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Ousia energeia and actus purus essendi

From Aristotle to Aquinas: Some Groundwork for an Archaeology of Power.

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In his recent book *Opus Dei: An Archeology of Duty*, Giorgio Agamben writes that “a terminological transformation, if it expresses a change in ontology, can turn out to be just as effective and revolutionary as a material transformation”.¹ The broader ongoing inquiry of which this paper presents some results, bears on one such fundamental transformation: that of *in-potency* into *potency considered as power*, and correlatively, that of *act* into *action*.

The first part of this inquiry was mainly devoted to Aristotle.² I shall briefly summarise it before coming to this diptych: Aristotle/Aquinas, which brings together some of the main issues of the whole project. Being-in-potency and being-in-act are, as is well known, Aristotelian concepts. The term *energeia* (“act”, “actuality”) was itself invented by Aristotle. *Dunamis*, on the other hand, was already found in classical Greek, where it means “force”, “strength”, or “potency” in the sense of an active power. In correlating *dunamis* with *energeia* and coining the phrases δυνάμει/ἐνεργεία (“in-potency/in-act”), Aristotle invented a new concept, namely that of being-in-potency. In-potency is no more reducible to active power than it is to passive potency. For a given being, in-potency signifies the principle of a motion ordered by the act that is also that being’s end and its own proper good. Put differently, through the correlation of in-potency and in-act, Aristotle creates an alternative model to that of efficient causality – that is, an alternative to the division of the sphere of action between active potency and passive potency.

But there is also an ontological model involved here that is in fact – as I argue in *Dieu sans la puissance* – the model that governs all of Aristotelian ontology. In the *Metaphysics*, we can indeed follow the path opened by E 2, 1026a 33-b 2, where being-in-potency and being-in-act are counted,

¹ G. Agamben, *Opus Dei. An Archeology of Duty*. Transl. A. Kostko, Stanford, Stanford UP, 2013, p. 79.

² Cf. G. Aubry, *Dieu sans la puissance. Dunamis et energeia chez Aristote et chez Plotin (Archéologie de la puissance I)*, Paris, Vrin, 2006. New edition, revised and expanded, 2020.

along with the categories, among the principal meanings of being (Λ 5 later calls them the “principles common to all substances” (1070b 17)). This approach allows us to consider a unified reading of the *Metaphysics*, on the condition that we recognize that the concepts of act and in-potency are irreducible to those of form and matter. But in fact, the traditional interpretation of the *Metaphysics* admits the existence of separate forms in Aristotle, and then identifies the first unmoved mover with the first of these separate forms. This interpretation thereby exposes itself to what Cherniss has called “the paradoxical doctrine of the pure form”;³ that is, the question of how Aristotle can simultaneously maintain that form never exists without matter *and* that pure forms exist. But this reading must also grapple with the problems of the effective connection and the theoretical unification of mobile substances that are composites of matter and form, on the one hand, and an immobile substance considered as pure form, on the other. This paradox and this difficulty disappear as soon as we take seriously the fundamental characterization of the prime mover as being “act”, which is reiterated in Λ, and furthermore as being such that its very substance is act (“*ousia energeia*”, Λ 6, 1071b 20). (It is worth noting that, conversely, Aristotle never characterizes the prime mover as “pure form”, nor does he use any term that could be translated in that way.⁴) The notions of being-in-potency and being-in-act are principles of a single, unified ontology, but they are also principles of a unique ontology, one that I propose we call “axiological” for its affirmation of the identity of being with goodness.

If we read Aristotle in this way, the unique character of his theology also becomes clear. As *ousia energeia*, the prime mover is indeed as radically free of all being-in-potency as it is from all power. And yet, for all that, it is not impotent. It is endowed with an efficacy that can be called *non-efficient*. This unique efficacy can be seen in Aristotle’s ontology, and more precisely through the priority of act over in-potency, which is discussed in Θ 8: the prime mover acts insofar as it is the mediated or indirect end of composite substances. Understood as act, the god is also identified with the good (Λ 9 and 10). In other words, its designation as *ousia energeia* accomplishes

³ Cf. H.F. Cherniss, *Aristotle’s Criticism of Plato and the Academy*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins UP, 1944, Ch. III.

⁴ This has already been observed in E.E. Ryan, “Pure Form in Aristotle.” *Phronesis* 18, 1973, pp. 209-224; M. Burnyeat, too, notes the “myth of the prime mover as ‘pure form’ “ (*A Map of Metaphysics Zeta*, Pittsburgh, Mathesis, 2001, p. 77, n. 155 and p. 130, n. 8)

Aristotle's metaphysical project of positing the Good as being primary, identifying the causality proper to it, and dissociating this first being from potency.⁵

These preliminary remarks lead me to the question that I will be considering here: as I have said, my project consists in identifying the process by which the ontology of power and action came to replace the ontology of in-potency and act – it consists in seeing, then, how in-potency was turned into potency as power, and act into action. But this question leads to another: how did the god considered to be pure act, totally without potency, come to be replaced by the God considered to be omnipotent, all-powerful? And finally: what happens, in this story, to the Aristotelian identification of god and the good? More precisely, or more dramatically: can we conceive of the convergence of power and the good in God?

Asking this question at the same time shifts and reformulates one that Hans Jonas, in *The Concept of God after Auschwitz*,⁶ calls “the old question of Job”, “the chief question of theodicy.” For the divine attribute of omnipotence is indeed at once metaphysically necessary and ethically problematic. While it is required in Christian theology for conceiving of creation *ex nihilo*, the incarnation, and the resurrection,⁷ this paradoxical attribute can also lead us to posit in God the possibility of evil (and not merely to investigate the compatibility between a good God and the reality of evil, as classical theodicy does). In the notion of omnipotence there is indeed a logic of excess, which can be seen in the notion of *potentia absoluta* as distinct from that of *potentia ordinata*:⁸ if we wish to conceive of divine power in itself, then we must remove every law – whether logical, moral, or natural – that would be capable of limiting it. The compatibility of the attribute of omnipotence with the attributes of wisdom and goodness then becomes problematic. Hence the necessity, for this attribute and for it alone, of positing a distinction between two forms of power: the one absolute, and the other restrained by a certain normativity. I lack the space here

⁵ Cf. in particular *Met.* A 2, 982b 5-8; on the failure of Empedocles and Anaxagoras to distinguish the final cause from the efficient cause, cf. A 7, 988b 6-11; on that of Plato to distinguish it from the formal cause, A 7, 988b 11-16. For detailed analyses, see *Dieu sans la puissance*, Ch. 1.

⁶ H. Jonas, “The Concept of God after Auschwitz. A Jewish Voice”, in L. Vogel (ed.), *Mortality and Morality. A Search for the Good after Auschwitz*, Evanston, Northwestern U.P., 1996.

⁷ Thus, J.-L. Solère speaks of a “systematic, irreplaceable function” of the attribute of omnipotence (“Le concept de Dieu avant Hans Jonas: histoire, création et toute-puissance”, *Mélanges des sciences religieuses* 53, 1996, pp. 7-38: p. 13, n. 14.

