techne*), knowledge (*episteme*), practical judgment (*phronesis*), wisdom (*sophia*) and intellect (*nous*).¹³ Aristotle disqualifies art and knowledge from being adequate candidates for virtues, because the former deals with what is made (*poesis*) and not with actions (*praxis*) themselves, and the latter because it only deals with necessities and not with what changes and comes to be. Practical judgment, on the other hand, *phronesis*, is a perfect candidate because it deliberates over contingent situations with the goal of action that is 'conducive to living well as a whole' (Aristotle, 2002, 1140a30).

Yet how is it possible for one to deliberate, in a particular situation, over something so general as 'living well as a whole'? This intellectual capacity, like all virtues, is acquired through experience. Yet the experience needed to guarantee such a noble path seems impossibly high. Adding up every particular ethical action does not equal knowledge of the whole life of a human being, but without this knowledge of the whole, what is there to guide the particular truth-disclosing actions? If, as Aristotle says, 'practical judgment is a truth-disclosing active condition involving reason about human goods that governs action' (Aristotle, 2002, 1140b21), then we must know something about human goods prior to acting well.

This knowledge of the whole is not 'knowledge' at all, and hence the problem of a purely epistemological reading of the intellectual virtues. The 'whole' being invoked is that which makes one's *own life* whole, that is, a unified, rationally structured self who affirms one's own being in the actions themselves. In other words, practical judgment actualizes the capacity to actualize one's ethical capacities in harmony. This is not done in general once and for all but in the repeated *particular* experiences of a human being's life. It is there that the ethical capacities are tested and seamlessly integrated into one's actions, almost as if they were natural. Practical judgment is the name for the intellectual capacity earned through the actualization of ethical capacities up to the point where they are inseparable from one's own perception. For 'practical judgment is directed at the ultimate particular, of which there is no knowledge but only perception' (Aristotle, 2002, 1142a25). This perception is inflected perception, filled with the content of an ethical rationality produced from particular situations. Particular experience produces particular capacities, but these particular capacities allow for the universal function of humans to be actualized. 'The work of a human being' or the function of the human, 'is accomplished as a result of practical judgment and of virtue of character, since virtue makes the end on which one sets one's sights right and practical judgment makes the things related to it right' (Aristotle, 2002, 1144a6–10). Practical judgment and ethical virtue realize the best possible life of human being, for in their very activity, they confirm the *actuality* of human being.¹⁴ This actuality is *eudaimonia*, the complete unity of rational thought and ethical action.

Can we call this our second nature? Second nature, as John McDowell argues, is a realization and not a transcendence of our nature. It is a sort of virtuous perception, in which one sees situations from the standpoint of how best to act in order to achieve an end already instilled. He writes:

Practical intellect's coming to be as it ought to be is the acquisition of a second nature, involving the molding of motivational and evaluative propensities: a process that takes place in nature. The practical intellect does not dictate to one's formed character—one's nature as it has become—from outside. One's formed practical intellect—which is operative in one's character-revealing behavior—just is an aspect of one's nature as it has become. (McDowell, 1998b, p. 185)

But what is the relation between this second nature and the good life? It seems as though second nature is acquired by anyone who goes through the process of an adequate social formation, in which cultural behaviour, language and some ability to judge and act are instilled. Yet there seems to be more for Aristotle than just being culturally educated. If that were true, then everyone would be said to be living well. Flourishing, however, requires a particular manifestation of one's second nature, a way of living that even goes beyond the particularity of one's social context. For the being of human is universal, and this universality exists not just within one's particular context, but against it and across it as well. This universal function of the human discloses truth, not culture. The truth that is disclosed by living well is the self-appropriating nature of human being, the capacity to learn from one's own actual experiences and develop more fulfilling, more thoughtful active responses in the future. This ability is acquired socially, but it is accomplished individually. Or rather, it is the accomplishment of individuality.

