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**“Miracle, Mystery and Authority”:
a Deconstruction of the Christian Theology of Omnipotence¹**

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“There are three powers, three powers alone, able to conquer and to hold captive forever the conscience of these impotent rebels for their happiness— these forces are miracle, mystery and authority”: so speaks Dostoevsky’s Grand Inquisitor in *The Brothers Karamazov* (320). I would like to show how those three powers, those three forces, can be derived from the Christian theology of omnipotence, and accordingly how this theology forms a place of scission between ethics and the religious. To that end, I shall pick up some of the conclusions from a forthcoming book, *Genesis of the Sovereign God* (*Genèse du Dieu souverain*), the second volume of an archaeology of power that I began earlier in *God without Power* (*Dieu sans la puissance*). These two books form a diptych that highlights two symmetrically opposed figures of the divine: the Aristotelian model of a god without power and identical with the Good; and the Christian model of an omnipotent God who can be posited as beyond the Good and even capable of evil.

However, along with this theological mutation, my goal is also to identify an ontological mutation that is indissociable from the theological one and that, in my interpretation, lies at its core: that is, the mutation that substitutes the modern ontology of power and action for the Aristotelian ontology of in-potency and act (*dunamei/energeiai*). In other words, my aim is to identify afresh the emergence of what Agamben calls the “ontology of operativity” (*Opus Dei* 4) and Heidegger, in “Metaphysics as History of Being,” “the representation of being as efficiency,” but also to show that this ontology is built not on the basis of the Aristotelian one, to which it is usually referred, but *against* it.

This deconstruction and new sequencing not only illuminate a turn in the history of metaphysics, but also reveal within it—and even more, at its source, with Aristotle— an alternative ontology and an alternative theology. These in turn prompt us to call into question certain equivalencies inherited from the Nietzscheo-Heideggerian tradition (such as the one

between the God of the metaphysics, the omnipotent God and the moral God),² and moreover to reformulate the question—the old question—of theodicy.

I. “Miracle, mystery, authority”

To begin, let us see how the three powers of the Grand Inquisitor also constitute three names of the Almighty.

a. Miracle, first. The divine attribute of omnipotence is at the basis for Christianity’s key dogmas such as *ex nihilo* creation, incarnation, and resurrection.³ It accounts for that which is unthinkable to Greek rationality. One of the founding texts of the theology of omnipotence, Peter Damian’s *De Divina omnipotentia*, thus opens with the question of whether God can restore virginity to a woman who has lost it—a seemingly minor and somehow ludicrous issue, but which amounts to asking if God can undo the past. Now, for the pagan tradition, to undo the past, or “make what has been done undone” is an absolute impossibility, even for god or the god: “This only is denied even to God/ The power to make what has been done undone,” writes Aristotle, quoting Agathon, in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (VI, 2, 1139b5–12). Alexander of Aphrodisias and Pliny the Elder also mention this example in their lists of things impossible even for god—such as making something out of nothing, raising the dead, or making 2+2 equal 5.⁴ But for Peter Damian, defending omnipotence means exempting it from the laws of logic as well as of nature, maximally extending the field of contingency, positing, at least in principle, a world of miracles and marvels.

Now, and this is what interests me here, in the Aristotelian scheme, what is against nature is called violent: there is a strict opposition between what is φύσει and what is βίη (cf. *Phys.* IV, 8, 215a 1–4; *Gen. et Corr.* II, 6, 333b 29–31). The Christian conception of miracle focuses to a great extent on undoing this opposition, that is to say, on positing that what is not natural is not violent as such. Thus, miracle can break natural laws without constituting a violent action. But in order to achieve this, one has to weaken the concept of nature considerably. This is already the case with Augustine, whose thought Damian radicalizes: miracle is not opposed to nature, or to natural laws, as violent motion to spontaneous motion, or even as disorder to order, but rather as the unusual to the usual. Indeed, natural laws and miracles are nothing else than two distinct modes of action of one and the same cause, i.e., what Augustine calls “seminal reasons.” Seminal reasons are latent forces infused by God into

creatures at the moment of creation that will progressively actualize themselves. Now, even in their usual, ordinary, unmiraculous development, those forces are not autonomous: they need to be sustained by the continuous action of the first cause, of omnipotence. “If God withdraws from nature this intimate operation (*operationem intimam*) by which he sustains it into being and creates it, immediately this nature somehow fades away and nothing remains of it” (*De Genesi ad litteram* IX, XV, 27). We see here that, even in nature, omnipotence is an intimate operation or power.⁵ Nature is by itself miraculous, but it is a miracle to which we have grown accustomed. “Of course natural order is also submitted to God’s will, but the continuity of habit dulls admiration” (*De Trinitate*, III, II, 7).

The same strategy can be found, much later, in Duns Scotus. It aims—this time explicitly since, contrary to Augustine, Scotus has read Aristotle—at overcoming the opposition between *phusei* and *biai*, nature and violence. Duns Scotus thus builds the concept of “neutral” or “bare” potency (*potentia neutra*, *potentia nuda*)⁶: that is, of an immanent, purely receptive potency (*capacitas passiva*), which has the distinctive feature of not being correlated to a determinate form or act (cf. *Ordinatio*, Prol., §75).⁷ It is this absence of defined correlation that has as its consequence that neutral potency is external to the opposition between nature and violence: nothing can force it, since it has no natural form or act. The only thing that properly defines it is its correlation to omnipotence: neutral potency is a potency for omnipotence, which, because it is separated from any immanent end or form, is pure receptivity to transcendence. Moreover, Duns Scotus gives himself a strict, theological concept of omnipotence, which he distinguishes from the philosophical concept of infinite power by defining it as the ability to act immediately, i.e., without the mediation of secondary causes (*Quodlibet*, qu. 7, art. 1).