⁸ It is at the very beginning of the 13th century, in Godfrey of Poitiers, that the distinction between *de potentia absoluta* and *de potentia conditionalis* appears. The opposition *absolutus/ordinatus*, however, appears even earlier in a juridical context, where it designates forms of a contract *post-mortem*.

to go through the different interpretations of the distinction between absolute power and ordered power.⁹ We would have to look in particular at how it arises in response to the dilemma raised by Abelard's theology, which is constructed wholly in opposition to the idea of an arbitrary principle, a tyrant-God: if God is good, then, as Abelard shows, he cannot do anything more than what he does; a God who *could* do more things than he wishes to do, but does not do them, would be wicked or jealous.¹⁰ It is in his response to Abelard that Peter Lombard was already to revive Augustine's *potuit sed noluit*.¹¹ From the *Sentences* onwards, we see an absolutization of power with respect to the will – which is to say to the good will.

If the diptych formed Aristotle/Aquinas highlights, as I said, the main concerns of my inquiry, it is precisely because it clearly manifests the opposition between god as pure act and God as omnipotent. But what is particularly interesting in Aquinas is that even while he breaks radically with Aristotelian ontology and with the theology that it undergirds, he keeps its vocabulary in place. Thus, his all-powerful God is also *actus purus essendi*, pure act of being. My first question, a seemingly innocent one, but one rarely posed, is then the following: how can Aquinas characterize God as being pure act and omnipotent at the same time, given that for Aristotle the pure act radically excludes all potency? Now, what seems essential to me here is that the Thomistic act not only admits potency-as-power, but also signifies the full power of being (*potestas/virtus essendi*). To put it differently, we can detect in Thomas the coupling – in the first being – of potency-as-power with being itself, a union that amounts to the basic framework of an ontology of power; and at the same time, this ontology of power is expressed in the same terms as the Aristotelian ontology of in-potency and in-act, which it is actually subverting. Symmetrically, the concept of in-potency in Thomas – which is modified, as I hope to show, by means of the concept of *épitédeiotès* inherited from Neo-Platonism – is no longer going to signify the principle within

⁹ Cf. especially F. Oakley *Omnipotence, Covenant, and Order. An excursion in the History of Ideas from Abelard to Leibniz*, Ithaca-Londres, Cornell University Press, 1984; E. Randi *Il sovrano e l'orologiaio. Due immagini di Dio nel dibattito sulla "potentia absoluta" fra XIII et XIV secolo*, Firenze, La Nuova Italia, 1987; A. Vettese (a cura di), *Sopra la volta del mondo. Omnipotenza e potenza assoluta di dio tra medioevo e età moderna*, Bergame, Lubrina, 1986; W.J. Courtenay, *Capacity and Volition. A History of the Distinction of Absolute and Ordained Power*, Bergame, Lubrina, 1990; L. Moonan, *Divine Power. The Medieval Power Distinction up to its Adoption by Albert, Bonaventure, Aquinas*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1994; O. Boulnois, *La Puissance et son ombre. De Pierre Lombard à Luther*, Paris, Aubier, 1994.

¹⁰ Cf. Petrus Abaelardus, *Theologia Scholarium* III, 511, 379-381; 385-512; 395.

¹¹ Cf. Petrus Lombardus, *Sententiae* I, dist. 42, 3, 3.

each substance of its own proper and immanent act, but rather its dependence on the first act, the primary being.

The hypothesis that I wish to explore is thus the following: Aquinas's revival of the notion of act comes to conceal the basic framework of an ontology of power that ties being itself to *potestas/virtus* in the prime being, and which, by giving primacy to power, relegates the good to a secondary position.

1. Omnipotence and the pure act of being

Like Aristotle, Thomas makes systematic, even systematising use of the concepts of act and potency. If the pure act of being properly describes the first being, act and in-potency, for their part, are the fundamental divisions of being in general and have a broader extension than form and matter, which divide only natural substances.¹² Now, this may be surprising, but the ontological usage of act and potency is often treated by commentators on Aquinas as his invention and not that of Aristotle.¹³ Perhaps we should see here a 'delayed impact' of the reduction of act to form that was so common in Scholastic Aristotelianism. This reduction, as I have said, creates a number of problems for the interpretation of the *Metaphysics*. But one may wonder whether, beyond affecting our reading of Aristotle, it doesn't also bias our reading of Thomas: if we should take the Aristotelian prime mover to be form and not act, then it would of course be unnecessary for us to investigate how Aquinas might alter the concept of act when he makes use of it here. But in reality, this process of appropriation sheds a great deal of light on the peculiarity of Aquinas's own ontology.

¹² Cf. Thomas de Aquino, *Summa contra Gentiles* (CG) II, 64, 9.

¹³ Louis-Bertrand Geiger ("Saint Thomas et la métaphysique d'Aristote", in P. Moraux, S. Mansion et D.A. Callus (ed.), *Aristote et saint Thomas d'Aquin*, Louvain-Paris, 1957, pp. 175-220) thus affirms that act, in Aristotle, refers only to motion and that St. Thomas is the first one who "elevates to the level of being" the doctrine of act and potency – an affirmation that the first lines of *Metaphysics* Θ explicitly contradict ("Potency and act apply to more than just things spoken of in reference to motion" (1, 1046a 1-2)). More recently, Dominique Dubarle writes again that one can find nothing in Aristotle of a "complete establishment [*mise en place achevée*]" of the ontology of *Energeia* (*L'Ontologie de Thomas d'Aquin*, Paris, Cerf, 1996, p. 124). The classic work by Cornelio Fabro, *Participation et causalité selon saint Thomas d'Aquin* (Louvain-Paris, Publications universitaires de Louvain, 1961), too, rests on the idea according to which Aristotelian metaphysics is a metaphysics of form, such that Thomas should again be considered as the first to have conceived of act as such.

Once we recall that the ontological function of act is not a Thomistic invention, it remains to be seen in what exactly it consists, and – to return to our first question – how, instead of excluding potency-as-power, it actually implies it.

As is well known, the notion of the pure act of being comes to mean the identity of essence and *esse* in God. In the *Prima Pars* of the *Summa Theologica* (*ST*), the demonstration of this identity successively proceeds through the attribution of omnipotence to God and through the denial of any being-in-potency in him. If God is the “first efficient cause,” then his being cannot be the effect of another being. Consequently, he cannot be anything other than his essence (*ST* Ia, q.3, a.4, resp.). A second demonstration, which immediately follows the first one, takes up the notion of act:

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.¹⁴

Because he is the first efficient cause, God is act insofar as his being is not received in any potency. We can see already, then, that the act of being is bound up with omnipotence. But even more, *esse* itself, as Thomas conceives it, contains potency-as-power. This is what the demonstration of divine perfection in the *Summa contra Gentiles* (*SG*) shows: *esse* is presented as admitting a gradation that determines the degree of nobility or perfection of each thing. Thus, that in which being is present in its highest degree, or in its fullness, will be perfect. Now, this fullness of *esse* is characterized as the fullness of the power (*potestas* or *virtus*) of being:

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

¹⁴ “Quia esse est actualitas omnis formae vel naturae, non enim bonitas vel humanitas significatur in actu, nisi prout significamus eam esse. Oportet igitur quod ipsum esse comparetur ad essentiam quae est aliud ab ipso, sicut actus ad potentiam. Cum igitur in Deo nihil sit potentiale [...] sequitur quod non sit aliud in eo essentia quam suum esse. Sua igitur essentia est suum esse.”

