

CHAPTER 5

INTRINSIC PRINCIPLES OF BEING: POTENCY AND ACT

1. BOOK V: DEFINITIONS

Lesson 14: *Potency/capacity*

954. Having treated the various senses of the terms which signify the parts of unity, here Aristotle begins to treat those which signify the parts of being. He does this, first, according as being is divided by act and potency; and second (977), according as it is divided by the ten categories “*Quantity means*”).

In regard to the first, he gives the various senses in which the term potency (*potentia*) or power (*potestas*) is used. But he omits the term act, because he could explain its meaning adequately only if the nature of forms had been made clear first, and he will do this in Books VIII (1703) and IX (1823). Hence in Book IX he immediately settles the question about potency and act together.

This part, then, is divided into two members. In the first he explains the various senses in which the term potency is used; and in the second (975), he reduces all of them to one primary sense (“But those senses”).

In regard to the first he does two things. First, he gives the various senses in which the term potency is used; and second (967), the various senses in which the term incapacity is used (“Incapacity”).

In treating the first he does two things. First, he gives the senses in which the term potency is used; and second (961), those in which the term capable or potent is used (“And since the term”).

955. In dealing with the first part, then, he gives four senses in which the term *potency* or *power* is used:

First, potency means an [active] **principle of motion** or change in some other thing as other. For there is some principle of motion or change in the thing changed, namely, the matter, or some formal principle on which the motion depends, as upward or downward motion is a result of the forms of lightness or heaviness. But a principle of this kind cannot be designated as the active power on which this motion depends. For everything which is moved is moved by another; and a thing moves itself only by means of its parts inasmuch as one part moves another, as is proved in Book VIII of the *Physics*. Hence insofar as a potency is a principle of motion in that in which motion is found, it is not included under active power but under passive potency. For heaviness in earth is not a principle causing motion but rather one which causes it to be moved. Hence active power must be present some other thing than the one moved, for example, the power of building is not in the thing being built but rather in the builder. And while the art of medicine is an active power, because the physician heals by means of it, it may also be found in the one who is healed, not inasmuch as he is healed, but accidentally, i.e., inasmuch as the physician and

the one who is healed happen to be the same. So therefore generally speaking potency or power means in one sense a principle of motion or change in some other thing as other.

956. (2) Here he gives a second sense in which the term potency is used. He says that in another sense the term potency means the principle whereby something is moved or changed by another thing as other. Now this is **passive** potency, and it is by reason of it that a patient undergoes some change. For just as every agent or mover moves something other than itself and acts in something other than itself, so too every patient is acted upon by something other than itself, i.e., everything moved is moved by another. For that principle whereby one thing is properly moved or acted upon by another is called passive potency.

957. Now there are two ways in which we can say that a thing has the potency to be acted upon by another. Sometimes we attribute such a potency to something, whatever it may be, because it is able to undergo some change, whether it be **good or bad**. And sometimes we say that a thing has such a potency, not because it can undergo something evil, but because it can be changed for the better. For example, we do not say that one who can be overpowered has a potency [in this last sense], but we do attribute such a potency to one who can be taught or helped. And we speak thus because sometimes an ability to be changed for the worse is attributed to incapacity, and the ability not to be changed in the same way is attributed to potency, as will be said below (965).

959. (3) He now gives a third sense in which the term potency is used. He says that in another sense potency means the principle of performing some act, not in any way at all, but **well** or according to “intention,” i.e., according to what a man plans. For when men walk or talk but not well or as they planned to do, we say that they do not have the ability to walk or to talk. And “the same thing applies when things are being acted upon,” for a thing is said to be able to undergo something if it can undergo it well; for example, some pieces of wood are said to be combustibile because they can be burned easily, and others are said to be incombustibile because they cannot be burned easily.

960. (4) He gives a fourth sense in which the term potency is used. He says that we designate as potencies all **habits or forms or dispositions** by which some things are said or made to be altogether incapable of being acted upon or changed, or to be not easily changed for the worse. For when bodies are changed for the worse, as those which are broken or bent or crushed or destroyed in any way at all, this does not happen to them because of some ability or potency but rather because of some inability and the weakness of some principle which does not have the power of resisting the thing which destroys them. For a thing is destroyed only because of the victory which the destroyer wins over it, and this is a result of the

weakness of its proper active power. For those things which cannot be affected by defects of this kind, or can “hardly or only gradually” be affected by them (i.e., they are affected slowly or to a small degree) are such “because they have the potency and the ability to be in some definite state”; i.e., they have a certain perfection which prevents them from being overcome by contraries. And, as is said in the *Categories*, it is in this way that hard or healthy signifies a natural power which a thing has of resisting change by destructive agents. But soft and sickly signify incapacity or lack of power.