Now, this is precisely what miracle consists of: the immediate action of omnipotence. To put it in other words: miracle requires thinking omnipotence as an operative potency. This is also what appears from the distinction, formulated for the first time at the beginning of the 13th century, between *potentia absoluta* and *potentia ordinata*. According to what Eugenio Randi calls “the standard use of the distinction,” ordered potency comes to designate the power to maintain the actual order of the world, while absolute power is the power of other possible orders/worlds, or even the power of disorder (Randi, ch. II; see also Bianchi). For instance, God can *de potentia absoluta* make A and non-A be true at the same time or have Peter damned and Judas saved. In other words, absolute potency is the power to break not only natural laws, but also logical and moral laws (Hugues de Saint Cher, from whom I

borrow these examples, and who was the first to propose, circa 1230, an explicit distinction between “absolute power” and “conditioned power,” clearly defines the latter, as opposed to *potentia absoluta*, by its articulation with goodness [cf. *In Sent.*, dist. 42, qu.1, ad 3; ad 8]. This is why some scholars tend to present a logicist, deflationist reading of the distinction⁸: according to such a reading, absolute power will be interpreted not as an operative power but as a mere logical operator, the matrix of hypothetical arguments about possible worlds. However, when it comes to miracle, one has to go against this interpretation: for absolute power is also posited as the cause of miracles, and, as such, as an operative power, the cause of an effective, immediate action, which breaks order and the law.

Miracle is thus the prime manifestation of omnipotence, and, even more, of omnipotence in its absolute form, exempt from any law, whether natural, logical, or ethical, capable as such of disorder, the absurd, or evil.

b. I now come to the question of mystery, which is closely linked to the problem of the articulation, or rather the tension, between omnipotence and goodness.

What Hans Jonas, in *The Concept of God after Auschwitz* calls “the traditional concept of God,” in fact manages to conjoin omnipotence and goodness only by sacrificing comprehensibility. Already in Augustine, the alliance between omnipotence and goodness, apparently unproblematic, could in fact only be maintained at the cost of mystery. This strategy is also present in the Thomistic concept of an incommensurable good, or in the Scotist notion of an infinite good. In particular, it comes in response to the problem of election and reprobation, and consists in saying that the allocation of grace proceeds from a choice that is arbitrary (which cannot be guaranteed by merit, lest divine freedom be limited) but nevertheless just, although this justice cannot be judged.⁹ Duns Scotus was to cross one more threshold of radicality, by affirming that there can be no relation of justice between the infinite (God) and the finite (creatures) (*Ord.* IV, d. 46, q. 1, §22, §29).

However, the strategy of mystery and incommensurability also comes as a response, like the distinction between absolute power and ordered power, to the dilemma of Abelard, which can be formulated as follows: either God is good, with a goodness of which an account can be given, in which case he cannot do anything other than he does; or else he can do something other than what he does, and then he is either jealous or bad (*Theologia Scholarium* III: 511; 379–512; 395). Abelard—who was condemned in 1140 by the Council of Sens—chose to subordinate omnipotence to reason and goodness: God is good, and for this

reason he cannot do anything other than he does. This world is not only the best, but the only possible world.

From this point, theologians were confronted by a twofold constraint: how could God's goodness be preserved without limiting his potency to the actual order of the world, as Abelard did? How can one affirm that God can do something other than what he does—that the created order is contingent—without being either jealous or evil? One solution consists in invoking an incommensurable good, a mysterious reserve: one will then say that divine goodness is not exhausted in the actual world, that other worlds are therefore possible, but that this reserve is the mark, not of a jealous or evil God, but of a goodness that exceeds human comprehension and judgment.

Another solution, which can already be read in Peter Lombard (12th C), consists in saying that God, although He is good, can do more things than He does, insofar as the good is not the cause, but the effect of the divine choice (*Sentences* 43, 2; see also Aquinas, *De Potentia*, q. I, a. 5, sol. 7). This voluntarist option amounts to affirming that the good is not what is done by God, but what God does—that it is the effect, not the cause, of the divine choice. It subordinates the good to omnipotence, and no longer omnipotence to the good, as Abelard did.

This option is found amongst contemporaries. For instance, it is formulated by Wittgenstein in his talks with Friedrich Weismann:

Schlick says that theological ethics contains two conceptions of the essence of the Good. According to the more superficial interpretation, the Good is good because God wills it; according to the deeper interpretation, God wills the Good because it is good. I think that the first conception is the deeper one: Good is what God orders. (15)

So we have here two distinct strategies, whose purpose is to conciliate omnipotence and goodness, and which I propose to call strategy of incommensurability and strategy of indifference. In the first case, the point is to say that God is good, but that his goodness is incommensurable, incomprehensible to finite reason, mysterious; in the second case, the point is to say that God is indifferent—out of excess—to good and evil. Those two strategies lead to the same result: none of God's actions can be called evil, even though they appear as such to finite reason, and this, either because divine action is beyond judgment, or because everything God does is good (including evil) insofar as it is done (and therefore willed) by Him.

The question here is then whether one can still call “good” a God whose goodness is so mysterious that it integrates what appears as evil to finite reason. A God indifferent to good

and evil? Capable of saving the guilty but also damning the innocent and whose choice is either inaccessible to reason or radically without reason?

Asking this question is to stand on the threshold between faith and doubt, or anxiety, or revolt. Either one persists in attributing the name “good” to the Omnipotent, while modifying it by the infinite index which extracts it from reason and turns it into a pure object of belief; or one persists in questioning the validity and the legitimacy of such an attribution, so that one eventually has to ask the following question: how can the attribute of omnipotence lead not only to positing in God himself the capacity for evil, but also to asserting that evil itself can be good?

c. I now come to the third point, which is also the third term of the Grand Inquisitor’s triad: authority. And I shall, here, make a detour via modernity.

In his first *Political Theology*, published in 1922, Carl Schmitt defines sovereignty as the decision on the state of exception (5). This “eminent” or “pure” decision is what “reveals most clearly the essence of the state’s authority” (13). At the same time, it manifests the paradox that is constitutive of this authority as a principle of the law that is outside the law (but not illegal): “Authority proves that to produce law it need not be based on law” (“*Die Autorität beweist, dass sie, um Recht zu schaffen, nicht Recht zu haben braucht,*” *ibid.*). Indeed, the decision of the exceptional state breaks with juridical norms, but this does not mean it presides over chaos: “Because the exception is different from anarchy and chaos, order in the juristic sense still prevails even if it is not of the ordinary kind” (13). The paradox is thus that of an ordered breakage of order, or again, of a self-suspension of law.¹⁰

It is in order to think about this break in which the state of exception consists that Schmitt mobilizes the notion of omnipotence:

All significant concepts of the modern theory of the State are secularized theological concepts, not only because of their historical development—in which they were transferred from theology to the theory of the state, whereby, for example, the omnipotent god became the omnipotent lawgiver—but also because of their systematic structure, the recognition of which is necessary for a sociological consideration of these concepts. The exception in jurisprudence is analogous to the miracle in theology. (43)

The theological reference plays a twofold part in these lines: first, as the element of a “transfer” which leads from the “omnipotent God” to the “omnipotent lawgiver”; next, as one of the terms of an analogy which establishes a correspondence between jurisprudence/theology and state of exception/miracle. Although one can detect here a

hesitation between the strong thesis of a derivation of the juridico-political sphere from the theological, and the weaker thesis of a simple structural analogy,¹¹ nevertheless the reference to the theologoumenon of omnipotence is both explicit and precise. It refers, in the first instance, to the motif of the miracle, understood simultaneously as a breaking of the law and as direct intervention of the principal power. At the same time, it points toward *potentia absoluta* as the principle of miracles, in its difference from *potentia ordinata* as the principle of order, or at least of the habitual; but also toward a concept of absolute potency close to the one developed by Duns Scotus, that is, defined both by immediate action and by the ability to act outside or against the law (*praeter legem vel contra eam*, cf. *Ord.* I, dist. 44, qu.un., §3).

The theology of omnipotence thus intervenes, in Schmitt's definition of sovereignty by decision and the state of exception, as a constitutive paradigm.

Well before Carl Schmitt, however, at the dawn of the Classical Age, the absolutist characterization of the State already invokes its authority in principle.¹² The definition by Bodin of sovereignty as “that absolute and perpetual power vested in a commonwealth” (I, 8, 111) also refers to the medieval concept of *potentia absoluta*.¹³ Isolated in this way, absolute power comes to designate “the power of giving law to all in general and to each in particular,” and this is so, adds Bodin, without taking law from anyone superior, nor equal, nor less than oneself (I, 10, 160). Here again, then, it refers to a potency that is both freed from and establisher of the law. As Jean-François Courtine emphasizes (33), this inherited concept of potency goes together with a new concept of law and right. The law is no longer defined by the order it exemplifies, but by the will that decides upon it. What constitutes it formally is the *voluntas principis*: “The law,” writes Bodin, “is nothing but the command of a sovereign, making use of his power” (*Rép.* I, 10). Law, then, is an effect, not a limit, for the sovereign power. Hobbes was to accept Bodin's definition of sovereignty as absolute potency, unlimited by law or ordered potency. *Souveraigne power* comes to be strictly identified with *potentia absoluta*. Absolute potency does not characterize the royal exception, but the very foundation of the State.¹⁴ And no more than by a law to which it submits—since law is that which it decides—is it limited by other potencies on which it exerts itself: for it itself proceeds from the transfer by each citizen both of her own potency and of her right to resistance (*De Cive*, V, 11).

Thus, absolutism brings into play a potency that, once again, takes its origin from the determinate model of *potentia absoluta*. Jean-François Courtine has shown how what was in play here participated not in a “secularization of ecclesio- or theologico-political doctrines,”

but, on the contrary, in a process of “re-sacralization of the State.” The theology of omnipotence, the theologoumena that constitute it, are not merely ornamental, but intervene as an apparatus necessary for the affirmation by the modern State of the absolute nature of its sovereignty (18–19; 41).

The question then arises of the extent to which this political figure of potency merges with that of violence—but also, and at the same time, to what extent violence is already inscribed within the theology of omnipotence. In its first moment, this question was formulated by Jacques Derrida in *Force of Law*, echoing Walter Benjamin’s *Zur Kritik der Gewalt*. As Derrida emphasizes at the outset, in German, *Gewalt* means as much “violence” as “legitimate power, authority, public force.” This indeterminacy bears the problem within it: “How to distinguish between the force of law of a legitimate power and the allegedly originary violence that must have established this authority, and that could not itself have authorized itself by any anterior legitimacy, so that, in this initial moment, it is neither legal nor illegal: as others would quickly say: neither just nor unjust?” (234). In *Zur Kritik der Gewalt*, Benjamin makes evident this intrinsic relation of violence to law, which unfolds in two functions: the violence that founds law, and the violence that conserves law. Derrida echoes him by means of a passage from Pascal that includes the expression, itself borrowed from Montaigne, “mystical foundation of authority.”¹⁵ This formulation indicates that “the very emergence of justice and law, the instituting, founding and justifying moment of law, implies a performative force; that is to say, always an interpretative force and a call to faith” (241). Violence, therefore, does not intervene merely as the force of law, but as the very power of institution.

All law, all justice, are ultimately based on a decision: “The operation that amounts to founding, inaugurating, justifying law, to *making law*, would consist in a *coup de force*, of a performative and hence interpretative violence that in itself is neither just nor unjust, and that no justice and no earlier and previously founding law, no pre-existing foundation, could by definition guarantee, or contradict, or invalidate” (241).

For Benjamin, as for Derrida, the potency that founds the law bears the name of violence. It is that *coup de force* that establishes justice and law without having been previously subject to them. But this violence is already inscribed within the theology of omnipotence. In the very distinction posited by Benjamin between violence that founds and violence that conserves that law, one re-encounters one of the possible interpretations of the distinction between *potentia absoluta* and *potentia ordinata*, which makes the former the

potency of all possible orders, and the latter that of the actual order. The violent moment of establishment would be situated more precisely at the very articulation of absolute potency and ordered potency, on the threshold that separates and connects them, that is, at the point where absolute potency decides on the order that ordered potency will preserve.

I would now like to come to another point: to see not anymore how the triad of the Great Inquisitor, miracle, mystery and authority, can be derived from the theology of omnipotence, but how the very notion of omnipotence finds its ultimate roots in a determinate concept of potency as immediate, non-normed efficiency. This concept of potency is elaborated through an ontological labor that both separates it from its Aristotelian source (the *dunamis-energeia* ontology) and links it to the concept of being. It is with Aquinas that this decisive mutation gets accomplished.