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).¹⁵

There is in each thing a power of being, which is indeed a *potestas* and not a *potentialitas*, that is, a power and not a potentiality: in the example of whiteness, this power is opposed to the purely receptive potency that limits it. Moreover, being is in itself power, *posse* and *virtus*. Therefore the separate being which is not received in anything else can and does exercise its full power. Aquinas thus binds *posse* and *esse* together: and the determination of act is ultimately secondary. Pure act – that is, being in its fullness or perfection – is that which exercises the very power of being without limit (i.e, that in which the power of being is not limited by the power-for-being, that is by the mere ability to be).

What we have here is a decisive ontological movement that simultaneously links together being and potency-as-power and calls their full identity *act*.

Aquinas notes a precedent for this move: he appeals to Proclus in his commentary on the *Liber de causis*. Chapter 4 of the *Liber* posits the absolute primacy of being over all created realities: “The first of created things is being, and before it nothing else was created.” Commenting on this passage, Aquinas refers to Proposition 89 of the *Elements of Theology*. This proposition states that “all true being is composed of limit and infinite”.¹⁶ Proclus’s demonstration establishes that what is infinite is what has an infinite potency (*apeirodunamon*). Prior to this, Proposition 86, to which Thomas also refers, already declares that every true being is infinite neither in number nor in magnitude, but “only according to potency (*kata tēn dunamin monēn*)”. Thomas echoes these Proclusian formulas when he calls upon the notion of the “power of being”.¹⁷ Thus, commenting on Proposition 89, he explains that “every immobile being is infinite according to its power of being; if what can persist longer in being is greater in potency, then what can persist in being

¹⁵ “Igitur si aliquid est cui competit tota virtus essendi, ei nulla nobilitatum deesse potest quae alicui rei conveniat. Sed rei quae est suum esse, competit esse secundum totam essendi potestatem : sicut, si esset aliqua albedo separata, nihil ei de virtute albedinis deesse potest ; nam alicui albo aliquid de virtute albedinis deest ex defectu recipientis albedinem, quae eam secundum modum suum recipit, et fortasse non secundum totum posse albedinis. Deus igitur, qui est suum esse, ut supra probatum est, habet esse secundum totam virtutem ipsius esse.”

¹⁶ Proclus, *The Elements of Theology*. A Revised Text with Translation, Introduction, and Commentary by E.R. Dodds, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 2004 (1963), p. 83.

¹⁷ Namely, some lines apart: *virtutem essendi* (p. 30, l. 19); *virtutem ad essendum* (p. 30, l. 21); *potentia existendi* (p. 30, l. 17); *potentiam essendi* (p. 30, l. 12 and 27); (cf. *Sancti Thomae de Aquino Super Librum de Causis Expositio*, ed. H.-D. Saffrey, Fribourg-Louvain, 1954).

infinitely is of an infinite power.”¹⁸ Likewise, Thomas in a way completes Proposition 86 of the *Elements of Theology* by explaining that Proclus’s “only according to potency” refers, once again, to the power of existing (“*potentiam solam, scilicet existendi, ut ipse [Proclus] exponit*”).

As in the *Summa contra Gentiles*, then, we see here the conjunction of *potency as power* with being, a conjunction to which Thomas himself assigns a Proclusian precedent. The fact is that already in Proclus the association of true being with power/*dunamis* effects a radical rupture with Aristotelian ontology. This rupture is made possible by the distinction between two types of *dunamis*. One is complete or perfect (*teleia*). The other is incomplete or imperfect (*atelēs*) (this distinction is drawn in Proposition 78 of the *Elements of Theology*, and Thomas’s commentary also refers to it).¹⁹ “Perfect” power is a productive or generative one (*gennētikē*). It does not tend towards act, but it is correlated with it (it is “κατ’ἐνέργειαν”), and it engenders in turn a new act (“ἐνεργείας γόνιμος”), in accordance with a schema that can be traced back to Plotinus.²⁰

Thomas, however, goes further, in that he takes terms that Proclus distinguishes hierarchically and places them on the same plane of reality: the first infinite and potency on the one hand, and being on the other, correspond in Proclus to different degrees of the real: being is a mixture of finite and infinite, and is not the highest thing. Incidentally, Thomas notes this, too: in his commentary on Chapter XV (XVI) of the *Liber de Causis*, he makes clear that infinity “is not, for Platonists, the idea of being”.

Now, since, as we have just seen, the act of being comes to mean for Aquinas the full exercise of the power of being, it must be said that far from being a pure act that excludes all potency as power, it is precisely *because* the Thomistic God is the pure act of being that he is also all-powerful:

Active potency is not contrary to act, but is rather founded upon it; for everything acts according as it is actual. (*ST Ia*, q. 25, a. 1, sol. 1).²¹

¹⁸ “Quam quidem compositionem etiam Proclus ponit LXXXIX propositione, dicens: omne enter ens ex fine est et infinito. Quod quidem secundum ipsum sic exponitur: omne enim immobiliter ens infinitum est secundum potentiam essendi; si enim quod potest magis durare in esse est maioris potentiae, quod potest in infinitum durare in esse est, quantum ad hoc, infinitae potentiae.”

¹⁹ See also Proclus, *In Alc.* 122.9-11; *Platonic Theology* III 8, 34.1. 1-11; III 10, 40.1. 10-41, 1.15.

²⁰ Cf. G. Aubry, *Dieu sans la puissance*, pp. 227-231 (2006), pp. 247-253 (2020).

²¹ “Potentia activa non dividitur contra actum, sed fundatur in eo, nam unumquodque agit secundum quod est actu.”

The same formula expressing this primacy is found again in the *Summa contra Gentiles*: “Active potency belongs to a thing according as it is in act” (II, 8, 2);²² and again in the *De Potentia*: “the more actual a thing is, the more it abounds in active power (*virtute agendi*)” (q.I, a.2, resp.).²³

Here one might claim that such a principle, which refers action back to act, can be drawn from Aristotle: in the *De Anima* and the *De Generatione et corruption* (GC), Aristotle indeed makes being in-act a precondition for action.²⁴ However – and this is an essential point – this model does not work for the prime mover. The prime mover is pure act, but in Aristotle this is no grounds for attributing an active power to it. Quite to the contrary, it is precisely inasmuch as it is pure act, *ousia energeia*, that active power just as much as being-in-potency must be denied in the prime mover. Indeed, in *Metaphysics* Λ 6, *dunamis* and *energeia* operate in their ontological sense, and not only in their kinetic one. Potency as such may *not* act and being-in-potency may *not* be, such that a being whose *ousia* is mixed with *dunamis* cannot be the source of eternal motion. One could object here that, without *being* potency, the first mover could yet *have* some potency: but in fact its designation as final cause excludes such a possibility. *De Generatione* thus declares that “the final cause is not efficient” (I, 7, 324b 15). The final cause is a moving cause, *kinētikon*, but not productive or efficient, *poiētikon* (cf. GC I, 6, 323a 16-18).

And so, although it may at first glance appear Aristotelian, the Thomistic conception of divine action implies once again a radical rupture with Aristotle. But this rupture proceeds from the one that we have just analyzed: it is because the Thomistic act signifies the unity of potency- as-power with being, the *virtus essendi* in its fullness, that the first act is also the first efficient cause.

Omnipotence, too, is going to be attributed to the divine being. The *Contra Gentiles* can thus declare that “God’s power is his substance” (II, 8).²⁵ This proposition is demonstrated in the following way:

²² “Potentia enim activa competit alicui secundum quod est actu.”