961. Here he gives the senses of the term **capable** or **potent**, which correspond to the above senses of potency. And there are two senses of capable which correspond to the first sense of potency.

(1) For according to its **active** power a thing is said to be capable of acting in two ways: in one way, because it acts immediately of itself; and in another way, because it acts through something else to which it communicates its power, as a king acts through a bailiff..

962. (2) Next, he gives a second sense in which the term *capable* is used, and this corresponds to the second sense of the term *potency*, i.e., passive potency. He says that, in a different way from the foregoing, a thing said to be capable or potent when it can be changed in some respect, whatever it may be, i.e., whether it can be changed for the **better** or for the **worse**. And in this sense a thing is said to be corruptible because “it is capable of being corrupted,” which is to undergo change for the worse, or it is not corruptible because it is capable of not being corrupted, assuming that it is impossible for it to be corrupted.

965. (3) Here he gives a third sense in which the term *capable* is used; and this sense corresponds to the fourth sense of potency inasmuch as a potency was said to be present in something which **cannot be corrupted** or changed for the worse. Thus he says that in another sense a thing is said to be capable because it does not have some potency or principle which enables it to be corrupted. And I mean by some other thing as other. For a thing is said to be potent or powerful in the sense that it cannot be overcome by something external so as to be corrupted.

966. (4) He gives a fourth sense in which the term capable is used, and this corresponds to the third sense of potency inasmuch as potency designated the ability to act or be acted upon **well**. He says that according to the foregoing senses of potency which pertain both to acting and to being acted upon, a thing can be said to be capable either because it merely happens to come into being or not or because it happens to come into being well. For a thing is said to be capable of acting either because it can simply act or because it can act well and easily. And in a similar way a thing is said to be capable of being acted upon and corrupted because it can be acted upon easily. And this sense of potency is also found in inanimate things “such as instruments,” i.e., in the case of the lyre and other musical instruments. For one lyre is said to be able to produce a tone because it has a good tone, and another is said not to because its tone is not good.

Incapacity

967. Then he gives the different senses of the term incapacity, and in regard to this he does two things. First, he gives the various senses in which we speak of incapacity; and second (970), he treats the different senses in which the term impossible is used (“And some things”).

In treating the first part he does two things. First, he gives the common meaning of the term incapacity. Second (969), he notes the various ways in which it is used (“Again, there is”).

He accordingly says, first, that incapacity is the privation of potency.

Now two things are required in the notion of privation, (1) and the first of these is the **removal** of an opposite state. But the opposite of incapacity is potency. Therefore, since potency is a kind of principle, incapacity will be the removal of that kind of principle which potency has been described to be. (2) The second thing required is that privation properly speaking must belong to a **definite subject** and at a **definite time**; and it is taken in an improper sense when taken without a definite subject and without a definite time. For properly speaking only that is said to be blind which is naturally fitted to have sight and at the time when it is naturally fitted to have it.

968. And he says that incapacity, such as it has been described, is the removal of a potency, (1) “either altogether,” i.e., **universally**, in the sense that every removal of a potency is called incapacity, whether the thing is naturally disposed to have the potency or not; or (2) it is the removal of a potency from something which is naturally fitted to have it **at some time** or other or only at the time when it is naturally fitted to have it. For incapacity is not taken in the same way when we say that a boy is incapable of begetting, and when we say this of a man and of an eunuch. For to say that a boy is incapable of begetting means that, while the subject is naturally fitted to beget, it cannot beget before the proper time. But to say that an eunuch is incapable of begetting means that, while he was naturally fitted to beget at the proper time, he cannot beget now; for he lacks the active principles of begetting. Hence incapacity here retains rather the notion of privation. But a mule or a stone is said to be incapable of begetting because neither can do so, and also because neither has any real aptitude for doing so.

969. Then he explains the various senses of incapacity by contrasting them with the senses of potency. For just as potency is twofold, namely, active and passive, and both refer either to acting and being acted upon simply, or to acting and being acted upon well, in a similar fashion there is an opposite sense of incapacity corresponding to each type of potency. That is to say, there is a sense of incapacity corresponding “both to that which can merely produce motion and to that which can produce it well,” namely, to (1) active potency, which is the potency (a) to simply move a thing or (b) to move it well, and to (2) passive potency, which is the potency (a) to simply be moved or (b) to be moved well.

970. Then he explains the various senses in which the term *impossible* is used; and in regard to this he does two things. First, he gives the various senses in which the term impossible is used; and then (975) he reduces them to one (“But those senses”). In regard to the first he does three things:

(1) First, he says that in one sense some things are said to be impossible because they have the foregoing **incapacity** which is opposed to potency. And impossible in this sense is used in four ways corresponding to those of incapacity.

