

Act and Potency

by

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Manner of Procedure

This treatment of Act and Potency shall consider the following items, in the respective order given.

After showing the importance of acquiring a knowledge of act and potency, we shall inquire how the intellect comes to the knowledge of act and potency. From the sensible evidence of change the reasoning intellect will abstract and arrive at a concept of something which is, what it is, but which can be something else. The intellect will now be able to define the results of the rational experiment, and we shall have a workable knowledge of act and potency.

Then will follow a consideration of the various kinds of act and the various kinds of potency.

The interrelation of act and potency will show how they are present in all created things, as well as their mutual real distinction.

From learning that act is perfection, and that every being is a certain act, we shall inquire why every being is not perfect.

A brief summary will recapitulate the main points of the thesis, and also afford an appropriate conclusion.

To attempt to write this thesis on act and potency means to tread over ground that has been covered many times previously. Hence, originality can be confined mostly to a manner of presentation; and while thoughts and ideas previously given by

other authors can be acknowledged in general, it is impossible to point out those thoughts in particular. The following books have been most useful in preparation of this thesis: Maritan, Introduction to Philosophy; Garzigou-Lagrange, God, His Existence and His Nature; Gredt, Elementa Philosophiae; and Renard, Philosophy of Being.

Let us now proceed to an idea of the importance of understanding the concepts of act and potency.

Importance of Thesis

The most fundamental division of Aristotelelian and Scholastic philosophy is the division of being into act and potency. This adequate division, which will become evident as the paper unfolds, is carried through the whole field of intellectual reasoning to explain the determinable and the determined. For a brief substantiation of this statement let us turn to the various branches of philosophy.

Under metaphysics come the supreme genera of beings, and we are met with substances and accidents, which are either potential to existence or already existing. Further, we constantly refer to the essence and existence of a being, and we see that essence is potentiality with regard to the existence.

In the study of the material body we are faced with its composition; and we say that every material substance is composed of matter and form. Now the matter is potency, while the form is act. We face change and motion constantly, and it is defined as the transition from potency to act.

In psychology we understand that powers and faculties are potentialities of an actual soul. External senses are potencies with respect to the stimulus which gives them determination, or act. And internal senses depend on external sensations for their exercise.

Now from these examples, it becomes more and more plain, that a thorough understanding of the ideas of act and potency is indispensable for a scholastic philosopher, and hence it is with this view in mind that this paper is written.

Let us now proceed to understand how we first arrive at our concepts of act and potency, and then we shall be in a position to define what is meant by them.

The Concept of Potency

The most evident fact, which meets our experience, is change. The baseball hurtles through space; the dog runs; what was cold becomes hot under the action of fire; food eaten by us becomes part of us (our flesh); what was living, dies; and every spring the leaves reappear on the trees. It is impossible to deny change, while at the same time it is quite difficult to ontologically prove change. Formulations have been set up by ancient philosophers such as Zeno to prove that change does not exist, but such expositions are only playfull problems to refute, and while even Zeno might say, "There is no change" he could not believe it, nor act on it; as is quite evident to all people.

In all the above examples of change we observe that there is a transition from one being to another, or from one mode of

being to another. And we equally notice there is always something which undergoes this change. It is the "dog" or the "baseball", etc., which changes its mode of being: "now here--nowthere". It is absurd to think that change could exist before something which undergoes change. For if it is not something that changes, then it is not--something, and something which is not, can't change.

We have just said that this change is from one being to another or from one mode of being to another. Since therefore, it is with being that we are concerned, it is necessary to lay aside all particularities which make being to be this being and to consider being in the abstract--remembering, of course, that it was first necessary to arrive at the idea of change through sense perception.

In the intellect we can speak of this transition as a becoming. And immediately the intellect asks how a being can become another being. In other words, how can the starting point of change become the goal?¹ The first attempt at an answer would say that the starting point becomes the goal in respect of what the starting point is. But we know that the starting point is nothing but what it is, and already it is everything that it is; and therefore in this respect it is not capable of becoming, for it already is. The next obvious possibility of how the starting point can become the goal, is to say that it can become the goal in respect of what it is not.

