

# Ενέργεια: From the Potential to the Actual



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Since antiquity, philosophers have wanted to know what the world is made of. But they have also wondered what sets it in motion. Where does this force that effects change, overcomes inertia, and leads to development come from, and how does it operate? Is it inherent in all matter? Does it stem from the way matter is constituted? Or maybe it is external and timeless, preceding and simultaneously shaping all that is material? This force had the power to transform disorder and chaos into a structured order that was at least partially comprehensible.

The story of how the universe was born also merits careful consideration of the nature of the energy precipitating its birth. What triggered this eruption of energy? Was that process random or, on the contrary, marked by purposefulness even before it all began? Is it possible to find and use this primordial energy? Is it present in our everyday lives? What is left of it? What (or maybe who?) is or was it? Who or what was its source?

The concept of energy is one of the central topics raised in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. Energy (ἐνέργεια) is the vitality, activity, and force thanks to which a being turns from potential to actual. This would make it something formal in nature. Energy could be described as the force thanks to which potentiality, which is contained in primordial matter, starts the process of its actualization, which is accomplished in the process of its achieving form. According to Aristotle, this is because the proper object of study is intrinsic being, which he calls substantial being, whose structure is always composed of matter and form, or hylomorphic. Here, form means the conceptual component of a thing; it refers to those properties of substance that can be defined. As such, it is the essence of a thing, its actuality and reality. It could be said that it is thanks to form that we can say that a pot is a pot, a tree is a tree, and a human is a human. The specifics, in turn, are determined by matter, which contains individual differences that determine that a specific human is me, and not someone else. We can talk about two meanings of "matter": one is narrower and refers to what a specific thing is simply made of (wood, gold, stone), whereas the other pertains to what is not a concrete thing, nor a quantity, nor any category that determines and defines being.

We cannot cognize matter in this primary sense, because it has no concept – it is pure potentiality, undifferentiated possibility. Its individual substances are only extracted from it by the energy of form, and they are what we can cognize. Since activity is the nature of form, Aristotle argues that activity, or energy, is the essence of being. The world is described as the continuous motion from the potential to the actual. This transition takes place within the order of four causes: the material cause, the formal cause, the efficient cause, and the final cause. Each of them can be described using the concept of energy, which is the driving force behind the mechanism of all emerging, doing, creating, and acting. To gain a better grasp of this order, we could use the metaphor of a house in which the material cause is formed by bricks, concrete, wood, and so on, the formal cause by the design made by an architect, the efficient cause by the builders who will build the house based on the design, and the final cause by the purpose it was built to serve, which here means the desire to have a place to live.

Changes taking place in the world are based on the transition from the potential to the actual. This transition is driven by energy, which following Aristotle we can call an "act." The process initiated by energy culminates in the full actualization of potentiality, or entelechy (εντελέχεια). If energy is



the driving force behind action, activity, and anxiety, then entelechy is actualization, the moment of perfection, fulfillment. In most cases, it is not permanent: substantial beings do not achieve entelechy in order to stop and persist in that state. The actualizing energy continues to operate, no longer as a factor of development, but as a factor of degeneration. I will mercifully not illustrate this mechanism using a human being as an example, but rather propose to take the example of a rose. In full bloom, it reaches the state of the most perfect actualization of its potentiality, it is a rose in the fullest sense of the word, but only to then wither, die, and rot – all the while preserving its matter, because it is the foundation of phenomena and all of their transformations. Substances are composed of matter, which lasts even when a thing itself falls apart.

We still have to ask a question that is crucially important from the perspective of energy: where does it come from? How did this motion begin, thanks to which potentiality becomes an act? In his description of the world, Aristotle did not assume a notion of infinity. The world has its beginning in time and space – each element must be located in its own sphere, and outside the sphere of the last element there is neither matter nor vacuum. This world can be simultaneously described as a process of causally related events where one by necessity leads to the next. Since this chain of causes cannot be endless, because time is finite, this means that there must be a primary cause of all motion, *venerabilis inceptor*, *primus motor*, the prime mover. Aristotle describes the prime mover as what sets everything in motion yet remains unmoved. It is non-complex and there is only one prime mover – it is the efficient and final cause of the world, because it is the ultimate good towards which the world is moving. The prime mover is the only necessary being, and the actuality of his being is happiness – in other words, the prime mover remains in a state of permanent entelechy.

The figure of the prime mover, which Aristotle sometimes calls reason, became an important inspiration for mystics, who tried to find it in contemplation, and for physicists, who searched for an inexhaustible source of energy. It also proved very helpful to St. Thomas, who had the thankless job of trying to reconcile Aristotle's thought with the dogmas of Christianity. Identifying the prime mover with God was certainly a lot more obvious than trying to reconcile empiricism with Augustinian-Platonic rationalism. It is worth noting, however, that the establishment of this view of energy in culture led to the conviction that the most important source of energy did not come from our world at all. Perhaps this was what gave rise to the Anthropocene's extreme irresponsibility. ■