

Actus and Potentia: From Philosophy of Nature to Metaphysics

*(Dedicated to Lawrence Dewan, OP and
Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, OP)*

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1. Introduction cum exhortation

In this presentation I want to lay out the general parameters of the distinction between *actus* and *potentia*, and to indicate how the order of learning here takes us fairly directly from philosophy of nature to the heights of metaphysics — more particularly, to St. Thomas’s teaching on creation *ex nihilo*, both (a) in its positing of the distinction between *esse* and *essentia* in the creature that receives, as it were, the act of creating and (b) in its characterization of the agent of creation.

This is just one example of the power of St. Thomas’s Aristotelian philosophy of nature. I hope that what I say here will help you to recognize indications within contemporary mainstream philosophy of the enduring importance of the distinction between *actus* and *potentia*, acknowledged or unacknowledged, not just for philosophy of nature and philosophy of science, but for philosophical anthropology (*aka* philosophy of mind), natural theology, and moral theory as well.

Now our best approach to the distinction between *potentia* and *actus* is precisely to begin from the principles of change as Aristotle lays them out in *Physics* 1 and to link the various specifications of the distinction to distinctive exercises of efficient causality.

Before I get to that, however, I want to insert a word of encouragement and exhortation to the budding Thomists out there. David Bentley Hart’s recent comical spewing forth of one after another expression of contempt for Thomistic Scholasticism¹ reminded me of the scorn heaped on Thomists in the 1960’s by a certain set of Catholic blowhards, who had convinced themselves that their own unwillingness to submit to the hard work of close reasoning was a sign of intellectual vibrancy and a triumph over the narrow-minded ‘sterile abstractions’ of the Scholastics. In another place I have commented on the shortsightedness of this outlook, something that can be seen clearly in hindsight by examining the evolution of philosophical theories over the last fifty years in English-speaking secular philosophy.² But my point here is a simpler one. The fact is that the Aristotelian-Thomistic ‘abstractions’ are firmly grounded in common experience of the sort that any ordinary undergraduate can readily appreciate. After lecturing on form, matter, and privation as principles of change, I always tell my students that they should proceed after class directly to the Office of Student Accounts and demand a refund for that lecture. After all, why should anyone have to pay to have explained to them what is, at

¹Thus Hart: “I was once told by a young, ardently earnest Thomist ... you know, one of those manualist neo-paleo-neo-Thomists of the baroque persuasion you run across ever more frequently these days, gathered in the murkier corners of coffee bars around candles in wine bottles, clad in black turtle-necks and berets, sipping espresso, smoking Gauloises, swaying to bebop, composing dithyrambic encomia to that absolutely gone, totally wild, starry-bright and vision-wracked, mad angelic daddy-cat Garrigou-Lagrange ...” (*First Things*, April 2015). Question: Does *First Things* still have editors?

²[The Vindication of St. Thomas: Thomism and Contemporary Anglo-American Philosophy.](#)

least upon reflection, perfectly obvious? (I hope you feel the same way after hearing this talk.)

Since the 17th century, if not before, we have been paying the price — in both philosophy and theology, not to mention real life — for abandoning the ‘abstractions’ of Aristotle’s philosophy of nature. This truth is starting to come home, in at least a fragmented way, to the more perceptive contemporary philosophers and systematic theologians. Others, less perceptive, have reacted hysterically — in both senses. You should not let such reactions trouble you at all or discourage you from embracing Thomistic Aristotelianism. In fact, just the opposite; the negative reactions are an indication that something good is happening. And today we are much better positioned to respond effectively to these reactions than Thomists were in the 1960’s and 1970’s. I suggest that you purchase a few extra copies of Ed Feser’s *Scholastic Metaphysics: A Contemporary Introduction* (he has all those children to feed, after all) and hand them out, if not on street corners, at least in places where philosophers and theologians tend to congregate. Do it cheerfully and with confidence, and offer up your good work for the repose of the soul of Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, OP.

