

METAPHYSICAL POTENCY (*Metaphysics*, IX, qq. 1-2)

The basic question

Aristotle has a sense of ‘potency’ in which potency is incompatible with actuality. How should we understand this sense?

q. 1: are they opposites?

q. 2: is one a relation to the other (are they “opposed relatively”)?

Note that the domain of the actual is constantly increasing (it seems to include past items here as well as present things). So the domain of the potential is being constantly encroached upon.

Miscellaneous assumptions

Potency in the relevant sense is a *relation* to act (they’re “opposed relatively”). Relations for medieval philosophers are akin to monadic properties: they inhere in a *relatum*; if the *other relatum* likewise has an inherent relation, the relation is mutual. In addition to the *relata* and the inherent relation, relations also have ‘foundations’ or ‘grounds’: the feature of one or both of the *relata* in virtue of which they are related in the required way (e.g. whiteness as the ground for the relation of similarity holding between two white things).

Potency in this sense is (among other things) required for something to be the end term of a (further) causal relation – i.e. to be caused (see e.g. n. 33).

‘Ens (being) is that to which esse (existence) is non-repugnant’

Structure of the questions

Objections and sed contra

nn. 1-5: objections to show that they’re not opposites

nn. 6-7: sed contra – gives the Aristotelian texts

nn. 8-12: objections to show that there is not sense of ‘potency’ in which potency is relatively opposed to act.

n. 13: sed contra – cites an Aristotelian text which purports to show that they are inter-defined

Body of question

nn. 14-21: divisions of potency, results in isolating the required sense (= “metaphysical potency taken most narrowly”; = “objective potency,” cf. n. 41)¹

nn. 14-16: distinguish potency as principle/power (= qq. 3-4), potency as mode of being (= this question)

¹ There is a mistranslation here, the first four lines of n. 21: “In one way it is opposed to the impossible, not as it implies a mode of composition (as in the second member of the division), but as it refers to the disposition of something non-complex.”

n. 22: reply to first question: this kind of potency is opposed to act

nn. 23-59: reply to the second question: what is the relationship between potency and act?

n. 24: varieties of opposition relation: mutual or non-mutual. Mutual relations are such that both *relata* possess correlative relations. Non-mutual relations fail to satisfy either one of these conditions (example: knower and known; creature and God). Act-potency is non-mutual because there's got to be an "order" to act.

nn. 24-38: three doubts and their solution [**this section does most of the philosophical work!**]

nn. 24-6: three objections stated

n. 27: one way of understanding what the foundation of the relation is – a *realist* one²

nn. 28-30: replies to the objections

nn. 31-2: two objections to reply 3

nn. 33-4: replies to these objections

n. 35: another way of understanding what the foundation of the relation is – a *non-realist* one.

n. 36: replies to objections in nn. 11-12, 25-6, 31-2

nn. 37-8: reply to n. 33

nn. 39-48: discerning an additional kind of metaphysical potency that tracks objective potency for all natural changes: i.e. subjective potency (cf. n. 42).

nn. 40-3: the distinction introduced

n. 44-5: divisions of objective and subjective potency in relation to processes and objects)

nn. 46, 48: subjective potency distinguished in terms of accident/substance as end term

n. 47: objective potency and first/second actuality

nn. 49-59: six general statements about metaphysical potency

n. 49: (1) they don't remain with act; (2) individuated by acts; (3) so subjective potency distinct from its subject

nn. 50-2: objections to (3) and replies

n. 53: (4) both equal in entity

nn. 54-7: objections and replies to (4)

n. 58: (5) subjective potency in definition of 'motion'

n. 59: (6) two subjective potencies for the same form cannot exist in one subject

nn. 60-4: replies to objections to q. 1

nn. 65-9: replies to objections to q. 2

Hardest bit

n. 28: reply to an objection (n. 24) to the effect that potency can't be ordered to (i.e. be a relation to future) act, because either "to act in potency" or "to act as actualized", neither of which is possible (first generates infinite regress, second implies the same thing is in potency and act):

² Note: there is a mistranslation here, p. 463, ll. 2-3 should read "existence] can denominate either of the two . . ."

Distinguish ‘act in act’ and ‘act in potency’ into ‘composite or divided meanings’. In composite sense ‘act in act’ means ‘act that includes act’, and ‘act in potency’ means ‘act that includes potency’. In divided sense, ‘act in act’ ‘act considered as act’, and ‘act in potency’ means ‘act considered as in potency’. So ‘being ordered to act’ is false if ‘act’ is ‘act in act’ (in either sense); it’s false if ‘act in potency’ is ‘act that includes potency’ (composite sense); it’s true if ‘act in potency’ is ‘act considered as in potency’.

