

# Curtis L. Hancock

---

## Plotinus' adoption of Aristotle's doctrine of act ("energeia")

---

Studia Elckie 14, 117-135

---

2012

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej [bazhum.muzhp.pl](http://bazhum.muzhp.pl), gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.

CURTIS L. HANCOCK\*

## PLOTINUS' ADOPTION OF ARISTOTLE'S DOCTRINE OF *ACT* (*ENERGEIA*)

Aristotle coined the expression, *hē energeia*, to denote a crucial principle in his philosophy, especially in his metaphysics. He employed *energeia* so often that it occurs in almost all of his writings.<sup>1</sup> Under Aristotle's influence other ancient philosophers embraced the principle. Accordingly, *energeia* appears often in the writings of such Hellenistic philosophers as the Epicureans, the Stoics, and the Neoplatonists.<sup>2</sup>

The task of this article is to examine *energeia* in the philosophy of Plotinus, the founder of the Neoplatonic school. I will accomplish this objective by focusing on two treatises from Plotinus' middle period: II, 5 (25),<sup>3</sup> "On What is in Potency and in Act," and VI, 2 (43), the second treatise of the trilogy "On the Genera of Being." To set the context for these two treatises, I will first comment briefly on important observations regarding *energeia* in earlier treatises.

Plotinus implements the principle of *energeia* early in his writings. It appears for the first time in the second treatise that Plotinus wrote: IV, 7, "On the Immortality of the Soul." This treatise aims to defend the Platonic theory of the human soul against opposing theories, including Aristotle's. This polemic against Aristotle, however, does not prevent Plotinus from adopting as his own

---

\* Dr. Curtis L. Hancock – Rockhurst Jesuit University, Kansas City, USA; e-mail: [curtis.hancock@rockhurst.edu](mailto:curtis.hancock@rockhurst.edu)

<sup>1</sup> *Energeia* appears as early as the *Protrepticus* (see W.D. Ross, *Fragmenta Selecta* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955], fragment 14) and as late as the *Poetics*, *Politics*, and *Rhetoric*. For a helpful listing of the instances of *energeia* in the works of Aristotle, see G. A. Blair, "The Meaning of 'energeia' and 'entelecheia' in Aristotle," *International Philosophical Quarterly*, 7 (1967): p. 103.

<sup>2</sup> That *energeia* appears in the writings of these thinkers is confirmed by consulting the following sources: (1) *Glossarium Epicureum*, Hermannus Usener, ed. (Roma: Edizioni Dell' Ateneo e Bizzarri, 1977), p. 255; (2) *Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta*, J. von Arnim, ed. Leipzig: 1903-1924; reprint Stuttgart, 1964), Vol I. 50; (3) *Lexicon Plotinianum*, J. H. Sleeman and G. Pollet, eds. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1980), pp. 374-384.

<sup>3</sup> The number in parentheses in these references to the *Enneads* denotes the number of the treatise in the chronological order of Plotinus' writings. For example, II, 5 (25) indicates the twenty-fifth treatise that Plotinus actually wrote, although the treatise is the fifth in the second volume in Porphyry's arrangement of Plotinus' treatises (the *Enneads*). Fortunately, to his credit, Porphyry reported the chronological order of Plotinus' treatises, which is a real blessing to Plotinian scholarship.

the former's doctrine of *energeia*. Evidence for this appears in chapters 8<sup>2</sup> and 8<sup>3</sup> of IV, 7, where Plotinus employs *energeia* in a series of criticisms against the Stoics. *Energeia* first emerges when Plotinus attacks the Stoic position that the soul is corporeal. He interprets the Stoics as maintaining that the union of the soul and body is really a kind of mixture (*krasis*). Plotinus protests that such a mixture would destroy the very being (*to einai*) of the soul, for the components of a mixture are in potency and not in act.<sup>4</sup> The act of soul, therefore, militates against Stoic materialism.<sup>5</sup>

While brief, this criticism suffices to show what *energeia* means for Plotinus. If *dynamis* signifies a nature altered by or subordinated to elements of a mixture, then *energeia* denotes a nature independent of such alteration or subordination. So understood, what Plotinus means by *energeia* accords with Aristotle's meaning when the latter speaks of *energeia* as it pertains to mixture in *De Generatione* (Bk. I, 10, 327b 22-26), a passage Plotinus may have had in mind:

Some things are in potency while others are in act, the ingredients of a compound can be in one sense and yet not be in another sense. The compound may be in act other than the ingredients from which it has resulted; nevertheless, each of the ingredients may still be in potency what it was before it combined.<sup>6</sup>

On the basis of this quotation, as well as other passages from Aristotle,<sup>7</sup> we may take Aristotle to be saying that *energeia* refers to that which is a distinguishable or determinate or intelligible nature, an *eidos* or *ousia*. Plotinus implies as much in his criticism. Accordingly, the first use of *energeia* in the *Enneads* is instructive, disclosing at once what *energeia* basically means for both Aristotle and Plotinus. This is an agreement that the *Enneads* consistently reinforce.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> "Act" is the translation of *energeia* that I most commonly prefer, since "act" denotes the exercise of something's very being. However, the Greek word has many senses and may require other translations depending on the context.

<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that a Stoic would immediately object to Plotinus' argument on grounds that it fails to respect the Stoic distinction between *mikton* and *krasis*. The latter is a kind of mixture which consists of elements interpenetrating each other so that each retains its act. For a lucid account of the various kinds of mixture in Greek thought, see Samuel Sambursky, *The Physics of the Stoics* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1959), ch. 1.

<sup>6</sup> *Epei d'esti ta men dynamei ta d'energeia tōn ontōn, endechetai ta michthenta einai pōs kai mē einai, energeia mēn heterou ontos tou gegonotos ex autōn, dynamei d'esti hekaterou haper ēsan prin michthenai kai ouk apolōlota.*

<sup>7</sup> *Metaphysics*, Zeta 3, 1029a 29-30; 7, 1017b 21-22; Eta, 3, 1043b 1; Theta 3, 1047a 1-2; 8, 1050b 2-3.

<sup>8</sup> Plotinus employs the term *energeia* 768 times (compared with Aristotle's 537 times). Hence, there are plenty of opportunities in the *Enneads* for Plotinus to indicate his agreement with Aristotle. The following treatises especially show the connection of *energeia* with *ousia* and *eidos*: IV, 7 (2); V, 9 (5); V, 4 (7); VI, 9 (9); II, 5 (25); III, 6 (26); VI, 7 (38); VI, 2 (43); V, 3 (49).