2. *Accidental change and potentia passiva*

Let’s begin, as Aristotle does in *Metaphysics* 9, with *potentia*, which, depending on context can be translated into English as *potentiality*, *potency*, or *power*. (Aristotle insists later on that while *potentia* can be characterized by its relation to *actus*, *actus* in the sense of an actuality is a undefinable metaphysical primitive.) In its most proper non-figurative sense *potentia* signifies a potentiality for acting or operating or effecting (so-called *active potentiality* or *active power*). But the sense that “concerns us here” is instead *passive* potentiality, the real potentiality for a perfection or ‘form’ that exists as unactualized in the ‘matter’ of a change taken in itself prior to the change. (Some of this will have to be re-formulated when creation *ex nihilo*, which is not a change, enters into the conversation.) Notice that just as an active potentiality is defined in terms of the ‘act’ or ‘form’ (in the generic sense) that is able to be effected by means of it, so a passive potentiality is characterized in terms of the corresponding ‘form’ (in a generic sense) or actuality, i.e., the actuality that can be effected by means of a suitably active power exercised by a suitably positioned agent.

Let us now return to *Physics* 1 and the discussion of the principles of change. Here Aristotle does not simply respond to arguments, but instead constructs a framework meant both (a) to serve as an alternative to those posited by Heraclitus and Parmenides (as he interprets them) and (b) to exhibit the coherence of our ordinary beliefs about the world — what Parmenides had derisively labeled ‘the Way of Seeming’.

So, on the one hand, Aristotle is concerned to correct the Heraclitean claim that there is nothing stable and perduring that undergoes or receives change and underlies it. He does this by positing ‘matter’ in a general sense as the perduring subject or recipient of change, where matter is thing-like and not, say, an arbitrarily selected collection of temporal parts. Sometimes the matter of a change is itself a substance undergoing a change with respect to quality, quantity, or place;³ at other times matter is the recipient of a so-called substantial form, which incorporates the matter of the change into a substantial unity that constitutes a substance of a given natural kind.

However, our main concern here is not with the Heraclitean position, but instead with the

³According to Aristotle, all ‘accidental’ changes are in the end traced back to changes with respect to quality, quantity, and/or place.

Parmenidean position. As is well known, Parmenides held that change as we ordinarily conceive of it is impossible, since it involves something's coming from nothing. Take a simple apparent change. Ten-year-old Socrates, as of yet untutored in music, is signed up for flute lessons by his mother, and during his first year at the flute he progresses to the point that he is able to play almost flawlessly that perennial favorite of patrons of fifth-grade music concerts, "Mary had a little lamb." Let us use the term 'musical' to describe someone with this level of flute-playing proficiency. Then we can formulate the following Parmenidean argument against the reality of change:

- (1) During interval *I* Socrates changed from being non-musical to being musical. (*assumption for reductio ad absurdum*)
- (2) If (1) is true, then, before *I*, musical Socrates was either (a) something or (b) nothing. (*obviously true exclusive disjunction*)
- (3) If (2a) is true, then there was no change during *I*. (*Principle of inference: What already is cannot come to be.*)
- (4) So it is not the case that before *I* musical Socrates was something. (*1, 2 and 3*)
- (5) If (2b) is true, then musical Socrates was nothing before *I* and something after *I* — which is absurd. (*Principle of inference: Something cannot come to be from nothing*)
- (6) So it is not the case that before *I* musical Socrates was nothing. (*Whatever entails an absurdity is itself absurd*)
- (7) So it is not the case that before *I* musical Socrates was something, and it is not the case that before *I* musical Socrates was nothing (*4 and 6*)

Therefore, Socrates did not change from being non-musical to being musical during *I*. (*1, 2, 7, disjunctive modus tollens*)

But this is a perfectly general argument that can be applied to any putative change. Therefore, there is no genuine change in the world. All apparent change is an illusion, a mere appearance. So on this score the world 'within which' we live is unreal. Genuine wisdom consists in part in keeping this truth constantly, so to speak, before our minds. Thus speaks Parmenides.

