

Nicolai Hartmann  
**Possibility and Actuality**



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With an Introduction by Roberto Poli

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## Alex Scott and Stephanie Adair

### Translators' Preface

Nicolai Hartmann (b. February 20, 1882, Riga, Latvia, d. October 9, 1950, Göttingen, Germany) was one of the leading figures in 20th century German philosophy. He was educated at St. Petersburg, Dorpat, and Marburg. He was professor of philosophy at the University of Marburg (1920–5), University of Cologne (1925–31), University of Berlin (1931–45), and University of Göttingen (1945–50). He produced a large body of work in the fields of ontology, ethics, epistemology and the history of philosophy. His best known writings include *Grundzüge einer Metaphysik der Erkenntnis* (1921), *Die Philosophie des deutschen Idealismus* (1923–9), *Ethik* (1921, *Ethics*, translated by Stanton Coit, 1932), *Das Problem des geistigen Seins* (1933), *Zur Grundlegung der Ontologie* (1935), *Möglichkeit und Wirklichkeit* (1938), *Der Aufbau der realen Welt* (1940), *Neue Wege der Ontologie* (1940, *New Ways of Ontology*, translated by Reinhard C. Kuhn, 1953), and *Philosophie der Natur* (1950).

*Möglichkeit und Wirklichkeit* (*Possibility and Actuality*) is the second volume of a four-volume series on ontology. This ground-breaking work traces the historical development of philosophical concepts of possibility and necessity, discussing the differences between the real and ideal spheres, and offering new insights into the relations between the modes of knowledge and modes of being. Hartmann describes the logical relations (of implication, exclusion, and indifference) between the modes of possibility, actuality, and necessity, defining the intermodal laws that govern these relations. He explains the importance of modal analysis as a basic investigative tool for dealing with philosophical problems. He presents an approach to understanding the nature of human existence that provides common ground between the fields of ontology, modal logic, and epistemology.

Hartmann distinguishes between two “ways of being,” the ideal and the real. The ideal sphere is the realm of essence; the real sphere is the realm of existence. However, ideal being is more than essence, and real being is more than existence. Real being may partially coincide with ideal being, but at the same time real being may also presuppose ideal being. From an ontological standpoint, the real sphere and ideal sphere are the primary spheres; the logical sphere and the epistemological sphere are secondary.

In order to situate the reader more comfortably within the context in which this treatise appears, a short summary will be given of each of the works in Hartmann’s four volume series on ontology, followed by a discussion of the strategy we assumed in translating this particular work.

*Zur Grundlegung der Ontologie (Toward the Foundation of Ontology)*, the first volume in the series, is concerned with the question of being as being and with the relation between being-there (*Dasein*) and being-so (*Sosein*). This investigation also examines the givenness of reality and the connectedness between ideal and real being. Hartmann describes being-there and being-so as complementary, but also mutually indifferent, “aspects” of being. All being has aspects of being-there and being-so. Being-there is the “that” of being, i.e. the fact that it is, its being in itself. Being-so is the “what” of being, i.e. what it is, its content-related characteristics, particularity, and determinateness. Thus, the relation of being-there and being-so is an aporetic of “that” and “what.” Being-so is the being-there of something “in” something, while being-there “in” something is the particular form of being-there of all being-so (Hartmann 1948, p. 134).

Hartmann’s concept of being-there is thus quite different from that of Heidegger. While Heidegger uses the term *Dasein* to refer to a mode of being that may understand its own being and that therefore is the kind of being that belongs to human beings, Hartmann uses the term more neutrally to describe a way of being that is not relative to consciousness or human existence. While Heidegger is concerned with investigating the meaning of being, Hartmann argues that a more basic question may be: what is being as being? Hartmann says that to try to understand all being as relative to the kind of being that belongs to human beings is to evade the question of “being as being,” and he contends that Heidegger’s existential approach to ontology is concerned with only the givenness of being and not with the ways in which modes of givenness may proceed from modes of being.

According to Hartmann, the question of “being as being” is an aporia, an insoluble problem. Being, as such, may ultimately be indefinable. To try to define being may be merely to particularize it rather than to recognize its indeterminateness and generality. Thus, Hartmann is deeply concerned with aporetics and the investigation of the fundamental difficulties that are involved in understanding the ways and modes of being.

*Möglichkeit und Wirklichkeit* explores the relations between the modes of possibility, necessity, and actuality in two spheres of being (the ideal and the real). In carrying out this investigation, it examines the differences between the positive modes and their negative counterparts (impossibility, contingency, and nonactuality), and the differences between the absolute and relational modes. It also explores the differences between first-order intermodal relations (those that exist between modes of the same sphere) and second-order intermodal relations (those that exist between corresponding modes of different spheres).

Hartmann describes several kinds of errors of modal argumentation. Three of the examples he cites should be mentioned.

- (1) The so-called “master argument” of Diodorus Cronus (Greek philosopher of the 4th century B.C.E.) is described by Epictetus in the *Discourses*, Book II, Chapter 19. Diodorus provides an argument that is intended to show that everything that is possible either is or will be true, or negatively, that nothing is possible that neither is nor ever will be true. Hartmann describes this argument as an example of circular reasoning.
- (2) Hartmann also criticizes Leibniz’ concept of “possible worlds.” According to Leibniz, the world was created by God from an infinite number of possible worlds that were all simultaneously in God’s mind and that God could have created instead of the actual world. However, according to Hartmann, Leibniz fails to distinguish between ideal and real possibility. In this connection, Leibniz’s concept of “compossibility” is also discussed. Hartmann explains why Leibniz’s “possible worlds” are compossible (together possible) in the ideal but not in the real sphere of being, and why compossibility does not imply real possibility.
- (3) Kant’s argument concerning “one hundred possible thalers”<sup>1</sup> is also criticized. In Book II of the “Transcendental Dialectic” in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant attempts to show the impossibility of an ontological proof of the existence of God by arguing that an *a priori* concept of God as necessarily existing does not prove that God actually exists. As an example, Kant explains that one hundred “possible” thalers (of which we may have a concept) are equal in value to one hundred “real” thalers (which we may actually have in hand). One hundred “possible” thalers represent the same amount of money as one hundred “real” thalers. However, the person who has one hundred real thalers in hand is wealthier than the person who merely has in mind the concept of one hundred possible thalers. Thus, the real thalers are not analytically contained in the concept of the possible thalers, and the concept of their existence does not prove that they “really” exist. Hartmann explains that the logical errors made by this argument are based on a misunderstanding of the relation between possibility and actuality, as well as on a misunderstanding of the relation between ideality and reality.

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<sup>1</sup> A thaler is a silver coin that, for hundreds of years, was used as a form of currency in Europe.

*Der Aufbau der realen Welt: Grundriß der allgemeinen Kategorienlehre* (*The Construction of the Real World: Outline of the General Theory of Categories*), the third volume of the series, is concerned with the constitutive principles of being, and describes how being can take the form of a system of categories. Hartmann turns from modal analysis to a categorial analysis of the relations between various “strata” or levels of construction of ideality and reality. He defines categories as basic predicates of being that constitute the foundation for more specialized predication. Categories are not mere essences; they establish the correlation between general principles and their individual substrates or *concreta*. Thus, they are not mere concepts or abstractions. Elementary categories include form, matter, quality, quantity, principle, relation, substrate, mode, structure, diversity, unity, discreteness, and continuity.

According to Hartmann, the ideal and real spheres of being each have their own categories, and a task of categorial analysis is to investigate the differences between them (Hartmann 1949b, p. 66). In ideal being, everything is general, but in real being, the general is only found in individual cases. The general is a category of both ideal and real being, but the particular or individual is a category only of real being. Thus, the various categories of ideal and real being only partially coincide, and they are not always transferable to each other.

Hartmann describes the structure of the real world as consisting of a hierarchy of strata. The four main strata, from lowest to highest, are inorganic being, organic being, mental being, and spiritual being. This hierarchical structure is based on the being-contained of the lower levels in the higher. The categories of the lower strata are always contained in the higher, but not vice versa. Each stratum of being has characteristic categories; the categories of the higher strata presuppose those of the lower, but not vice versa. Categorial laws according to which the real world is constructed govern the relations between the strata, as well as the relations between individual categories and their *concreta*.

