

## PHILOSOPHICAL PERFECTION, POTENCY & ACT

Let us pause before we proceed to address the proof from order and look again at what we mean in philosophy by the word 'perfection'. The relation of *perfection* to *act* resembles the relationship between *essence* and *quiddity*, names we give for the same reality but with a difference of emphasis. Just as—

*essence* signifies *what IS*,

and—

*quiddity* signifies *WHAT is*,

so—

*act* signifies *does-be-ness*

while—

*perfection* signifies *fulness of be*.

### *Definition*

There is something else we should consider carefully. All definition comes, eventually, to some first and simple notion which is itself undefinable. This is the reason St Thomas says that in the definition of things there can be no regress unto infinity. (*In IX Meta*, n. 1826) All our knowledges depend ultimately on these first and simple notions which are given us immediately through nature, notions such as *be* (or existence), *good*, or *one*, or *something*. The following examples illustrate.

*Man* is defined as 'rational animal'. Let us consider 'animal': how do we define it? 'That which moves itself.' Let us analyse 'moves'. What is movement? 'Passage from can-be to does-be', that is, passage from 'potency' to 'act'. *Potency* is can-be-ness. *Act* is does-be-ness'. Hence, 'animal' resolves into a consideration of *be* under some respect. And the same goes for 'rational' if we were to analyse it.



*Bridge* may be defined as 'device spanning a gap in terrain'. A device is a material means, an instrumental efficient cause. (A plank or a ladder might serve, or some more permanent structure.) What is a 'cause'? That which exercises influence unto the *be*, or existence, of some reality. So, here again the definition resolves into a consideration of *be* under some respect, a first and simple notion.

### *Principle of Impossibility of Infinite Regress*

We have used the principle of impossibility of infinite regress in each of our proofs for God's existence, those from movement, from efficient causality, from being, and from various perfections manifest in the essences of things. Here the principle applies to definition. It also applies to the issue of doubt. Those philosophers, like Descartes, who said we should mistrust our senses and rely on nothing that cannot be proved—that we must doubt everything—were heading for intellectual chaos.

*We cannot prove everything.* What is given us via the first and simple notions is certitude and all our knowledges depend on the foundation they provide.

Now like the perfections *one, something, good* and *be, act* and its cognate *potency* are among the first and simple notions. Yet we can delineate *act* through its nominal definition in Latin, *ac-tus* which signifies 'does-[be]-ness'. Similarly, the nominal definition of *potency* from the Latin, *po-ten-tia* means 'can-be-ness'. And, by extension in the right context, *potency* can mean also *can-do-ness*, or power of acting, which is the usual way men regard the word 'potency'.

### *Analogy*

Let's revisit shortly the three possibilities in the use of the terms we apply to things. When the term 'horse' is used of *Makybe Diva* and *Phar Lap*, it signifies a reality which is the same in each subject. The term is called *univocal* because it speaks 'with one voice' in respect of each. When the term 'cricket' is used of the game and of the insect, it signifies in each a character which is simply diverse. We call the term *equivocal*. The only thing the two have in common is the name. In between these two extremes, as it were, is a term which signifies among those realities to which it refers, characteristics which are simply diverse yet with a unity *secundum quid*, and which we call *analogous*. For instance, 'good', when said of a pie, of a man, of the universe, and of God is an *analogous* term signifying a character in each which is somewise same and somewise unsame—but more unsame than same ! Both *act* and *potency* are analogous terms.

### *Potency & Act*

*Potency* is real capacity for perfection, the subject of the *act* whereby it is actuated. *Potency* signifies imperfection, unfinished-ness in the order of the unfinished. It is not mere absence or privation of perfection, for this is merely non-being, or nothing. To confuse *potency* with non-being was Plato's error. *Potency* found in something is real capacity, natural appetite, for some perfection. Hence the lad John Pat has the potency to be an astronomer, something his dog, *Shep*, does not have. *Potency* is an intrinsic reason or principle of perfectibility in a thing. *Per se* it is ordered towards *act*, to which it is opposed not as a contradictory but as a contrary. In *contradictory* opposition one is the negative of the other—as being is the contradictory of non-being. In *contrary* opposition, one replaces or drives out the other, as grey replaces blue as the colour of the sea in bad weather. The sea now grey is in potency to be blue, a potency realised in act when the sky clears and the sun reappears.

*Pure potency* is potency which is not in itself act in any respect. This is prime matter, the potency actuated by substantial form, together with which it constitutes some corporeal essence.

It is to be contrasted with *mixed potency*, potency which is either in itself act (a spiritual essence), or composed from potency and act (a corporeal essence), which is in potency to some further act, either :

*substantial* (entitative) act for the constitution of some actual being; or,

*accidental* act either—

in the order of *being*—and then is potency of substance relatively to its accidents; or,

in the order of *doing*—and then is *operative power* or faculty (e.g., intellect, sense, nutritive power).

*Pure potency* is to be contrasted, too, with *pure act*, act which is act by essence, and this is God.

To summarise, then—

|                |                |   |                                       |                     |
|----------------|----------------|---|---------------------------------------|---------------------|
|                |                | [ & in itself <i>act</i>                      | -                                     | a spiritual essence |
|                | [ <i>Mixed</i> | [ or  |                                       |                     |
|                | [              | [ in itself composed [ <i>substantial act</i> | -                                     | a corporeal essence |
|                | [              | [ from <i>potency</i> and [                   |                                       |                     |
| <b>Potency</b> | [              | [ <i>act</i> , yet in potency [ or            | [ <i>in order of being</i> (potency   |                     |
| is             | [              | [ to some further [                           | [ of substance relative to its        |                     |
| either:        | [ or           | [ <i>accidental act</i>                       | [ accidents)                          |                     |
|                | [              |   | [ or                                  |                     |
|                | [              |   | [                                     |                     |
|                | [              |   | [ <i>in order of doing</i> (operative |                     |
|                | [              |   | power)                                |                     |
|                | [ <i>Pure</i>  |   | -                                     | prime matter        |

And the ultimate relationship between potency and act may be set forth like this :

|                      |   |                          |                      |
|----------------------|---|--------------------------|----------------------|
| <b>Pure act</b>      | does-be-ness                              | -                        | God                  |
|                      |   |                          |                      |
|                      |   | [ & in itself <i>act</i> | - spiritual essence  |
|                      |   | [                        |                      |
|                      |   | [                        |                      |
| <b>Mixed act</b>     | [ in itself composed from <i>potency</i>  |                          |                      |
| <b>&amp; potency</b> | [ & <i>act</i> yet in potency to some     |                          |                      |
|                      | [ further act, whether—                   |                          |                      |
|                      | [ [ <i>substantial act</i>                | -                        | corporeal essence    |
|                      | [ [ or                                    |                          |                      |
|                      | [ [ <i>accidental act</i> [in order of be | -                        | potency to accidents |
|                      | [ [                                       |                          |                      |
|                      | [ [in order of do                         | -                        | operative power      |
|                      |   |                          |                      |
| <b>Pure potency</b>  | can-be-ness                               | -                        | prime matter         |

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