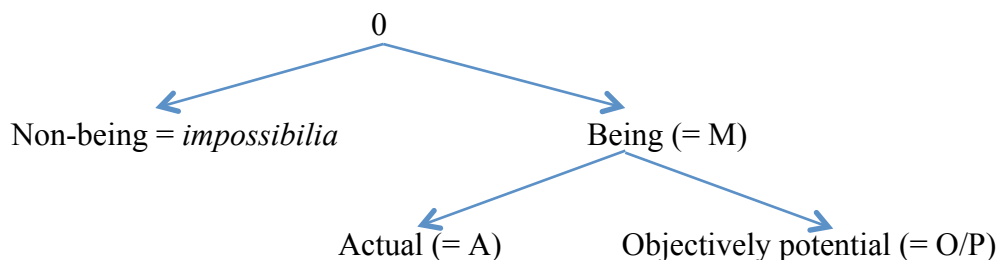
The contrast between the two views in nn. 27 and 35:

According to the view in n. 27, potency is a mind-independent relation between a possible essence and its (future) actualization, grounded in the possible essence itself, a mind-independent being; so it’s a relation between the possible essence and the whole (essence + actuality).

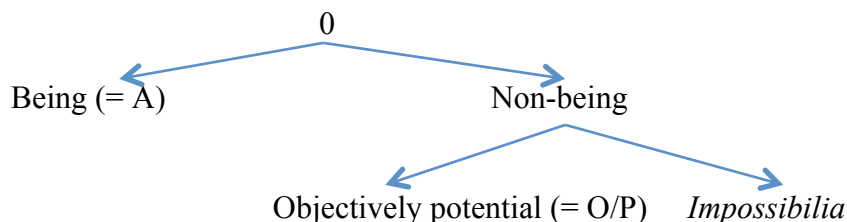
According to the view in n. 35, potency is a mind-dependent relation between a possible essence and its (future) actualization, such that the possible essence is a non-being, something merely mind-dependent.

The two views sketched

(n. 27)



(n. 35)



Relation between logical and metaphysical potency

“Neither should we think that [being something – *esse aliquid*] is not repugnant to man because it is a being in potency, and is repugnant to chimera because it is not a being in potency; rather, it is the other way round, because it is not repugnant to man, therefore it is possible by logical potency, and because it is repugnant to chimera, therefore it is impossible by the opposed impossibility. And objective potency follows this possibility, and this if we suppose the omnipotence of God, which regards every possible thing (while that is other of itself), even though this logical possibility, absolutely, from its own notion, can stand even though *per impossibile* no omnipotence relates to it.” (*Ordinatio* I, d. 36, q. un., n. 61)

POTENCY AS PRINCIPLE/POWER (*Metaphysics IX*, qq. 3-4, q. 5)

The basic claim

q. 5, n. 13: Potency is the foundation for any relationship to the *principiatum*. So it means (causal) power.

qq. 3-4

Some terminology

n. 19

Principiatio (relation)

Principium (foundation for relation; quo)

Principians (principle/cause/subject)

3-4, n. 20

Potentiality (relation)

Potency (foundation for relation; quo)

Potens (cause/subject)

Two views

qq. 3-4, nn. 22-3: (1) potency = principium, covers all four causes; (2) potency relates only to efficient and material causation (active potency, passive potency). n. 24: Scotus prefers the first but doesn't really think it matters.

Relations of potencies

n. 25: on either view, potencies (e.g. active and passive) are related to their subjects and to other potencies.

n. 27: passive potencies also have relations to form (act as correlated of matter; together matter and form are intrinsic principles/principiantes)

n. 29: so passive potency related to principiatum, to active principians, and to the form (so its equivocal)

n. 30: active potency related to the principiatum, the passive principians; but not to the form, because form is the principium – it just *is* the potency.

n. 42: an active potency has a kind of 'subjective potency' for its act (i.e. *principiatio*, a relation to the principiatum) – though not by being informed.

q. 5

Henry's view

- n. 4: form as 'principium' requires some kind of relation to effect
- n. 5: 'potency' is the relation and this must be included in the definition of the potency prior to the effect. (example of soul)

Objection

- n. 7: makes the potency too complex (composite of absolute and relation)

Example of soul

- n. 5: Henry: power = soul's bearing different relations to different objects/acts – just one simple item, the soul + relations
- n. 17: distinction of powers cannot come from distinct relations to different objects/acts (as Henry's view implies), since powers are prior
- n. 18: the distinction between the soul and the powers (i.e. the potens and the potency) is either formal distinction or rational.
- n. 19: but if the latter, how do different kinds of act get elicited?
- n. 20: set that worry aside: still, the absolutes must be prior to the relations, potencies prior to principia – prior to act, they have potential relation, with act they have actual relation.