*Philosophie der Natur: Abriß der speziellen Kategorienlehre* (*Philosophy of Nature: Outline of the Special Theory of Categories*) is the fourth and final volume in his series on ontology. It describes the categories of the two lower strata of being, with which the philosophy of nature is concerned. According to Hartmann, the dimensional categories of inorganic and organic being include time, space, and motion. The cosmological categories of inorganic and organic being include becoming, arising, passing by, persisting, changing, substantiality, and causality. The organological categories include the individuum, the continuity of processes, the structure of form, the structure of processes, the life and death of species, and their procreation, heredity, and variability.

Throughout these investigations Hartmann is concerned with the connectedness of being and with the many ways in which possibility and actuality may be

determined by a total network of real connection. He describes the lawfulness of the ideal and real spheres of being, but he does not subordinate these spheres to the sphere of logic or the sphere of knowledge. At the same time, he clarifies the relation between the universal and the particular in the ideal and real spheres, and he emphasizes the individuality and uniqueness of real being.

Why should Hartmann's views concerning possibility and actuality be of interest to contemporary philosophers? Why should his work be translated and, thus, be made accessible to a wider audience?

Theories of modality are the subject of ongoing discussion in many areas of philosophy, including ontology, metaphysics, epistemology, and the philosophy of language. Hartmann's contributions to the understanding of modal concepts are relevant to such disciplines, and may have particular significance for possible worlds ontology, possible worlds semantics, the logic of counterfactual conditionals, and modal epistemology.

Hartmann distinguishes real possibility from other kinds of possibility (including ideal, logical, and epistemic possibility), a distinction that has often been overlooked in contemporary discussions of possible worlds. This insight could help to resolve some of the ambiguities that arise in these discussions. According to Hartmann, real possibility only belongs to that whose conditions for actuality are all fulfilled (he uses the metaphor of the chain of conditions that must be completely linked together in order for an event to become really possible, really actual, or really necessary).

He also emphasizes the distinction between disjunctive and indifferent (real) possibility. Disjunctive possibility is simultaneously positive and negative possibility, which disappears in the becoming actual of an event. Indifferent possibility, on the other hand, is compatible with the being actual or being necessary of an event.

## Notes on Translating This Work

*Möglichkeit und Wirklichkeit* has never before been translated into English. We have attempted to translate this work into idiomatic English, remaining true to Hartmann's words, while not introducing ambiguity into the English text that was not there in the German. Such ambiguity can emerge when idiomatic phrases in German are translated literally into English. Thus, we have aimed to strike a balance, producing a text that is no less readable in English than it was in the German original, and yet still retains the original intricacies and subtleties, thus requiring the same kind of interpretive work from the reader.

In particular, there are two things that are more readily allowed for in the German than in the English language: extended complex sentences, and the creation of new compound words. Although in many cases we have retained Hartmann's complicated grammatical constructions, in other cases where these constructions could not be imitated in English without causing confusion, we have chosen to break up very lengthy sentences into smaller, more manageable ones. As for the compound words, we retained the ones with a *Sein* stem, using hyphens to link them together. Thus, for instance, *Wirklichsein* is "being-actual," *Notwendigsein* is "being-necessary," and *Seinkönnen* is "being-able-to-be." Other strategies we used when dealing with compound words were pairing up a noun and adjective, or rendering the word as a genitive structure.

The word "*inhaltlich*" is another example of how incongruent linguistic structures present unique challenges for translation. Hartmann adopts this term from the noun "*Inhalt*" (content), turning it into an adjective by adding the suffix "*lich*." We considered mimicking this coinage by using the term "contentual," but decided against this because this term is rather unconventional and seldom used in English. Thus, we have chosen in this case to replace the single word with a phrase (such as "with regard to content" or "in terms of content") that conveys the same meaning.

When translating a work such as this, one occasionally comes across a term in the source language that covers a large semantic space, encompassing several more specific meanings, while the target language does not offer a similarly broad term that allows the same specific terms to be encompassed by it. One must then choose a specific, more limited term for each of its occurrences. *Grund* presents precisely this kind of difficulty, since its more specific meanings include "ground" and "reason." If one turns the two English terms over in one's head for a bit, then one realizes that in English the two terms are ultimately much more closely related than they initially appear. The grounds for something are in fact the reason why it happens. Without specifically pointing out the relationship between these two terms, however, one might overlook this connection. We briefly considered simply translating all occurrences of *Grund* as "ground." But even if the immediate context of the sentence in which the term appeared had consistently allowed for this, it was not a viable alternative, because the *Satz vom zureichenden Grund*, discussed at length by Hartmann, is standardly translated as the "principle of sufficient reason." Consequently, we have chosen to examine the function played by *Grund* each time it appears and then choose between "reason" and "ground" accordingly.

*Sein* and *Seiende* are important terms in the field of ontology that are also challenging with regard to their translation. *Sein* is being in general, while

*Seiende* refers to the specific things that are, the “beings.” When the latter is in the plural, it is relatively easy to discern the difference between “being” and “beings”, but when it is singular the two terms appear identical in English. We have dealt with this by choosing a phrase in lieu of a single word for *Seiende*. Depending on the immediate context, the singular *Seiende* is translated as “that which is,” “a being,” or “particular being.”

Some other philosophical terms used by Hartmann are simply difficult to translate in themselves, regardless of any specific differences in the way that the German and English languages function. One such term is *novum*, which Hartmann uses to designate a categorial aspect of being that has newly appeared in a stratum of the real world and that is more than a synthesis of categorial aspects of lower strata. Another such term is “*Anlage*” (layout or plan), which he uses to designate the role of *dynamis* in Aristotle’s concept of possibility. Hartmann explains that, according to Aristotle, *dynamis* (potentiality) is an immanent tendency of something to be actualized. *Dynamis* is a determinate stage of a process of becoming. It is a layout or plan for the becoming of something, and thus it is not a purely modal concept. In contrast to pure being-able-to-be (*Seinkönnen*), being-planned-out (*Angelegtsein*) is a way of being that is teleologically directed to actualization.

After much deliberation, we decided to translate “*das seelische Sein*” as mental being and “*das geistige Sein*” as spiritual being, following in the footsteps of a number of other Hartmann translators. We would, however, like to draw the reader’s attention to the fact that “spiritual” and “spirit” (“*geistige*” and “*Geist*”) are not meant to indicate a supernatural, or even necessarily religious, dimension to Hartmann’s philosophy. They indicate the highest level of being – a level of being that humans reach, but certain other creatures do not even though they do, in fact, participate in mental being (“*das seelische Sein*”), which is the next level down.

We have provided occasional footnotes to supply background information on prominent figures or ideas to which Hartmann alludes and to highlight word play, which could not be effectively rendered in English. These are distinguished from Hartmann’s footnotes by the indication [Translator’s note] that precedes them. Within the main body of the text we have inserted transliterations and translations of foreign terms. They appear in square brackets following the term to which they refer.

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Roberto Poli

## Introduction

The fundamental decisions of metaphysics have always fallen within the field of modality (“Foreword”).

### 1 Premise

After the Second World War, Hartmann was elected President of the German Philosophical Association for both the acknowledged value of his philosophical ideas and his apparent lack of any improper compromise with Nazism. This is but one item of information showing that during his lifetime Hartmann was a well-known and well-respected philosopher. Surprisingly, however, after his death in 1950, attention to his ideas vanished. The almost seventy years that have passed since the war have seen waves of interest in a number of thinkers who, for various reasons, have never been part of mainstream philosophy in either its analytic or continental variants: to provide a couple of examples, Brentano or Meinong. But Hartmann’s ideas have never again been a topic of discussion. I do not know all the reasons why things have gone this way. Some aspects of Hartmann’s style may provide the beginnings of an answer. He systematically adopted a non-speculative style of analysis, admitting only the minimum of metaphysics needed to frame the problems that ontology proves unable to address. His language was clear, and his method was rigorous, almost pedantic, proceeding punctiliously step by step, without anticipating solutions or taking anything for granted. His writings are so precisely organized that their reader is held in check and feels unable to foresee the next step in the argumentation. These aspects place Hartmann close to analytic philosophy. But he also exhibits a thorough mastery of the history of philosophy: Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, Leibniz, Kant, Hegel are his workfellows. From this point of view, Hartmann comes closer to continental philosophy. In the end, however, neither the former nor the latter have been willing to recognize him as an associate (for an introduction to Hartmann, see Poli 2012).