Another important finding comes to light in IV, 7 (2). While chapters 8<sup>2</sup> and 8<sup>3</sup> show that Plotinus accepts Aristotle's doctrine of *energeia*, chapter 8<sup>5</sup> shows that he rejects his predecessor's doctrine of *entelecheia*. Whereas Aristotle appears to regard the two doctrines as basically identical, Plotinus regards them as distinct, considering *entelecheia* to be exclusively bound up with Aristotle's psychology. Plotinus judges that, if he must reject Aristotle's doctrine of soul, he must reject his theory of *entelecheia*. Curiously, he is willing to accept *energeia*, interpreting it as a genuinely ontological doctrine rather than a purely psychological one. *Energeia* does not just describe the human soul; it describes all beings, and especially the hypostases Intelligence (*Nous*) and Soul (*Psyche*), since both are true *ousiai*.<sup>9</sup>

While IV, 7 associates *energeia* with Plotinus' doctrine of soul, a subsequent early treatise, namely, V, 4 (7), relates *energeia* to *Nous* (divine Intelligence, or the second hypostasis), and in so doing contributes further to our grasp of *energeia*. A key statement in the treatise occurs in chapter two, lines 3-4, where Plotinus defines the second hypostasis as an existent whose "*energeia* is *noēsis*." This description, complemented by relevant observations from V, 9 (5), provides the clue for explicating Plotinus' multifaceted conception of the intelligible world, which constitutes the mind of the second hypostasis.

Because of the judgment in IV, 7 (2) that *energeia* primarily means *ousia*, one can correctly conclude that in V, 4 (7) Plotinus, by defining *Nous* as the *energeia* of *noēsis*, means that the second hypostasis is nothing less than pure intellection. While other beings, such as Soul and individual souls, may *have noēsis*, the Intelligence simply *is noēsis*, thereby constituting the very first *noēsis*. Indeed, all subsequent beings have *noēsis* because they "participate in" or are *logoi* of that which is *noēsis*.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Only once does Plotinus use *entelecheia* in a way synonymous with *energeia*: IV, 2 (4), 1, 3. He appears consciously to avoid using *entelecheia* at all in later treatises. For a detailed discussion of Plotinus' criticism of the Aristotelian doctrine of *entelecheia* and of his aversion to the term in his own writings, see G. Bruni, "Note di polemica neoplatonica contro l'uso e il significato del termine *entelecheia*," *Giornale Critico della Filosofia Italiana*, 39 (1960): pp. 205-236; and G. Verbeke, "Les Critique de Plotin contra l'entéléchisme d'Aristote: Essai d'interprétation de l'Enneades, IV, 7, 8, 5," in *Philomathes: Studies and Essays in Memory of Philip Merlan* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1971), pp. 194-222.

<sup>10</sup> This word *logos* appears many times in Plotinus' writings but is never clearly defined. He seems to mean by *logos* the way in which a higher hypostasis is present on a lower level of emanation. Donald Gelpi in his article "The Plotinian *Logos* doctrine," *The Modern Schoolman* 37 (1959-1960): p. 315, identifies *logos* as "an active power identical with the being of the hypostasis in which it exists and ordered to the production of some reality lower than itself." Furthermore, "the lower reality which it produces will always be another *logos* of an inferior nature, except in the case of the final *logoi*. The final *logoi* are the *logoi* of sensible form. Since sensible

In addition, other perfections must describe the Intelligence, since it is an existent whose very act is intellection. First, the Intelligence is an eternal knower (V, 9 [5], 5, 1-4). This follows since the second hypostasis does not merely have the power to know but is knowledge *per se*. As a result, the Intelligence must be an intuitive knower because discursive knowledge requires becoming and time. Secondly, as an eternally actual, rather than potential, knower, the Intelligence must be its own object of knowledge (V, 9, 4-7). If its object were separate from itself, it would be dependent on and in potency to that object. Thus, Plotinus' *Nous* is comparable to Aristotle's *noēsis* *noēsēōs*.<sup>11</sup> However, Plotinus goes beyond Aristotle, explaining that, when the Intelligence contemplates itself, it contemplates the Platonic Forms which are the contents of divine Mind (V, 9, 6). Consequently, Plotinus' vision of the intelligible world is a synthesis of Platonic Forms and Aristotelian Intelligence.

Thirdly, Plotinus reasons that, if *eidos* is the same as *ousia* and if *Nous* is identical with every *eidos* (V, 9, 6, 1-11),<sup>12</sup> the divine Intelligence is perfect being and is really the whole universe of beings and acts, a conclusion that Plotinus makes to vindicate Parmenides' famous fragment (fragment 3) that thinking and being are the same.<sup>13</sup>

From this analysis of intelligence as the *energeia* of *noēsis*, it follows that intelligence must be the second and not the first reality. The plurality of the *noēta*, even though comprised of only logically (or conceptually) distinct elements, admits some disunity and thus is necessarily derivative rather than primary in reality. The Intelligence is being and composite and therefore requires ultimate simplicity as its cause (V, 4, 1, 5-15). Thus, from a careful reading of V, 9 (5) and V, 4 (7), one may infer that *energeia*, since it denotes being, cannot

---

form does not produce any other being, the *logoi* of sensible form terminate the process of universal emanation."

<sup>11</sup> Plotinus explicitly acknowledges that the intelligence is comparable to Aristotle's Separate Intelligence in his criticism of the Stagirite in V, 1 (10), 9. Also consult VI, 7 (38), 35-37 and V, 3 (49), 1-14. For an interesting discussion of how Plotinus and Aristotle compare and differ on the Intelligence, see J. M. Rist, "The One of Plotinus and the God of Aristotle," *Review of Metaphysics* 27 (1973): pp. 75-87.

<sup>12</sup> As Plotinus explains later (VI, 2 [43], 19-22), the *Nous* is perfect act consisting of a plurality of logically distinct acts, the separate Platonic Forms. To say that the Platonic Forms are logically distinct acts is to say that, while all the Forms are *in reality* the same, they are distinguishable from each other by abstract analysis. Each of these Forms is related to every other, and in a way roughly resembling a coherent scientific system, e.g., Euclidean geometry. These interrelationships Plotinus describes in terms of *energeia* *dynamis*. Considered separately, each Form is act but potentially every other (in that each Form implies every other). For a helpful discussion, see R. T. Wallis, *Neoplatonism* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1972), p. 42-43.

<sup>13</sup> Plotinus cites this fragment several times: III, 8 (30), 8, 6-8; I, 4 (46), 10, 9; V, 1 (10), 8, 17-23, attributing it explicitly in the last instance to Parmenides. For a commentary on this fragment, see Leo Sweeney, *Infinity in the Presocratics* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1972), p. 109.

signify the first reality. While *energeia* may describe the *ens perfectissimum* (where *ens* signifies only being), it cannot describe the *res perfectissima* (where *res* means reality).<sup>14</sup> In V, 4, (7), Plotinus only implicitly acknowledges this conclusion, as evident in his remark at V, 4, 1, 10 and 2, 40, that the One is beyond being (*epekeina tēs ousias*). But Plotinus explicitly declares that the One is beyond act in a couple of later passages prior to *Ennead* II, 5 (25). The first occurs at III, 9 (13), 9, 1-9:

But the First beyond being does not think: Intelligence is the real beings, and there is movement here and rest. The First itself is not related to anything, but the other beings are related to it, staying around it in their rest, and moving around it, for movement is desire, but it desires nothing, for what could it desire, it which is the highest? Does it not, then, even think itself? Is it not said in a general way to think in that it possesses itself? It is not by possessing itself that anything is said to think, but by looking at the first. But thinking itself is also the first act.<sup>15</sup>

The One's transcendence over *energeia* is again expressed at V, 6 (24), 6, 3: "So the Good is without act."<sup>16</sup> From these remarks one may assume that by the time Plotinus reached his middle period as a writer, he realized the need to make explicit what in earlier treatises had been only implicit: the One radically transcends *ousia* and therefore *energeia*.