²³ “Unumquodque enim tantum abundant in virtute agendi quantum est in actu.”

²⁴ Cf. GC I, 9, 326b 31-33; II, 7, 334b 9-10; *De anima*, II, 5, 417a17-18.

²⁵ “Quod Dei potentia sit eius substantia.”

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 not distinct from his very being. And, since God is his own being [...], he is therefore his power (*ibid.*, 4).²⁶

It appears clearly here that, far from compromising the perfection of the divine being as potency in the sense of being able not to be, power is, quite the opposite, in itself a perfection that becomes one with that of this being.

The divine essence is, in itself, power:

It is impossible to say that God acts by his essence but that there is no power in God, because that which is a principle of action is a power: thus, God is posited to act through the divine essence, and for that reason the essence is posited to be is power (*unde essentia divina ex hoc ipso quod ponitur deus per ipsam agere, ponitur esse potentia*). Hence the notion of power in God does not detract from his simplicity or his primacy, since it is not posited as something in addition to his essence (*De Pot.*, q.1, a.1, ad. 5).²⁷

Ultimately, the distinction between essence and power in God is only one of reason. Attributing omnipotence to God is one way for us to consider him in relation to his effects or, more exactly, to make sense of how his effects are dependent on him:

Something in reality corresponds mediately, but not immediately < to the relation of principle that power adds to essence >. For our intellect conceives the creature as bearing a relation to and being dependent on its Creator: and since it is unable to conceive one thing related to another, without at the same time conceiving that relation to be reciprocal, it conceives in God a certain relation of principle, which is consequent to its mode of understanding and which is thus referred to the thing mediately (*ibid.*, ad. 10).²⁸

This identity of divine power and divine essence, which is itself identical to *esse*, means that it cannot be distinguished from act.

²⁶ “Amplius. Potentia activa ad perfectionem rei pertinet, ut ex praedictis patet. Omnis autem divina perfectio in ipso suo esse continetur, ut in primo libro ostensum est. Divina igitur potentia non est aliud ab ipso esse eius. Deus autem est suum esse, ut in primo libro ostensum est. Est igitur sua potentia.”

²⁷ “Ad quantum dicendum quod ista sunt impossibilia, quod Deus ponatur agere per essentiam suam, et quod non sit in Deo potentia : hoc enim quod est actionis principium, potentia est : unde essentia divina ex hoc ipso quod ponitur Deus per ipsam agere, ponitur esse potentia. Et sic ratio potentiae in Deo non derogat neque simplicitati neque primitiae eius, quia non ponitur quasi aliquid additum essentiae.”

²⁸ “Et similiter est de relatione principii quam addit potentia supra essentiam : nam ei respondet aliquid in re mediate, et non immediate. Intellectus enim noster intelligit creaturam cum aliqua relatione et dependentia ad creatorem: et ex hoc ipso quia non potest intelligere aliquid relatum alteri, nisi e contrario reintelligat relationem ex opposito, ideo intelligit in Deo quamdam relationem principii, quae consequitur modum intelligendi, et sic refertur ad rem mediate.”

Here we have our first answer to my initial question: if Aquinas is able to conjoin omnipotence and pure act in God, it is because pure act no longer means for him, as it did for Aristotle, an *ousia* that excludes all potency; now, quite to the contrary, pure act is instead the unity in God of being and potency-as-power. Where, for Aristotle, God is without potency (but nevertheless, not impotent), for Thomas, “God is his own power” (“*Deus est sua virtus*”, *De Potentia*, q. 3, a. 7, resp.).

From this answer, another question arises: in this twofold identification of act with *esse* and with perfection, what happens to the Aristotelian identification of act with the end and with the good? To ask this question is to attempt once again to measure the distance between Aristotle and Aquinas, since, as we have noted, Aristotle’s project as announced in *Metaphysics* A consists in positing the good as primary as well as identifying its proper power. Now, at the end of *Metaphysics* Λ, it appears not only that the First Mover is *ousia* without potency, pure *energeia*, but also that it is this substance whose essence is the good.²⁹ And it is its identity with act, in its double sense, both ontological and axiological, that allows us to determine its unique power. This power is determined as a kind of non-efficient efficacy: the act is at work not insofar as it is endowed with efficiency or active power (which is excluded, as we have seen, by its very nature as pure act), but rather insofar as it is related to being-in-potency as its end— in accordance with a model to which I shall return.

It is obvious that such a schema cannot be maintained in a conception that makes God the first efficient cause and designates as his act – *actus purus* – the unity of being and power that is found in him. But what needs to be emphasized here is that through Aquinas this assertion of the primary and ruling position of power goes hand in hand with a demotion of the good to a secondary status. Now, in a new inversion, it is once again the notion of act that, by the intermediary of its association with the notion of perfection, is going to be the instrument of the good’s relegation to second tier.

The act of every being is its *esse*. For this reason it can be posited that “being itself is the most perfect of all things (“*ipsum esse est perfectissimum omnium*”) (*ST* Ia, q. 4, a. 1, sol. 3). Recall how the *Contra Gentiles* made clear that God is the most perfect being insofar as he “has being according to the whole power (*virtus*) of being itself”. It is this characterization of the full power

²⁹ Cf. Λ9-10 and G. Aubry, *Dieu sans la puissance*, pp. 177-182 ; 196-200 (2006) and pp. 197-203 ; 223-230 (2020).

of being as perfection that in turn is going to permit the good to be reduced to being. Here Thomas can claim to be following 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”*). This formula is echoed in the *De Potentia*: “Being, as such, is good” (*“Esse autem, in quantum huiusmodi, bonum est”*) (q. 3, a. 6, resp.). Immediately afterwards, it is the notions of act and perfection that come to mediate this equation of being with goodness: “Inasmuch as a thing is in act, it is good; because in this respect it has perfection and entity, and it is in this that the principle of the good [*ratio boni*] consists” (*ibid.*).³⁰

We can see here how the divergence between Aristotle and Aquinas comes about: the first equation, good = act = perfection, is still Aristotelian, but Thomas then identifies perfection with being – and indeed even with the full extent of the power of being, such that ultimately one can say that being is the standard of goodness, and that the first being is goodness itself.

It could be objected here that being and the good are, for Aquinas, both convertible and non-identical: they refer to the same reality but differ conceptually insofar as goodness adds to being the aspect of desirableness (*ratio appetibilis*).³¹ Thus, everything that is, is good merely *qua* being, but it won’t be absolutely good until it has reached its end and ultimate perfection through acts added to its substantial form.³² Of course this applies only to creatures: it is only in their case that the good can be said to have priority over being (*ST* Ia, q. 5, a. 2, sol. 1). With respect to God, the good designates him as a final cause, but it is because God is the first efficient cause that he is also a final cause: “Since God is the first efficient cause of all things, it is manifest that the aspect of good and desirableness belongs to him” (*ST* Ia, q. 6, a. 1, resp.).³³ This is why “He who is” is the most proper name of God— rather than, as Dionysius says, the name “good” (*ST* Ia, q. 13, a. 11). Aquinas here explicitly posits the priority of being and the efficient cause over the good and the

³⁰ “Secundum vero quod actu est unumquodque, bonum est: quia secundum hoc habet perfectionem et entitatem, in qua ratio boni consistit.”