Hartmann’s main interest was in ontology. The overall architecture of his ontology was set out in four books: *Foundations of Ontology* (1935), *Possibility and Actuality* (1938, this volume), *The Construction of the Real World* (1940), and *Philosophy of Nature* (1950). Specific aspects of the overall framework were treated in a variety of Hartmann’s other books. *Plato’s Logic of Being* (1909) paved the way towards his understanding of the sphere of ideal being,

while *The Problem of Spiritual Being* (1933), the three volumes of *Ethics* (1926) and the *Aesthetics* (1953) dig deeply into the many intricacies of the spiritual stratum of reality, an inquiry prepared for by systematic analysis of German Idealism (*The Philosophy of German Idealism*, 2 vols., 1923 and 1929). Hartmann addressed the problem of knowledge and the connections between epistemology and ontology in *Metaphysics of Knowledge* (1921) (Poli 2012).

Two major aspects of Hartmann's ontology are moments of being and spheres of being. Moments of being regard the difference between *Dasein* and *Sosein*, which can be translated as *being-there* (approximately, *existence*) and *being-so* (approximately, *determination*). Spheres of being in contrast are the spheres of real and ideal being. All entities – either real or ideal – have *Dasein* and *Sosein*, albeit in different ways. For instance, real existence (i.e. the existence of a real being) is temporally shaped, while ideal existence is compossibility. Furthermore, apart from the two principal spheres of real and ideal being, Hartmann discusses the two secondary ones of logical being and knowledge: the former comes close to ideal being, the latter to real being.

The difference between *Dasein* and *Sosein* – and every other articulation that ontology is supposed to present – is characterized categorically. As a matter of fact, categories are the only tools available to an ontologist. Ontology, therefore, is a thoroughgoing theory of categories. Thus, the difference itself between the primary and the secondary spheres must be articulated categorically, which is precisely one of the tasks of the modal analyses developed in detail by this book.

The main thesis defended by Hartmann in the first volume of his ontological tetralogy – the *Foundations of Ontology* – is the claim that all the ontological distinctions are articulations of being, not differences between being and not-being. Parts and wholes are both authentic aspects of being; independent and dependent entities are similarly being; physical, biological, psychological and spiritual types of being are all manifestations of being, without any of them being more genuinely being than any other. From the point of view of ontology, no part, aspect or moment of reality is more really real than any other part, aspect or moment of it. The fact that, say, biological entities depend on physical entities does not imply that physics is more ontologically real than biology. Dependent entities are as ontologically genuine as independent ones.

The basic ontological assumption concerning knowledge is that it does not create or generate its objects. Ontologically speaking, knowledge “grasps” objects. If knowledge does not generate its objects, objects precede any effort to grasp them. Objects are indifferent to their being known. Knowledge captures, explicates an object, making it more distinct. While these activities are relevant for the knower, they are of absolutely no importance for the object itself.

Knowledge improves, discovers aspects, brings to light the features, dimensions, and properties of objects. Knowledge introduces a divide between that part of the object which has been captured by knowledge and that part which remains to be known. The former is usually typified and then crystallized by concepts. The divide between the full ontological object and the part that has been unfolded shifts as knowledge develops.

## 2 Ontological Categories

According to Hartmann, ontological categories are the lower level of being. They form the network of internal, dynamic determinants and dependences which articulate the furniture of the world. We come to know ontological categories through the objects that we come to know.

Our knowledge of ontological categories is as *provisional* as our knowledge of objects. We discover ontological categories through the objects that exemplify them. In other words, ontological categories are intrinsic to objects. The difference between knowing objects and knowing categories explains why ontological categories are often confused with concepts. The problem is that categories do not allow direct acquaintance as objects do.

On the other hand, as far as ontological categories are concerned, the difference between the ontological and the cognitive sides is even more important than it is in the case of objects. At best, concepts are names of ontological categories, which implies that concepts are partial, static, separate representations of something that in itself is both essentially dynamic and inseparable from other ontological categories.

Not dissimilarly from the knowledge of objects, the knowledge of ontological categories changes as well – when ontology develops, our understanding of ontological categories, too, develop towards a deeper and better grasping of their articulation and subtleties.

Ontological categories are arranged in layers of depth: some categories constitute the innermost core of being, others constitute more external layers. As far as ontological categories are concerned, the main distinction is between the categories whose contents are directly apprehensible and those whose contents are only indirectly apprehensible. The former are the categories of determinations, whilst the latter are the categories of the modes of being, or modal categories (Introduction, § 13). Modalities are the most general and most fundamental categories of being, as well as of the knowledge of being (Foreword). Being the lowest or innermost group of categories, it is not surprising that modal categories appear as almost devoid of content. They are indirectly

apprehensible through, with, or in the content of other categories, especially the structural categories of determination (Introduction, §13; for an overview of the categories of determination see Poli 2011, 2012).

While none of the basic ontological categories can be defined, the two ways of being, *Dasein* and *Sosein*, can be grasped only from the internal arrangement of their categories, from their categorial construction (Foreword). Modal categories, in particular, are the categories of the *Dasein* of entities, whilst the categories of determinations are the categories of the *Sosein* of entities.

The opposition between modes and determinations is relative, however. In fact, *Dasein* and *Sosein* for Hartmann are *positional* categories. “Positional” refers to the fact that the two categories composing a pair alternate with each other. It follows that some aspects of the content of each category depend on the position that the latter occupies with reference to its twin category. Here is how Hartmann presents their positional alternation: The *Dasein* of a tree is the *Sosein* of a forest (*Grundlegung*, §19a); without the tree the forest would be different. Similarly, the *Dasein* of the branch is the *Sosein* of the tree. The *Dasein* of the leaf is the *Sosein* of the branch. The *Dasein* of the vein is the *Sosein* of the leaf. Things can be reversed, too: the *Sosein* of the leaf is the *Dasein* of the vein; the *Sosein* of the branch is the *Dasein* of the leaf, etc.

The fact that only a part of the *Sosein* of an entity *X* contributes to the *Dasein* of a different entity *Y* does not raise problems. The *Dasein-Sosein* series has two limits: towards the first, original *Dasein* and towards the last *Sosein*, the *Sosein* of the whole of reality.

The mainstream interpretation of *Dasein* and *Sosein* as entirely separate aspects of being depends on epistemological acts of isolation. Only when moments are separated do independent substances and dependent qualities appear, and it is for this reason that it seems that qualities do not have any *Dasein* and, complementarily, that their bearers have no *Sosein* (*Grundlegung*, §20c; more on positional categories in Poli 2012).

### 3 Modal Spheres

While the content of modal categories is not directly apprehensible, their relations are. This is a general ontological law: categories themselves are far more difficult to apprehend than their relations with each other (§12a).

The two primary modal spheres of real and ideal being and the two secondary spheres of logic and knowledge are distinguishable through the different relations linking, within each sphere, modal categories one to another. The most relevant outcome here is the exhibition that modal categories are differently

arranged within the different spheres of being. That is to say, the modal architecture of real being is different from the modal architecture of the ideal, logical and epistemological spheres. This is a major departure from traditional ontology, according to which spheres of being were directly distinguished by modes (e.g., the real as the realm of contingent being and the ideal as the realm of necessary being). For Hartmann, instead, all the modes pertain to each sphere of being. What makes them different is the different arrangement of the modes (§43c). To wit: “The most obscure problem in ontology is here brought to light: the essence of real being and ideal being, which in itself is in no way graspable, becomes approximately determinable from the relation of the modes to one another” (Introduction, §13, see also §12a).

