

## Aristotle on the Infinite

In the *Physics*, motion and time are considered to be what is continuous, and the concept of the infinite appears in Aristotle's explanation that what is continuous can be divided ad infinitum (200b16-21). In this paper, I clarify Aristotle's conception of the infinite by scrutinizing his uses of 'a statue' (206a19-20) and 'the day/the contest' (206a21-22).

Many of the interpretative questions about the infinite in Aristotle center around the potentiality/actuality distinction.

(1) I argue that Aristotle's explanation which contrasts the infinite with a statue (206a18-21) should be taken to mean that the way in which the infinite exists potentially/actually is not the same as the way in which a statue exists potentially/actually, and *not* that the infinite, unlike a statue, does not exist actually. I criticize scholars (e.g. Bowin 2007) who are perhaps influenced by Hardie & Gaye's (in Barnes 1984) standard (but imprecise) translation of the passage, 'something infinite will not be in actuality' (206a20-21). The key question that scholars have failed to address adequately is how to reconcile 'the infinite exists only potentially' (206b12-13) and 'and actually too' (206b13-14). I provide a consistent reading of these remarks.

(2) I propose interpreting Aristotle's account of the infinite by analogy with 'the day/the contest' (206a21-22) as implying that, in his view, the infinite is said to exist actually because of the fact that its parts become actual one after another. My contention is that Aristotle understands the infinite by division in actuality as a process of becoming actually divided from being divisible, which can be repeated infinitely, rather than as a process of being divided infinitely in actuality as opposed to in potentiality (*pace* Hintikka 1966).

(3) It is mistaken, *pace* Coope (2012), to explain the incompleteness of the infinite by

division in terms of '[being] incomplete while it is going on', which belongs to a process of change as contrasted with an activity (*Metaphysics* Θ.6, 1048b18-35). It is important to note that '[being] incomplete while it is going on' applies to a process in general, regardless of whether infinite or finite. The type of incompleteness at issue in Aristotle's discussion, I claim, is one that an infinite division has insofar as it is infinite and not insofar as it is a process. I also clarify why Aristotle does not explain the infinite by division by an analogous comparison to a process of a statue's coming to be, a more familiar Aristotelian example of a process.

### Bibliography

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