³¹ Cf. Thomas de Aquino, *De veritate*, q. 21, a. 1; *ST* Ia, q. 5, a. 2. On the convertibility of the good and being, cf. J.A. Aertsen, *Medieval Philosophy as Transcendental Thought. From Philip the Chancellor to Francisco Suarez*, Leiden, Brill, 2012; L. Honnefelder, ‘God’s Goodness’, in B. Davies and E. Stump (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Aquinas*, Oxford, Oxford UP, 2012, pp. 147-157; S. MacDonald (ed.), *Being and Goodness. The Concept of the Good in Metaphysical and Philosophical Theology*, Ithaca (NY), Cornell UP, 1991.

³² On the influence here of Boethius’s *De Hebdomadibus* and of the distinction between substantial and accidental good, see J. A. Aertsen, ‘Good as transcendental and the Transcendence of the Good’, in MacDonald (ed.), *Being and Goodness*, pp. 56-73; see also E. Stump and N. Kretzmann, ‘Being and Goodness’, in *ibid.*, pp. 98-128.

³³ “Cum ergo Deus sit prima causa effectiva omnium, manifestum est quod sibi competit ratio boni et appetibilis.”

final cause.³⁴ And, even more, being as such is already *bonum* and *perfectissimum*. So, *act* no longer signifies, as it did for Aristotle, the good as being, but now rather posits being itself as good.³⁵

Insofar as the good includes the Aristotelian notions of act and end, some commentators hold that this Thomistic rupture is one that is effected with respect to Plato much more than with respect to Aristotle.³⁶ But this reading overlooks two points: first, that act does not have the same meaning in Aristotle as it does in Aquinas; second, that positing the good as primary is an Aristotelian move, one that Aristotle actually makes against Plato, who, according to Aristotle, failed just as much to distinguish the good from the One as he did to identify it as final cause. But these two points go together: for Aristotle, act does not designate being as good, as it does for Thomas, but rather the good as being. This then allows him to posit the good – *to the exclusion of potency* – as being primary. Such is the move that Aristotle undertakes: to posit the good as being primary, *and* to dissociate primacy from power – and he accomplishes it in a single stroke in the identification of the First Mover with *ousia energeia*.

What makes this move possible is the ontology of *dunamis* and *energeia* that is set forth in the central books of the *Metaphysics* and in particular the correlation of in-potency with act. Now, just as he does with the notion of act considered by itself, Aquinas also seizes upon the relation of act to being-in-potency. Thus we must ask here the same questions that we raised earlier about his reappropriation of act: what is it that allows Thomas to take hold of in-potency as he does? What end does it serve in his own schema? And how does his use of it disrupt Aristotle's ontology?

³⁴ Cf. É. Gilson, *Le Thomisme. Introduction à la philosophie de Saint Thomas d'Aquin*, Paris, Vrin, 1997 (1919), p. 117. J. de Finance also notes that the metaphysics of the *esse* is fundamental to Thomistic axiology (*Être et Agir dans la philosophie de Saint Thomas*, Paris, Beauchesne, 1945, p. 189); see also J. Aertsen, *Nature and Creature*, Leiden, Brill, 1988, p. 341.

³⁵ Cf. É. Gilson, *Le Thomisme*, p. 175: the act of being “precedes the Good itself, since a being is only good insofar as it is a being, and it is only a being in virtue of the *ipsum esse* that permits one to say of it: *this is*.” But Gilson sees here an Aristotelian move such that Thomas, on this view, goes on to a simple “transposition” “from the tone of being to the tone of existing” (p. 116).

³⁶ See, for example, C. Fabro, *Participation et causalité*, p. 251: “The perfection of *esse* as *actus essendi* [...] restores the Aristotelian *ens* to its dignity as “*primum metaphysicum*” against the *bonum* of the Platonists, because *esse* has the principle of perfection as its end.”

2. In-potency and the act of being

For Aquinas, as already noted, in-potency and act are the fundamental divisions of being in general, and they have a broader extension than do matter and form:

Thus, matter and form divide natural substance, while potency and act divide being in general. Accordingly, whatever follows upon potency and act as such is common to both material substances and immaterial created substances: to receive and to be received, to perfect and to be perfected (*CG* II, 54, 9).³⁷

Here again, Thomas proves himself to be both a perceptive reader of Aristotle and an unfaithful one. In fact, the very acuity of his reading is what allows for his infidelity: for by identifying and reappropriating the nodal points of Aristotle's metaphysics, Thomas proceeds to turn them into the instruments of a radical inversion. In *Metaphysics* Λ5, Aristotle too affirms that *dunamis* and *energeia* are the principles common to all substances by analogy (1071a 3-5). This affirmation follows a progressive movement extending *dunamis* and *energeia* from sensible and perishable substances to sensible and eternal substances. Although free of matter, these latter substances can indeed also be said to be in-potency.³⁸ In this way, in-potency and act have a broader extension than form and matter, and they are the elements of a unified ontology that includes sensible substances, whether corruptible or incorruptible, just as much as it does the unmoved substance. Indeed, if this unmoved substance is pure act, such that it excludes all potency, then for that very reason it also finds itself related to the substances that are mixtures of act and in-potency. Whereas the notion of a pure form (which as we saw earlier is not to be found in Aristotle anyways) contains no principle linking the prime mover to composite substances, the pure act, on the other hand, does contain both what distinguishes it from composite substances (which here amounts to a primacy) as well as what relates it to them. Now, this relation is the same one that Θ 8 explores by elucidating various modes of the anteriority of act over in-potency. It is the analysis of the anteriority of act according to *ousia* that provides the key to the necessity of the correlation of *dunamei* and *energeiai*, revealing it to be the relation of a movement towards a form that is posited as an end.

³⁷ "Sic igitur patet quod compositio actus et potentiae est in plus quam compositio formae et materiae. Unde materia et forma dividunt substantiam naturalem : potentia autem et actus dividunt ens commune. Et propter hoc quaecumque quidem consequuntur potentiam et actum in quantum huiusmodi, sunt communia substantiis materialibus et immaterialibus creatis : sicut recipere et recipi, perficere et perfici."

³⁸ Dissociated from *hylè*, the *dunamis* of the eternal substances is associated with movement: it is the principle of change not from non-being to being, but from one place to another – a potency of contraries and not of contradictories (see *Met.* Λ2, 1069b 26 and G. Aubry, *Dieu sans la puissance*, p. 152 s. (2006), p.165 s. (2020)).

Characterizing the prime mover as pure act, then, indicates as much its priority over other substances as its connection to them: the relation between in-potency and act within composite substances taken individually is the same as the relation between composite substances as a whole and the *ousia energeia*. Within a single substance, act can be called anterior to in-potency in the sense that act is the end of in-potency; in the same way, the pure act is anterior to the substances that are composites of act and in-potency (whether eternal or corruptible), and thus to the mobile substances taken as a whole in the sense that it is their end. It is their end, however, in a very particular way, as Λ 7 1072b 2-3 emphasises: it is not the immediate and immanent end of other substances – (i.e. the prime mover is not the act of the world). Instead, each substance strives towards its own act, its own end, and its own proper good, and through these it also strives for the necessity and the perpetuity that are proper to the divine act.³⁹

It is important to keep all this in mind because Aquinas's reinvention involves not only the *terms* of in-potency and act but also the relationship between them. It may even be precisely in this relationship that Thomas sees the necessity of his reappropriation – that, at least, is the hypothesis that I would like to explore. As we have seen him do with act, he is also going to modify profoundly the meaning of in-potency. But at the same time, he maintains their correlation – or more precisely, he maintains it as an empty mould whose content is going to be changed as much as its terms have been.