This argument, to be sure, is not as impressive as Zeno's arguments against plurality and change. But it is this sort of nettlesome argument that Aristotle uses as a springboard for developing his alternative understanding of change and of ordinary experience in general.

Now in *Physics* 1 and 2 Aristotle is especially concerned with the reductionistic claim — pressed not only by Parmenides, but by Empedocles, the Atomists, and (in his own peculiar way) Anaxagoras as well — that there is no unqualified change or coming to be. More specifically, the claim is that being in the primary sense, i.e., substance, neither comes into being nor passes out of being. So, on this view, all putatively higher-level substances, including minerals, plants and animals, are just aggregations of

substances and not substances in their own right.⁴ This is why Aristotle is at pains to extend his discussion of the principles of change to the special case of unqualified change — what Thomists call ‘substantial change’. This is his ultimate target. But as is always the case with Aristotle, he begins at the simplest and most evident level, and in the present case this is the level of so-called ‘qualified’ change — in Thomistic terms ‘accidental’ change.

Aristotle’s response to the Parmenidean argument is that there are two senses of ‘something’, viz., *being in act* and *being in potentiality*. This distinction cuts across the distinction between *substance* and *accident* introduced in the *Categories* and discussed at length in *Metaphysics* 7 and 8, where Aristotle in effect begins the arduous task of bringing together his logic and his philosophy of nature. But it is only in *Metaphysics* 9 that Aristotle gets to the topic of concern here. Socrates the young boy is brimming with as yet unactualized potentiality, including a potentiality ordered toward the playing of the flute at the Mary-had-a-little-lamb level. But this potentiality needs to be brought to fulfillment by a number of distinct agents acting on the matter or subject of the change, viz., Socrates himself. He must receive, both from himself and from other agents, the collective action by virtue of which he becomes a flute player of of the relevant degree of proficiency.

On an Aristotelian philosophy of nature the range of potentialities had by any substance is in part a function of its nature and in part a function of its history. Notice, too, that potentiality doesn’t cease when it is actualized; instead, it becomes a now actualized potentiality. This is why St. Thomas thinks of the *substance/accident* duality as a *specification* of the *potentia/actus* duality. The accidents of a substance just are the substance’s actualized or realized potentialities. If those actualities cease, the potentialities, at least in many cases, are still there.

To my mind, the core of passive potentiality is what we might call ordered receptivity. Any given subject is such that there is a range of actualities that it is poised to receive. Receptivity is crucial, and that is why, later on, St. Thomas will be able to talk about *actus* and *potentia* even in the case of creation *ex nihilo*, which is an action but not a change precisely because of the absence of a prior passive potentiality.

3. Substantial change and potentia passiva

I cannot spend much time here on unqualified or substantial change, but I do want to highlight the role of “pure potentiality,” i.e., primary matter, which of itself is in potentiality with respect to all the corporeal natural kinds in the universe.⁵

Just as an accident or accidental form is an actualization of certain potentialities of the substance in which it inheres, so a substantial form is the actualization of the potentiality of primary matter to be constituted as a corporeal substance of the natural kind characterized by that form. That gives us the following chart:

⁴Obviously, this sort of reductionism is held either explicitly or implicitly by many contemporary Anglo-American philosophers. Only the elemental entities have changed, but for philosophical purposes the exact nature and identity of the elemental entities is irrelevant.

⁵I am assuming here that Aristotle and St. Thomas were mistaken in positing a special sort of matter as the matter of celestial bodies. This opinion is for present purposes beside the point, since it is easy enough to extend the philosophical account that Aristotle and St. Thomas give of sublunar corporeal substances to all corporeal substances, absolutely speaking, wherever they might be located in the universe.