Two families of relations are relevant. First-order relations connect the modes within each sphere of being. The main outcome arising from first-order relations is the above-mentioned distinction between the two primary and the two secondary spheres of being. Second-order relations are the relations connecting the different spheres. Their main outcome is the asymmetry between the real sphere and all the other spheres, according to which all the ontological weight lies on the real sphere alone (Introduction, §14).

Six modes are distinguished by Hartmann. They are arranged according to the following order (in brackets a preliminary sketch of their content; §1a)

- Necessity (not being able to be otherwise)
- Actuality (being so and not otherwise)
- Possibility (being able to be so or not so)
- Contingency (being able to be otherwise)
- Nonactuality (not being so)
- Impossibility (not being able to be so)

Modes are captured through six partially overlapping oppositions, namely positive vs. negative modes; higher vs. lower modes; primary modes (modes of being) vs. secondary modes; primary modes recurring in the secondary modes; determinate vs. indeterminate modes; fundamental vs. relational modes (§5c).

Necessity, actuality and possibility are called “positive modes”; contingency, nonactuality and impossibility are called “negative modes”. As regards the positive modes, the lower mode (“lower” in the above specified ordered list) is contained in the higher one: what is actual must at least be possible, and what is necessary must at least be actual. Apparently, a specular organization surfaces from the negative modes. On closer inspection, however, the distinction between positive and negative modes is far more complex than it may initially appear. Contingency, in fact, is a halfway negative and halfway positive mode.

Contingency mixes up the otherwise unequivocal arrangement of modes (§1b). A contingent thing is an actual thing in which only the mode of being necessary is negated. I will come back to contingency after clarification of the positive modes.

Necessity means that an indissoluble connection exists between contentually very different features of a thing (event, process, etc.) or even between whole groups of features; so that if the one appears, the others cannot fail to appear (Introduction, §11). Real necessity connects, within the event, one stage with another, the real with the real, the temporal with the temporal (Introduction, §12).

Each sphere has its own kind of necessity: real necessity is different from ideal or essential necessity, which in its turn is different from both logical and epistemic necessity. Each of them is objectively justified and each of them is indispensable in its own sphere (§2d). Apart from real necessity, the other three kinds of necessity are connected by a relation of dependence, according to which epistemic necessity depends on logical necessity, which depends on ideal necessity (§2c). This form of dependence can be read the other way round by saying that the logical falls under the laws of the ideal and the epistemic falls under the laws of the logical. The four kinds of necessity have in common the relational structure according to which something is necessary only on the ground of something else. Since neither infinite regress nor reflexivity make sense from an ontological point of view, necessity implies that there must exist some non-relational first ground, which is therefore contingent (§2c). Every first thing is contingent.

Possibility is more complex. First, the merely possible must be distinguished from the really possible. The former is always at the same time possibility of being and possibility of nonbeing. This possibility is called “disjunctive possibility” by Hartmann. Epistemic and logic possibilities (and, therefore, ideal possibility too) are forms of disjunctive possibility (§3b). Real possibility, on the other hand, is never disjunctive (§3c).

What is meant by saying that something is *really* possible? Ontologically, something is really possible only when *all* its conditions are fulfilled. If only one of the needed conditions is lacking, that something is really not-possible, that is, impossible. Real possibility is therefore total possibility. Cognitively and practically we almost never apprehend the complete chain of conditions of something, and must content ourselves with partial possibility, which implies that we do not know whether *A* or not-*A* will ultimately appear. Partial possibility produces disjunctive possibility in our cognition (§3b). Epistemic possibility, however, is not real possibility (§3c). Like necessity, also possibility is rooted in a connection of dependency (§3e).

Possibility and necessity exist on the ground of something that, for its part, is actual (§19a). Possibility and necessity are correlated to something on which they depend. If the chain of the real conditions of a thing is complete, then its real necessity is given at the same time as its real possibility (§19b).

Possibility and necessity are dependent in the real sphere. There is here neither a merely possible nor a merely necessary, but only the actual. Things change at the limits of the real sphere, because it is here that contingency lies (§24e). Contingency is a boundary mode (§10c). The contingent is nothing other than the being-actual or being-nonactual of something (§9d). Everything in a sphere can be contingent, but everything in a sphere cannot be necessary (§10a).

Differently from necessity and possibility, actuality does not imply reference to any relation of dependence, and for this reason it is the least describable mode. It is also the most fundamental real mode (§4a). Not being directly graspable through its relations to the other modes of its sphere, real actuality can nevertheless be indirectly apprehended through its counterparts in the other spheres: that is, by opposition to essence (ideal actuality), validity (logical actuality) and factuality (epistemic actuality) (§4c).

All of the relational modes are relative to the absolute modes (§7a). This relativity of the relational modes to the absolute modes is common to all spheres (§7c).

## 4 The Architecture of the Spheres

Intermodal relations are different in the various spheres. As a consequence, a certain diversity in the modes themselves arises. Furthermore, in each sphere some specific modes show a dominating influence over the other modes (§12b).

Absolute modes dominate in the real sphere, whilst relational modes dominate in the ideal sphere. Furthermore, in the case of the real sphere, the contingent plays a major role. Caution is necessary here: strictly speaking, there is no contingent within the real sphere; contingency intervenes only at the external boundary of the sphere, as the starting point of its dependency chains. Furthermore, within the real sphere the positive modes imply each other; and the negative modes imply each other as well. Each group is coherent in itself, and the two groups are completely disjoint from one another (§14f). It follows that there is no actual thing in the real world that is not also necessary and no possible thing that is not also actual and necessary (§16c). The real sphere is the ground of complete determinateness. It is for this reason that there is no room for contingency in it (§17c). If these results are not precisely understood in their literal sense, the whole modal construction of reality collapses (§16c).

The ideal sphere is a pure sphere of structures, and relational modes dominate. Within the ideal sphere, actuality vanishes behind the domination of relations (§7c). Within the ideal sphere, it is sufficient for something to be possible for it to be an ideally existing thing. In the realm of essences, possibility and necessity – as well as their negative counterparts – virtually claim the field alone. With the regression of actuality, the modes acquire a different meaning.

The logical sphere is primarily determined by the ideal sphere, i.e. logical modes are determined by essential modes (§5c). Within the logical sphere, necessity dominates over the other modes. Traditionally, Hartmann sees the logical sphere as the sphere of concepts, judgments, and conclusions. Only judgments, however, have independent modality. Within this sphere the opposition between absolute and relational modes recedes (§36d). Within logic there is a merely possible that is not actual, or a merely actual that is not necessary. The connections that keep them together in the real sphere recede. This is the main difference between logical being and real being (§37d). While the sphere of logic is objective, it is not a sphere of being. Its structures do not exist in themselves, but only as objects of possible thought.

The sphere of knowledge is primarily determined by the real sphere, i.e., epistemic modes are determined by real modes. In this case, “primarily” refers to common sense experience and not to scientifically exact knowledge, which is more influenced by the ideal and the logical spheres. The sphere of knowledge appears to be further divided into the realms of perception and thought (or representation). Knowledge as a real process is not to be taken for its contents. Four different components characterize knowledge: the subject, the object, the relation between them, and the content or the form in which the object is given to the subject’s consciousness. This multiplicity of moments makes it clear that the sphere of knowledge is by far the most complex modal sphere.

This introduction has furnished only the minimal, preliminary map that the reader is advised to keep present in his/her navigation. Many further groundbreaking and enlightening analyses of modal categories await the reader willing to explore this otherwise uncharted territory.

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Nicolai Hartmann

# **Possibility and Actuality**



## Foreword

This is the second volume of my work on ontology. Of my four investigations, it ties in most closely with *Toward the Foundation of Ontology* [*Zur Grundlegung der Ontologie*], which was published two years ago; it relates to the latter as the core of a science does to the preliminaries. It stands midway between these preliminary investigations and the already highly specialized analysis of the categorial construction of the real world.