II. Aristotle/Aquinas: An Ontological Mutation

The ontological mutation that occurs between Aristotle and Aquinas substitutes the ontology of power (or of potency as power) and action for the ontology of in-potency and act. Although decisive, this mutation goes widely unnoticed, for it is concealed by an apparent lexical continuity. Indeed, *in-potency* and *potency*—that is to say, *potency as potentiality* and *potency as power*—are not always well distinguished, and this is also the case for *act* and *action*. Yet, these are distinct concepts, which in their turn are at the basis of two antinomic conceptions of being and of the divine: the first one, by Aristotle, radically excludes every potency from God; the second, by Aquinas, defines God as the full power of being, and thus exhibits the linkage, in the first being, of being and potency as power.

a. In chapter 6 of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* Lambda, we read a demonstration leading to the perfectly unique idea of a god without power—but not impotent.¹⁶

The first part of Λ6 presents itself as a regressive argument, aiming to show that “there must some substance which is eternal and immutable” (1071b4–5), but also to account for the eternity of motion (*kinêsis*, b7). The steps are the following:

- it is not enough, to account for the eternity of motion, to suppose an efficient or kinetic capacity (*kinêtikon/poiêtikon*) if this is not active (*mê energoun*, 1071b12); for it is possible to *have* a potency and not to act (*to dunamin ekhon mê energein*, b13–14);

- if we want to account not only for motion but for *eternal* motion, we have to admit as its principle not only an active and acting *dunamis* (potency), but an *ousia* (a substance) such that it excludes any *dunamis*. Indeed, that which *has* a potency may not act, and that which *is* in-potency may not be (*to dunamei on mê einai*, b19): note the shift from “to have a *dunamis*” to “to be *dunamei*,” with the dative form, which Aristotle more specifically uses for the ontological meaning of the *dunamis*;
- consequently, there must be a principle such that his *ousia* is act (*ousia energeia*, b20), that is to say: a principle such that it excludes any potency as well as any in-potency.

One already sees the apparent paradox: Aristotle here demonstrates the necessity of a principle/a god without potency but one whose connection to the world and effect on it (eternal motion) precisely derives from his not having potency.

This peculiar conception of the divine/the principle presupposes the whole ontological work that has been made in book Theta on the notions of *dunamis* and *energeia*. In particular, the demonstration of $\Lambda 6$ involves the distinction between *having a potency* and *being in-potency*— that’s to say between what Aristotle calls the kinetic and the ontological meaning of the *dunamis*. This distinction has been formulated at the very beginning of Theta, which immediately counts (as is also the case in E 2, 1026b1–2) the *dunamis* and *energeia* as one of the primary senses of being ($\Theta 1$, 1045b33–34), “extending beyond the sphere of terms which only refer to motion” (1046a1–2). In fact, Theta achieves a transfer from the kinetic to the ontological meaning of the *dunamis/energeia*. Let me review briefly what happens there: in its kinetic use, the primary formula of the *dunamis* is “source of change in some other thing, or in the same thing *qua* other” ($\Theta 1$, 1046a11). After the definition of this first meaning, Θ also mentions the passive *dunamis*, *dunamis tou pathein*, which can itself be characterized as “source of a passive change in the patient itself by the action of some other thing, or of itself *qua* other” (1046a12–13). We are here in the classical scheme of efficiency, which distinguishes between an active and a passive potency, an agent and a patient. From $\Theta 6$, the focus will concentrate on the ontological meaning of the *dunamis/energeia*: i.e., the meaning which as already been announced in $\Theta 1$ as the most important, the one the ongoing investigation bears on. The question is no longer one of knowing what it means *to have a potency and to act* but what it means *to be in-potency and to be in-act*. Now, says Aristotle, if we want to understand this, we have to take the *dunamis* and the *energeia* together: for it is in their relation that their meaning will be grasped. This is why $\Theta 6$ builds up an analogy, which organizes the following terms: that which is building/that which is capable of building; that which is awake/that which is asleep; that which is seeing/that which has the eyes shut but has the power of sight, etc. (1048b1–5). The first series of terms corresponds to the *energeia*, the second, to the *dunamis* (or rather the *dunamei*). But the fundamental step occurs in $\Theta 8$: here,

the terms of the analogy of $\Theta 6$ are not only ordered in an analogy but correlated. And what $\Theta 8$ also adds, is that the relation between them is asymmetrical. Indeed, the *energeia* has a triple priority over *dunamis*: first, in formula (*logos*) (it is in relation to actuality that potentiality is defined); second, in time (it is an actual man who generates the actual man); third, in substantiality (*ousia*). The elucidation of this third relation of priority, that in *ousia*, is the core of $\Theta 8$ and maybe also of Theta as a whole, since this is where the transition from the kinetic to the ontological meaning of the *dunamis/energeia* is going to be achieved—as well as the transition from the model of efficiency to that of finality. Indeed, the priority of act in *ousia* appears to be that of the *form as end* (the *energeia* is the “that for the sake of which,” the *to hou heneka*, of generation [1050a8–10]). To be *energeiai*, in-act, is to be fully, i.e., to be (or have become) identical to one’s form or one’s essence, and to one’s end or one’s good.

Now, it is this priority of the act as end that provides the key to the necessary correlation of *dunamis* and *energeia*. The terms that, in the series of examples of $\Theta 6$ were merely ordered in the analogy, are now correlated: we no longer say that the *energeia* is to the *dunamis* like that who is actually building to that who can build or like that who actually sees to that who has sight, but that it is *in order* to build that one learns carpentry, *in order* to see that one has sight, and so on (1050a11–14). Actuality, therefore, does not appear only as that *in relation* to which in-potency is defined, but as that *for* which in-potency *is*. To be *in-potency* is to be the principle of a motion whose end, and the good, is the act. And we thus verify that, as announced in $\Theta 6$, the meaning of the notions of *dunamis* and *energeia* is given by their very relation. Indeed, the identity of *energeia* to the end is going to be reasserted, and at the same time *dunamis* is going to be defined in relation to it: “The actuality is the end, and it is for the sake of this that the potentiality is acquired” (1050a9–10). *Dunamis* and *energeia* are thus articulated according to a relation that is both asymmetrical and teleological, since the potentiality is for the actuality, but not the actuality for the potentiality.

