LUDGER JANSEN

Are Aristotle's *energeiai* states or events?*

Are Aristotle's *energeiai* states or events? To answer this question we have to know what an energeia is, and what the words "state" and "event" refer to. I cannot answer the first question in any detail here, but want to stress the contrast to *kinesis* as sketched by Aristotle in his *Metaphysics*. I want to reject the interpretation of energeiai as "states", while "events" represent the interpretation I favour myself. Presently I want to argue that Aristotle's distinction between kinesis und energeia should not be understood as a classification of verbs or verb-phrases, but as a "metaphysical" distinction of entities in the world.[1]

Energeia is a central concept in Aristotle, and it is most probably a term of Aristotle's own making. By its morphology, "energeia" suggests a translation like "being in work", often rendered into English as "activity" (cf. Blair 1967, Chen 1956). Another term Aristotle uses for "happenings" is *kinesis* (movement, change). What is the difference between these two? Aristotle puts forward his point in a short passage in his *Metaphysics* (1048b 18–35). From this source we can firstly extract a list of examples: Aristotle counts perceiving, contemplating, thinking, living well, living happy, causing motion (*kinein: active voice*) as energeiai, whereas he regards learning, being cured, reducing, house-building, walking, becoming, being moved (*kineisthein: middle voice*) as kinesis. Secondly, the passage seems to contain a criterion to distinguish between kinesis and energeia:

"At the same time it is not the case that one is walking and has walked, nor that one is house-building and has house-built, nor that one is becoming and has become, or is being moved and has been moved. But secondly, one is causing motion as well as has caused motion. And one has perceived and is perceiving at the same time the same [object], and is thinking as well as has thought. Indeed, I call a case like this an energeia, the former kinesis." (*Metaph.* IX, 6; 1048b 30–35; my translation)

This presumed criterion has been called "tense test" in the literature, because its principle is to contrast the Greek present tense (rendered into the English present progressive) and the Greek perfect tense (rendered into the English simple perfect). But at a closer look this test does not rely on a mere difference in tense (being the relation between the time of utterance and the time of evaluation of a sentence; cf. Bybee 1992), but draws rather on an *aspectual* distinction (cf. Potts 1967, Mourelatos 1978). It contrasts the *perfective aspect* (i.e. the English simple form or the Greek present system), which describes e. g. an action as whole from a point of view temporally outside of this action, with the *imperfective aspect* (i.e. the English continuous form or the Greek present system), which views an action from "inside" as still happening (cf. Kienzle 1994). Therefore I prefer to call this criterion "perfect test".

But what is it a criterion for? Is it a method to distinguish verbs like "walking" from verbs like "thinking" by contrasting grammatically formed sentences differing in the morphology of their verbs? This I call a *linguistic criterion*, because the objects of the test are linguistic entities, i. e. sentences. It would be a criterion for a *linguistic distinction*, because it parts off verbs in two groups (i. e. two "aspectual classes"). In this version, the perfect test would run e. g. like this:

(LL) "Perceiving" is an energeia-verb if and only if "Jones is perceiving" and "Jones has perceived" are asserted by a competent speaker at the same time.[2]

Or is the perfect test a criterion to distinguish, say, happenings in the world by means of properties of these happenings? This I call a *metaphysical distinction*, because it distinguishes two groups of entities (which are not necessarily substances) "in the world". Furthermore, I call it a *metaphysical criterion*, because it refers to properties found in the world, rather than in language (but not independent of language):

(MM) Perceiving is an energeia if and only if Jones is perceiving and Jones has perceived at the same time.[3]

---

2 Or, more formally: Let p be any well-formed English sentence using the verb "V-ing" in the present progressive as the predicate and q the sentence one gets when transforming the predicate of p into simple perfect. "V-ing" is an energeia-verb iff p and q are asserted by an competent speaker at the same time. "V-ing" is a kinesis-verb iff p and q are never asserted simultaneously by a competent speaker.

