On Aristotle’s Test for *Energeia*
: A Habitual Reading

(4799 words)

Abstract

I argue that Aristotle’s test is not about inferential relations between temporal forms of an action sentence whether they are tense or aspect; rather it is about a time-general statement that implies temporally specified statements. Since a time-general statement such as ‘I drink coffee every morning’ is often called a habitual statement, we may call my reading a habitual reading. Aristotle’s test is not concerned with inference between the present tense and perfect tense of an action sentence, because if it is, sentences that describe either processes or states pass the test and neither processes nor states are *energeiai*. Nor is it concerned with the entailment of a perfective aspectual meaning from an action sentence in present tense, since if it is, the test will neglect the essential temporal structure of *energeia*. Only if we adopt the habitual reading, I argue, the test will reveal the teleological and temporal structure of *energeia*.

Key words: Aristotle, Philosophy of action, Activity, *Energeia*, *Kinēsis*

1. Introduction

In *Metaphysics* Θ 6, Aristotle famously distinguishes action into two kinds (1048a19). One is a kind of action that has no limit and is complete in itself, a kind that Aristotle calls *energeia*. Another is a kind of action that has a limit and is not complete in itself, a kind that he calls *kinēsis*. After briefly discussing each kind, Aristotle seems to suggest a simple grammatical test by which we can distinguish the two. The upshot of the test is that in the case of *energeia*, one is acting and has acted at the same time, whereas in the case of *kinēsis*, it is not the case that one is acting and has acted at the same time.

Although this test appears to be simple enough, there has been much controversy about how to understand it. Some argue that Aristotle test is about inference from an action sentence in present tense to the same action sentence in perfect tense (e.g. Ackrill 1997; Graham 1980), an interpretation I will call a tense reading. Others argue that the test is of inference between an action sentence in present tense and the same action sentence in perfective aspect (e.g. Burnyeat 2008; Kosman 2013), an interpretation I will call an aspect reading.
Despite their disagreements, however, all of these interpreters agree on one thing: that is, Aristotle’s test is about the inference between different temporal forms of the same action sentence, whether those forms are of tense or aspect.

In this paper, I will argue that Aristotle’s test is not about inferential relations between temporal forms whether they are tense or aspect; rather it is of a time-general statement that implies temporally specified statements. Since a time-general statement such as ‘I drink coffee every morning’ is often called a habitual statement, I will my reading a habitual reading. The tense reading can’t be right, because if it is, sentences that describe either processes or states pass the test and neither processes nor states are energeiai (Chapter 3). Nor the aspect reading can be correct, since if it is, the test will neglect the essential temporal structure of energeia (Chapter 4). Only if we adopt the habitual reading, the test will reveal the teleological and temporal structure of energeia (Chapter 5).

2. Preliminary remarks

Before discussing Aristotle’s test, we first need to grasp two distinctions: the distinction between tense and aspect, and that between state and process. I will not delve into too much detail here, but some preliminary remarks on these distinctions will be helpful for our discussion.

2.1. Tense and aspect

First on the difference between tense and aspect. Tense concerns the relation of the time of a situation referred to with some other time, usually with the moment of speaking. Aspect, on the other hand, concerns a situation’s own internal temporal structure. To see the difference between the two, compare the following sentences:

(1) I was singing a song.
(2) I sang a song.

(1) and (2) have the same past tense, but different aspects. (1) represents the temporal structure of my singing a song as continuous or ongoing. (2) represents my singing a song as a complete whole, without referring to its own temporal structure.

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1 Here, my discussion heavily relies on Comrie (1988). For more philosophical investigation of the notion of aspect, see Galton (1984) and Rödl (2012).
The first two examples reveal the two general types of aspect: *imperfective* and *perfective*. An imperfective aspect makes an explicit reference to the temporal structure of a situation, representing the situation as ongoing (1). A perfective aspect, on the other hand, lacks explicit reference to the situation’s own temporal structure, and so represents the situation as a complete whole (2).