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Notes

1. On this point, see McDowell (1995).
2. A more complete account of Aristotle's conception of change would have to incorporate his theory of *hyle* [matter], *morphe* [form], and their dialectical relation. For an interesting modern take on this relational dynamic, see Adorno (2001).
3. This is a reconstruction so-far of the arguments in Chapters 1 and 2 of Aristotle's *Metaphysics Theta*.
4. See Chapter 3 of *Metaphysics Theta*.
5. On the distinction between *dunamis* as causal power and *dunamis* as ontological mode, see Charlotte Witt (2003).
6. See *Metaphysics Theta* 1049b30-1050a-3:

That is why also it seems impossible to be a builder if one has not built anything, or a harpist if one has not played the harp; for it is by playing the harp that someone learning to play the harp does learn to play the harp; and likewise too for other people. It is from this that the sophistical puzzle arises, that someone who does not

have knowledge will be doing that which the knowledge is of. For the learner does not have knowledge. But because something of what is coming to be has come to be and in general something of what is changing has changed (this is clear in the discussions about change) the learner too must perhaps have something of the knowledge. But at all events it is also clear from this too that actuality is prior in this way to potentiality also, namely in respect of coming to be and time. (Aristotle, 2006)

7. The translation in the Loeb edition by Tredennick, which is somewhat clearer here, runs as such: ‘For the activity is the end, and the actuality is the activity; hence the term “actuality” is derived from “activity”, and tends to have the meaning of “complete reality”’ (Aristotle, 1933).
8. See also a similar paragraph in *Metaphysics Theta* (Aristotle, 2006, 1047b30–35):

As all capacities are either innate, like the senses, or come about by habit, like that of flute playing, or by learning, like that of the crafts, in the case of some, previous practice is necessary for their possession, namely those of them which come about by habit and by reason, but it is not necessary for those which are not of this sort, and for those which involve being affected.

9. See Aristotle (1984, 1103b15–20), translated by Apostle:

It is by our *actions* with other men in transactions that we are in the process of becoming just or unjust, and it is by our *actions* in dangerous situations in which we are in the process of acquiring the habit of being courageous or afraid that we become brave or cowardly, respectively. It is likewise with *desires* and with anger.

10. See Aristotle (1984, 1103b20–25), translated by Apostle:

In short, it is by similar activities that habits are developed in men; and in view of this, the activities in which men are engaged should be of [the right] quality, for the kinds of habits which develop follow the corresponding differences in those activities. So in acquiring a habit it makes no small difference whether we are *acting* in one way or in the contrary way right from our early youth; it makes a great difference, or rather all the difference.

11. On this thought, see Baracchi (2008, p. 114):

What is by nature requires no exercise in order to be enacted: to begin with, one has the power of seeing and sees. To be sure, one’s ability to see can subsequently be refined and trained further, but the enactment of such a power is immediate and unintentional. In matters of habituation, instead, one proceeds from the acquisition of an activity to its further reenactment, from actuality to actuality. Or, to put it even more sharply, instead of the transition from potentiality to actualization, in matters of virtue it is the acquisition of actualities that gives rise to our power. Not only, then, do we receive an actuality and enact it ourselves, but our very receptivity with regard to what surrounds us, our exposure to the worldly and communal circumstances, frees our potentiality as human beings. It is in this way that we genuinely become who and what we are and are to be, that human potential may as such be released.

12. See Baracchi (2008, p. 135):

We observed, in that which is by nature, the priority of potentiality over actuality. In ethical matters, however, we saw how actuality proceeds from actuality (virtue from virtue). No habits are simply by nature. That we are capable of developing and acquiring habits is a kind of gift from nature. But the gift does not prescribe what those habits should be. In other words, human beings are not bound to necessity absolutely or in an unqualified way. They enjoy a margin of “freedom” that is at once a source of perplexity, a lack of direction.

13. See the first three chapters of Book Six of *Nicomachean Ethics* for this argument.

14. For a close but different take, see John McDowell (1998a, p. 19): ‘The life of exercises of excellence is the life that most fully actualizes the potentialities that constitute human nature.’

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