3 Again in formulae: V-ing is an energeia iff for all x: If x is V-ing, then x has V-ed. V-ing is a kinesis iff for all x: If x is V-ing (from A to B during a time C) the x has not V-ed (from A to B during C).

Under the influence of "linguistic philosophy", the perfect test has often been interpreted as a linguistic criterion for a linguistic distinction (LL-reading). Linguistic verb classifications as proposed by Zeno Vendler (1957)[4] or Anthony Kenny (1963) have been used by their authors or their successors to get a grip on the kinesis-energeia distinction. Kenny, for example, distinguishes between static verbs, performance verbs and activity verbs:

Let V be an English verb. V is a static verb, if and only if it has not a continuous tense. V is an action verb, if and only if it has a continuous tense. An action verb V is a performance verb, if and only if "A is V-ing" implies "A has not V-ed". An action verb V is an activity verb, if and only if "A is V-ing" does not imply "A has not V-ed". (Cf. Kenny 1963)

Of course, hybrid versions of these two readings of the test are also possible. E. g. the linguistic criterion is often supposed to yield a metaphysical distinction. Such an (ML)-reading is explicitly intended by Alexander Mourelatos (1978) and is even laxly made by Kenny: "I shall call verbs [...] 'static verbs' and say that they stand for states" (Kenny 1963, 172). Thus Kenny often speaks simply about states, performances and activities, rather than of static verbs, performance verbs and activity verbs. "States" then must correspond to the Fregean "Sinn" of the static verbs, as their extensions ("Bedeutung") obviously are the classes of objects of which they can be truely predicated of.

It has been suggested by Kenny himself that both static or performance verbs are energeia verbs. John Ackrill (1965),[5] on the other hand, identifies performances as energeia, whereas Daniel Graham (1980) insists that states only are energeiai. This multitude of different opinions in the (LL)-reading camp should make us suspicious, and it is this kind of interpretation against which I will argue (and out of which I took the "states" as paradigm). I want to argue now that (1) the kinesis-energeia distinction cannot be seen as a linguistic distinction, and, moreover, that (2) the reading as a linguistic criterion is not apt to Aristotle's perfect test.

(1) The unprejudiced reader of the *Metaphysics* (and also most of the interpreters of Aristotle) will be struck by Aristotle's classification of "walking" as a kinesis. "But how can this be so?", Ackrill (1965, 131) wonders himself, and is after some more argumentation ready to conclude "that there is a serious confusion in Aristotle's exposition of the energeia-kinesis distinction" (p. 135),

---

4 Vendler neither intended nor suggested any connection of his work with anything in Aristotle (cf. Verkuyl 1994, 359 n. 25). However, his paper became prominent in the interpretation of the kinesis-energeia distinction.

5 Ackrill is originally referring to Vendler (Vendler 1957) classification. Note that Ackrill uses indeed sometimes (MM) in his discussion, but suggests (LL) in his "recapitulation".

because "his treatment of examples is not in accordance with that distinction" (p. 134). Is it or not the case, that one can assert "Jones is walking" as "Jones has been walking" simultaneously? This problem does not arise with "Jones is walking from Athens to Theben". This sentence is not asserted simultaneously with "Jones has walked from Athens to Theben". But should this not count as an argument against the (LL)-reading rather than against Aristotle's exposition?