971. (2) Accordingly, when he says “in a different sense, he gives another way in which some things are said to be impossible. And they are said to be such not because of the privation of some potency but because of the **opposition existing between the terms in propositions**. For since potency is referred to being, then just as being is predicated not only of things that exist in reality but also of the composition of a proposition inasmuch as it contains truth and falsity, in a similar fashion the terms possible and impossible are predicated not only of real potency and incapacity but also of the truth and falsity found in the combining or separating of terms in propositions. Hence the term impossible means that of which the contrary is necessarily true. For example, it is impossible that the diagonal of a square should be commensurable with a side, because such a statement is false whose contrary is not only true but necessarily so, namely, that it is not commensurable. Hence the statement that it is commensurable is necessarily false, and this is impossible.

972. Here he shows that the *possible* is the opposite of the impossible in the second way mentioned; for the impossible is opposed to the possible in the second way mentioned. He says, then, that the possible, as the contrary of this second sense of the impossible, means that whose contrary is not necessarily false; for example, it is possible that a man should be seated, because the opposite of this—that he should not be seated—is not necessarily false.

973. From this it is clear that this sense of possible has three usages. (1) For in one way it designates what is **false but is not necessarily so**; for example, it is possible that a man should be seated while he is not seated, because the opposite of this is not necessarily true. (2) In another way possible designates what is **true but is not necessarily so** because its opposite is not necessarily false, for example, that Socrates should be seated while he is seated. (3) And in a third way it means that, although a thing is **not true now, it may be true later on**.

974. He shows how the term *power* is used **metaphorically**. He says that in geometry the term power is used metaphorically. For in geometry the square of a line is called its power by reason of the following likeness, namely, that just as from something in potency something actual comes to be, in a similar way from multiplying a line by itself its square results. It would be the same if we were to say that the number three is capable of becoming the number nine, because from multiplying the number three by itself the number nine results; for three times three makes nine. And

just as the term impossible taken in the second sense does not correspond to any incapacity, in a similar way the senses of the term possible which were given last do not correspond to any potency, but they are used figuratively or in the sense of the true and the false.

975. He now reduces all senses of capable and incapable to one primary sense. He says that those senses of the term capable or potent which correspond to potency all refer to one primary kind of potency—the first **active potency** which was described above (955) as the principle of change in some other thing as other; because all the other senses of capable or potent are referred to this kind of potency. For a thing is said to be capable by reason of the fact that some other thing has active power over it, and in this sense it is said to be capable according to passive potency. And some things are said to be capable because some other thing does not have power over them as those which said to be capable because they cannot be corrupted by external agents. And others are said to be capable because they have it “in some special way,” i.e., because they have the power or potency to act or be acted upon well or easily.

976. And just as all things which are said to be capable because of some potency are reduced to one primary potency, in a similar way all things which are said to be incapable because of some impotency are reduced to one primary incapacity, which is the opposite of the primary potency. It is clear, then, that the proper notion of potency in the primary sense is this: a principle of change in some other thing as other; and this is the notion of active potency or power.

2. BOOK IX: POTENTIALITY AND ACTUALITY

Lesson 2

Subjects of potency

1786. Having explained the different senses in which the term potency is used, here the Philosopher establishes the truth about potency in relation to the things in which it is found. This is divided into two parts. In the first (1786) he shows how these potencies differ from each other on the basis of a difference in their subjects. In the second (1795) he shows how potency and actuality are simultaneous or not in a substance.

In regard to the first he does three things. First, he shows how potencies differ on the basis of a **difference in their subjects**. He says that, since potencies are principles both for acting and being acted upon, some of these principles are in **non-living** things and some in living ones. And since **living** things are composed of body and soul, and the principles for acting and being acted upon which are present in the body of living things do not differ from those in non-living ones, he therefore adds “and in the soul,” because the principles of action which are present in the soul clearly differ from those present in non-living things.

1787. Again, there are several kinds of souls, and many of these do not differ to any great extent both in acting and in being acted upon from non-living things which act by natural instinct; for the parts of the **nutritive and sentient** soul act by natural impulse. Now only the rational part of the soul has dominion over its acts, and it is in this respect that it differs from non-living things. Therefore, having pointed out the difference between souls, he adds “and in the soul having reason,” because those principles of living things which are

found in the **rational** part of the soul differ specifically from those of non-living things. Hence it is evident that some powers of the soul are irrational and others rational.

1788. He explains what he means by those which are rational, when he adds that (1) “all the **productive** arts,” as the building and constructive arts and the like, whose actions pass over into (+) external matter, and (2) all sciences which do not perform actions that pass over into (~) external matter, as the **moral** and **logical** sciences—all arts of this kind, I say, are *powers*. And this is concluded from the fact that they are principles of change in some other thing inasmuch as it is other. This is the definition of active power, as is clear from what was said above.