These highlights should supply sufficient context for commenting on *energeia* in II, 5 (25) and VI, 2 (43).

### *Ennead* II, 5 (25), 1-5

The first and most obvious contribution of II, 5 is its distinction between two types of *energeia* as well as between two types of *dynamis*. The first two chapters of the treatise state that *hē energeia* differs from *to energeia on* and that *hē dynamis* differs from *to dynamei on*. The former distinction I translate as

---

<sup>14</sup> Obviously, in this analysis I presume that Plotinus' philosophy is a monism, according to which reality is unity; that is to say, whatever is real is one. Hence, being, since it presupposes the subject/object distinction (the *noēsis/noēton* distinction), represents something short of pure reality. Being is not unity but unity-in-multiplicity. Being has to some degree already fallen away from reality (perfect Unity or the One). The following texts stress the primacy of unity in Plotinus: VI, 9 (9), 1, 1; III, 8 (30), 10; VI, 6 (34), 1, 1; VI, 7 (38), 16-17; VI, 2 (43), 11, 17; V, 3 (49), 12. For a careful elaboration on these and additional texts, see Leo Sweeney, S. J., "Basic Principles in Plotinus's Philosophy," *Gregorianum* 42 (1961): pp. 506-516. Additionally, Plato Mamo makes a highly persuasive case that Plotinus is a monist in his essay "Is Plotinian Mysticism Monistic," in *The Significance of Neoplatonism*, R. Baine Harris, ed. (Albany, New York: SUNY Press, 1976), pp. 199-216.

<sup>15</sup> Here I mainly follow the Armstrong translation.

<sup>16</sup> It may be helpful to see the context from which this quotation is excerpted: *Ei dē tauta orthōs legetai, ouk an echoi chōran noēsēos hentinoun to agathon. Allo gar dei tō noounti to agathon einai. Anenergēton oun.*

that between “act” and “being in act,” and the latter as that between “potency” and “being in potency.”<sup>17</sup>

To understand these distinctions, it is best to begin with *to dynamei on*, since it describes sensible matter and thereby is the basis of helpful inductive illustrations. In simplest terms, being in potency is something which can become something else (1, 10-15). Bronze, for instance, is a being in potency because it can become a statue; water, because it can become something else altogether, e.g., air or bronze (1, 12-21). Such examples indicate that something is a being in potency if it can receive either accidental or substantial form from an extrinsic cause. Hence, being in potency is passive *dynamis*: that which can be a substrate (1, 29-31) for another or rather that which can be formed by another (*par' allow*; 2, 33-34).

So understood, the distinction *to dynamei on* compares readily with elements in the Aristotelian philosophy. First, Aristotle, himself uses the Greek phrase *to dynamei on* to signify passive potency.<sup>18</sup> Secondly, Plotinus' example of bronze (*chalkos*) echoes one of Aristotle's favorite illustrations of passive potency.<sup>19</sup> Thirdly, by saying that being in potency makes change possible (from which it follows that being in potency cannot belong in the immutable intelligible world), Plotinus accepts Aristotle's position that being in potency is the principle of change. Because of this third parallel, Plotinus is willing to largely accept Aristotle's doctrine of prime matter as pure passive potency (chapters 4-5). Finally, Plotinus also accepts Aristotle's distinction between prime matter (*protē hylē*) and second matter (*eschatē hylē*), as is indicated by his illustrations regarding bronze (see especially 2, 1-8). Prime matter is being in potency in an absolute sense, while second matter is such only relatively.

---

<sup>17</sup> It is worth noting that Plotinus in an earlier treatise has introduced another distinction between two kinds of *energeia*: “the *energeia* of an *ousia*” (*hē energeia tēs ousias*) vs. “the *energeia* from an *ousia*” (*hē energeia ek tēs ousias*). This distinction Plotinus employs in V, 4 (7), 2, 26-42 for the purpose of explicating emanation. Out of a prior perfection or being (the *energeia* of an *ousia*) another being emanates (the *energeia* from an *ousia*), as heat emanates from fire. So *Nous* (the *energeia* of an *ousia*) emanates or produces Soul (the *energeia* from an *ousia*); in turn, Soul (the *energeia* of an *ousia*) generates lower *logoi* or the beings of Nature (the *energeia* from an *ousia*). Of course, this pattern of emanation continues until all perfection (*energeia*) is exhausted. For further comments on this distinction, see J. M. Rist, *Plotinus: the Road to Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), pp. 68-69.

<sup>18</sup> *Metaphysics*, Beta, 6, 1002b 33; Gamma, 4, 1007b 28; Theta, 8, 1050b 8; Lambda, 6, 1071b 19; Nu, 2, 1089a 28. In this last text *to dynamei on* is explicitly identified as the principle of change. However, Aristotle does not use the expression as formally as Plotinus; this is shown by the fact that occasionally it signifies active potency in his writings: *Metaphysics*, Theta 3, 1047a 25; Delta, 7, 1017b 1-10.

<sup>19</sup> For examples: *De Generatione*, Alpha, 10, 328b 8-14; *Politics*, Alpha, 8, 1256a 5-10; *De Partibus Animalium*, Alpha, 1, 640b 23-29; *Metaphysics*, Delta, 2, 1013b 6; *Physics*, Beta, 3, 195a 33; *De Generatione Animalium*, Alpha, 18, 724a 23-27; *Physics*, Alpha, 7, 190a 24-27..

A grasp of *to dynamei on* prepares one for its correlate, *to energeia on*, an expression which also appears in Aristotle.<sup>20</sup> Being in act refers to any existent which is completed by form (2, 3-8). Thus, *to energeia on*, unlike *to dynamei on*, may belong in the intelligible world, for intelligible beings are also completed by form. However, the matter which is There completed by form is "intelligible matter" (see II, 4 [12], 1-5) and potency (*hē dynamis*) rather than being in potency (*to dynamei on*). Unlike sensible matter, the matter There is indeterminate but real and, as such, truly unites with form.<sup>21</sup> In other words, intelligible matter and form are only logically (conceptually, not really), distinct (II, 5 [25], 3, 8-12). In the intelligible world there is no sensible matter, no being in potency, and therefore no change. In the sensible world, however, every being in act is subject to change and therefore is also a being in potency. Each sensible thing is a composite of matter and form but is in potency to some extrinsic being. We may say generally then, that with the exception of prime matter every being in potency is also a being in act.