It remains to be proven that the theory of modality occupies this key position within the complex problematic of “that which is as it is” [*das “Seiende als Seiendes”*]. For this fact is, by no means, self-evident. But the proof is nearly identical to the course taken by the investigation, itself. Let it only be said beforehand: the crucial question of what “reality” is – i.e. what the “way of being” of reality is in the perpetual flow of the world that surrounds our lives, that brings us forth and passes us by – this question is, if answerable at all, only to be dealt with in one way, which is revealed by modal analysis. Modal analysis penetrates the structure of possibility and actuality, necessity and contingency. It gains, from the peculiar relation that the modes have with one another in the course of world events, the ontological internal aspect of real being as such, which makes its positive identification at least indirectly possible.

Thus, this book is not about “Possibility and Actuality” alone. It is about much more than can be expressed in the mere title of a book. Possibility and actuality are only central to our new investigation insofar as through their relation one may seek to shed light on nearly all of the many greater and more important things, which must here find their expression.

What the difficulty is with the more exact determination – or even with the mere description – of the pure ways of being should have sufficiently arisen from the “foundation.” The analysis of being-there and being-so was, therefore, only a preparatory move; it allowed the difference between the ways of being (reality and ideality) and the moments of being (being-there and being-so) to emerge concretely, but it could not elucidate the particular nature of the ways of being, themselves. It was shown in all clarity that, in general, neither being nor the particular ways of being in one ontological sphere can be defined. The only viable way to determine the ways of being is to understand them from their categorial construction, i.e. to let their own structures illuminate them from within.

This is no small task. Since the structures of “that which is” can be understood as categories, the theory of categories can, therefore, be said to have already begun. In fact, no clear-cut line can be drawn between this theory

and ontology. All of ontology, when it investigates the particular, becomes a theory of categories; and likewise for all epistemology and all metaphysics. In this respect, these fields of philosophy stand close together and show historically related developmental trajectories. The world one seeks to know is imbued with content, which, in turn, is rooted in the particularity of the principle prevailing in it. Whether one is dealing with this world itself or merely with its recognizable aspects, the investigation will always be concerned with the predicaments that are involved in understanding the particular principle in it.

The levels of modality are the most general and most fundamental categories of “that which is,” as well as of the knowledge of “that which is.” In this respect, their investigation rightly precedes the content-related categories. The latter are “constitutive” principles. From Kant, one is familiar with the distinction between constitutive and regulative principles; one might accordingly expect a certain equation of the modal with the regulative. With that equation, however, the problem of modality would be misunderstood from the outset. The Kantian opposition is purely epistemological; it separates the content-related aspect of knowledge from the methodological, and therefore does not touch at all on the problem of being. There is method only in the progress of knowledge as such. “That which is as it is” has no methods. It has, alongside its constitutive principles of construction, and ahead of them, its aspects of being (being-there and being-so), its ways of being (reality and ideality), and its modes of being (possibility, actuality, and necessity). They all stand in very determinate, although differently dimensioned opposition to the constitutive categories. But none of these kinds of opposition coincide with the Kantian one.

Since the aspects of being have now preliminarily been examined, but the ways of being can only gradually be clarified, there now appears in the place of the Kantian opposition the ontologically fundamental opposition of the constitutive and the modal. What “modal” means cannot, of course, be readily indicated in any other way than the way offered by the difference in levels of the modes of being themselves. This is not something unfamiliar to practical thought, but its more precise meaning can only be revealed by the investigation itself. This investigation leads immediately to greater technical difficulties, and is, moreover, from the outset burdened with the task of making possible the most important decisions of ontology. In order to forge ahead it must first of all uncover and clarify the proper field of activity. If one could be spared this work in ontology, and if one could also methodically separate the interlocking requirements, then one would surely have an easier time of it. But, as the matter stands, no separation and no simplification is possible. The course of the investigation is clearly predetermined by the given surfaces for attack presented by its objects; it cannot be arbitrarily or otherwise changed.

It is an investigation that is not undertaken lightly or for its own sake. No direct and actual concerns of daily life, and no speculative interests within the area of philosophical concerns adhere to the object of modal analysis. Only deeper behind these spheres of interest does its realm begin. And yet, the foundational questions of metaphysics are indirectly brought to light by the clarification of the modal problem. Among them are questions concerning sufficient reason, continuous determination, the *contingentia mundi*, the essence of becoming, the “Ought,” the actualization of the nonactual, and the making-possible of the impossible. The ancient masters of *prima philosophia* truly sensed this, and in their own way they strove to resolve the modal problem, as did all of the philosophers before Aristotle, and after him the most important of the Scholastics, as well as the ontologically-oriented thinkers of modern times: Leibniz, Wolff, and Hegel. It may, indeed, be said that further theses in the construction of their theoretical systems emerged according to the extent to which these philosophers understood the relation of possibility and actuality, knowing how to recognize its consequences. To track the development of modal concepts through the centuries up to the present day is a fascinating and yet seldom mastered task of historical research: from the ancient opposition of *dynamis* and *energeia*, on through its subtle changes in the medieval opposition of potency and actuality, up to the modern themes of *possibile et impossibile*, *necessarium et contingens*, *determinatum et indeterminatum*. With such a pursuit, I believe one would find that the fundamental decisions of metaphysics have always fallen within the field of modality.

Only present-day investigations in ontology try to avoid modal analysis. In fact, with the nadir of ontology, beginning at the end of the eighteenth century, the consciousness of the necessity of modal analysis has not reemerged at all in these investigations. Such a consciousness must be reawakened. Otherwise, one cannot break free from all the deeply rooted conceptual confusion and sloppy thinking that have rendered an actual grasp of “that which is as it is” virtually impossible. One must have comprehended what real possibility is in order to be able to distinguish it from essential possibility and logical possibility. It is of no use to ignore such things because they seem formal and meaningless; one cannot overlook the consequences, and one cannot see in advance how disastrous it is if one loses one’s orientation right at this initial crossroads.

Ontology cannot be carried out in this way. In order to go about it seriously, one must draw on the foundations peculiar to “that which is” itself, and must therefore be unconcerned as to whether in this way one disregards a currently prevailing concern. The basic problems of philosophy have always had an esoteric character. One cannot turn them around at will, back onto the beaten tracks of temporally conditioned interests. They prescribe a peculiar path to the seeker,

a path that is not for everyone. If the path has been recognized, then one merely has to decide to pursue it or to renounce any further foray. Renunciation of the path signifies the abandonment of philosophy. But the pursuit of the path is the undertaking of a task whose end cannot be foreseen.

Modal analysis is, if correctly considered, a complete science. It has, up until now, been carried out only sporadically – just as logic, before its first summation by Aristotle, was once a merely sporadically practiced science. It may be of no less philosophical importance than logic. But this only becomes apparent if it is approached systematically. For the time being, it suffices to recognize that modal analysis is a field replete with surprises and revelations – indeed, not only in an ontological respect. It ushers in no dogmatism of being, no primacy of any passively substantial powers that set limits to human activity. It is the task of freeing us from the bonds of misunderstanding that it serves, the direct continuation of that for which Kant and Fichte strove – the preparation of the path for a well-grounded philosophy of humankind and creative action. These are, admittedly, not things that are obvious at first glance; they require the troublesome process of steadily pushing forward. But it seems to me that only modal analysis can establish such a foundation. For it alone is in a position to shed light upon the equally dreaded and avoided murky problems of determination. At no point since antiquity, however, have the traditional concepts of ancient metaphysics been more ill-fated than they have been in these problems.

Faced with such tasks, perhaps I could have limited my investigation to the modes of the real. They constitute a subject matter that opens up a wider perspective. But there is such an abundance of errors concerning the modes of ideal being, of logic, and of knowledge itself that it was not possible to leave these out of the picture. These errors constantly encroach on how the real is understood, having almost completely distorted it over time. In any case, the modal analysis of ideal being belongs ontologically to this theme; the modal analysis of judgment and of knowledge, on the other hand, could have been conveniently omitted, if it were possible to encounter preconceptions anywhere other than within their own field of objects. But in the last two centuries, modal concepts have historically developed predominantly in the fields of logic and epistemology. Thus, I am left with no other choice than to include in this investigation the modal relations of ideal being, in addition to the modal relations of logic and of knowledge. I have summarized these three groups of problems, which in this way are withdrawn from the modal analysis of the real, in Part III under the common title “The Modality of the Unreal,” the negativity of the title leaving sufficient leeway for their heterogeneity.