1789. Second, he gives the difference between the above-mentioned potencies. He says that the same rational potencies are (+) open to contrary determinations as the art of medicine, which is a potency, as has been explained (1404-7), can produce both health and sickness.

But irrational potencies are not (~) open to contrary determinations, but properly speaking each is determined to one thing; for example, the heat of the sun has as its proper effect to heat, although it can be the cause of coldness inasmuch as by opening the pores it causes the loss of internal heat; or by absorbing the matter of a hot humor it destroys the heat and thereby cools.

1790. Then the Philosopher gives the reason for the aforesaid difference, and it is as follows: a **science**, which is a rational potency, is a conception of the thing known existing in the mind. Now the same conception explains both the **thing and its privation**, although not in the same way, because it first

makes known the existing thing and subsequently its privation; for example, the power of sight itself is known properly by means of the notion of sight, and then blindness is known, which is nothing but the very lack of sight in a thing naturally disposed to have it. Hence, if science is a conception of the thing known existing in the mind, the same science must deal with contraries—with one primarily and properly, and with the other secondarily; for example, the art of medicine is cognitive and productive primarily of health and secondarily of sickness, because, as has been pointed out, this art has to do with the conception of the thing known in the mind, and this conception is of one of the contraries directly and of the other indirectly.

1791. And since the remarks which the Philosopher had made above about privation he afterwards transferred to **contraries**, he shows that the same conception applies to a contrary and to a privation; for just as a privation is explained by negation and removal (for example, the removal of sight explains blindness), in a similar fashion a contrary is explained by negation and removal; because privation, which is merely the removal of some attribute, is a sort of first principle among contraries.

For in the case of all contraries one stands as something perfect and the other as something imperfect and the privation of the former; black, for example, is the privation of white, and cold is the privation of heat. Thus it is evident that the same science extends to contraries.

1792. He next develops this point, and he begins to give the reason for the aforesaid difference. For it is clear that natural things act by reason of the forms present in them. But contrary forms cannot exist in the same subject. Therefore it is impossible for the same natural thing to produce contrary effects.

But science is a potency for acting and a principle of motion, because a person has an idea of the thing to be made and this principle of motion is in the mind. And since this is so it follows that natural things produce only one effect; for example, what is healthful produces only health, and what is capable of heating produces only heat, and what is capable of cooling produces only cold.

But one who acts by science may be occupied with both contraries, because the conception of both contained in the soul is the same; for the soul possesses the principle of such motion, although not in the same way, as has been explained.

1793. Therefore, just as a **natural** activity proceeds to bring about its effect as though it were united to its form, which is the principle of action whose likeness remains in the effect, in a similar fashion the **soul** by its activity proceeds to bring about both opposites “by the same principle,” i.e., by the conception which is one for the two opposites, uniting both motions to this principle and causing both to terminate in it inasmuch as the likeness of this principle is verified in both of the opposites brought into being.

Therefore it is evident that rational powers produce an effect opposite to irrational powers, because a rational power

produces contrary effects, whereas an irrational power produces only one effect. The reason is that a single principle of contrary effects is contained in the conception belonging to a science, as has been explained.

1794. He explains the relationship of some of the senses of potency mentioned above to those which come under them. For it was stated above that a thing is said to have active or passive potency, sometimes only because it can act or be acted upon, and sometimes because it can act or be acted upon well. Therefore he says that the potency for acting or being acted upon well involves the potency for acting or being acted upon, but not the reverse. For it follows that someone acts if he acts well, but the opposite of this is not true.

Lesson 3

Objection 1: A thing has potency only when it is acting

1795. Having compared one kind of potency with another in the above discussion, here the Philosopher begins to explain how potency and actuality are found in the same subject. This is divided into two parts. In the first he rejects the false opinions of some men. In the second (1815) he establishes the truth (“And since among”).

The first is divided into two parts. In the first part he rejects the opinion of those who said that a thing is possible or potential only when it is in a state of actuality. In the second part (1810) he rejects the opinion of those who maintain the reverse of this: that all things are potential or possible, even though they are not in a state of actuality (“Now if what”).

In regard to the first he does two things. First, he rejects the erroneous opinion referred to. Second (1804), he explains what it is to be potential or possible, and what it is to be actual (“Moreover, a thing”).

In regard to the first he does three things. First, he gives this opinion. Second (1796), he destroys it (“It is not difficult”). Third (1803), he draws his intended conclusion (“Therefore, if it”).

He accordingly says, first, that some said that a thing is in a state of potency or capability only when it is acting; for example, a man who is not actually building is incapable of building, but he is capable of building only when he is actually building; and they speak in a similar way about other things.