Type of Efficient Causality	<i>Potentia Passiva</i>	<i>Actus</i>
Accidental change	Substance	Accident
Substantial change	Primary Matter	Substantial Form

Two comments are necessary here:

First of all, the changes in nature are ordered, so that not just any substance can be immediately generated, naturally speaking, from any other substance. Rather, a substantial change is characteristically preceded by a series of accidental changes which are dictated by the natures of the relevant substances and which prepare the way for the substantial change by rendering the substance or substances that are the *terminus a quo* properly disposed for the substantial change in question. And we empirically ascertain correlations between the accidents of the generating substance or substances and the accidents of the generated substance.

Second, Aristotle designates “first” or “primary” matter as the matter of a substantial change in order to emphasize the fact that the substantial form of a material or corporeal substance subordinates all the elements and/or minerals to the new substance in such a way that the new substance is a genuine unity (or genuine mixture of lower-level substances), with its own irreducible powers and characteristic activities, rather than a mere aggregation of independent elemental substances.⁶ In other words, the elements entering into the constitution of a higher-level substance no longer exist as substances in their own right but have been “taken up” into the new substance and into the structures and processes which are peculiar to that new substance. In general, at whatever level of description we specify the material constituents of the new substance, those constituents, while contributing active and passive powers to the new substances, are not themselves substances. The substantial form dominates from the top all the way down, and from the bottom all the way up. This is most evident in the case of living things, but it is nearly as evident in the case of minerals composed of elements. The elements and minerals taken up into a living substance remain not in their substance but in their active and passive powers. Hence, even though primary matter never exists as such without any form, the unity of generated substances demands that the immediate subject of a substantial form be a matter capable of being totally dominated by and directed by the principle that makes a generated substance to be of a certain natural kind. This is primary matter, and this is why St. Thomas calls it “pure potentiality.”

4. *Creation ex nihilo and potentia passiva*

As we turn to creation, let’s first make sure that we’re all on the same page. St. Thomas’s doctrine of creation does not of itself entail that time has a beginning. That is why St. Thomas can hold — plausibly according to Francisco Suarez⁷ — that Aristotle knew of and embraced creation *ex nihilo*. Instead, St. Thomas’s doctrine has to do with the radical metaphysical dependence of every creature on the Creator at every instant of its existence.

⁶I talk here of ‘elements’ and ‘minerals’ to conform to Aristotle’s conception of the levels of ontological complexity. The number of such levels is, philosophically speaking, irrelevant to the main anti-reductionist position that Aristotle champions. So it is no objection to what is being claimed here that we now know that there are several more levels that intervene between ‘elements’, i.e., first-level entities, and, say, living things.

⁷See *Disputationes Metaphysicae* 20.1.24-26.

In order to see this a little more clearly, notice that if creating *ex nihilo* is metaphysically possible, it must clearly count as an instance of efficient causality. And yet all of Aristotle's characterizations of efficient causality say in effect that efficient causality is the communication, by means of an action, of a form to a patient. By contrast, there is no patient, i.e., preexisting thing acted upon, in the case of creation *ex nihilo*; this is the clear implication of the phrase '*ex nihilo*'. So in order to carve out conceptual space for creation *ex nihilo*, St. Thomas in effect re-characterizes efficient causality as the communication, by means of action, of *esse*, where *esse* is broad enough to extend even to primary matter itself.

With this in mind, we can usefully state St. Thomas's doctrine of creation as follows:

Necessarily, for any entity *x* wholly distinct from the divine nature, God gives *x* *esse*-as-such at every moment *x* exists; that is, God gives *esse* to *x* and to all its accidents and parts and components (including primary matter if applicable) at every moment at which *x* exists.

Now on the surface it might seem a bit strange for me to be talking about creation *ex nihilo* in a presentation that has centered mainly on *potentia passiva*. For unlike accidental change and substantial change, it is precisely in the case of creation *ex nihilo* that there is no antecedent passive potentiality which receives the agent's action and out of which (*materia ex qua*) new forms emerge.