Plotinus asks (2, 3-8) an important question regarding the relationship of being in potency to being in act: where there is change, does being in potency really become being in act, or is the resulting being in act altogether different from the prior being in potency? The resulting being in certain ways is the same but in other respects is different from the original being in potency. This is true whether one considers the being in potency as second or as prime matter. If second matter is considered in itself, i.e., as being in act, then it is different from the product it becomes because every being in act is a distinct composite of matter and form. But if second matter is considered not in and of itself but relatively to whatever form it will acquire, then it is partly the same as the resulting being in act. In other words, if second matter is considered as a being in potency, it may be said in a sense to be the same as the product. It is the same in that it remains as the substrate for the newly acquired form. This is true, however, only of accidental change. In substantial change the form is altogether lost and therefore cannot be part of the product.

Like second matter, prime matter is also partly distinct from and partly identical with the resulting being in act, depending on one's point of view. Since matter is never itself in act, matter is necessarily different from the result-

<sup>20</sup> *De Generatione Animalium*, Beta, 1, 734b 21; *Metaphysics*, Eta, 6, 1045b 21; Theta, 6 1048b 8; *De Generatione*, Alpha, 10, 327b 23. Plotinus' careful separation of *to energeia on* from *hē energeia* could be based on Aristotle's conception of *ousia*. Aristotle holds that *ousia* in the strict sense applies to the composite of form and matter; form and matter separately being *ousiai* in less preferred senses. Respecting Aristotle's distinctions, Plotinus may have designated *ousia* in the proper sense with the expression *to energeia on* and may have reserved *hē energeia* for secondary *ousia* or *eidōs*, the component of *to energeia on*. (See Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Delta, 8, 1017b 10-25; Eta, 1, 1042a 24-33.)

<sup>21</sup> II, 4 (12), 3, 6-18; 4, 14-20; 5, 4-12.



ing composite. But matter is certainly a part of the composite since it is the ultimate substrate of the latter.

This brings us to *hē energeia* itself. Here Plotinus says that *hē energeia* is form (2, 28-31). Thus, II, 5 states explicitly what is expressed implicitly in IV, 7 (2) that Plotinus follows Aristotle by identifying *energeia* with *eidos*. How does *hē energeia* relate to the prior two distinctions, being in potency and being in act? Being in potency receives and becomes substrate of act (*hē energeia*). Since being in potency is passive *dynamis*, act comes to being in potency only through the agency of another (*par' allow*; 2, 33-34). The resulting union of being in potency (substrate) and of act (form) brings about a being in act. Hence, *to energeia on* denotes the whole, whereas *hē energeia* denotes the part. Sometimes Plotinus uses *hē energeia* and *to energeia on* interchangeably (3, 1-40). This is permissible in that an existent is an intelligible unity (a whole) because of its form.

Finally, there remains *hē dynamis*, which is ordinarily translated as "potency." How exactly does *hē dynamis* differ from *to dynamei on*? Plotinus answers that the former is active potency or power but that the latter is passive potency. Whereas being in potency is determined by another (*par' allou*), potency determines itself, or rather the agent who exercises the potency determines it. Plotinus explains this through his allusion to the sculptor (*kata to poiein*; 1, 21-26). The sculptor's perfections (his talent, imagination, and artistic judgment) produce operations perfecting not only external objects but also the sculptor's active powers themselves. Through the sculptor's active powers (*dynamis*), he perfects himself. One and the same agent is origin and recipient of act.

Plotinus further elaborates this point through the illustrations of the knower (2, 15-26) and the moral agent (2, 34-36). Knowledge is possible through knowing powers which belong to a subject who himself is perfected (i.e., acquires *energeia*) through the exercise (activities)<sup>22</sup> of those powers. Moral conduct is the result of powers (habits) which themselves are further perfected by that conduct.

Potency, therefore, is the active power of a living agent. The agent, moreover, has act through his own active power, because an agent perfects himself through his powers and their immanent operations.

These technical distinctions furnish the principles for an analysis of the intelligible world which appears in chapter three of II, 5.<sup>23</sup> As noted already, if *to dynamei on* is the principle of change, it cannot belong in the intelligible

<sup>22</sup> This is another permissible translation of *energeia*, occurring in contexts when *energeia* involves *praxis*. See below, discussion bounded by notes 38 and 39.

<sup>23</sup> Chapter three is brief and elliptical. Hence, what follows is my attempt to make explicit what is implicit there.

world. Hence, while it is correct to call intelligible beings potencies (more precisely, active powers), it is incorrect to call them beings in potency (3, 8-22).

Being in act applies to the intelligible world because intelligible beings are composites of matter (albeit intelligible matter) and form. True, the matter There is a potency rather than a being in potency; nonetheless, it is a logically distinct constituent of an intelligible being which, as composite, may be called a being in act. Because an intelligible being is a composite of potency and act rather than of being in potency and in act, it is a real unity of parts only logically distinct. This differentiates it sharply from sensible beings, for the latter are composed of sensible matter which repels form (as Plotinus notes at III, 6 [26], 14, 29-35) and thus never really unites with its act. It is for this reason that sensible beings are poor imitations, mere shadows, of intelligible beings.

All intelligible beings are pure acts, because each is really identical with its form, having intelligible matter only in a logically distinguishable way. These beings are the logically distinct contents of a single divine nature, the second hypostasis, which by comprehending all acts may itself be called pure act.

Without *energeia* belonging to the intelligible order, there could be no *energeia* in the sensible, for the sensible exists as a participant or *logos* of the intelligible. As the *logoi* of *Nous* reflect a descending hierarchy of perfections, the entire universe of beings may be considered a gradation of *energeiai*.<sup>24</sup>

How precisely does potency (*hē dynamis*) belong in the intelligible world? Potency is the procession out of the One which, through its own perfection and tendency (*epheisis*),<sup>25</sup> reverts back to its source so as to become *energeia*.

The indeterminate power (*he dynamis*) which accounts for intelligible being is, of course, intelligible matter, which V, 4 (7) calls "the Indefinite Dyad" (*aoristos dyas*; V, 4, 2, 7), showing how Plotinus borrows from Aristotle's account of the "unwritten doctrines" (*agrapha dogmata*) of Plato in order to explicate his own Neoplatonic theory of the generation of the hypostases. This

<sup>24</sup> *Nous* is perfect contemplation, life, and act. Thus, all products of *Nous* are ever diminishing, ever dimmer contemplations, lives, and acts. See VI, 7 (38), 17, 39; III, 8 (30), 8, 14-24.