The reason for this position seems to be that they thought that all things come about **necessarily** because of some connection between causes.

Thus if all things come about necessarily, it follows that those things which do not, are **impossible**.

1796. Then he adduces arguments against the above opinion, and these reduce it to its absurd consequences. The first is as follows: to be **building** is to have the power or capability of building. Therefore, if no one has the power or capability of acting except when he is acting, no one is a builder except when he is building. And the same thing will be true of the

other arts; for all arts are certain capabilities or potencies, as has been pointed out (1786). It follows, then, that no one will have an art except when he is exercising it.

1797. But this is shown to be impossible if two assumptions are made. The first is this: if someone did not at first have an art, it would be impossible for him to have it later unless he had learned it or acquired it in some way, i.e., by discovery.

1798. The second assumption is that if someone had an **art** it would be impossible for him not to have the same art later **unless he lost it** in some way, either through forgetfulness or through some illness or through the passage of a long time during which the knowledge was not exercised; for this is the cause of forgetfulness. Now it cannot be that someone should lose an art as a result of the destruction of its object, as it sometimes happens that true knowledge is lost when a thing is changed; for example, when someone makes a true judgment that Socrates is sitting, his true judgment is destroyed when Socrates stands up. But this cannot be said about an art; for an art is not a knowledge of what exists, but of what is to be made; and so long as the matter from which an art can produce something continues to exist, the object of that art always exists. Hence an art cannot be lost when its object is destroyed, except in the ways mentioned.

1799. Now from these two assumptions the Philosopher argues as follows: if a man does not have an art except when he is exercising it, then when he begins to exercise it he has it anew. Therefore he must either have learned it or acquired it in some other way. And similarly when he ceases to exercise an art it follows that he lacks that art, and thus he loses the art which he previously had either through forgetfulness or through some change or through the passage of time. But both of these are clearly false; and therefore it is not true that someone has a potency only when he is acting.

1800. Here he gives the second argument, which now has to do with the irrational principles present in non-living things, namely, hot and cold, sweet and bitter, and other qualities of this kind, which are active principles changing the senses and thus are potencies. Now if potency is present in a thing only when it is acting, it follows that nothing is hot or cold, sweet or bitter, and so forth, except when it is being sensed through a change in the senses. But this is clearly false; for if it were true it would follow that Protagoras' opinion would be true, since he said that all the properties and natures of things have existence only in being sensed and in being thought.

And from this it would follow that contradictories would be true at the same time, since different men have contradictory opinions about the same thing. Now the Philosopher argued dialectically against this position above in Book IV (636). Therefore it is false that potency exists only when there is activity.

1801. Here he gives the third argument, which is as follows: **sense** is a kind of potency. Therefore, if potency exists only when there is activity, it follows that a man has sensory power only when he is sensing, for example, the power of sight or hearing. But one who does not have the power of sight although he is naturally disposed to have it is blind; and

one who does not have the power of hearing is deaf. Hence he will be blind and deaf many times on the same day. But this is clearly false, for a blind man does not afterwards regain sight nor a deaf man hearing.

1802. Here he gives the fourth argument, which is as follows: it is impossible for a thing to act which does not have the power to act. Therefore, if one has a potency or power only when he is acting, it follows that when he is not acting it is impossible for him to act. But whoever says that something incapable of happening either is or will be, is mistaken. This is evident from the meaning of the word impossible; for the impossible is said to be false because it cannot happen. It follows, then, that something which is not is incapable of coming to be in any way. And thus potency so understood will do away with motion and generation, because one who is standing will always stand, and one who is sitting will always sit. For if anyone is sitting, he will never stand afterwards, because so long as he is not standing he does not have the power to stand. Hence it is impossible for him to stand, and consequently it is impossible for him to get up. Similarly what is not white will be incapable of being white, and thus could not be made white. The same holds true in the case of all other things.

1803. He draws his intended conclusion, saying that, if the absurdities mentioned above cannot be admitted, it is obvious that potency and actuality are distinct. But those who hold the foregoing position make potency and actuality the same insofar as they say that something has potency only when it is in a state of actuality. And from this it is evident that they wish to remove from nature something of no little importance, for they eliminate motion and generation, as has been stated (1802). Hence, since this cannot be admitted, it is obvious that something is capable of being which yet is not, and that something is capable of not being which yet is. And "it is similar in the case of the other categories," or predicaments, because it is possible from someone who is not walking to walk, and conversely it is possible from someone who is walking not to walk.

1804. Here he explains what it is to be **potential** and what it is to be actual. First, he explains what it is to be potential. He says that that is said to be potential from which nothing impossible follows when it is assumed to be actual; for example, if one were to say that it is possible for someone to sit if nothing impossible follows when he is assumed to sit. And the same holds true of being moved and of moving something, and other cases of this kind.