1. C. F. Maritan, Introduction to Philosophy, pg. 241.

But this is absurd, for in respect of what a thing is not, it is nothing; pure and simple, and hence can not be the source of the product of change. It can not become, for it simply isn't. Hence, we see plainly that the starting point cannot become the goal either in respect of what it is, or in respect of what is not. In otherwords, the new being which is the product of change can be derived neither from the being which already exists, nor from a nothing which has no existence whatever.

But this is not to conclude that change is impossible, as Parmenides¹ maintained; for evidently something has been overlooked in the foregoing analysis. We agree that the starting point is everything which it is, but we say that it is not yet all which it can be. In otherwords, it is not yet that particular thing it is destined to become, but yet it possesses the capacity to be it. Briefly--it can be it! Therefore the starting point becomes the goal by means of something which lies between that in respect of what it is and in respect of what it is not. This intermediate condition is the power of being. This intermediate state lies between being and nothing. An example will illustrate the point. The arrow is here (on the bow for instance) and from the standpoint of "being", pure and simple, it is nowhere else; but it can be there (at the goal for example) and possesses the means to be there. Also, bread is bread and nothing but bread and not at all flesh in the sense of flesh completely realized; but it can cease to be bread and

1. Garigou-Lagrange, God, His Existence and Nature. Vol I, p.197.

become flesh. There is in bread that which enables it to undergo change under the influence of a determined cause.

From this we see that things are not held fast by what they are or are not, for even while they are this or that, we see that they can become this or that--they possess the power to be there and no longer here. But as long as they are here, or are this, that power they possess remains mere power.

We must remember that this "power" is something real. This becomes evident if we use the example of a sleeping man. While asleep, this man does not see, nor talk, nor think, and yet we know that these respective powers are still present in him, even though they are not being exercised, for while he is not speaking, yet he retains the power to speak. He still has it within him; but he does not have the power to become a tree or a brick, for that power is not in him.

But this power of being is not being. We know that the power of speaking is not speaking; and yet power of being, without as yet being, is not sheer non-entity. The power of speaking is not nothing. And hence, the power of being, in itself, can not properly be called a being; nor on the other hand can it be called sheer non-entity. It is different from either one of them; it is something of its own, but it does have a place somewhere, for, precisely in so far as things can be something they are not, they, in some respect, are!

Now, up to this point of the paper, we have come upon something which can not properly be called a being except in an

improper and secondary sense, but at the same time, this "something" is real. Philosophers call this "something", Potency!

Garrigou-Lagrange, (quoting from Aristotle), in approaching this same idea says, "The origin of becoming presupposes an intermediate state between being (which is determined) and mere nothing; this intermediate state is being as yet undetermined or in potency; for what is already determined, since it is actually being, can not be the cause of its being as such, and from nothing comes nothing; and yet being becomes. Hence, becoming is a transition from potency to act. What becomes hot had a capacity for becoming hot, though it was not actually hot."¹

At this point let us understand precisely where potency fits into the scheme of philosophy. On one extreme we think of nothing, pure and simple. This is in an order all by itself, and does not influence potency because we have already shown that potency is not "nothing". Therefore potency must lie in the order of being, and yet it is not a being, pure and simple. Hence we dub it with the name non-being. In the order of being, therefore, we have its entire scope subdivided, when we say "being and non-being" include all real things. There is only one example of a non-being and that is potency--of which there are various kinds to be treated later. But with this division in mind we are now in a position to understand what was stated in

1. Garrigou-Lagrange, God, His Existence and Nature. Vol I p. 194.

the first part of this treatise, viz, the most fundamental division of Aristotelian and Scholastic Philosophy is the division of being into act and potency. Act is being, and potency is non-being.