<sup>25</sup> It is appropriate to borrow this term *epheisis* (meaning tendency or proclivity) and apply it here to the stage of *prohodos* or intelligible matter in the second hypostasis: "this proclivity may be compared with what Plotinus elsewhere describes as unconscious contemplation. In the eighth treatise of *Ennead* 3 he asserts that all things, even down to the vegetable world, are striving (the word *ephiesthai* which brings us back to *epheisis*) after contemplation. If such an urge is the symbol of existence even among inferior beings of the world of sense, it would be foolish to deny it to the substrate (*to hypokeimenon*) of the Second Hypostasis. The likelihood is that the Dyad or Matter betrays in its *epheisis* towards the One that symbol of existence shared by all things with the smallest claim to reality." (J. M. Rist, "The Indefinite Dyad and Intelligible Matter in Plotinus," *Classical Quarterly* 12 [1956]: p. 101.)

priority of *dynamis* in the generation of the Intelligence implies an important assertion: the kinship of intelligible matter to the indeterminacy of the One (which is itself sheer active power, *dynamis tōn pantōn*, II, 8 [30], 10, 1; *pantōn tōn ontōn dynatōtaton*, V, 4 [7], 1, 25) makes it a perfection even greater than that of being or act itself. In other words, it is intelligible matter, not form, which is the supreme perfection in the intelligible world.<sup>26</sup> This, of course, sharply contrasts intelligible matter with its sensible counterpart, sensible matter, which Plotinus paradoxically describes in the closing passages of II, 5 (chapters 4-5) as “truly false” and “really unreal.” As pure being in potency, sensible matter is noting in itself; yet it is in potency all beings, since it may serve as the substrate successively of all forms. In order to be the substrate of all forms, matter must never be any single form and therefore is unable to truly unite with any form. As the eternal capacity for form, matter is never itself in act. As being in potency, matter is powerless to acquire form without an extrinsic agent.

All of this places sensible matter in stark contrast with intelligible matter. As active potency informed by *energeia*, intelligible matter partly describes the multiple and dynamic interrelationships of the perfect beings which constitute the intelligible world. These interrelationships are explored at length in VI, 2 (43).<sup>27</sup>

### *Ennead VI, 2 (43), 7-8; 14-15*

As mentioned before, this treatise is the second of a three-part study, which includes VI, 1 (42) and VI, 3 (44). These treatises aim to clarify and defend Plotinus’ interpretation of the Platonic theory of the *megista genē* (which Plato outlines in the *Sophist*) against the alternative theories of the Aristotelians and Stoics. VI, 2 in particular argues that the Platonic genera are the true *noēta*,

---

<sup>26</sup> Rist draws this conclusion elsewhere: “Intelligible Matter, the first effluence from the One, possesses by its very indeterminacy a kinship with the One which the Forms do not possess. As we read in Enn. 2. 4. 3, matter ‘there’ is everything at the same time. It has nothing into which it can change, for it already possesses everything. This indeterminacy which can, on its return to its Source, yield any one of the eternal Forms, has of itself something more akin to the One than have these later determinations. The Forms are perfectly what they are; they are perfect being. Intelligible Matter has a shadow of the superiority of *to epekeina* in its potential of being all Real Beings.” (“The Indefinite Dyad and Intelligible Matter in Plotinus,” pp. 105-106.)

<sup>27</sup> Between II, 5 (25) and VI, 2 (43), Plotinus wrote two other treatises that deal with *energeia* at length. These are VI, 7 (38) and VI, 8 (39). The former treatise is important in that it reflects Plotinus’ attempt to connect his theory of *energeia* with the cosmological principles of Plato’s *Timaeus* and reiterates explicitly that the One transcends *energeia* (the word occurring 66 times) but is, in the final analysis, not a reliable statement of Plotinus’ true position on *energeia*, since it was written for exceptional and purely polemical reasons. See Émile Bréhier, *Plotin Ennéades* (Paris: “Les Belles Lettres,” 1938), Vol. 6, Part 2, “Notice” to VI, p. 8.

*onta*, and *energeia*, each of which is one in reality with the Divine Intelligence, the Plotinian equivalent of the Platonic Demiurge.

As far as *energeia* is concerned, *Ennead* VI, 2 (43) falls into two important sections, the first consisting of chapters seven and eight and the second of chapters fourteen and fifteen.<sup>28</sup> Section One is a direct statement of Plotinus' own position on the *megista genē*, while Section Two is a criticism of one aspect of Aristotle's position on the categories and the genera.

Chapters seven and eight of VI, 2 culminate a discussion that originates in the opening chapters of the treatise. Chapters one through seven lay down several important conclusions. First, the *megista gene* are not only the ultimate objects of the science of dialectics but are also the logically distinct constituents of the intelligible world, each constituent being identical with the second hypostasis. Secondly, each genus is equal to every other since each is really identical with every other (only differentiated by logical analysis). Thirdly, the real unity of the intelligible world results from its participation in the One. Lastly, the unities of body and soul are analogous to the intelligible unities and therefore make helpful beginnings toward knowledge of the intelligible world.

In chapters seven and eight Plotinus shows that an analysis of the intelligible world yields five supreme Forms: *ousia*, *kinesis*, *stasis*, *tauton* and *heteron*.<sup>29</sup> While he follows Plato in accepting these Forms as the ultimate beings and objects of knowledge, Plotinus parts with his predecessor in several respects. First, whereas Plato separates the intellection of the Demiurge from the Forms, Plotinus unites them. This union of *noēsis* and *noēta* unlocks Plotinus' whole account of the role of the *megista genē* in the intelligible world. Each genus represents either one or another of those two logically distinct components of *Nous*: *noēsis* and *noēta* (8, 318). *Kinēsis* is the *noēsis* which produces the eternal Forms (7, 18-20; 8, 1-5). But *kinēsis* from another point of view is itself a Form, since every Form is an intellect and therefore also a *noēton* (8, 14-18; 23-34; 43-49). Furthermore, in these two respects *kinēsis* involves *energeia*. As intellection, *kinēsis* is the pre-condition for all Forms or acts, and as a Form itself *kinēsis* must be numbered among the totality of acts.

The other four *megista genē* are likewise acts. *Stasis* is the *energeia* of the Intelligence signified by the Forms, which are the termini of *kinesis* (7, 24-31; 8, 23-27). *Ousia* is *energeia* in two respects: (1) in that *Nous* as a whole, i.e., as

<sup>28</sup> The end of VI, 2 (chapters 19-22) also gives attention to *energeia* but only to repeat what was discussed in V, 9 (5), that each Form is an act, but is potentially every other Form. Richard Harder (*Plotins Schriften* [Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1957], Band IV, b, p. 475) observes that these final chapters are something of an "Anhang," being thematically detached from the rest of the treatise. For these reasons I will not discuss these closing chapters of VI, 2.

<sup>29</sup> Plotinus has already treated all of these principles, except *stasis*, in *Ennead* VI, 7 (38), only more under the influence of Plato's *Timaeus* than the *Sophist*.

the second hypostasis, is the Plotinian equivalent to Aristotle's *noēsis noēsēos* and thus is pure act; (2) in that each of the Forms (each an *ousia*) is a logically distinct act (7, 27-31; 8, 7-11; 11-18). *Heteron* is *energeia* since it also refers to the plurality of the *different* Forms (8, 30-43). Finally, *tauton* is *energeia* in that it denotes the unity of all Forms comprehended by the divine *noēsis* (8, 34-43).

Secondly, Plato does not regard the *megista genē* as categories, and yet Plotinus interprets them as such in order to refute the Aristotelian and Stoic theory of categories. In fact, Plotinus holds that the Platonic genera are the only true categories because they are modes of perfect or intelligible being, which alone is authentic *ousia* and *energeia*. Accordingly, Plotinus rejects the Stoic and Aristotelian categories because they are grounded in sensible being, which is unreal and a false *noēton*. Consequently, Dialectics, the science of Platonic forms, is genuine *epistēmē*, while Aristotelian and Stoic wisdom is a pseudo-science.