This analysis is the key to what is at stake in $\Lambda 6$. $\Theta 8$ allows us to understand both why the prime mover is act without potency, and why it nonetheless has effects on the world. As we saw, if it *had* a potency, it could happen that it does not act. But if it *was* in-potency, then it would not *be* fully, and it would be engaged in a motion towards another being posited at its end: in those conditions, it could not be the principle of eternal motion. But, and furthermore, the very characterization of the prime mover as *ousia energeia* suffices to designate it as *telos*, as end, and consequently to indicate its mode of causality. It is precisely because it is without potency that the prime mover can act on the world as its end. In other words, the exploration

of the ontological meaning of the *dunamis-energeia* and of their correlation solves the apparent paradox of such a proposition (i.e., it has effects because it is without potency) and suffices to designate the prime mover as a final cause— even before $\Lambda 7$ does it explicitly. This point must be emphasized, for some contemporary commentators defend the idea that Aristotle’s god is an efficient cause.¹⁷ This probably comes from a kind of reluctance—a strong one, already present in Aristotle’s immediate successors (see e.g., Theophrastus, *Met.* 2, 5b14)—to conceive of a god or a principle without potency. But it may also come from a kind of backwards projection of the Christian metaphysics of omnipotency onto an ontology and a theology which are in fact irreducible and antinomical to it. And I also want to insist on the fact that the key to this unique theology is to be found in ontology. This structure is the reverse of that which we shall find in Aquinas: in his case, it is theological requirements instead that guide the ontological invention.

In fact, and this is my contention, the ontological elucidation of the relation between *dunamis* and *energeia* suffices to elucidate the relation between Aristotle’s prime mover and the other substances, i.e., between the pure act and the mobile substances, which, as such, are composites of act and in-potency. Indeed, the relation between the prime mover and the mobile substances as a whole can be understood as an ontological dependency analogous to that which governs, within mobile/composite substances taken individually, the relation between act and in-potency. What authorizes this extension is the remark, in $\Lambda 5$, according to which *energeia* and *dunamis* are common principles (i.e., common to all the substances, whether mobile or immutable) “by analogy” (1071a3–6). Here, like in $\Theta 6$, the analogy must be understood as an equality of relation; and, like in $\Theta 8$, it can be solved into a correlation: just as, within each mobile substance, its act is prior to the in-potency which is the principle of its motion, similarly (and that is what $\Lambda 6$ demonstrated) the *ousia energeia*, the pure act, is prior to the motions of composite substances as a whole.

The notion of pure act thus allows us to both establish the priority of the divine substance and to understand how this priority implies a specific connection to the other substances (while the notion of “pure form,” which Aristotle never uses but which is frequently and abusively applied to his god, rather implies a scission between the first substance and the “common” substances).¹⁸ In this way—i.e., if one takes seriously the claim according to which *dunamis and energeia* are by analogy the principles common to all substances, whether mobile or immutable—Aristotle’s ontology appears to be unified. But, moreover, the very project of the *Metaphysics*, as formulated in book A appears to be

accomplished. Indeed, this project can be formulated as a twofold decision (which is also a double break with former conceptions of the principle): first, to posit the Good as the principle; second, to identify the unique causality of the Good (without confusing it, as Empedocles and Anaxagoras do, with efficient causality, nor, as does Plato, with formal causality, see *Meta.* A 7, 988b6–16). This twofold decision finally concentrates in one formula: the principle is (pure) act. For saying that it is act amounts to saying that it is the Good. And it also amounts to identifying its unique causality: being pure act, the prime mover has no *dunamis*, no potency-as-power. But it nonetheless has effects (the movements of the other substances) that can be explained by the ontological elucidation of the priority of act over in-potency. Aristotle's ontology thus bears all the uniqueness of a theology which manages to conceive a god neither impotent nor omnipotent, but whose unique potency is that of the Good.

b. One can read in Aquinas a complete reversal of this scheme: indeed, Aquinas's God is both pure act—more precisely, pure act of being, *actus purus essendi*—and omnipotent. That is, a conjunction which, in an Aristotelian context, is radically impossible since, for Aristotle, act excludes potency—as much in-potency as potency-as-power. Now, if Aquinas can thus associate what, for Aristotle, is strictly incompatible, it is of course at the expense of a complete mutation of the very concepts of act and potency. This is what appears in the following text:

Therefore, if there is something to which the whole power of being belongs, it can lack no excellence that is proper to any thing whatsoever. But for a thing that is its own being it is proper to be according to the whole power (*potestas*) of being. For example, if there were a separately existing whiteness, it could not lack any of the power (*virtus*) of whiteness. For a given white thing can lack something of the power (*virtus*) of whiteness through a defect in that which receives the whiteness, for it receives the whiteness according to its mode and perhaps not according to the whole power (*posse*) of whiteness. God, therefore, Who is His being, as we have proved above, has being according to the whole power (*virtus*) of being itself. (*CG* I, 28, 2)

This passage brings together most of the issues. It presents a layered ontology, which organizes degrees of being. This ontology rests on an intensive conception of *esse*: there is in each thing a “potency of being.” Such a formula requires attention. “Potency” here stands for *potestas* or *virtus*: neither *potentialitas* nor even *potentia*. We are, from the outset, in the active register of the potency, which places it on the side of power, of force- not of potentiality or in-potency. Being thus admits different potencies. And its maximal, full

potency is associated by Aquinas with “separation,” that is to say, with the property of not being received in something else. Now, for Aquinas, that which receives being is the essence:

Being is the actuality of every form or nature; for goodness or humanity are spoken of as actual only because they are spoken of as being. Therefore, being must be compared to essence, if the latter is distinct from the former, as act is compared to potency (*potentiam*). And since in God there is nothing potential (*potentiale*) [...], it follows that in him essence does not differ from his being. Therefore his essence is his being. (*ST* Ia, q.3, a.4, resp.)

Therefore, the full potency of being is that of a being which is not received in an essence distinct from itself. This is why God “has being according to the whole power (*virtus*) of being itself”: because his being is not received in another essence, i.e., because his being and his essence are identical.

Let’s take one more step. Aquinas identifies the relation between being and essence with that between act and potency—understood here as in-potency and no longer as potency-as-power. Is in-act that which has *esse*. Is a composite of act and in-potency that whose *esse* is received in essence. Is pure act (of being) that which displays the full power of being. Aquinas thus tightly links together *esse* and *posse*, being and potency-as-power, and he calls “act” the completeness of the power of being.