Whoever regards this as not a matter of tangible results alone, but a matter of acquired insight and independent judgment, will appreciate this completion

of the overall picture. In fact, it is difficult to find one's way through the most general ontological questions, if one does not have a truly comprehensive view of the domain in which possibility and actuality manifoldly and varyingly confront us. Whoever wants to forego this or is able to independently orient himself to the complex problematic of the spheres, can keep in mind the core alone (Part II, "The Modality of Real Being"). He obtains, at least, a self-contained picture of things that are ontologically of greater importance and, in general, philosophically fundamental. Whether he can then dispense with the comprehensive view and further justification, he must work out with his own philosophical conscience.

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Nicolai Hartmann



# Introduction

## 1 Historical and Terminological Considerations

In the late Middle Ages, one understood by “mode” the particularity of a substance. In subsisting things, attributes were distinguished as constant and necessary, while modes were seen as changing and contingent determinations. The former were understood as essential parts and the latter as mere states of a substance. This meaning of “mode” was maintained in the philosophical systems of modern times based on a metaphysics of substance. In its time, this meaning prevailed with these dominant systems, falling along with them when critical thinking put an end to theories of substance. This meaning has nothing to do with the contemporary meaning of modality and may here be left to rest.

In contrast to this, later on in logic – probably not before the late eighteenth century – another meaning of the word “mode” developed. It pertained to a fourth dimension of the classification of judgment, in addition to quantity, quality, and relation. It emerges from the distinction between whether the judgment reveals a being-possible<sup>1</sup>, a being as such, or a being-necessary. These three cases form the three “logical modes.” The “modality of judgment” resides in their opposition.

One could be content with this, as long as the logically oriented theory of knowledge was the dominant, fundamental discipline in philosophy. Just as the ancient problem of being began to erupt once again – the first signs of which were already present in Hegelian logic – one also rediscovered in the content of judgment, a meaning of being, and that the modes of being must, consequently, underlie the modes of judgment. Thus, one now translated the modality of judgment back into a mode of being. In doing so, however, one simultaneously came up against the ancient problematic of possibility and actuality, which had accompanied ontological thought from its beginnings, or rather, had fundamentally governed it.

Hence, “modality of being” is a newly coined expression, although the subject matter itself is old. Its new guise did not suffice, because it was borrowed from the world of thought. The ancient content of the matter was no more sufficient for a new, broadened presentation of the problem than the knowledge of recent times has proven to be. First and foremost, the logical concept of actuality

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<sup>1</sup> [Translator’s note]: In an effort to distinguish between “Sein” and “Seiende,” “Sein” will be translated as “being.” Depending on the context, “Seiende” will be translated primarily as “that which is,” “what is,” “that is,” “particular being” or “a being.”

collapsed when confronted by the hardness of the real. But the possibility of being also led back to an importance of the real situation, the airy structure of merely uncontradictory conceivabilities exhibiting only a distant resemblance to it. It was here that the ancient pair of categories, “potency and actuality,” offered to fill those logical modes with the content of being. But it neither coincided with the underlying modal opposition of possibility and actuality nor provided space for the third, now advancing, ontological mode, necessity.

In these interferences of heterogeneous meanings and the sequences of problems behind them, which are still recognizable and no less heterogeneous, the field of research into the modality of being matured into a certain ripeness for decision, without yet having gained firmness in its foundations. By no means does the deficiency expressed here adhere solely to the state of the problem of modality. It adheres rather to the situation in all of ontology, and ultimately goes back to the obscurities in the concept of being, in the traditional theory of *essentia*, in the understanding of being-there and being-so, as well as in the givenness of real and ideal being. A new beginning could only be made, if clarity were brought to these points.<sup>2</sup>

Once this occurs, the way has at least been cleared. It has been shown that two different pairs of oppositions are found in the traditional opposition of *essentia* and *existentia*: the opposition of ideality and reality, on the one hand, and the opposition of being-there and being-so, on the other. The ways of being always adhere to the aspect of being-there. They are the particularizations or ways of being-there. But, now a third opposition appears along with the opposition of ways of being and the opposition of the aspects of being: the opposition of the modes of being. For within each way of being-there, there is in turn the difference between being-possible, being-actual, and being-necessary, as well as that between the corresponding negative modes, being-impossible, being-nonactual, and being-contingent. Depending on their spheres of being and their ways of being, these modes of being turn out very differently and show different lawfulness in their mutual relation.

The investigation of this relation is complex and must be conducted separately for each sphere of being. This holds true not only for the primary and independent spheres, but just as much so for the secondary spheres, i.e. for that of logic and that of knowledge. If in the history of philosophy, the problem

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<sup>2</sup> To create such clarity was the task of the first volume, *Zur Grundlegung der Ontologie* (4th ed. 1965), whose four parts correspond to the points indicated.

of the modes of being had taken a linear course of development, then arguably such a complication could have been avoided. But after the investigation of this problem has taken a detour via logic and epistemology, and its control over the spheres of being is still incomplete, the necessity of unfurling the problem of modes in its whole breadth is revealed.

The necessity of such an intricate analysis already attests to the fact that even today it is difficult to separate an aspect of being, way of being, and mode of being. Nothing is more common in our day than the conflation of being-there and reality, reality and actuality. What is required for the purpose of ontology is not, however, confined to mere clarifications and differentiations. Rather, it is necessary to work out the positive relation holding sway between them. Only in this way can the investigation of the problem of “that which is as it is” [*das “Seiende als Seiendes”*] be properly served.

## 2 Aristotle and the Theory of Potency and Actuality

One can easily be deceived about the importance of such investigations. In stark contrast to ancient philosophy, the last century has judged there to hardly be any task here, much less has an attempt been made to deal with it. The beginnings lie at the pinnacle of Greek philosophy. They are instructive in more than one respect.

It is astonishing that in his theory of “that which is as it is” Aristotle made little use of the “ten categories” he had so carefully established and developed. Οὐσία [*ousia*, substance, being] surely stands at the center of the discussion, not as a principle that one applies, but rather as a complex tangle of the problem’s threads to be unraveled. In order to untangle it, he introduces four other principles that have nothing to do with his categories. They turn out to be two pairs of oppositions: form and matter, potency and actuality. The first two are obviously of a constitutive nature, while the latter claim to be levels of modality.

The important thing in this case is that the analysis is carried out with nearly all of the weight of the ontological problem resting on the oppositional interplay of potency and actuality. Form and matter are static principles and becoming is not to be grasped in them; but it is in becoming that all of the real is comprehended. Aristotle regards form as an active, moving principle; but with this conception, he already oversteps the meaning of the being of form, and pushes “form” under an aspect of “*energeia*” that has its opposite not in matter but in “*dynamis*.” It is no accident that the theory of Book Z in the *Metaphysics*, which seeks to construct the concrete real (σύνολον) [*synolon*, compound whole] from the interaction of form and matter, cannot be carried out without

the theory of *dynamis* [potentiality] and *energeia* [activity] from Book Θ, although it is by no means laid out in it. This relation was soon noticed by interpreters, but was not evaluated. The only substantive consequence to be taken from this amounts to the fact that already in Aristotelian metaphysics the modal principles prove themselves to be the truly fundamental ones. Potency and actuality have long been able to hold their own in the history of metaphysics, even after the dualism of form and matter has been ruptured. The latter had already occurred in Duns Scotus' principle of individuation; on the other hand, "potencies" were still the "capacities" of the soul in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, "energies" – the activities of German Idealism.

Thus, the way of being of the real world was modally constructed from the outset. But of course, the principles of this construction were neither purely modal nor sufficient for the comprehension of becoming. This is shown most clearly in the double meaning of "*energeia*." On the one hand, it should be the moving principle of a thing, but on the other hand it should be the perfect thing, itself. In the former sense, the *eidōs* [form, essence] is "pure *energeia*;" in the latter, it is the concrete individual case. Hand in hand with it goes the conception of the real process as actualization of an *eidōs*. Given that this *eidōs* is the energetic movement in the process, *energeia* itself thereby develops into an active principle of purpose that guides actualization, just as the predetermined purpose in consciousness guides action. And at the same time, *dynamis* develops into a state of being-planned-out [*Anlagezustand*], which is teleologically directed towards actualization.