And it is also interesting to note here that the Congregation of Studies in July, 1914 handed down through the medium of Acta Apostolicae Sedis a list of twenty four theses which were to be promulgated by every school teaching Scholastic Philosophy. The first one of these twenty four approved theses is the following. "Potency and act so divide being that whatsoever exists either is Pure Act (being), or is necessarily composed of act and potency as to its premordial and intrinsic principles."¹

When the early philosophers refuted the arguments proposed by Parmenides,² it is interesting to see how they referred to potency. Plato, according to Garrigou-Lagrange,³ said in his work entitled the Sophist that he did not fear "to incur the risk of being considered a paracide by attacking the formula of Parmenides and affirming the existence of non-being."⁴ At first these two terms seem contradictory, viz., the "existence of non-being", but upon consideration it becomes clear that by this "non-being" he referred to potency. At the particular instance in which he said the foregoing, Plato was explaining why there is multiplicity of being. The non-being of which he

1. Parenthesis added. "Potentia et actus ita dividunt ens, ut quidquid est, vel sit actus purus, vel ex potentia et actu, tamquam primis atque intrinsicis principiis necessario coalescat" Acta Apostolicae Sedis, Aug. 1914.

2. Garrigou-Lagrange, God, His Existence and Nature. Vol 1 p. 197.

3. Garrigou-Lagrange, Ibid., p. 197.

4. Plato, The Sophist. 241D: 257A: 259 E.

spoke was that intermediate state between being and mere nothing --the limit with regard to being.

Aristotle in refuting the same Parmenides said that the distinction between various individuals of the same species can not be explained except by admitting the "reality of non-being"¹ or matter as the subject and limit of the form, common to these individuals.

All these quotations are presented here to get a better idea of this thing called potency. It is not just a word which philosophers use to explain something, but it is something real and is to be found in all created being.

But at this time it may be necessary to eradicate false ideas about potency. We must begin by saying that we cannot know potency qua potency, for if there were no being, we could never know about potency. But, because we see that something became something else, we can thereby look in retrospect and say that, because a thing is, it could be, or had the capability of becoming what it already is. There is an important distinction to be made here. If we look back at the origin of the becoming of what now is, we can speak of it as the potency to be; but, if we look forward and say that something will become something else, it cannot properly be called a potency, but rather a possibility.² In other words what will be is only a possibility and is in the logical order. While what is, had a real potency

1. Aristotle, I Metaphysics Book 1, Chap. 5.

2. Dubray, Actus et Potentia. "Catholic Encyclopedia" Vol 1, p. 515.

and is to be treated of in the real order. Hence being in potency is not to be identified with possible being. They are in two different orders.

The Concept of Act

Up to this time we have centered our discussion around potency, but let us turn now to a consideration of act. This potency, although it is not nothing, it is not being in the full sense of the term. The term which philosophers give to a being pure and simple is act!

Act can not be defined; that is to say, it can't be put into a genus and species proper to it. This is quite evident because there is no genus above being. But because act can not be defined is not to say that we can't know that there is such a thing as act. Act is the being of an existing thing. It is always a perfection. It is always something in distinction to potency which is a capacity to become something. Act is the finished the determined while potency is the capacity to become finished, it is the determinable. These last ideas of the determined in relation to the determinable are the most common expressions of the concepts of act and potency.

It is probably already evident that the concepts of act and potency confound the imagination. Since they are based on being, they are apprehended only by the intellect. Nevertheless, we should recall that it was through the senses that we observed being or act, and through the senses that we perceived motion and came to the idea of potency, because this potency, of itself, is also inconceivable except through act, for if it could of

itself be conceived it must have some determination.

In the earlier part of this subject we spoke of change as the transition from one being to another, or from one mode of being to another. This definition was useful to arrive at the concept of something which is and of something which can be something else. From there we abstracted to being and the power of being--to act and potency. Let us now return to that first definition and give it in terms of our new ideas.

Change is the transition from potency to act. With this more precise definition in mind, it follows that everything which is subject to change, viz., all created beings, in so far as they are changeable are composed of potency and act. There must be some act in the changeable thing; or else it couldn't change, for, as we have pointed out, it is always something, which changes. There must be some potency, or else it must needs remain as it is, and in this respect there is no change. Thus potency can not exist of itself, but is always in some subject which is in act. How this potency is in a subject will be later explained.

Now potency can not reduce itself into act, but must be reduced by something which is already in act. For potency of itself is undetermined, while act is determined. And it is absurd to think that what is undetermined can give itself something which it lacks, namely, determination. If this were possible, then the potency would needs be determined and undetermined at the same time and in the same respect, which is a contradiction.