### 2.2. Vendler-Kenny typology

Contemporary philosophers of action often distinguish actions into four different kinds. The so-called Vendler-Kenny typology below presents that distinction nicely.\(^2\)

![Vendler-Kenny Typology Diagram]

(3) I am walking.
(4) I am building a house.
(5) I reach the summit.
(6) I am tall.

I will not discuss each category in detail here; a brief remark on and an example of each should suffice.\(^3\) To begin with, *Processes* are, roughly speaking, ongoing actions the parts of which are homogenous, actions that do not have an end point in themselves (3). *Performances* are actions that have an end point in themselves, and their forms are determined by their ends ((4), (5)). *Accomplishments* are performances that have duration intrinsically (4). *Achievements* capture the climax of performances (5). In that sense, achievements depend on accomplishments, and are indeed parts of the latter. Achievements do not occur over or throughout time; they occur momentarily. *States* are enduring situations that involve no dynamics (6).

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\(^3\) For a helpful discussion of it, see Mourelatos (1978).
3. Aristotle’s test as a tense test
   3.1. Energeia as process

We can now turn to Aristotle’s test. In the *Metaphysics* Θ 6, Aristotle says:

> At the same time we are seeing and has seen, and are understanding and have understood, and are thinking and have thought, while it is not true that at the same time we are learning and have learnt, or are being cured and have been cured (*Met. 1048b23-5*).

The dominant interpretation of this passage is that Aristotle’s test is of *inference* from a sentence in a present tense to a sentence in a perfect tense. For instance, consider:

(7) I see.
(8) I have seen.
(9) I am building a house.
(10) I have built a house.

It is clear that whereas (7) entails (8), (9) must not entail (10). If I see something, it follows that I have seen that thing at least for a short period of time. But if I am building a house, it must not be the case that I have already built that house. The idea then is that only action predication in the present tense that entails the same action predication in the perfect tense represents *energeia*.

In what case does an action predication in the present tense entail the same action predication in the perfect tense? The most common answer is that it is in the case of an action whose temporal parts are homogeneous. To see why, we need to consider Aristotle’s thesis that there is no earliest moment in movement: “everything that is in motion must have been in motion before” (*Ph. 236b33*). If I start to φ at time \( t \), I am not φ-ing at \( t \); only at some moment later than \( t \), say at \( t1 \), can it be said that I am φ-ing. But since no two moments are contiguous, there must be a period between \( t \) and \( t1 \), however short it is. And this period is a period in which I have been φ-ing, preceding the moment when it is said that I am φ-ing. Therefore, if it is true that I am φ-ing at a certain moment, it must also be true that I have been φ-ing at least for a short period of time.

Now, according to Aristotle, both *energeia* and *kinēsis* are a sort of movement, although the meaning of the former extends to other things too (*Met. 1047a30-2; Ph. 210a8-9*). Hence, given that my seeing and building a house are movements, whenever it is true that I am seeing or that I am building a house, it must also be true that I have been seeing or that I have been building a house.
My seeing and building a house are then both temporally extended, having temporal parts. But whereas the temporal parts of my seeing are homogeneous, the temporal parts of my building a house are not. Although every moment of my seeing consists in the same activity of my seeing, there is at least one distinct moment in my building a house—the moment that I finished my building. The moment of finishing the house is distinct in that it completes and brings to an end my activity of building; that is, after this moment, there will be no more moments of the same activity. And sentence (11) ‘I have built a house’ implies that this moment in which I finished building the house is already in the past. This is why if I am building a house, it is not true that I have built a house (although it is still true that I have been building a house). For if it is the case that I have built a house, since then there must be no more moments when I am doing the same activity. In contrast, my seeing has no distinct temporal part as in the case of my building; there is no part such that, once having it, there are no more moments of the same activity. Thus, sentence (9) ‘I have seen’ does not imply that I bring the activity of seeing to an end. And given that if it is true that I see something now, there must be preceding moments of my seeing that thing, it follows that if I see something now, I have seen that thing.