1805. Second, he explains what it is to be **actual**. He says that the word actuality is used to signify *entelechy* and perfection, namely, the form, and other things of this kind, as any action at all, is derived properly from **motion**, so far as the origin of the word is concerned. For since words are signs of intellectual conceptions, we first give names to those things which we first understand, even though they may be subsequent in the order of nature. Now of all acts which are perceived by us in a sensible way, motion is the best known and most evident to us; and therefore the word actuality was first referred to motion, and from motion the word was extended to other things.

1806. And for this reason motion is not attributed to (~) non-existent things, although certain of the other categories mentioned above are attributed to non-existents; for we say that non-existent things are intelligible, or thinkable, or even desirable, but we do not say that they are moved. For, since to be moved means to be actual, it follows that things which do not exist actually would exist actually; but this is obviously false. For even if some non-existent things are potential, they are still not said to be, since they are not actual.

Objection 2: All things are possible.

1807. Having destroyed the opinion of those who claim that nothing is possible except when it is actual, the Philosopher now destroys the opposite opinion of those who claim **that all things are possible**; and in regard to this he does two things. First, he destroys this opinion. Second (1810), he establishes a truth about the succession of possible things.

He accordingly says, first, that if it is true that a thing is said to be possible because something follows from it, inasmuch as the possible has been defined as that from which nothing impossible follows if it is assumed to exist, it is evident that the statements of some thinkers that anything is possible even if it never will be, cannot be true, since as a result of this position impossible things will be eliminated. For example, if one were to say that the diagonal of a square can be commensurate with a side, even though it is not commensurate with it (and one might speak in the same way about other impossible things), and not think that it is impossible for the diameter of a square to be commensurate with a side, those who maintain this position, I say, speak truly in one sense and in another they do not.

1808. For there are some things which nothing will prevent us from designating as capable or possible of coming to be, even though they never will be or ever come to be; but this cannot be said of all things. Yet according to the doctrine laid down above, and which we are now to assume, only those things are capable of being or coming to be, even though they are not, from which nothing impossible follows when they are posited. However, when it is posited that the diagonal of a square is commensurate, an impossible conclusion follows. Thus it cannot be said that it is possible for the diagonal to be commensurate, for it is not only false but impossible.

1809. Now some things are **false only but not impossible**, as that Socrates sits or that he stands. For to be false and to be impossible are not the same; for example, it is false that you are now standing, but it is not impossible.

Therefore the foregoing opinion is true of some things, because some are **possible even though they are false**. However, it is not true of all things, because some are **both false and impossible**.

1810. And since he had said that a thing is judged possible because nothing impossible follows from it, he indicates the way in which there are possible consequents. He says that not only is the position in question destroyed by the definition of the possible given above, but it is also evident at the same

time that, if the antecedent of a conditional proposition is possible, the consequent will also be possible; for example, if this conditional proposition "If when A is, B is," is true, then if A is possible, B must be possible.

1811. Now in order to understand this we must note that the word *possible* is used in two senses: (1) It is used, first, in contradistinction to the **necessary**, as when we call those things possible which are capable either of being or not being. And when possible is taken in this way, the foregoing remarks do not apply. For nothing prevents the antecedent from being capable of being or not being, even though the consequent is necessary, as is clear in this conditional proposition, "If Socrates laughs, he is a man."

1812. (2) The word possible is used in a second sense inasmuch as it is common both to those things which are necessary and to those which are capable of being or not being, according as the possible is distinguished from the **impossible**. And the Philosopher is speaking of the possible in this way here when he says that the consequent must be possible if the antecedent was possible.

1814. In which place it must be noted that the following proposition is correct: (+) if the consequent is impossible, the antecedent is impossible; but (~) the reverse is not true. For nothing prevents something necessary from being a consequence of the impossible, as in this conditional proposition, "If man is an ass, he is an animal."

Therefore what the Philosopher says here must not be understood as meaning that, if the first, i.e., the antecedent, were impossible, then the second, i.e., the consequent, would also be impossible. But it must be understood to mean that, if the consequent is impossible, both will be impossible...

Lesson 4

How potency precedes or follows act

1815. Having rejected the false opinions about potency and actuality the Philosopher now establishes the truth about them; and in regard to this he does two things. First, he shows how actuality is prior to potency in the same subject; and second (1816), how potency, when it is prior to actuality, is brought to a state of actuality.

He accordingly says, first, that, since (1) some potencies are **innate** in the things of which they are the potencies, as the sensory powers in animals; and (2) some are **acquired** by practice, as the art of flute-playing and other operative arts of this kind; and some are acquired by teaching and learning, as medicine and other similar arts; all of the abovementioned potencies which we have as a result of practice and the use of reason must first be exercised and their acts repeated before they are acquired. For example, one becomes a harpist by playing the harp, and one becomes a physician by studying medical matters.