Since, therefore, that which is actual is required to reduce that which is potential into act, it is necessary that act is prior to potency.

Now everything which changes has this mixture of act and potency; and this postulates that there must be something which has no potency whatever within it; for we know that the greater can not come from the lesser. This is evident because it is based on the principle of contradiction. Now, if that which is partly act and partly potency could of itself reduce its own potentialities into act, then the greater is coming from the lesser, because that which is in act would add to its perfection through the self reduction of its potentialities into further perfection of its act, and this is absurd for it would needs be that it is this act, as well as a further act at the same time and in the same respect. Hence, there must be that which has no mixture of potency and act, but is act itself, or pure act, and by means of this pure act all other potencies are reduced into act. This pure act is what we call God; and it is evident also that because He is pure act, there can be no change in Him, for change is the transition from potency to act, and in Him there is no potency, nor mixture of act and potency.

Kinds of Act.

Already now we have discovered that there are two kinds of act. There is pure act, God; and non-pure act, or a mixture of act and potency. This constitutes the adequate division of all things which exist. Under pure act there can be only one,

God; while under this act mixed with potency, we have two classes, which are entitive act, and formal act.

Entitive act is defined as existence, or the existential act. It is that which ultimately terminates essence in being.

Formal act is a determining act, but it is of such a nature that it is ordered to further act, namely, the entitive act. It determines pure potency to become a definite potency for a thing.

Let us by an example illustrate these various acts. Haec res is composed of two principles. They are essence and existence. Now existence is the entitive act or the "esse". The essence of "haec res" is further composed of matter and form. Now this form is the formal act. We have thus far analyzed "haec res" from the surface down, but let us now view "haec res" from the inside, and then proceed outward. Prime matter which is the potential element in "haec res" becomes definitized upon the reception of the formal act. Now this formal act, actuating the prime matter, makes up the essence. But as yet the essence does not exist. But when the essence receives the existential act then we have "haec res".

"Essence is the act which perfects and determines a thing in its species."¹ "Existence is the act perfecting and determining an essence in such a way, that it is no longer a possible being, but is present in the real order."²

1. Bittle, Domain of Being. P. 58.

2. Ibid., p. 58.

Formal Act is the first act of prime matter, while existence is the first act of an essence, and that is the entitive act. There is a short formula which well expresses the above connections. It says, Matter plus form equals essence.

And Essence plus existence equals "haec res".

We must not be drawn to think that there is a chronological procession in "haec res" as regard to its reception of the various perfections. We can break down "haec res" into its component principles only by the mind. And the mind can do this only by its intellective reasoning. The imagination would attribute existential act to an essence, qua essence; whereas this is wholly false, for essence, qua essence, does not exist, except in "haec res" which has simultaneously its essence and existence in an unseparable union, although each are separate principles of "haec res". We say they are separate but unseparable. According to the mind essence is prior to existence, but according to nature, existence must be prior to essence, just as act is naturally prior to potency, but logically potency is prior to act, for a thing must have had the capacity to be in act before it is in act. This interrelation of act and potency will be treated after we discuss the various kinds of potency.

Kinds of Potency

Potency is a capacity; and we can distinguish two kinds. There is active potency, or the capacity to do something; and there is passive potency, or the capacity to become something.

Under active potency there can be uncreated and created

activity. The uncreated active potency is the power which God alone possesses, which enables Him to do all things. This is the attribute of Omnipotence. Strictly speaking, uncreated active potency is not potency at all, for it bespeaks no limitation. Created active potency is the active capacity which created things possess, which enables them to do things. In a certain sense it is a perfection, for we even designate it as act-ive potency, while at the same time it is an imperfection, for it is only a capacity. An example of such a potency is the active intellect. It has the active power to think. In so far as the power is active, it is a perfection; but because it must reason to bring perfection, it is imperfect.

Thus we say that our human reasoning intellect is a perfection for man, but at the same time it is one of his imperfections and will not endure forever, for it is imperfect to reason, while it is perfection to know!