More generally, it seems that in the case where the temporal parts of φ-ing are homogenous, if I am φ-ing, necessarily I have φ-ed. This is what leads Ackrill (1997) to conclude that Aristotle’s test is about whether an action is a process or not and that energeia is process, because process is by definition action in which the temporal parts are homogeneous. This interpretation faces difficulties. First of all, there are many processes Aristotle considers as kinēsis, not as energeia. For instance:

(11) I am walking.
(12) I have walked.

(11) entails (12), and so they must be describing a process according to the interpretation. The same goes also for ‘I am building’ and ‘I have built’. But

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4 Someone might think that strictly speaking, it is not true that the temporal structure of my seeing is homogenous in that it consists of distinctive physiological processes. The same point goes for walking. But we can understand the sense in which seeing or walking is homogenous in the following way: for there to be my seeing from t1-t10, necessarily there is enough of my seeing from t1-t10 if there is some my seeing from t1-t10. So my momentary seeing will be a basic stuff or mass from which my whole seeing is constituted. For more detailed account of this point, see Crowther (2011).

5 See also Kenny (1963) and Taylor (1977).

6 Indeed, some of its problems are indicated by Ackrill (1997) himself.
Aristotle clearly categorizes walking and building as *kinēsis*, not as *energeia* (*Met.* 1048b29–30).

Indeed, it is not hard to transform action sentences for *kinēsis* such as (9) and (10) into actions sentences for process that seems not to be *energeia* such as (11) and (12). We can come up with action sentences for processes by simply not specifying the object of a transitive verb in action sentences for *kinēsis*. And this suggests at least that some *kinēsis* can count as process, and given that *kinēsis* is not *energeia*, process is not *energeia*.

Moreover, as Burnyeat (2008) convincingly argues, it must be that Aristotle has in mind that the direction of entailment between two action sentences with different tenses must go both ways. The idea that the inference is supposed to go from present tense to perfect tense was based on the assumption that when Aristotle says “at the same time one is seeing and has seen”, he implies that the first conjunct entails the second conjunct. However, he also says:

> We have seen and see the same thing at the same time, understand and have understood [the same thing at the same time] (*Met.* 1048b33–4).

In this passage, it is clear that Aristotle thinks that the logical entailment goes in both ways because he mentions ‘we have seen’ in the first conjunct and ‘we see in the second conjunct, and then mentions ‘we understand’ in the first conjunct and ‘we have understood’ in the second conjunct.

It should thus be the case that not only does (7) entail (8), but (8) also entails (7). But surely (8) does not entail (7) if we understand two sentences in terms of their tenses. For even if I have seen something in the past, it doesn’t guarantee that I am in seeing that thing now. I may now be asleep, for instance, am not seeing anything at all. Then it turns out that Aristotle’s own example for *energeia* fails to pass the test for *energeia*, which is absurd.

### 3.2. *Energeia* as state

Some of the aforementioned problems can be dealt with, while still maintaining that Aristotle’s test is a tense test. Graham (1980) holds that although it is true that Aristotle’s test is about the inference from a present tense to a perfect tense, we should be more careful about what kind of perfect tense Aristotle has in mind. Graham argues that the perfect tense in an action sentence that is supposed to be inferred from the same action sentence in a present tense in Aristotle’s test is the *resultative* perfect: a perfect tense that implies a continuing state that results from a past action. For instance:

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(13) I have come to the United States.
(14) I have built a house.

(13) implies that as a result of my coming to the United States, I am currently in the state of being in the United States. (14) implies that as a result of my building a house, that house currently exists; that is, a house is in the state of being. Let us call the first kind of resultative perfect *subjective resultative perfect* and the second kind *objective resultative perfect*. Graham’s idea is that an action predication that passes the test is a predication that can have the subjective resultative perfect tense. So for instance:

(15) I see X.
(16) I have acquired the visual perception of X.