But (1) other potencies which are not acquired by practice but which belong to us by nature and are passive, as is evident in the case of sensory powers, are not a result of exercise; for one does not acquire the sense of sight by seeing but actually

sees because he has the power of sight.

1816. Here he shows how those potencies which are prior to actuality are brought to actuality; and in regard to this he does two things. First, he shows how different potencies—rational and irrational potencies—differ from each other in this respect. Second (1820), he shows how rational potencies are brought to a state of actuality (“Therefore, there must”).

In regard to the first he does three things. First, he lays down certain conditions required for the study of the aforesaid differences, and (1) one of these is that it is necessary to consider several qualifications in the definition of the *capable or potential*. For the capable does not refer to just anything at all but to something **definite**. Hence the capable must be capable of something, such as to walk or to sit. And similarly what can act or be acted upon cannot act or be acted upon at any time whatever; for example, a tree can bear fruit only at some definite time.

Therefore, when it is said that something is capable, it is necessary to determine **when** it is capable. And it is also necessary to determine **in what way** it is capable, for that which is capable can neither act nor be acted upon in every way; for example, one can walk in this way, namely, slowly, but not rapidly. And the same thing is true of the other qualifications which they are accustomed to give in the definitions of things, for example, by what instrument, in what place, and the like.

1817. Another qualification which he lays down is that (a) some things are capable of something because of a **rational** plan, and the potencies for these capabilities are rational. (b) But some capabilities are **irrational**, and the potencies for these are irrational. Again, rational potencies can exist only in living things, whereas irrational potencies can exist in both, i.e., in both living and non-living things. And they exist not only in plants and in brute animals, which lack reason, but also in men themselves, in whom are found certain principles both of acting and of being acted upon which are irrational; for example, the powers of nutrition and growth, and weight, and other accidents of this kind.

1818. (2) Second, he gives the **difference** between the potencies in question.

He says that in the case of **irrational** potencies when the thing capable of being acted upon comes close to the thing which is capable of acting, then in accordance with that disposition whereby that able to be acted upon can be acted upon and that capable of acting can act, it is (+) necessary that the one be acted upon and that the other act. This is clear, for instance, when something combustible comes in contact with fire.

But in the case of **rational** potencies this is not necessary; for no matter how close some material may be brought to a builder, it is not (~) necessary that he build something.

1819. (3) Third, he gives the reason for the difference pointed out. (a) He says that **irrational** potencies are such that each is productive of only one effect, and, therefore, when such a potency is brought close to something that is capable of being

acted upon, it must produce the one effect which it is capable of producing.

(b) But one and the same **rational** potency is capable of producing contrary effects, as was said above (1789-93). Therefore, if, when it is brought close to something capable of being acted upon, it would be necessary for it to bring about the effect which it is capable of producing, it would follow that it would produce contrary effects at the same time; but this is impossible. For example, it would follow that a physician would induce both health and sickness.

1820. He then shows what is necessary in order for rational potencies to begin to act, seeing that closeness to the thing capable of being acted upon is not sufficient. In regard to this he does three things.

First, he reveals the principle by which a rational potency is made to act. He concludes from the above discussions that since a rational potency has a common relationship to two contrary effects, and since a definite effect proceeds from a common cause only if there is some proper principle which determines that common cause to produce one effect rather than the other, it follows that it is necessary to posit, in addition to the rational power which is common to two contrary effects, something else which **particularizes** it to one of them in order that it may proceed to act. And this “is appetite or **choice**,” i.e., the choosing of one of the two, or the choice which involves reason; for it is what a man intends that he does, although this occurs only if he is in that state in which he is capable of acting and the patient is present. Hence, just as an irrational potency which is capable of acting must act when its passive object comes close to it, in a similar fashion every rational potency must act (a) when it desires the object of which it has the potency, and (b) in the way in which it has it. And it has the power of acting when the patient is present and is so disposed that it can be acted upon; otherwise it could not act.

1821. Second, he answers an implied question. For since he had said that everything capable of acting as a result of a rational plan, when it desires something of which it is the potency, acts of necessity on the patient before it, someone could ask why he did not add this qualification, namely, “when nothing external hinders it”; for it has been said that it must act if it has sufficient power to act. But this does not occur in any and every way, but only when the thing having the potency is disposed in some particular way; and in this statement external obstacles are excluded. For the things which hinder it externally remove some of it desires, and assuming that some the qualifications laid down in the common definition of the capable or possible, so that it is not capable at this time or in this way or the like.