We have here a decisive ontological gesture, which completely disrupts the Aristotelian ontology. It can be resumed in one word: *for Aristotle, pure act excludes potency; for Aquinas, pure act is the full potency/power of being.*

Whereas, for Aristotle, God is without potency (but not impotent), for Aquinas, “God is his own power” (“*Deus est sua virtus*” *De Potentia*, q.3, a.7, resp.). The *Contra Gentiles* also states that “God’s power is his substance” (“*Quod Dei potentia sit eius substantia*” II, 8). This proposition is demonstrated in the following way:

Active power (*potentia activa*) pertains to a thing’s perfection [...] But every perfection of God is contained in his very being [...] Therefore, God’s power is nothing other than his being (*Divina igitur potentia non est aliud ab ipso esse eius*). And, since God is his own being [...], he is therefore his power. (*ibid.*, 4).

Not only does act come to designate the identity, in God, of being with power but it designates this identity as good. Aquinas thus maintains the axiological meaning of the act which he inherits from Aristotle. But whereas, for Aristotle, act designates the good as being, for Aquinas act designates being itself as the good. In the *Eudemian* as well as the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Good in the category of substance is designated by Aristotle as being

“God or intelligence” (*Eth. Eud.* I, 1217b30-33; *Eth. Nic.* I, 1096a24–27). What this means is that god is a substance that is essentially good.¹⁹ With respect to the other substances, which for their part are mutable and compounded from act and in-potency, *energeia* has another meaning: they are in act once they have reached their essence, which is their own end and their own act. Whereas, for the prime mover or the *ousia energeia*, the good is an essential predicate, it is, for the other substances, an accidental predicate.

Here again, things are quite different in Aquinas. For Aquinas, “Being, as such, is good” (“*Esse autem, in quantum huiusmodi, bonum est,*” *De Pot.* q. 3, a. 6, resp.). Aquinas here follows Augustine, whom he cites, in Question 5 of the *Prima Pars, De Doctrina Christiana* (I, 32): “It is inasmuch as we are that we are good (*inquantum sumus, boni sumus*).” And for Aquinas, what is fully being—i.e., full potency of being—is “goodness itself and not only good” (*CG* I, 38, 2). This is why one must say that “He who is” is the most proper name of God. Thomas asserts this against Dionysius the Aeropagite who considered that “the good” was the proper name of God (*ST* Ia, q. 13, a. 11, sol. 2). If Dionysius inverts the priority, it is, says Aquinas, because he names God “from creatures, as a cause from its effects” (*ST* Ia, q. 5, a. 2, sol. 1). But in fact, “*esse* considered absolutely comes before the idea of cause” (*ST* Ia, q. 13, a. 11, sol. 2). More precisely, the good designates God as a final cause. But here again, one has to restore the order of priority: it is because God is the first efficient cause that he also is a final cause: “Since God is the first efficient cause of all things, it is manifest that the aspect of good and desirableness belong to him” (*ST* Ia, q. 6, a. 1, resp.).

Aquinas thus achieves a double subordination: of the good to being and of the final cause to the efficient cause. It is because he is fully *esse*—because he has the full *potestas essendi*—that God also is the omnipotent and the first efficient.

The gap between Aristotle and Aquinas therefore intervenes on two main plans:

- in Aristotle, pure act designates being at the exclusion of potency; in Aquinas, pure act designates the full potency of being;
- in Aristotle, pure act designates the substance that is essentially good; in Aquinas, it designates being as good in itself.

From this follows a double subordination: of the good to being, and of the final cause to the efficient cause.

Such is, briefly described, the ontological mutation that occurs between Aristotle and Aquinas and that substitutes the ontology of power (or of potency-as-power) and action for the ontology of in-potency and act. This ontological mutation is, as we just saw, indissociable, in Aquinas, from his thought of omnipotence. In other words, the theologico-political apparatus that I sketched earlier—and of which the divine attribute of omnipotence is the key element—is based on a precise ontological apparatus.

III. Conclusions and perspectives

a. At the end of his *Nietzsche*, in a famous text entitled “Metaphysics as History of Being,” Heidegger examines the significance of the Latin translation of *energeia* by *actus*. He sees in it, like in the translation of *hupokeimenon* by *subjectum*, that of *ousia* by *substantia*, or that of *aletheia* by *adaequatio*, a key moment in the history of being. Indeed, this translation signs for him the transition “from the Greek’s conceptual language to the Roman’s” but also a mutation in the very thought of being. Being is not conceived anymore like “presence” but like the “product of an action”:

Now *ergon* becomes the *opus* of the *operari*, the *factum* of the *facere*, the *actus* of the *agire*. The *ergon* is no longer what is freed in the openness of presencing [*das ins Offene des Anwesens Freige lassene*], but rather what is effected in working [*das im Wirken Gewirkte*] [...]. Having progressed from the beginning essence of *energeia*, Being has become *actualitas*.” (12)

At the end of this transition, being can only be thought as an effect that is caused, produced as *ex-istentia*. Heidegger does not mention Aquinas here (but this mention explicitly occurs in the reformulation of his analysis by his disciple, Jean Beaufret, who opposes it to Gilson’s reading of Aquinas (see Beaufret 137)). But Heidegger points out that this conversion of being into *actualitas* is what makes the Christian metaphysics of creation possible: indeed, it “gives to beings as a whole that fundamental characteristic which the representational thinking of the biblical-Christian faith in creation can take over in order to secure metaphysical justification for itself” (14). And even though Aquinas is not named, he is clearly present through the analysis of the determination of being as *esse actu* and of supreme being as *actus purus*. In other words, Heidegger considers indeed the Thomasian moment as that, decisive and founding, of the representation of being as efficiency. And he also underlines the maximal gap that separates this ontology from the Aristotelian one of the

energeia, as well as the kind of interference effect resulting from the seeming lexical convergence.

However, the Heideggerian reading of *energeia* as presence seems to conceal the fundamental character of the Aristotelian ontology, that is to say its axiological character. Indeed, as we saw, *energeia* does not designate “presence” but the identity—real in god, realized in the mobile substances—of being and the good.²⁰

Just as his reading of the *energeia*, Heidegger’s reading of the *dunamis* is also strangely inflected. In the lecture he gave at Freiburg, in 1931, on Theta 1–3, published as *On the Essence and Actuality of Force*, he emphasizes from the beginning that *dunamis* and *energeia* are, in Aristotle, a meaning of being, and that this meaning of being is irreducible to the categories. But at the same time, Heidegger univocally interprets the *dunamis* as force (*Kraft*): Aristotle’s analysis in Thêta would thus reveal “force in its essence.”