The claim is that (15) entails (16) because my seeing X is my state that has resulted from my acquiring the visual perception of X. Notice also that the verb *to see* is a *stative* verb because it cannot have a progressive form; I cannot felicitously say, for instance, ‘I am seeing’. It may imply that, as Graham argues, the verb *to see* refers to my being in some state; that is, I am in the state of seeing something. And this state is supposed to result from my acquisition of the visual perception of that thing. Hence, if it is true to say that I am in the state of seeing something, it must also be true to say that I have acquired the visual perception of that thing. And we cannot get this entailment in the case of *kinēsis*. Therefore, according to Graham, Aristotle’s test is concerned with whether a situation described is related with acquiring a state or not, and *energeia* is a state.

This interpretation seems to solve some problems to which Ackrill’s interpretation falls prey. For instance, now (15) and (16) mutually entail each other. However, Graham’s interpretation faces its own problems. First, it doesn’t seem that (15) and (16) describe one and the same action. (15) describes a state of my seeing, whereas (16) describes my acquiring that visual perception. It may be that (16) does not even count as an action for Aristotle. (16) describes an *achievement* that occurs momentarily. But according to Aristotle, as we have seen, all movements are temporally extended and actions are movements.

More importantly, a state is not even an action. For a state by definition does not involve dynamics, but surely, an action involves dynamics. And *energeia*, according to Aristotle, is an action. Not only it is an action, but also it is action *proper*; that is, only *energeia* can be properly called action. He says:
Since of the actions which have a limit none is an end but all are relative to the end... [T]his is not an action or at least not a complete one (for it is not an end); but that in which the end is present is an action. (Met. 1048b18-23)

The action that has no limit and contains the end inherently is *energeia*. And Aristotle is suggesting that only *energeia* is an action, strictly speaking.

To make the point that a state is not an action more explicit, consider (13) ‘I have come to the United States’. As a result of this action, it follows that:

(17) I am being in the United States.

But my state of being in the United States may have nothing to do with my actively engaging in the situation. I may, for example, just be forced to stay in a jail in the United State, and this situation can be well described by (13) and (17). Since it is still true that (13) entails (17), my being in the United States must be an *energeia* according to Graham, but this is absurd because I am doing nothing in that situation.

4. Aristotle’s test as an aspect test

While acknowledging the plausibility of Graham’s suggestion, Burnyeat (2008) argues that there is a better interpretation of Aristotle’s test, especially the perfect tense. According to Burnyeat, we don’t need to interpret the perfect tense in the test as the resultative perfect because what really matters is not what kind of perfect tense the test assumes. Indeed, it is not about the *perfect* tense, but about the *perfective* aspect. That is, the test is concerned with the perfective aspect of an action sentence, not with the perfect tense of it. Thus, according to Burnyeat, the test examines whether an action sentence in present tense entails the same action sentence in a perfective aspect or in a imperfective aspect.\(^7\) He says:

...Aristotle’s contrast between *kinēsis* and *energeia* comes out as a contrast between verbs whose present tense has imperfective meaning, e.g. ‘to slim’ or ‘to build’, and verbs whose present tense has perfective meaning, e.g. ‘to see’. (Burnyeat 2008, 250)

According to this passage, it turns out that we can distinguish between *kinēsis* and *energeia* based on the fact that action sentences for *kinēsis* in the present tense have a imperfective meaning, whereas action sentences for *energeia* in

\(^7\) Kosman (2013, 410) holds a similar view.
the present tense have a perfective meaning. Therefore, it must be true that in the case of *energeia*, an action sentence in the present tense entails the same action sentence but in the perfective aspect and *vice versa*.