Under passive potency we have two kinds. There is pure potency, and non-pure potency. Pure potency stands at the opposite extreme of pure act. Pure act possesses all perfection, while pure potency possess all imperfection. It is a capacity without any determination toward act. In this class we place prime matter, which is pure capacity. The second type of passive potency is non-pure potency. This is potency which has some act, namely, formal act, but which is in demand of further act, namely the existential act. Also under this type of non-pure passive potency is the capacity which an existing thing has to acquire further act.

Relationship of Act & Potency

Let us now consider the relation of act and potency to each other. This will bring back things we have previously discussed, but it is well to recall some of those ideas again, because of their importance.

Potentiality cannot exist in the pure state, apart from any act, for existence is an act, and potentiality can exist, therefore, only in things which are in act in some respect.

Nothing is reduced from potentiality to act unless by something which is in act. This was previously proved by showing that potency lacks determination, while act is determination; and a thing can't give what it lacks.

Because act is required to reduce potency into act, it is evident that act is prior to potency in the natural order.

Potentiality is essentially relative to act and is for the sake of act. Indeed, it is only in relation to act that the potential can be conceived. It is also only for the determination and the perfection that the determinable and the perfectable are even considered.

In God alone is there no relation between act and potency, for there is no potency in God, as was previously shown. But in all created things we find the interrelation of act and potency. What is potential in a created thing becomes actual, and this evident change indicates the interrelation. There is a good example given to show this particular interplay, by the train moving from Chicago to New York. In Chicago the train is

in potency for New York, while it has nothing of act in it (New York'ness). But when the train comes to Lima on its passage eastward, it has acquired some act, for it is no longer in Chicago, but, at the same time it is still in potency for New York. In Lima, therefore, it is partly in act and partly in potency at the same time, though not in the same respect. In New York depot the train is in completion of its act, and all of its potency for New York has vanished, for indeed, the train is in New York, while fifteen hours previous to that, we said that the train "could be" in New York.

Such is the interplay of act and potency in all things which have some act combined with potentialities.

Hence, we must remember that act and potency are really distinct. By really distinct is meant that act and potency have different formalities. This is proved by the very definition of act and potency, for act is determination, while potency is indetermination. From this we see that they are contraries, ie., extremes in the same order, and being contraries they must be really distinct.

Because they are really distinct, it would be absurd to say that a thing can be in act as well as in potency simultaneously and in the same respect. Thus, it would be absurd to say that the train is in potency for New York, and at the same time and in the same respect, it is in New York.

Mercier points out the results that follow when the distinction between act and potency is forgotten. He says,

"The philosophy of Descartes professes an absolute mechanism in Cosmology. It makes matter to be essentially extension and all corporeal activity to be nothing more than modes of extrinsic, mechanical movement. Now this mechanical conception is clearly false, because bodies of nature are not material points subjected to the action of extrinsic motors called mechanical forces; they have their own distinctive properties, their own peculiar nature, and they are subject to intrinsic accidental variations as also to substantial transformations. All this implies within them an intrinsic principle, capable of receiving determination, passive potentialities, in a word, a potential ground-matter determinable by accidental or substantial actuality. This false conception of the material universe arose from losing sight of the metaphysical distinction of potentiality and actuality. Descartes studied beings only "as they are", statically; he ignored what they can become, their potentiality."¹

Such historical examples indicate all the more, the importance of understanding the nature of act and potency, and their mutual exclusion of each other.

Limitation of Act

We shall now approach the final problem of this paper, and then proceed to a summary. This problem is stated thus: If act is perfection, then what limits an act. In other words, why is not everything perfection since act is unlimited in itself.

Now act is truly a perfection for a thing is said to be perfect in so far as it is. And in so far as a thing is, it is in act, by our concept of act. Hence, act of itself bespeaks perfection: And perfection in itself is unlimited, and hence act of itself is unlimited.

On the other hand potency is truly an imperfection, for a

1. Mercier, Manual of Scholastic Philosophy. Vol. 1, p.515.

thing is said to be imperfect in so far as it is not being pure and simple; and potency is the lack of act, which is; hence, potency bespeaks imperfection; and imperfections are limited by their very nature.