Now, the specificity of the Aristotelian *dunamis-energeia* ontology consists much rather in the fact that it describes being otherwise than as potency/power, and otherwise than as presence. *Dunamis*, as we saw, can neither be reduced to active potency nor to passive potency, but must be understood as the possibility of a movement aiming at act. And act designates being-in-the-end and the good as either realized (in the composite substances) or always-already real (in god). Act is, in fact, the ontological name of the Good. It says the unity of being and value. Every act is a perfection, even ephemeral, an inalienable culmination. The *dunamis-energeia* ontology is an ontology of the non-scission. Heidegger’s reading occults this feature of the notions of *dunamis* and *energeia*, which are, in fact, the fundamental concepts of an axiological ontology.

b. I would now like to turn to Agamben’s critical reworking of Heidegger’s analysis in “Metaphysics as History of Being.” In *Opus Dei*, Agamben undertakes an archaeology of operativity, that is to say, of the confusion or resolution of being into acting:

Operativity and effectiveness define [...] the ontological paradigm that in the course of a centuries-long process has replaced that of classical tradition: in the last analysis [...] being and activity today have for us no representation other than effectiveness. Only what is effective, and as such governable and efficacious, is real. (4)

Yet, according to Agamben, the decisive transition is to be found in the translation of *energeia* not in *actualitas* (as Heidegger says), but (much before, already in Chalcidius [IVth A.C] in his commentary to Plato’s *Timaeus*), in *effectus et operatio*, as well as (in the Latin

Church Fathers Jerome and Augustine) in *efficacia* et *efficientia*. And, rather than with the metaphysics of creation, this transition must be associated with a certain kind of technique: sacramental liturgy.

Agamben nonetheless considers that the ontology of in-potency and act already contains an “orientation of being towards operativity.” The *dunamis-energeia* distinction “constitutes the original nucleus of the ontology of effectiveness” (75). An essential part of his archaeological project therefore consists in deactivating this dispositive. The goal is to think a potency that is not exhausted in the act to which it is assigned, a potency that is therefore “inoperative.” Such a potency conserves itself *as potency* within the act, so that it can open itself up to other acts, other ends. It becomes “potency of its own potency,” it opens itself to new uses that no biological or social assignation determines. It thus becomes “available for this singular absence of work that we are accustomed to call ‘politics’ or ‘art’”; “and it is in this that the supreme good consists which mankind, according to the philosopher, can hope for: ‘a joy born of the fact that mankind contemplates itself in its own potency of action.’”²¹

Agamben calls this principle, by virtue of which potency becomes the potency of its own potency, “use.” As such, use must not be thought as a knowledge or a faculty, but as a “form-of-life,” that is, “a life ... whose singular modes, acts and processes are never mere *facts*, but always and above all the *possibility* of life, always and above all potency.”²¹

The form-of-life is thus the contrary of bare life, by which Agamben designates the correlate of sovereignty and the state of exception—a correlation that defines the “originary structure of Western politics.”²² The ontology of inoperative potency, and the ethics from which it is indissociable, must therefore enable the deactivation of yet another “bipolar machine”: not only the ontological one of potency and act, but the juridico-political one that articulates constituting power and constituted power, violence and law, *anomia* and *nomos*—²³ and which is already at work in the distinction between absolute potency and ordered potency.²⁴

Now, Agamben identifies, in Aristotle, a path—closed as soon as it is opened—towards such a conception of inoperative potency and destituent power: this is how he reads the affirmation of *Metaphysics* Theta 1 that “Every potency is impotence of the same and with regard to the same” (“τοῦ αὐτοῦ καὶ κατὰ τὸ αὐτὸ πᾶσα δύναμις ἀδυναμία,” 1046a30-31).²⁵

And just as he identifies in Aristotle a *dunamis* which is at the same time *adunamia*, Agamben finds in him a thought of *argia*: term opposed to that of *energeia*, which means “being-without-work” and not “being-at-work.”²⁶

From then on, the deactivation of the *dunamis-energeia* dispositive can be achieved through the substitution for their correlation of another one, which connects *adunamia* and *argia* instead of *dunamis* and *energeia*. The Aristotelian thought provides both the poison and the remedy: both the matrix of the ontology of operativity and the (very narrow, very buried) path towards its deactivation.

There is here, as so often in Agamben, a fascinating gesture. Yet, I find it difficult to embrace it totally. For, as I have tried to show, the Aristotelian ontology of in-potency and act bears a model which is in no case matricial for the ontology of operativity, but rather opposite and alternative to it.²⁷

The ontology of operativity, or of power and action, is in fact built against the Aristotelian axiological ontology of in-potency and act and not on the basis of it. We saw how this cardinal mutation was achieved in Aquinas and how it is indissociable from the theology of omnipotence. Therefore, the political model grounded on this theology, and whose correlate is a strong thought of subjection, can't be referred to the metaphysical tradition as a whole. Metaphysics, at its very origin, that is to say, with Aristotle, actually presents an ontology and a theology which dissociate god and being from power.

One must for this reason also call into question the commonly accepted identity between the omnipotent God, the God of the metaphysics, and the moral God: the God of metaphysics is not necessarily an omnipotent God; and the omnipotent God is not a moral God, since, on the contrary, and as we saw, the theology of omnipotence makes possible an excess of God over laws and values, and, even more, the hypothesis of a God capable of evil.

Finally this last point calls for a reformulation of the question of theodicy. And this, in two ways. First, the problem of omnipotence as such leads to a displacement of the traditional formulation of theodicy: for the question is not of knowing whether the existence of God is compatible with the effective one of evil in the created world, but whether God can, even before creation, will evil. So the question is not that of the compatibility of a supposedly good God and evil in the world, but rather that of the compatibility, in God himself, of omnipotence and goodness.

But we may also be led to displace not only the traditional formulation but the contemporary reformulations of the problem of theodicy. For instance, that of Hans Jonas in *The Concept of God after Auschwitz*, where he opposes to what he calls the "traditional concept of God" (i.e good, omnipotent, and intelligible) the idea—presented as a myth—of an impotent God. But one may also think of other contemporary defenders of God's impotency,

such as Gianni Vattimo and the *pensiero debole*.²⁸ The Aristotelian metaphysics, if one reads it as I propose, may allow us to unlock this alternative, since it presents a third figure, that is neither that of an impotent god nor an omnipotent God—but rather a God whose efficiency derives from the very absence of potency in him and, ultimately, is the very efficiency of the Good.