It becomes evident that in this way the teleological structure of determination in the real processes is decided; and this alone would be sufficient to make such modal concepts untenable. But ontologically, another deficiency remains in them: they are not purely modal concepts at all. Potency, understood as plan, is not possibility, but the "determination to become something," and the immanent tendency to become this something. *Energeia*, however, is not actuality, but the fulfillment of this something; namely, in the double sense of the purpose, which was initially predetermined, but then also actualized. Within a limited process of becoming, it behaves as the beginning and end of becoming; namely, corresponding to the double meaning of *energeia*, so that this, as the driving force already presupposed in potency, is not present as actualized form until the final stage.

In this way the constitutive side of both principles clearly emerges. But even more important is the fact that the character of principles is lost. If the δυνάμει ὄν [*dynamēi*, potentiality] and the ἐνεργείᾳ ὄν [*energeia*] are different stages of the process by means of which a particular being [*Seiendes*] proceeds, then their essence is rather that of states that detach from each other. And they

consequently enter a relation of mutual exclusion, which is not compatible with the character of modes of being. The potential particular being cannot simultaneously be actual, and the actual particular being cannot simultaneously be potential. Every particular being can only have either the one or the other state of being, but not both at the same time. *Dynamis* and *energeia* stand disjunctively to each other. They exclude each other. If one of the two must pertain to every particular being, then their relation is such that the whole world of the real stands divided into potential particular being and actual particular being.

### 3 The Division of the Real. The Ghostly Existence of Possibility

This is now a result that evokes a wealth of aporias. If *dynamis* and *energeia* were purely constitutively comprehended, i.e. if they meant nothing but phases of a thing's development, then this division of the real world could continue if need be. As a matter of fact, however, the modal opposition of possible and actual is, at least, still intended, which essentially changes the situation. For now "that which is" in the state of *dynamis* stands as a merely improper being, or a half-being, as it were. Thus, for example, the being of a seed is, in its way, not a fully-fledged being, but a hypothetical being of the plant, namely its mere being-planned-out. But since the life of a plant species consists in the steady oppositional interplay of the seed and the fully grown plant – both falling under the same *eidos* – this life of the species thus breaks down into two kinds of being, which never correspond, but continually alternate: a being-possible and a being-actual of the plant. All living things display these two kinds of being. And since Aristotle transfers these notions of the living to the whole of nature (to everything that has an internal principle of becoming, a φύσις [*physis*, nature]), the division between half-being and whole-being, in fact, cuts through the whole realm of the real.

This is a dualism of kinds of being that far outweighs a dualism of constitutive principles of being. "Form and matter" are still only elements in the construction of the world. They do not appear in isolation. *Dynamis* and *energeia*, on the other hand, stand alongside each other as separate states of the real. Of course, the true importance of being remains a matter of the actualized, and Aristotle's theory of the priority of *energeia* corresponds to this fact. But aside from the total state of the actualized, the world at any given moment is still full of the nonactualized; and insofar as this, in itself, has a modal meaning of the "possible" – insofar as it is something that can become actual or not become actual (since not everything that is potential has to become

actual) – there must be within the real world, alongside the actual, a large mass of the “merely possible,” concerning which the decision as to its whereabouts must be delayed.

Thus, in the Aristotelian world the possible leads a kind of ghostly existence. Here, the freely wandering “possibilities” are something absolutely real. They mingle together as half-beings amidst the whole-being, pushing into its ranks, and are links in its connections and dependencies. This difficulty will not be remedied by proposing the priority of *energeia*, since *dynamis* will not thereby be dissolved into *energeia*, and will only be made dependent on it. If Aristotle had left the seed its own character of actuality, because it is just as much a real thing as a fully developed plant, then the case would be quite different and the dualism would fall away. But he does not do this, since he considers as actual only the actualization of *eidos*. The seed, however, does not have its own *eidos*, but only the *eidos* of the plant, and this *eidos* is not actualized in it.

Is this real world, in which we live, actually such that in it, half-being stands next to particular being as a being-between, so to speak, of being and nonbeing? Is it true that the planned-out systems through which organisms reproduce do not have their own actuality, but only a suspended being-possible in indeterminateness? And even if this should be so, is this being-possible then transmitted to the great mass of inorganic, particular being, which likewise arises and vanishes? Should one perhaps understand determinate stages of movement or change (φορά and ἀλλοίωσις) [*phora* and *alloiosis*] as their “plan-phases,” according to a kind of seed? Must one not seek everywhere the final stages according to which those phases must be “planned?” This produces a completely skewed picture of the majority of physical processes. Here, all the more, the stages of the process have entirely the same kind of being, with no difference in their rank or constancy or volatility. They are all equally “actual” – having the same being-actual as the flow of the process as a whole – and for that very reason they are all equally “possible.” For if they were not possible, they could not be actual either.

If one looks closer, then one finds in the Aristotelian determinations a picture of the world that has no place for true becoming. This is astonishing enough, since, then again, one cannot fail to recognize that for Aristotle it is a matter of the determination of becoming. One must keep in mind, however, that in the dualism of *dynamis* and *energeia*, there is only one mode for the beginning stage of the process and one for the final stage – both of which are understood as static conditions – but no mode for the process itself, the moving forward, the flow. The state of *dynamis* lies “before” the process, and the state of *energeia* “after” the process. The process as such comes away empty-handed.

Since the process is the basic categorial form of the real – not therefore a transition from being to being, but the manner in which things, living organisms, humankind, etc. behave in being-there – the Aristotelian conception represents a misunderstanding of real being. The weight here rests completely on the statically understood principles of form that are “actualized” in the process; but the process only plays the role of a transition.<sup>3</sup>

Clearly, this conception of process cannot be maintained. It has already been breached by Aristotle, himself. But the coined determinations have outlived his system. They have, up to the present day, governed the problem of modality in the realm of ontological thought, and have hindered the emergence of a purer conception of possibility and actuality.

#### 4 The Future and the “Multitude of Possibilities”

The effect that the modal principles of Aristotle had in antiquity and in the Middle Ages will not be pursued here.<sup>4</sup> In the following centuries, potency and actuality did not remain true to the original meaning of *dynamis* and *energeia*, although the teleological-constitutive element in them was maintained. And this was too deeply rooted in the metaphysical conceptions of the Western world for a fundamental revision of modal concepts to occur.

For the problem of being, virtually everything depends on how the concept of possibility is understood. As long as being-possible was understood as the state of being of “potency,” one had to maintain the division of the real, and consequently at the same time also the conception of a half-being, indeterminate or undecided, that exists alongside the actual. The more this conception established itself, the more it freed itself from its ideological foundation and from an orientation toward the organic. One transferred it from the actual plan-systems (whose prototype is the seed) to the general construction of the

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3 This attests to the extreme difficulty that Aristotle has with the formulation of κίνησις: *Physics* γ, 201 a 10: ἡ τοῦ δυνάμει ὄντος ἐντελέχεια ἢ τοιοῦτον κίνησις ἐστίν. This definition amounts to a contradiction, for according to the presuppositions, a δυνάμει ὄν “as such” cannot have the kind of being of ἐντελέχεια [*entelecheia*]. The fundamental determinations are, therefore, breached. Compare this to, 201 b 27 f.: κίνησις [*kinesis*] arises neither in δύναμις [*dynamis*] nor in ἐνέργεια [*energeia*], it requires an ἐνέργεια ἀτελής [*energeia ateles*], which *ex. def.* is a “wooden iron” [i.e. a contradiction]. This is an important consequence, for κίνησις is not “movement” alone, but every kind of progress; i.e. it is “process” in general.?