Yet we have already seen enough to understand that this is not the end of the story. For once a given created substance comes into existence and now perseveres in existence, it is still radically dependent on God, in the sense explained above, for its existence. And on this picture it is easy to understand that everything the created substance is and has is *received* and is in that sense *in potentia* with respect to actual existence (*materia in qua*).⁸ This is why St. Thomas extends the distinction between *actus* and *potentia* to the case of creation *ex nihilo* by specifying it as the distinction between *esse* and *essentia* within the now existing creature, where *essentia* includes everything that possesses received existence.

Hence, we can add to our chart:

Type of Efficient Causality	<i>Potentia Passiva</i>	<i>Actus</i>
Accidental change	Substance	Accident
Substantial change	Primary Matter	Substantial Form
Creation <i>ex nihilo</i>	<i>Essentia</i>	<i>Esse</i>

The distinction between *esse* and *essentia* also opens up conceptual space for spiritual creatures within St. Thomas's metaphysics. Even angelic substances have *esse* that is received from another, and so in that sense are characterized by *potentia passiva*.

⁸This gives a theoretical underpinning for the claim that gratitude — rather than, say, indifference or suspicion or some other type of fear — should be our proper base-level response to human existence. I have in mind the sort of attitude according to which “it's good to be here,” as Chesterton puts it in the fourth chapter of *Orthodoxy*, where he tells us that he felt thankful to be alive as a human being even before he thought about the question of whether there was someone in particular to thank. To be sure, there are dragons out there (and in here as well), but it's fundamentally good to be able to have the sort of adventures that the existence of dragons portends.

5. *Actus purus*

So far we have seen that the distinction between *actus* and *potentia* functions both (a) to underwrite the general reliability of our common conception of the ordinary world, including its anti-reductionism, and (b) to reach, with its specification in the distinction between *esse* and *essentia*, the depths and heights of metaphysics. There is one more step.

When St. Thomas and other Scholastics ask the question, “Can it be shown by natural reason that creation *ex nihilo* is possible?”, they do not limit themselves to talking about mere logical or even metaphysical possibility. Instead, they pursue the more interesting question of whether it is possible for there to be an agent capable of creating *ex nihilo*. St. Thomas’s full answer to this question is too complex to deal with here, combining as it does limiting notions taken from both the Aristotelian and the Platonic philosophical traditions. To make a long story short, his answer is: Creation *ex nihilo* is possible if and only if there is an agent who is both *Actus Purus* and *Unparticipated Esse*, where each of these two characterizations of God contributes something distinctive to the overall account of an agent capable of creating.

Now this answer is both aesthetically pleasing and somewhat controversial. However, I will bypass the controversy and zero in on St. Thomas’s argument for the claim that only a being that is *Actus Purus* is capable of creating *ex nihilo*. As we now know, such a being is devoid of passive potentiality and, consequently, is such that (a) it cannot be generated from matter and (b) it has no accidents that bring its potentialities to fulfillment. There is no hint of receptivity in it. Such a being can be, as it were, only a universal donor, and not a recipient, of *esse*.

The argument goes like this: Agents whose nature includes passive potentiality are able to communicate only perfections which, like their own perfections, modify a presupposed subject. So we might say that agents of this sort can communicate only “such-esse,” i.e., forms of various kinds. Only a being whose own *esse* is not the actualization of some passive potentiality — and whose substance is thus not a subject perfected by accidents — is capable of giving *esse* from the top down and from the bottom up, i.e., without presupposing a subject or patient to act on. Such a being is *Actus Purus* with no admixture of passive potentiality.

I for one think that this is a pretty good argument. At least we can say this much: It is an argument that makes sense and has some bite within its rich metaphysical context. Show me another argument (or set of arguments) that even attempts to articulate the difference between a creator and a non-creator and that has some metaphysical substance behind it.

All of this originates with Aristotelian philosophy of nature at its very beginning, in Aristotle’s articulation of the principles of change. And I haven’t even said much about philosophical anthropology or scientific explanation or moral goodness — which is where most of the action is occurring today in English-speaking philosophy. The moral of the story is clear: Stick with Aristotelian philosophy of nature. It is a powerful tool that has too long been neglected by Catholic philosophers and theologians.