Plotinus connects *energeia* with his theory of categories by explaining that each of the supreme *onta* and *noēta* are acts. The *megista genē* are genuine categories, the most comprehensive modes of being, because they are acts. The Aristotelian categories are only pseudo-*ousiai* and therefore pseudo-*energeiai*. Accordingly, they can only support pseudo-*epistēmē*.<sup>30</sup>

Thirdly, Plotinus' indebtedness to *energeia* frees him from the Platonic doctrine of participation when he explains the interrelationships of the *megista genē* (8, 43-49). Since participation, as Plotinus understands it, is between lower and higher realities, it is not suited to an account of the supreme genera, which are equal realities.<sup>31</sup> This equality, in the final analysis, is due to the real identity of the genera. As identical with the Intelligence, they may collectively be defined as pure act. As logically distinct, they are each an act. Thus, *energeia* rather than *metechein* (to participate) explains properly the nature and relationships of Forms for Plotinus.

---

<sup>30</sup> For some helpful remarks on this implication of Plotinus' theory of categories, see John Anton, "Plotinus' Approach to Categorical Theory," in *The Significance of Neoplatonism*, R. Baine Harris, ed. (Albany, New York: SUNY Press, 1976), pp. 83-99.

<sup>31</sup> For Plotinus participation is associated with the doctrine of *logos*, the purpose of which is to explain the hierarchy of realities. Accordingly, Plotinus employs participation only to describe the relationship of lower existents to higher ones. A second reason he does not permit participation among the highest Forms is that his conception of participation, since it is designed for the needs of an *henology* (where to be real is to be one) rather than an ontology (where to be real is to be a being), is far more literal than Plato's. According to Plotinus, when one existent participates in another, it actually acquires the reality of that other. The participant, to the extent it is real, is identical with that in which it participates and, ultimately, is identical with the One. But since the product must be less perfect than the producer (and participation is a kind of production for Plotinus), participation is always between a lower and a higher and never between the *megista genē* which are equal in reality.

Fourthly, Plotinus does not admit with Plato that the *megista genē* are the primary realities. As the supreme objects of Dialectics, the genera are the supreme beings, but Plotinus relegates them to a secondary and derivative place in reality since, for him, being entails some measure of multiplicity and imperfection. The First reality, however, must be purely one and thus perfect. For Plotinus ontology must give way to "henology" (where reality is unity, not being). Moreover, Dialectics must ultimately give way to negative theology and mysticism, the object of which transcends the genera.

After Plotinus' presentation in chapters seven and eight of VI, 2, he highlights several questions to illumine further his conception of the *megista genē*. First, he responds negatively and at length to the question of whether the One can be itself a genus (chapters 9-12). Secondly, he considers whether the Aristotelian category of quantity can belong among the *megista genē* (chapter 13). After replying negatively to this last question, he next (chapters 14-15) explains why the Aristotelian category of quality cannot belong There.<sup>32</sup> His comments in these chapters, although occurring in a polemical context, clarify how *energeia* in the sensible world contrasts with *energeia* in the intelligible world.

In general Plotinus argues in chapters fourteen and fifteen that quality presupposes real distinctions and therefore cannot belong in the intelligible world. This is true whether one considers essential or accidental qualities (*symplērotika*<sup>33</sup> or *pathē*; 14, 15-19, even though both, like the *megista genē*, are *energeia*.<sup>34</sup> Essential qualities are acts that flow directly from an *ousia* and thus cannot belong where there are only logically distinct existents. Accidental qualities certainly cannot belong There since they are "acts" totally extrinsic to *ousiai* (e.g., whiteness to a man).<sup>35</sup> In essence, the *megista genē* do not complete (*symplērousi*) intelligible *ousia* in the way that qualities complete sensible *ousia*. In the sensible world the completion is between the really distinct and prior *ousia* and the posterior qualities. However, in the intelligible world the completion is between what is really identical and what is only conceptually distinct (14, 9-11; 15, 2-4; 6-18).

When Plotinus denies quality a place among the intelligible, he denies quality a place in science as well, for the intelligible are the only true objects of science. Qualities are part of sensible *ousiai* which are, according to Platonism

<sup>32</sup> Plotinus' remarks here depend in some measure on the much earlier treatise II, 6 (17), "On Being, or On Quality."

<sup>33</sup> See II, 6 (17), 1, 7-39.

<sup>34</sup> VI, 2 does not explicitly identify accidental qualities as acts. However, we know them to be such from II, 6, 3, 7, 20-22.

<sup>35</sup> Accidental qualities are acts in a very weak sense. Accidental qualities are only shadows or images of true acts which exist in the intelligible world. For example, the accidental quality "whiteness" is a shadow of true "Whiteness," a Form and genuine act existing in the intelligible world. See II, 6, 3, 1-5; 23-30.

and Neoplatonism alike, shadows and phantoms of reality. Obviously, such a view veils a serious criticism of Aristotelian philosophy since, according to the Peripatetics, sensible qualities and sensible *ousiai* are the proper objects of science. Thus, VI, 2 betrays a purely Platonic conception of science and implicitly charges that both Aristotelian physics and metaphysics are illusory sciences.

Since qualities, as well as sensible *ousiai*, appear on an inferior level of reality, it must be assumed that they are not contemplated objects of the second hypostasis. Qualities result from the inferior contemplation of Soul, the third hypostasis. The contemplation in the intelligible world forbids qualities, since the object of contemplation "There" is a real unity, only fragmented in the light of human conceptual analysis. Accordingly, the *Nous* through its contemplation is able at once to comprehend how one Form or act is really the same as (i.e., neither prior nor posterior to) another. The second hypostasis knows that The Human, for example, is in real union with The Grammatical and The Musical. The contemplation of the third hypostasis, however, fragments its object, producing real distinctions and thereby producing qualities and separate *ousiai*. It follows that Soul cannot know the real identity of man or musical. It knows them as really distinguishable acts: the one as an *ousia* and the other as a quality.

In light of this commentary, VI, 2 (43) shows (as much implicitly as explicitly) that *energeia* is bound up with Plotinus' account of production and is fundamental to his contrast between the intelligible and the sensible world.

### Summary and Conclusions

This discussion generates some important conclusions concerning *energeia* in Plotinus. Obviously, *energeia* and its correlate, *dynamis*, are involved in almost all significant subjects in Plotinus' philosophy: e.g., the production of the hypostases out of the One;<sup>36</sup> the transcendence of the One over being, life, and intelligence; the nature of contemplation; the hierarchy of beings and lives; the nature of the intelligible world (the universe of Plato's *megista genē*); the nature of the One itself (who is not *energeia* but pure active *dynamis*); and the nature of prime matter (which is not *energeia* but pure passive *dynamis*).

