17. POTENCY AND ACT

We conclude this series of lessons with a consideration of the most fundamental issue in philosophy, the distinction between potency and act. Let us recall (again !) the division of material being—

	[*Form*	which determines matter to be *this* thing, and
Material being is	[	
comprised of	[	
	[*Matter*	which is the stuff that form determines

Matter *can be* any thing. Form is what ensures that is *does be* some thing. Now we may consider that we have reached the ultimate division of things through this distinction. And in the case of material things this is true, but only because *form* and *matter* exemplify the fundamental distinction between what does be and what *can be.*

[Form   is an instance of *does-be-ness*
[
[
[Matter   is an instance of *can-be-ness*

In Book IX of the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle considers these two latter realities.   Can-be-ness is, in Latin, represented by the word *potentia*. Break it up and you can see the derivation : po = can ; -en[s] = be ; and -tia = ness.   Similarly, does-be-ness is, in Latin represented by a word actus. Act = do (or does) and -us = ness ; the *be* is understood. The two Latin words are in different declensions which is why the endings signifying 'ness' differ. So, to deal with things in their ontological order, we can see that—

[Act   or *does-be-ness,* is what form exemplifies, and
[
[
[Potency   or *can-be-ness,* is what matter exemplifies.

What is the most fundamental thing you can say about any thing ? That it IS.   *BE* (existence) is the most important attribute of any thing. No matter what attribute you may think to apply to a thing, e.g., that it rolls, that it walks, that it gives off a perfume, that it swims, that it talks, the attribute means nothing unless it passes from something under consideration to reality ; that is, unless it passes from *be-thought* to *be-in-the-real* ; that it IS. St Thomas called *be* (existence) the act of all acts, the perfection of all perfections.

We use this distinction all the time and never advert to its subtlety. For instance, we speak of going for a walk. This entails moving ourselves from 'can-walk' to 'does-walk'. Moving ourselves to speak entails moving ourselves from 'can-speak' to 'does-speak'. We know we have the power to walk, the power to talk. Power = *potency.* The exercise of that power is *act.* I move myself from potency to act in the order 'walk' when I get up from the table and step away. I move myself from potency to act in the order 'talk' when I open my mouth and utter a word ! Among the predicaments, or categories, the

nine accidents that apply to any material thing, these are accidental forms of *quality* and *action*. They are instances of potency and act in the accidental order.

Now, it is no different when we come to deal in more substantial things. When John Paul makes a table, when Catie makes a dress, each brings something from *can-be* to *does-be,* from potency to act in the artificial order ; from be-in-mind to be-in-the-real, from mental being to real being. They may be called 'creators' in a secondary sense. In the primary sense, of course, only God can bring something from *can-be* to *does-be*, can give existence to what did not exist previously, save in the Divine mind. Sacred scripture adverts to the lesson this parallelism teaches in the Book of *Wisdom* :

> "Stupid are those men who do not know God, who from seeing the good things [of the world] are incapable of reasoning to him who is ; who consider the works but are incapable of concluding to an artificer." [*Wisdom* ch. 13 : 1]

Incidentally, observe a curiosity about the English language. One who executes the act of *walk* we call a walker. One who executes the act of *talk* we call a talker. One who executes the act of *jump* we call a jumper. But one who executes the act of *be* we call *a being* !!

Parmenides & Heraclitus

There were two philosophers of Greek antiquity who, by their insistence on the position each held, exposed an intellectual problem. Here are their positions set out in syllogistic form (formal argument).
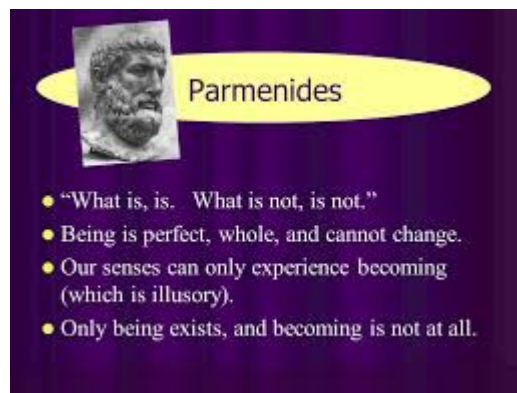
Parmenides argued :

> *Major premise* : That which is does not become (because it is !)
> *Minor premise* : But, being is.
> *Conclusion* : Therefore, being does not become.
>
> In other words, Parmenides argued that all change, or movement, is illusory, a figment of our minds. Moreover, the many-ness of things was likewise only an illusion. Being is one.

Heraclitus argued, in contrast :

> *Major premise* : That which becomes is not (because what is does not become !)
> *Minor premise* : But, everything becomes.
> *Conclusion* : Therefore, nothing is.