Recall that the perfective aspect refers to a situation as a complete whole. If I say ‘I sang a song’, I refer to my singing as a complete whole that already includes a starting, middle, and an end point of my singing. In contrast, if I say, using the progressive aspect, ‘I was singing a song’, I represent the temporal structure of my singing as ongoing.

Thus, Burnyeat’s idea is that in the case of *energeia*, whenever an action happens now, I can refer to it as a complete whole because it already has a complete structure at every moment at which the action occurs. And this fits well with what Aristotle says in *Metaphysics* Θ 6. According to him, *energeia* is “that in which the completion inheres” (*Met.* 1049a21; *Nic.* 1174a15). This implies that whenever *energeia* occurs, its completion is already achieved. Moreover, Burnyeat’s interpretation can solve some of the problems that the previous interpretations faced. For instance, a process can’t pass the test, because a process, when it is occurring now, can’t be a complete whole and so can’t have a perfective aspect.

But this interpretation is still not satisfactory. Most crucially, it is simply not true that action sentences in the present tense that have a perfective meaning refer to *energeia* and action sentences in the present tense that have an imperfective meaning refer to *kinēsis*. What is true is that action sentences for *energeia*, regardless of their tense, have both perfective and imperfective meanings.\(^8\) For *energeia* is still ongoing and so has temporal structure even though it is complete. Aristotle clearly holds that *energeia* has no limit (*Met.* 1048b19), implying that even though *energeia* is complete, it doesn’t necessarily bring itself to an end; *energeia* can still be ongoing, as it were.

To make this point clearly, it would be helpful to distinguish between *complete* actions and *completed* ones. Complete actions are actions that accomplish their aims; completed actions are actions that accomplish their ends and are brought to an end—that is, actions that are done. The former notion is teleological; the latter one is teleological and temporal. Now, in the case of *kinēsis*, whenever an action is complete, it is also completed—the action is brought to an end once its aim is achieved. But this is not the case for *energeia*. For even though it must be always the case that *energeia* is complete, it is not to be completed because as Aristotle emphasizes, it has no limit. And notice that the imperfective aspect is concerned with the temporal structure of a situation. That means that the progressive aspect describes a situation only as *in-

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\(^8\) A similar point is made also by Rõdl (2016).
completed, not as incomplete. Therefore, the fact that energeia is always complete does not prevent it from being described with imperfective aspect. And from the mere fact that an action sentence in the present tense has an imperfective meaning, it does not follow that the action sentence is for kinēsis, not for energeia.

The lesson we can get from the previous discussion is this: it must be that an action sentence for energeia has not only a perfective meaning but also an imperfective meaning. For it can be described not only as a complete whole but also as having an ongoing temporal structure. Then, the natural suggestion may be that Aristotle’s test is about the entailment between an action sentence in an imperfective aspect and the same action sentence in a perfective aspect.9 Consider:

(18) We are living well.
(19) We have lived well.

(18) states that we are living well continuously; that is, it refers to the temporal structure of our living well as ongoing. But also, our living well is itself an internal end of our living well, and so whenever it happens, it completes itself. Thus, we can refer to our living well as a complete whole as (19), whenever we are living well. On the other hand, if it is possible for us to say that we have lived well in a present tense and in a perfective aspect, we can say that we are living well too, given that achieving the completion of living well does not bring it to an end—our living well is still ongoing. Therefore, if this antecedent holds, the mutual entailment between (18) and (19) is established.

However, it is questionable whether the antecedent is true or not—whether we can describe our living well both in a present tense and a perfective aspect. Although we are now focusing on aspects of action sentences here, it seems that we should not totally disregard tense. For surely, (18) and (19) must have the same tense—a present tense in this case in order for the mutual entailment between them to be established. But, although a present tense has no problem with an imperfective aspect, it is simply not possible that a sentence in a present tense has a perfective meaning.10 For if we have lived well, our living well is already in the past. If we just say instead, ‘we live well’, it no longer expresses a perfective meaning, but a habitual one. Nor is it plausible

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9 Although his main focus is not on the interpretation of Aristotle, Boyle seems that have in mind this view when he says, “Aristotle thus seems to imply that an actualization of a capacity is an energeia just if its ascription in a verb phrase with imperfective aspect implies its ascription to the same subject in a verb phrase with perfective aspect” (Boyle 2011, 18n).