Plotinus demonstrates his commitment to *energeia* by the simple fact that he devotes an entire treatise (indeed one from his middle period, in which, as Porphyry says, he produced works "of the highest perfection"),<sup>37</sup> namely, II, 5 (25), to the *energeia/dynamis* distinction. He there presents certain technical

<sup>36</sup> This is clear from the fact that out of a prior active *dynamis* (the stage of *prohodos*) an hypostasis turns back (the stage of *epistrophē*) to contemplate its source and thereby becomes *energeia*. See V, 4 (7), 2; VI, 7 (38), 16-17.

<sup>37</sup> Porphyry, "On the Life of Plotinus," 6, 35. In A. H. Armstrong, *Plotinus*, Vol. I (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1967), p. 25.

distinctions which, on the whole, prevail throughout the *Enneads*, namely the expressions *hē energeia* versus *hē dynamis* and *to energeia on* versus *to dynamei on*. These principles account for the intelligible and sensible worlds. Thus, they are important to Plotinus' philosophical project as a whole.

In light of such evidence, one must conclude that such scholars as Philip Merlan, who hold that "Plotinus does not have much use for either of the two concepts of actuality and potentially," are quite mistaken.<sup>38</sup> On the contrary, this study has disclosed that without *energeia* Plotinus' entire ontology is inexplicable.

Once one discerns how *energeia* is operative in that ontology, another conclusion comes to mind: *energeia*, which is synonymous with contemplation (*noēsis*) and being (*ousia, eidos, to on, noēton*), should be translated in various ways out of respect for the fact that there are different levels of contemplation and being and that there are different ways of looking at being. Of course, in its most perfect sense, i.e., when signifying Divine Mind and the intelligible world, *energeia* should be translated as "act" or "achieved perfection." These seem to be the best English equivalents for that part of reality which is perfect thought or being, i.e., for that partial reality that is unity-in-multiplicity. It is important to note that these terms will also apply to any *logos* of intelligence, in that every *logos* is a certain thought of being realized on a certain level of perfection.

Besides "act" or "achieved perfection," it is also correct to translate *energeia* as "actuation," since form and intellection emerge out of prior *dynamis*. If *energeia* properly describes the stage of *epistrophē*, then *energeia* has in a sense "become" and thus may be translated as "actuation," signifying that which has become act. This translation is especially appropriate with regard to the *energeia* of the second hypostasis, which actuates itself and every other being.

In addition, as it refers to the level of human *praxis*, a weakened kind of contemplation that requires the development of moral habits and conduct, *energeia* may be correctly translated as "activity." This is a translation of the term appropriate to my comment on chapter two of II, 5 (25).<sup>39</sup>

A third important conclusion is that Plotinus' handling of *energeia* is generally a reaction, in both positive and negative ways, to the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle. Of course, a response to Aristotle is demanded by the simple fact that in the first place Plotinus adopts Aristotle's neologism, *energeia*. Upon accepting this term, Plotinus also embraces some of its Aristotelian applications, the most conspicuous of which is the description of the Intelligence as pure act. Here it is important to recall that, while Plotinus denies *energeia* of the

<sup>38</sup> *The Cambridge History of Later Greek and Early Medieval Philosophy*, A. H. Armstrong, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967). Part I is written by Merlan himself: "Greek Philosophy from Plato to Plotinus," above quotation, p. 49.

<sup>39</sup> See II, 5, 2. See above note 22.



highest reality, he agrees with Aristotle that *energeia* signifies *ousia* and form. Therefore, *energeia* applies most perfectly to the divine *Nous*, the Separate Intelligence. By so describing perfection as Intelligence, *energeia* (Plotinus agrees) must signify perfect life, for, as Aristotle argues in Book Lambda of the *Metaphysics*, to contemplate most fully is to live most completely.

Furthermore, Aristotelian influence occurs in the way Plotinus separates *hē dynamis* (active potency or power) from *to dynamei on* (passive potency). The former expression, as it applies to the order of beings, denotes perfection that is rooted in *energeia*. Active power follows from the presence of form (act). The latter expression, *to dynamei on*, applies only to that which from a certain point of view lacks form or determination (act). In the strictest sense, passive potency characterizes prime matter, which is never form but the eternal capacity for form (act). This general analysis clearly harmonizes with Aristotle's conception of active and passive potency and witnesses to Plotinus' inclination to remain faithful to Aristotle's idea of *dynamis* as well as of *energeia*. That he is faithful regarding the latter notion is particularly evident in his conception of *hē energeia* as form and *to energeia on* as a completely realized or informed being. This interpretation of these expressions accords perfectly with Aristotle's conception of them.

Aristotle's influence is evident even when Plotinus takes up ostensibly Platonic tasks, such as his treatment of the *Sophist's megista genē*. His project here is to justify the Platonic "categories" over the Aristotelian ones, and yet he does not hesitate to employ Aristotelian *energeia* to achieve this objective. He defines each of the *megista genē* as an *energeia*. This definition follows from the fact that each genus is only distinct by abstraction from the second hypostasis itself, which is pure act. Accordingly, each Form is also act.

This discussion of the Platonic genera involves a certain irony. Because the *megista genē*, Plotinus concludes, are perfect *energeiai*, they are true objects of science. However, the Aristotelian categories are imperfect *energeiai* and not true objects of science. Hence, Plotinus employs Aristotle in order to condemn him.

Plotinus, perhaps surprisingly, relies on Aristotle's potency/act distinction when he explains the intelligible world. He draws on Aristotle because, unlike Plato, Plotinus argues that the universe of Forms (while external) is dependent on the One and thus "emerges" into being. To explain this emergence of the second hypostasis, Plotinus employs act and potency in ways Aristotle himself could not have foreseen. Plotinus incorporates act and potency by arguing that out of a prior potency, indeed, the ultimate potency (*hē dynamis tōn pantōn*)

which is the infinite active power of the One, the order of posterior hypostases (acts) originates.<sup>40</sup>

At this point Plotinus diverges from Aristotle in two important respects: (1) this emergence from potency to act is a movement not into perfection but rather imperfection; (2) the absolute priority of the One, who is sheer *dynamis*, renders objectionable the Aristotelian principle that *energeia* is ultimately prior to *dynamis* in reality. These differences prove that, no matter how indebted he may be to Aristotle in many respects, Plotinus qualifies his acceptance of Peripatetic doctrines. He does not follow the Stagirite as if he were a disciple, that is to say, as if he were himself an Aristotelian. This is demonstrated by his rejection of Aristotle's notion of *entelecheia*. Plotinus, of course, agrees that soul is act (*energeia*), for it is a *logos* of the hypostasis Soul but denies that it is merely the act (*entelecheia*) of the body. Soul is an act because it is a complete, independent *ousia*, not because it is incomplete and dependent.