In other words, there is no fixity in anything ; it is always changing into something else. Heraclitus is famous for saying : "We never step twice into the same river." The river is changing even as we step into it. There is no fixity in anything, no natures : all reality is pure many-ness, individuals forever in a process of change. Heraclitus's view has, of course, reappeared in our own day in the Darwinian theory of evolution.

How was it to be solved, this dilemma between *be* and *become*, between *one-ness* and *many-ness* ? It was Aristotle who solved it. He did it in a way that we can illustrate by a homely example. Consider Sir Isaac Newton. He was (*is*, for present purposes) an astronomer. Young John Pat, sitting here in class, is not an astronomer as, neither, sitting outside, is Merry the dog. Here are the parameters :

Newton does-be an astronomer.

John Pat is not an astronomer, but he can-be.

Merry (the dog) is not an astronomer, nor can he ever be.

So, there is something in John Pat which is not in Merry, a reality, a 'can-be-ness', a potency or power. That something is real. It is not imaginary or illusory. What is *in act* in Sir Isaac Newton is, in John Pat, *in potency*.

Here is another illustration. Though it is at present cold, the water in the kettle in the kitchen *can be* hot. It has the capacity to be so. If it did not have that *potency*, no amount of heating would make the water hot, just as no amount of teaching would make Merry the dog an astronomer. This *facility* for the perfection of heat is a *potency* of water. There are some material things which are very reluctant to be heated, such as the tiles that coat the underside of the Space Shuttle and the scientists have used the reluctance of ceramic to be heated to serve their ends. Indeed, there is one material element which has no potency to be heated and we will come to that element in due course. The point is that if the *potency* under some respect is not in a subject, it cannot be brought to act.

Observe then : *potency* is not nothing. It is not non-being. It is not act (*does-be-ness*), as if the water were already somehow hot but in a hidden fashion. It is not imperfect act, as if the water were lukewarm already. *Potency* is real capacity for perfection. (Let me remind you once again that I am using perfection here in a technical sense. It means in philosophy *fulness of being*. *Act* under any respect is perfection, *fulness of being*.) Now, let's get back to Aristotle's solution of the dilemma.

Besides *Merry*, we have in recent time had three other dogs around us, *Lucy, Spot* and *Holly*. There is a reason of *one-ness* among the four, their 'dog-ness', the *actuality* (or form) that makes them be dogs and not some other sort of animal. There is a reason, too, for their *many-ness* (the fact that they are four and not one only), and that is the *potency* (matter sealed by first accident, *quantity*) in which the *act*

('dog-ness') is received. Matter *can be* anything : the form (or actuality) 'dog' is what determines some matter to be a dog, that ensures that it *does be* a dog.

Here is another example, taken from the accident *quality*. You will observe that 'whiteness' is present in each of these five pieces of chalk. Whiteness is a perfection, a species of act in the accidental order. These five pieces of chalk are one in being white. The perfection (or accidental *act*) 'whiteness' which is a principle of unity in the five—they are one in being white !—is divided by its reception in the (secondary) matter or *potency* into five by the pieces of chalk. The *unity* is explained by the perfection white ; the *many-ness* explained by the matter in which it is received.

So, act is divided and multiplied through reception in potency. In fact, being is many only because it is composed of act and potency. This is the reason why material being can never be simply perfect. On the other hand, any being which is not comprised of matter can attain perfection because the *act* that informs it is undivided and unique. This the reason behind St Thomas's assertion that every angel fills its species. In its own order (of angelic being) it is unique, and perfect.

I have mentioned before Plato's endeavour to explain *one-ness* and *many-ness* by the analogy of a man in a cave sitting with his back to the entrance facing the back wall. There is, Plato maintained, but one universal dog. What we see in the various dogs of our experience are but reflections, as it were, of that one dog on the back wall. (Plato's theory is characterised as 'extreme realism'.) It was Aristotle who reasoned to the truth that, while the universal exists *in the concrete* only in singular instances, the universal itself, e.g., 'dog-ness', exists only in the mind. His correction of Plato's error led to his philosophy being characterised, as 'moderate realism'.

St Thomas, with the advantage of Divine revelation was able to clarify the mind in which the universal originated : *Res [naturalis] inter duos intellectos constituta*—"The natural thing (e.g., dog) is established between two intellects". [*De Veritate* I, 2] We can extract the universal ('dog-ness') from individual instances by means of *our* intellect, which is the recipient. But its essence, *what it is*, has its source in *the Divine* intellect.

So while both Parmenides and Heraclitus were right, they were both also wrong. They erred in their respective minor premises, the factual assertions. There *is* be-ing, but there is also *be-coming*. These two realities are all around us and their resolution can only be solved by an understanding of the doctrine of potency and act.

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