3. The dissociation of form and act

If God is the pure act of being, it is, as we have seen, because his essence is not distinct from his *esse*. Conversely, everything that does not *per se* have *esse* will be said to be in-potency with respect to God: “Therefore, being must be compared to essence, if the latter is distinct from the former, as act to potency” (*ST* Ia, q.3 a.4, resp. 2).⁴⁰ Potency is thus the sign that the *esse* is *received*. In other words, it is the very hallmark of creaturely existence. To be in-potency is to

³⁹ See G. Aubry, *Dieu sans la puissance*, p. 165 s. (2006) ; 184 s. (2020).

⁴⁰ “Oportet igitur quod ipsum esse comparetur ad essentiam quae est aliud ab ipso, sicut actus ad potentiam.”

depend on the first being in one's own being: it is to be capable of being only through the gift of *esse*, the gift in which the act of creation consists.

Of immaterial creatures too, it must thus be said that they are being-in-potency. The *De ente et essentia* already affirms as much:

Now everything which receives something from another is in potency with respect to what it receives, and what is received into it is its act. It is necessary therefore that the quiddity itself or the form, which is the intelligence, be in potency with respect to the existence which it receives from God; and this existence is received as an act. It is in this way that potency and act are found in the intelligences, but not form and matter, unless equivocally (IV, 7).⁴¹

Once again, Aquinas's perceptive reading of Aristotle must be emphasised. Aquinas sees quite clearly that the concepts of act and in-potency are not simply duplicates of the concepts of form and matter, nor can the former pair be reduced to the latter. But, once more, the acuity of his reading permits him to effect a rupture: for if Aristotle does draw a distinction between form and act, *he never associates form and in-potency*. The concept of act supplements that of form in the sense that it expresses the form as being capable of subsisting by itself (i.e. "separately", in the specific Aristotelian use of this term)⁴², and as being identical to the end and to the good. Yet, for all that, form can in no case be called in-potency for act. But this is just what Aquinas, for his part, affirms: form can only be in-act when the *esse* is received. *Esse* is the actualising principle of the essence itself. Thomas goes as far as writing that "every form or act is in-potency before acquiring being" (CG II, 52, 7).⁴³ This means that form can be considered as act with respect to matter while remaining in-potency with respect to *esse*. Put otherwise, there are two levels of composition in every created substance: one of matter with form, and one of form with *esse*:

Although there is no composition of matter and form in an angel, there is yet act and potency. And this can be made evident if we consider the nature of material things which contain a twofold composition. The first is that of form and matter, whereby the nature is constituted. Such a composite nature is not its own being, but rather being is its act. Hence the nature itself is related to its own being as potency is to act. *Therefore, even where there is no matter, supposing that form*

⁴¹ "Omne autem quod recipit aliquid ab alio est in potentia respectu illius, et hoc quod receptum est in eo est actus eius; ergo oportet quod ipsa quidditas vel forma quae est intelligentia sit in potentia respectu esse quod a Deo recipit, et illud esse receptum est per modum actus. Et ita invenitur potentia et actus in intelligentiis, non tamen forma et materia nisi aequivoce."

⁴² Cf. Aristotle, *De anima* II, 412a 21; *Met.* Z 13, 1039a 7; *Λ5* 1071a 8-9: "form is in act if it is separate".

⁴³ "Omnis enim forma et actus est in potentia antequam esse acquirat."

*subsists without matter, the form still relates to its being as in the relation of potency to act. (ST Ia, q. 50, a. 2, sol. 3) [my italics].*⁴⁴

This last sentence must be emphasised, for it shows the exact point of Thomas's surgical intervention on Aristotelian ontology. With the expression "form subsisting without matter", Aquinas very precisely designates the Aristotelian act as a principle of separation. But what he affirms, for his part, is that a substance, material or immaterial, only really has subsistence and only remains in the separate state when it is completed by the divine gift of *esse*. Put differently, he makes substance integrally dependent on relation – or again, he constructs the ontology of creation.

The dissociation that has been effected between form and act comes to express this dependence. Act, to the extent that it is identified with *esse* – which itself is an effect of creative omnipotence – no longer expresses substance as being capable of an immanent completeness and perfection. Quite the opposite: act now designates substance as an effect of divine transcendence. It is no longer the sign of a kind of completeness of which it is the only principle; instead, act is now the sign of a relation without which the substance cannot be.

This relationship remains asymmetrical. The creature cannot be in act without God, i.e. without the pure act of being and omnipotence. But in God himself, the relation to creatures is only a relation of reason. It is merely a way of considering his essence, insofar as his essence is also action. In the creature, on the other hand, creation is a real relation. To say this is to say that the creature neither can be nor can be conceived without omnipotence or divine power: "God is the master of the creature, because he brought it into being by creating it. But his power is a relation that really exists in the creature (*Sed dominium est quaedam relatio realiter in creatura existens*)" (*De Pot.* q. 3, a. 3, s.c. 2).

Thus, in a new twist, act is found to be linked to a new relation: it is no longer tied only to the in-potency (the form, or the matter-form composite) that receives it, but now also to the

⁴⁴ "Licet in Angelo non sit compositio forma et materiae, est tamen in eo actus et potentia. Quod quidem manifestum potest esse ex consideratione rerum materialium, in quibus invenitur duplex compositio. Prima quidem formae et materiae, ex quibus constituitur natura aliqua. Natura autem sic composita non est suum esse, sed esse est actus eius. Unde ipsa natura comparatur ad suum esse sicut potentia ad actum. Subtracta ergo materia, et posito quod ipsa forma subsistat non in materia, adhuc remanet comparatio formae ad ipsum esse ut potentiae ad actum."

omnipotence that creates it. Moreover, the second relation is in truth ontologically anterior to the first, since the composite is only fully actual when the *esse* is received.

4. Being-in-potency, capacity, analogy

Like the notion of act, the notion of in-potency is the object of a profound reinterpretation in Aquinas. And this reinterpretation is also mediated by its association with another notion. This time, however, this notion is not a Thomistic invention, as was the case with the *esse*, but is inherited. Aquinas identifies in-potency with receptivity. It is in this way, as we have seen, that it is defined in some of the texts that I have already cited:

Now everything which receives something from another is in potency with respect to what it receives, and what is received into it is its act. (*DEE*, IV, 7; cf. also *CG* II, 54, 9).

Act, then, is what is received, and in-potency what receives. In-potency is a kind of capacity, not understood as unrealized potency but as pure receptivity, a vacant space left open to receive a gift.

Now – and this is an essential point – Aristotle, for his part, does not define passive potency, and still less in-potency, by way of receptivity. First, he never associates *dunamis* with absence or privation. Quite the opposite in fact, he distinguishes them explicitly.⁴⁵ Second, he gives a univocal and positive definition for both active and passive *dunamis*, namely as being the principle of motion or change.⁴⁶ Third and finally, he replaces the correlation of active and passive potency with that of in-potency and act. The concept of in-potency comes to designate, beyond the distinction between agent and patient, the principle of a movement that is finally completed by act.

