

ARISTOTELIAN DISPOSITIONS

In our everyday speech, we often attribute potentialities to people and objects. Glasses are fragile, builders are capable of building houses, and so on. But what is a potentiality? What is fragility? What is the capacity to build? ¹

Today, several of the authors who attempt to answer these questions tend to endorse something along the lines of the following conditional analysis of potentialities:

Conditional Analysis (CA): x has a potentiality to Φ iff there is some condition s such that s is a stimulus condition and if s were to obtain, then x would Φ .

where Φ -ing is a manifestation (say, a glass' breaking easily) and s is a type of event that has to occur for the manifestation to occur (say, the act of striking the glass). Thus an object possesses a potentiality such as fragility just in case, if something strikes it, it breaks easily.²

However, the (CA) is problematic. First, there are situations in which a stimulus occurs, but something prevents the occurrence of the manifestation. For instance, a natural account of the potentiality of poisonouness that would be an instance of (CA) is this: something has the potentiality to be poisonous just in case, if ingested, it kills. But if one takes an antidote, the poison can fail to kill once ingested. Here the (CA) wrongly predicts that the poison does not have the potentiality to kill. Second, it is not obvious that all potentialities have stimuli. For instance, radioactive material seems to have the potentiality to decay spontaneously. The (CA) does not seem to account for these potentialities.

Of course, these counterexamples do not establish that *every* conditional analysis of

¹ What I call 'potentiality' some authors call 'disposition' or 'power'. I assume that these terms are interchangeable.

² Cf. Ryle 1949 and Goodman 1954 for an explicit commitment to the (CA). Many later authors implicitly accept this view.

potentialities fails. Some more sophisticated version of the conditional analysis may succeed. In the recent literature, many such accounts have been attempted. Here, however, I will not consider any recent attempt at solving the problems of the (CA).³ Instead, I will focus on a much older account of potentialities, one which goes back to Aristotle.

Like the supporters of the (CA), Aristotle holds that an account of potentialities (*dunameis*) is desirable.⁴ Moreover, he seems to hold a view of potentialities that resembles the (CA) in many respects. He accepts that to each potentiality there corresponds a certain manifestation. He also accepts that potentialities are to be analysed in terms of conditionals. So we can ask him: can we amend the (CA) so as to avoid the preventing conditions problem?

This paper argues that we can. In my view, Aristotle endorses the following account of potentialities:

Sophisticated Conditional Analysis (SCA): x has a potentiality to Φ iff, if conditions C were to obtain, then x would Φ .

where ‘ C ’ refers to circumstances which exclude preventing conditions. For instance, if rain prevents the exercise of x ’s potentiality to build, Aristotle would say that x has the potentiality to ‘build when there is dry weather’. If I am correct, the (SCA) avoids the preventing conditions problem and the spontaneous potentialities problem, thereby securing an important advantage over the (CA). Moreover, the (SCA) can also meet some potential objections – or so I shall argue.

Section I rehearses the preventing conditions problem. Section II looks at Aristotle’s (SCA), and

³ The most promising amendment to the (CA) that has been suggested says: x has a potentiality to Φ iff, *ceteris paribus*, if s were to obtain, then x would Φ (Schrenk 2010). The challenge for this approach is to offer a satisfactory account of ‘*ceteris paribus*’ (for skepticism *ante litteram*, see Molnar 2003: 86ff.).

⁴ I use ‘potentiality’ only to refer to what Aristotle defines as ‘the principle of change which takes place in another thing, or in itself *qua* other’, and to ‘the principle of being changed by another thing of by itself *qua* other’ (cf. *Metaphysics* Theta 1 1046a1-10, 11-13, *Metaphysics* Delta 12 1019a35-b2, 1020a5-7). These potentialities are sometimes referred to as, respectively, active and passive potentialities.

at how it avoids the preventing conditions problem. Sections III-V meet some objections to the (SCA).