It remains to be seen whether the ontology of in-potency and act, as well as the theology of the god without power that it implies, may still allow not only for a deactivation but for a—or several—reactivation(s). That is another story. Let us hope that the one we just sketched out may already offer alternatives susceptible to empower those whom the Grand Inquisitor—and his heirs—call “the impotent rebels.”

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² See for instance Marion, ch. II.

³ See Geach; Solère 20.

⁴ Alexander of Aphrodisias, *De fato* 30, ed. Bruns, 200, 19-23; Pliny the Elder, *Nat. Hist.* II, 5, 27.

⁵ As one knows, the same adjective, “*intimus*”, is applied in the *Confessions* to the relation between God and the self: God is “*interior intimo meo*” (III, 6, 11, 13). This relation of hyper-interiority obtains for nature as well as for the self.

⁶ Cf. *Ordinatio*, Prol., 1, qu. Un, sol., §57; *Quaestiones subtilissimae super libros Metaphysicorum Aristotelis, libri VI-IX*, qu. 12, §8. See also Boulnois.

⁷ One could, for this reason (the disconnection of potency and act), see in the Scotist concept of “neutral potency” an anticipation of Agamben’s “inoperative potency.” But the comparison can’t be pushed further: for Scotus’s neutral potency is in fact potency (i.e., here: receptivity) for divine omnipotence, whereas Agamben’s “inoperative potency” is “potency of its own potency.” It is not a potency for God, or for God’s action, but, as writes Agamben quoting Spinoza, that through which “mankind contemplates itself in its own potency of action” (*L’Uso dei corpi*, 351).

⁸ See for instance Moonan, 65.

⁹ See Augustine, *De dono perseverantiae* IX, 23; *De gratia et libero arbitrio*, XX, 41, where God’s judgment is described as an “*occultissimo quidem iudicio, sed sine ulla dubitatione iustissimo*”; cf. also *De diversis quaestionibus ad Simplicianum* I, 16: “*Aequitate occultissima et ab humanis sensibus remotissima iudicat*.” For Aquinas, see *Summa Theologica* Ia, q. 23, a.5, sol. 3; *Contra Gentiles* II, 28.

¹⁰ Giorgio Agamben thus underlines that “the state of exception is neither external nor internal to the juridical order” and that “the problem of defining it concerns precisely a threshold, or a zone of indifference, where inside and outside do not exclude each other but rather blur with each other. The suspension of the norm does not mean its abolition, and the zone of anomie that it establishes is not (or at least claims not to be) unrelated to the juridical order” (*State of Exception* 23).

¹¹ About this hesitation, see De Vries ch. III; Courtine ch. VI.

¹² Cf. Courtine, ch. 1; Oakley, *Omnipotence...*, ch. IV.

¹³ Cf. Foisneau 259. Foisneau underlines that the distinction between absolute and ordered power is also used by Jacques I^{er}, in whose writings one can read, via the analogy between God’s *potentia absoluta* and the absolute power of the sovereign, a “manifeste de l’absolutisme naissant” (on this point, cf. also Oakley, “Jacobean Political Theology...”).

¹⁴ Cf. Foisneau, 262 and Hobbes, *De Cive* VI, 13.

¹⁵ Pascal, 467; Montaigne, 1203: both quoted by Derrida, 240.

¹⁶ Here, and in the following pages, I shall reiterate some of the conclusions from Aubry (2006), part I.

¹⁷ See in particular Berti, who also sums up the recent debate, 8–16.

¹⁸ This is what Cherniss (ch. III) already called “the paradoxical doctrine of pure form.”

¹⁹ About the predicate “good” as being here an essential difference, see Stevens 149.

²⁰ As a matter of fact, it is in an ethical context that Aristotle uses for the first time the concept of *energeia* in its association with that of *dunamis*. Fragment 14 of the *Protrepticus* thus opens with the claim that the word “live” is used in two senses, one according to potency, the other according to act (*to men kata dunamin/ to de kat’energeian*). The *dunamis-energeia* couple here opposes the capacity to the use. But it also bears a normative and teleological meaning: *energeia* designates more specifically the good use and the end—and, ultimately, the *ergon*.

²¹ G. Agamben, *L'Uso dei corpi*, 351/Spinoza, *Ethics* IV, LII.

²¹ *L'Uso dei corpi*, 264. The form-of-life is, in this sense, that in which *zôê* and *bios* can't be separated anymore.

²² *Ibid.* 333; about the correlation sovereignty/bare life see also *Homo sacer I. Sovereign Power and Bare Life*.

²³ Cf. *L'Uso dei corpi*, 338. About the relation between those different bipolar machines, and especially between Aristotelian *dunamis*, absolute power, and constituting power, see 339.

²⁴ 337. About the distinction *potentia absoluta/ordinata*, see also *The Kingdom and the Glory*, where Agamben associates it with the distinction between formal sovereignty and execution.

²⁵ Such a reading implies editing the greek "*adunamia*" without the subscribed iota (as does Pseudo-Alexander, *In Metaph.*, 568, 23 Hayduck).

²⁶ Cf. *Nicomachean Ethics* I, 1097b 22 s, where Aristotle asks whether there is an *ergon*, a being-in-act and a function proper to man, or whether man would not be rather essentially *argos*, without work, devoid of any specific vocation: "Are we to suppose that, while the carpenter and the shoemaker have definite functions or businesses belonging to them, man as such has none, and it is not designed by nature to fulfil any function (*ἀργὸν πέφυκεν*)?" (1097b29–31).

²⁷ Let's make clear here, in order to avoid any misunderstanding—and to answer an objection raised by the Anonymous Reader— that saying that Aristotle's ontology is not an ontology of operativity does not amount to saying that it is a pre-Agambenian ontology of inoperative potency. One has to distinguish between three different models:

- the Aristotelian one, which connects in-potency and in-act
- the modern, and originally Christian one, which connects potency and action
- the Agambenian one, which dissociates potency from act as well as from action, and connects *adunamia* et *argia*.

²⁸ About the motive of the impotent God in contemporary theology and philosophy, see Aubry (ed.), *L'impuissance de Dieu*.