Thus, if the notion of in-potency as receptivity is an inherited notion, and not a Thomistic invention, its heritage is not Aristotelian. I propose that we read in it a direct descent from a concept that has been less explored: that of *épitédeiotès* (aptitude). Far from being a simple synonym for in-potency, *épitédeiotès* changes the Aristotelian triple scheme of potency profoundly. In Aristotle we know that potency, especially as it is explained in the *De Anima*, has two distinct meanings.

⁴⁵ *Met.* Θ 1, 1046a 29-32.

⁴⁶ *Met.* Θ 1, 1046a 11; a 12-13; Δ12, 1019a 20.

The first kind of *dunamis* is according to “the kind and the matter”, and is an innate capacity, not yet developed – it is that in virtue of which every human being is capable of learning to read and to write, simply insofar as he is human. The second kind of *dunamis*, for its part, is a capacity that is already developed and formed, the exercise of which requires no additional learning, but simply the will and the absence of obstacles – e.g. the decision to set to work and open a book for someone who already knows how to read (II, 5, 417a 22-b 2). In both cases we should understand “capacity” as a power to act, a positive aptitude – even if it requires the intervention of another agent to become effective. In the Aristotelian scheme there is no such thing as a potency that is a purely passive capacity.⁴⁷ It is Alexander of Aphrodisias who introduces a new degree – and a new concept – of potency that is prior even to Aristotle’s first kind of *dunamis*: it is what he calls *épitédeiotès*, or the “aptitude or ability to receive disposition”.⁴⁸ The same modified scheme is found again in Porphyry.⁴⁹ There, in an even more striking way than in Alexander, *épitédeiotès* is defined as the absence of potency, a pure capacity for receiving *dunamis* from an external source.

Outside of Porphyry, the concept of *épitédeiotès* plays an important role in Neo-Platonism: it comes up in Plotinus as the passive *medium* of participation. This is also the use that Proclus makes of it in the *Elements of Theology*: there, *épitédeiotès* is tightly associated with *methexis*⁵⁰ as the same passive, receptive potency that makes possible the forms’ presence to the beings that participate in them.⁵¹

It is through the intermediary of this Proclusian usage that the notion passes to Thomas, who takes it up in his commentary on the *Liber de causis*. Chapter XIX (XX) of the *Liber* states in fact that “the first cause [...] governs all created things and [...] endows them with the potency of life and goodness according to the measure of their receptive potencies and their capacity (*secundum*

⁴⁷ W.N. Clark observes that one will find no trace in Aristotle of a concept of potency as being purely static, limiting, and receptive: cf. “The Limitation of Act by Potency: Aristotelianism or Neoplatonism”, *The New Scholasticism* 26/1952, pp. 167-194. On the specific use of the act-potency theory here, see also J.F. Whipple, *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas. From finite Being to Uncreated Being*, Washington, Catholic University of America Press, 2000, chap. IV; and *Metaphysical Themes in Thomas Aquinas*, Washington, Catholic University of America Press, 2007, chap. V.

⁴⁸ Alexander of Aphrodisias, *Quaest.* 81, 8-10.

⁴⁹ Cf. Porphyry, *On the Manner in which the Embryo Receives the Soul*, 1 (2) 18-22; 13 (2) 21-23. On the modification that *épitédeiotès* effects on the Aristotelian schema of potency, cf. G. Aubry, “La doctrine aristotélicienne de l’embryon et sa réinterprétation par Porphyre”, in L. Brisson, G. Aubry, *et al.*, *Porphyre. Sur la manière dont l’embryon reçoit l’âme*, Paris, Vrin, 2012, pp. 47-67.

⁵⁰ Cf. Proclus, *The Elements of Theology*, prop. 39.

⁵¹ See also prop. 72, l. 22.

modum virtutis earum receptibilitatem et possibilitatem earum)”. Goodness and other gifts are thus “diversified by their conjunction with the one receiving them (*ex concursu recipientis*)”. Commenting on this text, Thomas refers to Proposition 122 of the *Elements of Theology*. There we read that divine realities fill all things with their power and that other things participate in them insofar “as they can receive according to the measure of their own reality”.⁵² Thus, as in the *Liber de causis*, we find here the idea of a receptive potency, a pure ability to receive, which is nonetheless not indeterminate but rather graduated according to the very natures of the different participating beings. It is, in turn, this graduation that makes the relations of the participants to the forms in which they participate varied. And this is indeed the point that Aquinas’s commentary emphasises: each real being receives the influence of the first cause “according to its mode and according to the particularity of its own substance and potency” (*secundum modum et proprietatem suae substantiae et virtutis*, 110, 10-11). This is similar, says Thomas, to what happens when rays from a single source of light take on various colors by passing through different pieces of stained glass.

The term *épitédeiotès*, which, as we have seen, is present in several propositions of the *Elements of Theology*, does not appear in Proposition 122. On the other hand, that proposition is concerned with the ability to receive. And the image of light, with its color varying according to the glass that receives it, is found in Plotinus’ Treatise 22 (VI, 4), where it is employed precisely in order to illustrate the notion of *épitédeiotès*:

Now one must suppose that what is present is present for the aptitude of that which receives it (*ἐπιτηδειότητι τοῦ δεξιμένου*). And that being is everywhere in being because it does not fall short of itself, but that the thing that is capable of being present to it is only present to it to the extent of its capacity (*παρεῖναι δὲ αὐτῷ τὸ δυνάμενον παρεῖναι καὶ καθ’ ὅσον δύναται*); it is present not locally, but as the transparent is present to light; a clouded medium participates in the light in a quite different way (11, 1-10).

Aquinas, in turn, creates a fascinating variation on this image of light. In the *De ente et essentia* he associates it with *aptitudo*, this time explicitly. There he is concerned with distinguishing between two types of accidents: on the one hand, those that are “caused by essential principles according to a perfect act (*actum perfectum*), as heat in fire, which is always hot”; and on the other, those that are caused “according to aptitude alone (*secundum aptitudinem tantum*), their

⁵² ὥν δέχεσθαι δύναται κατὰ τὰ μέτρα τῆς οἰκείας ὑποστάσεως

completion coming from an external agent, as transparency in the air is completed by some external luminous body” (VI, 6).

Now elsewhere, this time in the *Contra Gentiles*, Thomas applies this second model to the relationship between form and *esse*:

Form is not being, either, but there is between them an order: form relates to being as *light* to *illumination*, or *whiteness* to the fact of *being white* [...]. Being relates to form itself as act. Indeed, in things composed of matter and form, the form is called the principle of being, because it is the completion (*complementum*) of the substance, whose act is its very being; thus, for example, transparency is the principle of illumination for the air, in that it makes air the proper subject of light (CG II, 54, 3 and 4).

We have here the following analogy: the relation of *esse* to form and through it to the whole substance, is the same as that of light to the transparency and the air. Being actualises the form and, through it, the composite, in the same way that the light received in the transparency actualises the air’s luminosity. Like the transparency, form thus belongs on the side of raw capability and aptitude: it is not act itself, but simply what receives act and what makes it possible for a substance to receive act. Thus we can see not only that Aquinas dissociates form from act in order to associate it with in-potency, but also that here we have to understand in-potency in the non-Aristotelian sense of *épitédeiotès*, that is, as a purely receptive potency.