The sting which is provided by the example "walking" indicates a systematic problem. Up to now we have treated the aspectual distinctions on which the perfect test is based, as if they were only due to the morphology of the verb. This is not quite right. We can distinguish between the aspect of the verb, i. e. some special morphological features, and the aspect of the sentence, i. e. the difference of the sentence meaning (Frege's "Sinn des Satzes") caused by the aspect of the verb. If we view (following Saussure) a linguistic sign as consisting of its morphological features (which are signifying) and its meaning (which is signified), the aspect of the sentence is what is signified by the aspect of the verb. But the aspect of the sentence is influenced not only by the verb-morphology, but also by e. g. the subject and the object of the sentence. For example, the (LL)-test yields different results for "Jones is walking" and "Jones is walking a mile". And Kenny's criteria treat "Jim crossed the border" differently from "The battalion is crossing the border" (cf. Vendler 1967, 104). Thus, one and the same verb may occur in all three of Kenny's categories. E. g. "understand" may feature as a static verb ("Yes, I understand you"), a performance verb ("Please understand (get the point) that I am only trying to help you"; "Once Lisa understood (grasped) what Henry's intentions were, she lost all interest in him") or as an activity verb ("I am understanding more about quantum mechanics as each day goes by"). In general, a verb which is an activity verb with undistributed plural objects, is a performance verb with distributed plural objects: "He is killing the seals" implies that he has not yet killed all the seals, hence "He has killed the seals" cannot be asserted, whereas "He is killing seals" and "He has killed seals" can be asserted simultaneously.[6]

Thus, if Aristotle intends a mutually exclusive classification (as the text suggests), the kinesis-energeia distinction cannot be a linguistic one.

(2) And neither can the perfect test be a linguistic criterion. Were it such, it would depend on accidental natural language phenomena, and different languages could yield different classifications. E. g. it was necessary for Kenny to introduce static verbs as a third class, which is at best *ad hoc*. But the main ar-

---

[6] For these examples cf. Mourelatos 1978, 419; Comrie 1976, 36; Evans 1967, 295ff.

gument is again Aristotle's own list of examples. We cannot classify "walking" as a kinesis while accepting a linguistic criterion. Even in Greek a linguistic criterion would not be without difficulties.[7] For Aristotle regards *hedone* (pleasure) to be an energeia of the soul, but the verb "*hedesthai*" has no perfect. Thus, the perfect test cannot operate. It is no wonder that Aristotle proposes in the Nicomachean Ethics another criterion when discussing "*hedesthai*", the "quickly-slowly test": A kinesis can be performed quickly or slowly, while an energeia cannot. One can walk quickly, but not enjoy quickly or slowly (cf. *Nic. Eth.* X. 1173a31–b3).

Therefore, (MM) is the most adequate reading of the perfect test. (MM) is able to reconcile the perfect test with Aristotle's list of examples. Therefore, the group of interpretations, of which I took "states" and "static verbs" as being paradigmatic, must be rejected. Nevertheless, it would go too far to say there is no connection between verbs and energeia at all. I will come back to this issue later.[8]

Now it is time to put forward my own suggestion: Energeia are events, and so are kineseis. Of course, there is much discussion about what events "are". At first, "**event**" is meant as a philosophers' technical term, denoting some entity in the world. For more details about these entities called events, a usage-theory of meaning will serve my purposes here. Three important topics connected with philosophical talk about events I want to mention here. Firstly, e. g. the English language has many nouns which are verb-nominalizations (cf. Chomsky 1970). Such nouns, like "a walk", "the marriage", "the thinking" and so on, are said to denote events (cf. Bennett 1988). Secondly, Donald Davidson (1980) uses quantification over events to analyse logical relations of action-sentences. Thirdly, both linguisticians and logicians use events as the common core of sentences in different verbal aspects in order to clarify logical connections between e. g. sentences with verbs in simple and progressive form (cf. Galton 1984, Kienzle 1994).

It is certainly not a conclusive proof, but at least a promising hint, that all three topics are touched on in *Metaph.* (1048b 18–35). The perfect test is nothing else but a test exploiting logical relations between action-sentences. And I have already noted that not only the tenses, but the aspects of the verb

---

[7] And thus it is not enough to say that the distinction in Met. (1048b 18–35) was obvious for any then native speaker of Greek, as Graham (1980) suggests.