10 So Comrie says that “the present tense is essentially … imperfective [progressive]” (Comrie 1976, 66). See also Galton (1984, 12).
to hold that we can’t have a present thought of *energeia*. For we can have a present thought of *energeia*. We can know that when we are saying that we are living well, we are engaging in living well and so in *energeia* at the moment at which we are saying that.

5. A habitual reading of Aristotle’s test

It may be thought that all statements of occurrences must have either perfective or imperfective aspect. But this is not the case. Consider:

(20) I go to school by bus.

(20) describes my action of going to school neither as ongoing nor as perfected. Rather it refers to my habitual behavior of going to school by bus. And (2) is true only if the occurrence of my going to school by bus happens *frequently enough*. We can call sentences like (20) *habitual sentences* that hold *generally* throughout time.\(^{11}\)

Keeping this in mind, we can interpret Aristotle’s test based on habitual thoughts. First, we must abandon the idea that the test is about the inference between (18) ‘We are living well’ and (19) ‘We have lived well’. Rather, there must be a habitual statement *implicit* in the test. Consider:

(21) We live well.

Insofar as (21) is a habitual sentence, it represents our living well as happening in general throughout time. If we live well, then there must be enough times in which we can say (19) ‘We are living well’ and (20) ‘We have lived well’, no matter exactly when we can say those; as there must be enough times in which I can say ‘I am going to school by bus’ and ‘I have gone to school by bus’ if I go to school by bus. Of course, (21) doesn’t necessarily entail that we have been living well at every moment of our life. Surely, there can be some moments where we feel that we are not living well. But that does not prevent (21) from being true if it holds throughout time *generally* albeit not *universally*. It is in this sense that (21) implies both (19) ‘We are living well’ and (20) ‘We have lived well’.

According to this reading, when Aristotle says that “at the same time, we are living well, and have lived well” in a form ‘at the same time, \(p\) and \(q\)’, he should not mean that \(p\) and \(q\) mutually entail each other. Instead, what he means must be that we manifest \(p\) and \(q\) at the same time, because we manifest

\(^{11}\) My discussion of habitual thoughts heavily relies on Thompson (2008) and Rödl (2012).
r (that is, we do something), and r implies p and q. Unfortunately, Aristotle doesn’t describe the test like this. However, this may be just because in Ancient Greek, there was no grammatical tool to distinctively express a present habitual thought; unlike in English, present tense in Ancient Greek is exclusively a progressive marker when it comes to action-predication. But from this, it does not follow that there was no a present habitual thought in Ancient Greek.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, I suggest a habitual reading of Aristotle’s test, a reading according to which the test is of a habitual thought that implies ongoing actions and perfected actions. Of course, many questions about this reading are left unanswered. Most importantly, one might ask whether all habitual statements describe energeiai or not. For instance, if I say, “I go to school by bus”, does this sentence refers to an energeia of going to school by bus? I am inclined to think it doesn’t. But to explain why, we should consider another type of generic thoughts that Thompson (2008) calls ‘natural-historical judgments’. There is a type of thoughts that generally hold not only throughout time, but also throughout subjects. For instance, if I say, “the lion eats meat”, I imply that it is generally true for lions to eat meat. So it says something about the nature or life-form of lions. There are things that subjects do because of their nature. And I think that only actions that are based on a life-form or nature can be energeiai. It becomes clear if we consider Aristotle’s examples for energeiai are actions that are based on either perceptual capacities (to see) or rational capacities (to think or to understand), capacities that he identifies in De Anima as natural dunamis. Of course, much careful examination on the issue than I can do here are in order to justify this claim.

References