Now in God we know that there is no limitation whatever, for he is pure act. But the question arises, wherein lies the limitation of impure acts, or of acts which are mixed with potency. The only tenable solution is to assert that potency limits act. We can explain this assertion thus. Anything which is subject to change, as are all created things, are composed of two principles. There is that which is act in them, and there is that which is potential in them. In other words, this principle of act is not pure act, but it is act combined with potency, so that the impure act can become less impure as its potentialities are reduced into act. Thus, potency is not a part of the concept of act, nor is it essential to it, and yet act and potency together are the principles of a created thing. Wherefore, it is said, that in so far as this thing is in act, it is perfect; but in so far as this very act is and must remain this act, it is thereby limited by its thisness, its potencies to be this and nothing else. For example: man is in act, for he exists. But man is not existence. His existence is limited by the very fact that it is man which is existing. The existence is limited by man-ness. Wherefore, the conclusion to be reached is that existence is limited by essence. In other words, act is limited only by potency.

St. Thomas is speaking about the differentiation between beings in general declared that it could be explained only by admitting the reality of non-being, which is a potency, that is the subject and limit of the act of being which is the existential act that is common to all beings. As he says "Actus multiplicatur et limitatur per potentiam."¹

This solution of the problem of the limitation of act is basic in scholastic philosophy. Thus in the explanation of what limits the existential act of a created thing we say that it is the essence, for existence is the act whereby an essence is made present in the real order. And so, although essence has something of act in it, namely, the formal act, yet the essence is considered as a potency to be actuated by the reception of the existential act. Since there is the relation of the determinable and the determined between essence and existence in created things, we must affirm that there is a real distinction between them.

Just as in this existential order essence is a potency actuated by and limiting existence, so also in the essential order we find that matter is a potency limiting the formal act. Wherefore, there is also a real distinction between matter and form.

Now because we say that matter and form are really distinct, we do not infer that they are distinguishable or separate, but unseparable. For, if they were to be separated, "haec res" would cease, thereby, to be "haec res".

1. St. Thomas, Summa Theologica, Ia q. 7 a. 1.

Even in Logic we must face the real distinction between act and potency--or the determined and the determinable. We speak of genus, which of itself is undetermined, but is capable of determination to one or the other species. Thus, genus is considered as a potentiality, while the species is considered as an act.¹ Hence the genus animal is potential as regards rational or irrational, and as such there is a real distinction between them, for act and potency are really distinct.

There are innumerable examples to be found in philosophy to illustrate the importance of having a thorough knowledge of act and potency. As was quoted earlier in this paper everything which is, or that is capable of being, is to be found under act, pure and simple, or under the mixture of act and potency.

Act and potency are transcendental. They are as basic as being itself, for only act and potency can adequately divide being.

Summary

To sum up what has been given in this paper we should recall the following points:

- 1) Act and potency are most basic principles of scholastic philosophy.
- 2) We come to a knowledge of act and potency by considering change as manifested by the senses and then as understood by the intellect, and thus we see how the starting point of change can become its goal.
- 3) From the above consideration we come to the knowledge that act is being, in so far as it

1. McCormick, Scholastic Metaphysics, pg. 51.

is. Potency is the capacity for being. Of itself it is a non-being, the extreme limit of being and yet it is real.

- 4) There are two kinds of act. Pure act is being pure and simple, with no potency whatever. Non-pure act is being which has inherent potentialities.
- 5) There are two kinds of potency. Active potency is subdivided into pure active potency, which is omnipotence and is predicable only of pure act; and non-pure active potency, which is a perfection in the subject having it, but which is also an imperfection in respect to pure active potency. Thus, the reasoning intellect is a perfection to man, but would constitute an imperfection in God.

Passive potency is also subdivided into pure potency, which has absolutely no determination for act, and non-pure potency, which has some act, but is related to further act.

- 6) Potency does not exist by itself, but is always found in something which is in act.

Only act can reduce potency into act, therefore, act is prior to potency in nature.

Potency is for the sake of act, for it is essentially relative to it.

Only God is pure act for only that which is actual can reduce potentiality into act.

There is a real distinction between potency and act, for they are contraries.

- 7) Act is perfection and is unlimited. Potency is lack of perfection and is limited. In beings which are composed of act and potency, the potency limits the act. It is the potentialities inherent in an act that differentiate beings.

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