[8] Critics of Ackrill's aporetic account of the kinesis-energeia distinction focus the reader's attention anew: Penner (1970) stresses the deep structure of sentences as opposed to their surface structure, while Liske (1992) refers to Aristotle's epistemology: I. e. both revive the "metaphysical" background of sentences with verbs of perception or enjoyment, which causes the Ackrill's aporia.

are essential for this test. Lastly, Aristotle uses verb-nominalizations to introduce the problem (1048b 19); and to give examples (1048b 29): "the reducing", "reduction",[9] "learning-progress", "walk", "house-construction". To be sure, these are all kineseis, thus there is no evidence in this passage for verb-nominalizations as far as energeiai are concerned. But the same strategies of nominalization work for energeiai, too, both in Greek and in English: "the thinking", "perception", "the good life" (and, of course, "pleasure", for which there is textual evidence).

My aim here was to show that Aristotle's energeiai are not "states" but "events". I have shown that Aristotle's examples cannot be reconciled with the perfect test within a linguistic interpretation. Therefore neither "states", nor "static verbs", nor "performance verbs" seem to be sufficient interpretations. On the other hand, Aristotle uses the concept of energeia in some of the cardinal contexts of analysis, where modern philosophers talk about events. My hope therefore is that re-reading Aristotle can be made fertile for the analysis of events and actions.

---

[9] Note that Aristotle does indeed use both forms of these different forms of nominalization in the same sentence 1048b 19, by way of which, as I think, he wants to illustrate his point.

References

ACKRILL, JOHN L.: Aristotle's Distinction between energeia and kinesis. In: *New Essays on Plato and Aristotle*, ed. Renford Bambrough, London 1965, 121–141.

ARISTOTLE: *Aristotle's Metaphysics*. A revised text with introduction and commentary, 2 vols., ed. W. D. Ross, Oxford 1924.

BENNETT, JONATHAN: *Events and their Names*, Oxford 1988.

BLAIR, GEORG: The meaning of 'energeia' and 'entelecheia' in Aristotle. *International Philosophical Quarterly* 7 (1967), 101–117.

BYBEE, JOAN L.: Tense, Aspect, and Mood. In: *International Encyclopedia of Linguistics*, ed. William Bright, New York and Oxford 1992, vol. 4, 144–145.

CHEN, CHUNG-HWAN: Different meanings of the term energeia in the philosophy of Aristotle. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 17 (1956), 56–65.

CHOMSKY, NOAM: Remarks on Nominalization. In: *Readings in English Transformational Grammar*, ed. R. A. Jacobs/P. S. Rosenbaum, Toronto 1970, 184–221.

COMRIE, BERNARD: *Aspect*, Cambridge 1976.

DAVIDSON, DONALD: The Logical Form of Action Sentences. In: Donald Davidson: *Essays on Actions and Events*, Oxford 1980, 105–122.

EVANS, C. O.: States, Activities and Performances. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 45 (1967), 293–308.

GALTON, ANTONY: *The Logic of Aspect: An Axiomatic Approach*, Oxford 1984.

GRAHAM, DANIEL: States and Performances: Aristotle's Test. *Philosophical Quarterly* 30 (1980), 117–130.

JANSEN, LUDGER: *Aristotle and the Talk about Events*, M. Litt.-Thesis, St. Andrews 1994.

KENNY, ANTHONY: *Action, Emotion and Will*, London 1963.

KIENZLE, BERTRAM: Ereignislogik. In: *Zustand und Ereignis*, ed. Bertram Kienzle, Frankfurt a. M. 1994, 413–471.

LISKE, MICHAEL-THOMAS: Kinesis und Energeia bei Aristoteles. *Phronesis* 36 (1991), 161–178.

MOURELATOS, A. P. D.: Events, Processes and States. *Linguistics and Philosophy* 2 (1978), 415–434.

PENNER, TERRY: Verbs and the Identity of Actions. In: *Ryle. A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. G. Pitcher/O. P. Wood, Garden City NY 1970, 393–460.

POTTS, T. C.: States, Activities and Performances. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supplement Volume 39 (1965), 65–84.

VENDLER, ZENO: Verbs and Times. *Philosophical Review* 66 (1957), 143–160. Reprinted in: Zeno Vendler, *Linguistics in Philosophy*, Ithaca NY 1967, 97–121.

VERKUYL, HENK J.: *A Theory of Aspectuality*, Cambridge 1994.