Plotinus does not follow Aristotle uncritically or slavishly, because he thinks of himself primarily as a Platonist. In fact, as Bréhier observes,<sup>41</sup> he often perceives himself as an enemy of Aristotelianism. For this reason Plotinus' adaptation of *energeia* is largely governed by Platonic principles. This is evident, for example, in the way he appropriates *energeia* to his Platonic conception of that most fundamental *megiston genos*, namely *kinēsis*. He satisfies the demands of Aristotelian philosophy by characterizing the Separate Intelligence as pure act, but also satisfies Platonic philosophy by describing the second hypostasis as motion. This synthesis would on the face of it seem impossible, since Aristotle infers that the Separate Intelligence as pure act must be *akinētos*. But Plotinus can achieve this synthesis because he makes Platonic *kinēsis* prior to Aristotelian *energeia*, in the sense that *kinēsis* is the eternal pre-condition (intelligible matter)<sup>42</sup> for the actuation of the divine *ousiai* and *eidē* which constitute the second hypostasis. The Intelligence is at once *kinēsis* and *energeia* because the former condition is logically prior to the latter.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>40</sup> In fact, two potencies precede the actuation of *Nous*: (1) the ultimate active power of the One/Good, and (2) the intrinsic, but eternal, indeterminate active power or intelligible matter (*prohodos*) of the second hypostasis itself.

<sup>41</sup> Émile Bréhier, *Plotin Ennéades*, Vol. 6. Part I, 8.

<sup>42</sup> From one point of view, *kinēsis* and *heteron* are properties of intelligible matter. Plotinus makes this point in II, 4 (12), 5, 28-29.

<sup>43</sup> Two essays by Riccardo Chiaradonna help clarify the unique nature of the second hypostasis as a combination of *noēsis* and *noēta*. The first of these articles, "Energeia et kinēsis chez Plotin et Aristotle (Enn. VI, 1 [42], 16, 4-19), in *Dunamis: autour de la puissance chez Aristotle*, ed. M. Crubellieer, Annick Jaulin et al., Louvain, La Neuve, Peeters, 2008, pp. 471-491, explains that Plotinus has to liberate *energeia* from its association with Aristotle's doctrine of *kinēsis*. This is because the latter is closely bound with his doctrines of hylomorphism and time. In a second article, "Energeiai e qualità in Plotino: a proposito de Enn. II 6 (17)," in W. Lapini, L. Malusa,

Plato's doctrine of participation, although reinterpreted somewhat by Plotinus, also governs the incorporation of *energeia* into Plotinus' philosophy. According to Plotinus every lower being is an act because it is a participant in a higher being or higher act. Because Plotinus' philosophy is a monism, he interprets participation in a far more literal sense than Plato. For Plotinus a lower existent participates in a higher because it really is that higher, but only as manifested on a lower, more fragmented, more multiple, less real, level of being. Thus, Plotinus' conception of participation is expressed in his *logos* doctrine: a *logos* is a higher existent on a lower level of reality. Since every *logos* is an act, one may say that Plotinus adapts *energeia* to his interpretation of the Platonic doctrine of participation.

Naturally, Plato's theory of Forms is a basic theme in Plotinus, as is evident in his discourse on the *megista genē*. He does not hesitate to refashion *energeia* to suit the Platonic theory of Forms, at least as he understands it. If, according to Aristotle, *energeia* belongs to Intelligence, then it should also, Plotinus infers, belong to the Platonic Forms, for they are the distinct but really identical constituents of Divine Mind, resulting from its act of *epistrophē*. Accordingly, Plotinus concludes that each Form is itself Intelligence and Life. Each Form is an act that contains all other lives and acts. This is so because in its intellection it comprehends the eternal reasons for all beings. Thus, the second hypostasis is, considered individually, pure act and is also, considered universally, the totality of acts.

On account of these conclusions, conjoined to my commentary on *Enneads* II, 5 (25) and VI, 2 (43), I hope to have shown that Plotinus' doctrine of *energeia/dynamis* unlocks his entire philosophy<sup>44</sup>.

---

L. Mauro, eds. *Gli antichi e noi. Studi dedicati a Antonio Mario Battezzare*, Brigati, Genova, 2009, vol. 2, pp. 443-459. Chiaradonna explains that Plotinus cannot admit qualities cannot into the intelligible world. Accordingly, Plotinus explains that perfections of substances cannot be qualities but activities of formative principles. So understood they can be forms (*energeiai*) in the Intelligible World. Those things that are qualities in the physical world have counterparts in the intelligible world that are, in fact, kinds, forms, or *energeiai*.

<sup>44</sup> Not surprisingly, scholars have given considerable attention to the relationship between *kinēsis* and *energeia* in Aristotle's metaphysics. Regarding the relationship of *energeia* and *kinēsis*, a number of studies examine a passage that raises a grammatical question at *Metaphysics*, Theta 6, 1048b 18-35. These articles deliberate whether the distinction between the present and perfect tenses of certain verbs indicates how states differ from activities. The significance of the passage in question is compromised somewhat by the suspicion that it was later added, not being original to Aristotle's corpus. Regardless, the value of such studies is put in perspective by Charles Hagen in "The Energeia-Kinesis Distinction and Aristotle's Conception of Praxis," *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, Vol. 22, 3, July, 1984, pp. 263-280. There he observes that whatever its linguistic significance, the "tense test" is no substitute for the metaphysical accounts of the *kinēsis-energeia* relationship which Aristotle elaborates in diverse contexts elsewhere, contexts that examine closely "the presence or absence of limit, possession or lack of indefinite continuability,

\*\*\*

**PLOTINUS' ADOPTION OF ARISTOTLE'S  
DOCTRINE OF *ACT* (*ENERGEIA*)**

SUMMARY

Plotinus demonstrated his commitment to *energeia* by having devoted an entire treatise to the *energeia/dynamis* distinction, which seems to be important to Plotinus' philosophical project as a whole. The article attempts to demonstrate that *energeia*, which is synonymous with contemplation (*noēsis*) and being (*ousia, eidos, to on, noēton*), should be translated in various ways out of respect for the fact that there are different levels of contemplation and being and that there are different ways of looking at being. It also maintains that Plotinus' handling of *energeia* is generally a reaction, in both positive and negative ways, to the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle. On account of delivered commentary on *Enneads* II, 5 (25) and VI, 2 (43), conjoined to its conclusions, the article strives for showing that Plotinus' doctrine of *energeia/dynamis* unlocks his entire philosophy.

KEYWORDS: Plotinus, Plato, Aristotle, contemplation, being, act, achieved perfection, actuality, activity.

---

and completeness or incompleteness." In light of these explorations elsewhere in Aristotle's texts, Hagen observes that "there is less reason than many have supposed for thinking that performance on the tense test is the basis of the distinction Aristotle is drawing." In other words, such studies must not distract us from remembering that Aristotle is primarily a metaphysician, not a grammarian, linguist, or logician. Three other studies are noteworthy on this controversy regarding the tense test: (1) Michael J. White, "Aristotle's Concept of Theoria and the *Energeia-Kinēsis* Distinction," *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, Vol. 18, 3, July, 1980, pp. 253-263; (2) M.-Th. Liske, "Kinesis and *Energeia* bei Aristoteles," *Phronesis* July, 1991, Vol. 36-2, July, pp. 161-178; (3) Dag Haug, "Aristotle's *kinesis/energeia*-test and the semantics of the Greek perfect," *Linguistics* 42-2, 2004, 387-418.