Now this receptivity is graduated, which is the essential point that the commentary on the *Liber de causis* already emphasises with the image of light being filtered by stained glass. From the Neo-Platonic development of the notion of *épitédeiotès*, Aquinas thus retains the twofold idea of both pure capacity and the principle of differentiation. This idea surfaces in Thomas by way of the axiom according to which “*actus non limitatur nisi per potentiam*” – “act is limited only by potency”. This axiom can only be understood if we take potency in the sense of *épitédeiotès*: for what it signifies is that act is limited by the potency *that receives it*, the capacity that accepts it.⁵³

⁵³ I do not have the space to show it here, but this model is decisive: it is at the foundation of the Thomistic conception of analogy as a graduated distribution of being, that is, strictly speaking, as a distribution proportional to the capacity of each being. On receptive capacity and analogy, see J.-F. Courtine, *Inventio analogiae. Métaphysique et ontothéologie*, Paris, Vrin, 2005, pp. 205-206.

There is clearly nothing Aristotelian about such a device.⁵⁴ Even more: it actually puts into play all the changes carried by Aquinas into the Aristotelian ontology of *dunamis* and *energeia*: the dissociation of form and act, the reinterpretation of in-potency as *épitédeiotès*, as well as the association of pure act and omnipotence. Infinite being is opposed to finite being just as that which, on account of being identical with its essence, exercises its full power of being (*potestas, virtus essendi*) is opposed to that which, on account of being received in an essence, is limited by the potency that receives it. The opposition between infinite and finite being can thus be expressed as an opposition between two species of potency: on the one hand, the perfect and active power of the first being, *virtus* and *potestas essendi*, and on the other, the bare potency, purely receptive, that is designated by *aptitudo/épitédeiotès* and which is a potency not *of* being but *for* being, the mere potentiality to be.⁵⁵

In the end, then, the concept of potency is redistributed between the Creator's full power *of* being, and the creature's potency *for* being.

Conclusion

Of this confrontation between Aristotle's and Aquinas's use of the notions of act and potency, three moments can be underlined:

- Aquinas's conjunction of power and being in the first being – a conjunction that, paradoxically, the notion of the pure act comes to signify; whereas, in Aristotle, pure act instead characterises the first being as excluding all potency;

⁵⁴ F.J. Kovach well recognizes a Neoplatonic heritage in the principle of the limitation of act by potency, but without identifying it more precisely (cf. 'Saint Thomas Aquinas: The Limitation of Potency by Act. A Textual and Doctrinal Analysis', *Atti dell'VIII Congresso Tomistico Internazionale, 5: Problemi Metafisici, Studi Tomistici* 14, Citta del Vaticano, ed. Vaticana, 1982, p. 387-411). R.J. Henle for his part, gives parallels to the *Liber de causis*, Pseudo-Dionysius, and Boethius (for the cognitive formulation of the principle) but none to the Neo-Platonic concept of *épitédeiotès* (cf. *Saint Thomas and Platonism*, The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1970, pp. 330-333).

⁵⁵ Cf. also Thomas de Aquino, *In Librum Beati Dionysii De divinis nominibus expositio*, ed. C. Pera, Turino/Roma, Marietti, 1950, p. 234, n. 629: "Omnis forma, recepta in aliquo, limitatur et finitur secundum capacitatem recipientis; unde, hoc corpus album non habet totam albedinem secundum totum posse albedinis. Sed si esset albedo separata, nihil deesset ei quod ad virtutem albedinis pertineret. Omnia autem alia [...] habent esse receptum et participatum et ideo non habent esse secundum totam virtutem essendi, sed solus Deus, qui est ipsum esse subsistens, secundum totam virtutem essendi, esse habet".

- the correlative demotion of the good to a secondary status by the assertion of the primacy of being;
- and finally, via the notion of *épitédeiotès*, Aquinas's identification of in-potency with the pure capacity for receiving the act of being that is imparted by omnipotence, and no longer with the immanent principle of actualisation within each substance.

We can recognize here three decisive moments in the formation of an ontology of power which, while borrowing its vocabulary, radically subverts the Aristotelian ontology of in-potency and in-act. It breaks with the axiological claim that, in Aristotle, posits the identity of being and the good in act, and conceives of god – or pure act – as both being the good and having no potency. This point deserves to be emphasised, particularly against Heidegger. At the end of his *Nietzsche*, in a famous text entitled “Metaphysics as History of Being”, Heidegger indeed recounts a story that is in a way parallel to the one that I am investigating. He examines the significance of the Latin translation of *energeia* by *actus*. In the latter, he sees the transition “from the Greek's conceptual language to the Roman's”, but also the transition from an ontology of presence⁵⁶ to an ontology of efficiency.⁵⁷ This reading, even if it does justice to the Thomistic *actus purus*, seems to me to lack the specificity of the Aristotelian *energeia*, insofar as *energeia* declares the identity of being not with presence but with the good.

More recently, Giorgio Agamben has also undertaken a history of *operatività*, operativity or effectiveness considered as the ontological paradigm that governs modernity: “In the last analysis [...] being and acting today have for us no representation other than effectiveness. Only what is effective, and as such governable and efficacious, is real”.⁵⁸ For Agamben, the decisive moment governing the movement from the ancient world to the modern one is to be found in the transition from the notion of potency to the notion of will.⁵⁹ But Agamben also holds that the Aristotelian distinction between *dunamis* and *energeia* already “implicitly contains an orientation of being

⁵⁶ *Energeia*, thus, is not “the effective reality as result, the product of an acting as an effect, but presence holding itself in the non-obscured”, and *entelekheia*, likewise, “is the fact of possessing (or being possessed) in the end, namely intimately possessing presence [...], and leaving pure and immediate presence” (Heidegger, *Nietzsche* II, Paris, Gallimard, 171, p. 325).

⁵⁷ The first being, indeed, the one theology calls “God”, is also conceived as the first cause, the supreme efficient being. “*Being* is thus conceived by reference to *doing* what, for its part, has its pinnacle in *being*” (J. Beaufret, ‘*Energeia et Actus*’, in *Dialogue avec Heidegger I: Philosophie grecque*, Paris, Minuit, 1973, p. 137).

⁵⁸ G. Agamben, *Opus Dei*, tr. Kotsko, p. XIII.

⁵⁹ G. Agamben, *Che cos'è il commando*, Roma, Edizioni Nottetempo, 2013.

towards operativity”.⁶⁰ A fundamental feature of his project therefore consists in deactivating the Aristotelian apparatus of potency and act and in isolating a potency that is not exhausted in the act to which it is ordered, a potency which is therefore “inoperative”. This “potency-not-to-do” is not impotence. Quite the reverse, in fact. It is a potency which, instead of passing into act without a remainder, preserves itself as potency within the act itself and can therefore open itself up to other acts and other ends than those to which it is usually ordered.

I have for my part tried to show here that far from governing the model of efficiency and operativity, the Aristotelian ontology of *dunamis* and *energeia* establishes a completely different model. I have also argued that a decisive transition towards the modern ontology of power therefore resides in the derivation (tightly linked to the theology of omnipotence) of potency-as-power from being-in-potency. This derivation serves as a prelude to the movement through which potency, once separated from the good and given primacy over it, may finally come to assume the disturbing, twofold form of a power that is both arbitrary and unlimited.*

⁶⁰ G. Agamben, *Opus Dei*, p. 75.

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