4 It is a complicated subject, which has recently been comprehensively discussed by August Faust, in *Der Möglichkeitsgedanke*, 2 Vol., Heidelberg 1931/32.

real world. And now it seemed, as had certainly not been intended by Aristotle, that there must be many more possible things than actual things in the world, since every present stage leaves open a multiplicity of “possibilities” for the future, only one of which ever becomes actual. Hence, that which has become actual always had to represent a choice from a much wider region of the possible.

Only through this widening of perspective does the concept of “possibilities,” spreading themselves out freely in the field of the real, gain a universal meaning. Every stage of the process is now an incalculably multifold possible; namely, the further it relates to the future, the more of an actual, incalculably multifold possible it is. Then again, as for the actual, it shrinks in its total state, becoming much slighter and poorer. The ghostly world of the “merely possible” besieges it on all sides and overruns its content. This is the aspect that one sees in the future when going about everyday human life: there are “one’s possibilities,” that lie within one, and from which one thinks one can choose this possibility or another. Indeed, speculative thought confers this aspect to the Deity who, at the beginning of time, chooses one world to create from among all “possible worlds.”

This wide realm of the possible is, by no means, meant as merely the “conceivable.” It is not that thoughtless “everything possible” that can also mean “everything imaginable.” Nor is it meant as the existence of this possible in an airy realm of essences without reality – as in the Leibnizian notion of “possible worlds” before the world’s creation. Rather, it is meant as something that belongs in the midst of real things, events, situations, living organisms, etc. but which is not yet actual – and from which the greater part never becomes actual. It envisions the anticipatory consciousness as a being-planned-out in the present, but without an actual plan that would be there as an entity, and of course also without any guarantee that the “planned-out” in it will ever become actual.

If one thinks of a being-planned-out, as not exhibited in any entity and itself fleetingly becoming something different from moment to moment, then no account of what a being-planned-out is supposed to be has been given. But if one considers that not even the power to guide the process is meant here, then all being-planned-out of such a kind becomes illusory. What remains is not much more than the simple dependence of the later on the earlier. Such a dependence is a slap in the face of the presuppositions already made, because it means anything but a standing open of many “possibilities.”

And it now, in fact, becomes quite questionable what it actually has to do with the “being-possible” in these “possibilities.” One is apparently not given any account of why most of them are quite impossible and only the perfunctory ones appear in any real givenness, binding thoughts as “possibilities.” Looked

at more closely, such superficial thinking occurs most frequently in abstraction and is not the ordinary way of thinking in practical life. We generally have only vague knowledge of the wide-reaching conditionality of true being-possible in the real connections of the moment. Truly, we know that not everything we envision as “possible” is possible in reality. And, indeed, we are careful to be aware of this, even when envisioning those “possibilities” – without the one abolishing the other, and without having to gain from this even the slightest hint as to which of the envisioned possibilities could claim to be an actual real possibility. We have no complete knowledge of the situation, but the experienced person may very well know, in general, that he does not have this knowledge.

Even the simplest reflection reveals that here a distinction must be made between envisioned possibility and real possibility. The former rightly claims the wide range for a multitude of “possibilities,” but does not withstand the traditional claim to reality. On the other hand, the latter proves itself to be strictly related to a series of real conditions, and thereby develops into an expression of a real relation. Both kinds of being-possible have consequently shed the traditional character of being a “state of that-which-is.”

Of course, it cannot be so quickly decided whether or not the ghostly being-there of the “merely possible” in the real sphere dissolves into empty appearance. After all, another realm of the possible has been revealed, in which it could very well belong. Whether or not this is the case, depends on a series of other matters.

## 5 An Overview of the Aporias in the Ancient Concept of Possibility

The aporias that are conjured up by the traditional concept of possibility constitute a long series of controversies, at least some of which have been fought through over time. Most of them are so closely linked to the teleological metaphysics of the Middle Ages (and even still, to the systems of recent times) that they hardly concern us anymore. The only important ones are those that lie in the essence of the thing, i.e. in the conception of the modes as “states” of being. They can be extracted from the above discussion and enumerated in the following manner.

1. The possible as true *dynamis* “toward something” or being-planned-out “in something” assumes a preexistence of the “something,” in which it is planned out. Since this preexistence is not real being, it must have either

another way of being or no being whatsoever. In the latter case, it is illusory. In the former case, it oversteps the sphere of being (the sphere of the real), whose modes are involved. In both cases, however, there cannot be within the real world a particular being “apart from” an actual particular being.

2. The possible as half-being within the real has the unfortunate tendency to waver intangibly between being and nonbeing. It is therefore liable to the ancient Eleatic aporia, which concerned becoming, as long as it was understood as the transition from nonbeing to being and vice versa (arising and vanishing – from nothingness and into nothingness). Ontologically, this yielded no unequivocal meaning, because transition itself, becoming, is the real’s continuous form of being.
3. If the possible, however, is a merely ideal being (essence, *eidos*, form transcending temporality), then in its sphere – in the realm of essence – it is entirely actual, but in the real sphere it is consequently neither actual nor possible; for many real conditions would belong to its real being-possible, all of which would have to be actually present. Thus, it is not possible in either sphere.
4. If one understands it, however, from the given concrete real situation in the determinate present as the future, then one encounters that plurality of simultaneously open “possibilities,” from which only one ever reaches actualization. It remains incomprehensible what differentiates the others from this one, proving them “impossible” in due course.
5. In this respect, the general conception of the possible remains an indeterminate or undecided thing, waiting for its whereabouts to be decided. But aside from the nonsense that the real world is burdened in this way by an overabundance of the undecided and the indeterminate – which does not at all correspond to the findings – there still remains the particular aporia: from where should the decisive factor come?

There are more severe difficulties that cannot be overcome without making blatantly metaphysical presuppositions. Ontology must refrain from making such presuppositions, however. Indeed the suspicion is close at hand that these difficulties, for their part, are already the consequences of metaphysical presuppositions and therefore represent artificial, self-made aporias. This suspicion becomes even stronger when one sees how they take effect in the concept of actuality. Namely, if an actual thing is merely that which may be considered as actualization of a predetermined *eidos*, then most things, events, situations – indeed, most of what is fleeting, ephemeral, a mere transitional – have sunk into the nonactual. With such a concept of actuality, at best one can comprehend the

typically recurring shapes of living things, but not the great mass of things that continually turn out differently in the ceaseless intersecting of events.

There is an age-old experience of philosophical thought: whatever is naively placed in the concept of possibility emerges quite dramatically in the concept of actuality, and whatever is left out of the concept of possibility avenges itself on one's understanding of actual life. It is therefore no accident that the attempt has been made, time and time again, to somehow grasp the internal relatedness of the two modes. Thus, at the crux of the matter lies the question: how does the possible become actual? Or, how does half-being become whole-being? How does the ideal become real? How does the future become the present, the indeterminate become the determinate, the undecided become the decided?

During the Middle Ages, there were many attempts to answer these questions. Most of them returned to the Aristotelian priority of *energeia*. But one thereby had either to make *dynamis* into a kind of latent state of *energeia* or to seek the impetus for actualization in a force outside of the world – a creative reason, a will, a predetermination. In both cases, there are prohibitive metaphysical assumptions. Later, in Wolffian ontology, we still find this problem in its ancient insolubility as the problem of a *complementum possibilitatis*. But this new concept is merely a newly cloaked perplexity.

Such a fundamental problem is clearly not to be overcome by these means. Rather, there is a need to revise the beginnings from which it originates. But, for this purpose, we must turn back to a time before Aristotle.

## 6 The Megarian Concept of Possibility and its Fate in the History of Philosophy

There are two questions on which everything else depends. The first question concerns the new coinage of the concept of possibility: is there not a simple meaning of being-able-to-be that would have nothing to do with being planned-out and aiming at, which in far greater generality would hold true for all real relations, and which would therefore be demonstrable in the same way for all becoming and having become?

But the second question is this: is the modal structure of the real exhausted by the oppositional interplay of the two modes? Is there not still another modality of being involved here – a modality of being, through which all halfness, indeterminateness, and indecision would be allowed to reach wholeness, and all searching for the impetus of actualization would become superfluous?

This second question leads to the introduction of necessity. It has taken a detour via logic. It is to be dealt with straight away. Although hardly any