1822. Third, he instructs us to avoid the absurd conclusions which he first said would follow, namely, that a rational potency would produce contrary effects at the same time. For if it is necessary that a rational potency should do what it should wish either by reason or by sense appetite, and granted that it should wish to do two different or contrary things at the same time, it does not follow for this reason that they will do them. For they do not have power over contrary effects in

such a way that they may do contrary things at the same time; but they act according to the way in which they have a potency, as has been explained (1816-20).

Lesson 5

Kinds of act

1823. Having drawn his conclusions about potency, Aristotle now establishes the truth about actuality; and this is divided into two parts. In the first he establishes what actuality is. In the second (1832) he establishes what is true when something is in potency to actuality.

In regard to the first he does two things. First, he links this up with the preceding discussion. He says that, since we have dealt with the kind of potency which is found in mobile things, i.e., the kind which is an active or passive principle of motion, we must now explain what actuality is and how it is related to potency; because when we will have distinguished the kinds of actuality, the truth about potency will become evident from this at the same time. For actuality is found not only in mobile things but also in immobile ones.

1824. And since potency is referred to actuality, it is evident from this that capability or potency taken in reference to action is attributed not only (1) to something that is naturally disposed (+) to **move** something else actively or **be moved** by something else passively, either in an unqualified sense, inasmuch as potency is referred alike to acting and being acted upon, or in some special way, inasmuch as potency is referred to what is able to act or be acted upon well; but (2) capability or potency is also referred to that actuality which is devoid of (~) **motion**. For although the word actuality is derived from motion, as was explained above (1805), it is still not motion alone that is designated as actuality. Hence, neither is potency referred only to motion. It is therefore necessary to inquire about these things in our investigations.

1825. Second, he establishes the truth about actuality. First, he shows what actuality is; and second (1828), how it is used in different senses in the case of different things (“However, things”).

In regard to the first he does two things. First, he shows what **actuality** is. He says that a thing is actual when it exists but not in the way in which it exists when it is potential. (a) For we say that the image of Mercury is in the wood potentially and not actually before the wood is carved; but once it has been carved the image of Mercury is then said to be in the wood actually. (b) And in the same way we say that any part of a continuous whole is in that whole, because any part (for example, the middle one) is present potentially inasmuch as it is possible for it to be separated from the whole by dividing the whole; but after the whole has been divided, that part will now be present actually. (c) The same thing is true of one who has a science and is not speculating, for he is capable of speculating even though he is not actually doing so; but to be speculating or contemplating is to be in a state of actuality.

1826. Here he answers an implied question; for someone could ask him to explain what actuality is by giving its definition. And he answers by saying that it is possible to

show what we mean (i.e., by actuality) in the case of singular things by proceeding inductively from examples, “and we should not look for the boundaries of everything,” i.e., the definition. For simple notions cannot be defined, since an infinite regress in definitions is impossible. But actuality is one of those first simple notions. Hence it cannot be defined.

1827. And he says that we can see what actuality is by means of the **proportion** existing between two things. For example, we may take the proportion of one who is building to one capable of building; and of one who is awake to one asleep; and of one who sees to one whose eyes are closed although he has the power of sight; and “of that which is separated out of matter,” i.e., what is formed by means of the operation of art or of nature, and thus is separated out of unformed matter, to what is not separated out of unformed matter. And similarly we may take the proportion of what has been prepared to what has not been prepared, or of what has been worked on to what has not been worked on. But in each of these opposed pairs one member will be actual and the other potential.

And thus **by proceeding from particular cases** we can come to an understanding in a proportional way of what actuality and potency are.

1828. Then he shows that the term actuality is used in different senses; and he gives two different senses in which it is used. (1) First, actuality means **action, or operation**. And with a view to introducing the different senses of actuality he says, first, that we do not say that all things are actual in the same way but in different ones; and this difference can be considered according to different proportions. For a proportion can be taken as meaning that, just as one thing is in another, so a third is in a fourth; for example, just as sight is in the eye, so hearing is in the ear. And the relation of substance (i.e., of form) to matter is taken according to this kind of proportion; for form is said to be in matter.

1829. There is another meaning of proportion inasmuch as we say that, just as this is related to that, so another thing is related to something else; for example, just as the power of sight is related to the act of seeing, so too the power of hearing is related to the act of hearing. And the relation of motion to motive power or of any operation to an operative potency is taken according to this kind of proportion.

1830. (2) Second, he gives the other sense in which the word actuality is used. He says that the infinite and the empty or the void, and all things of this kind, are said to exist potentially and actually in a different sense from many other beings; for example, what sees and what walks and what is visible. For it is fitting that things of this kind should sometimes exist in an unqualified sense either only potentially or only actually; for example, the visible is only actual when it is seen, and it is only potential when it is capable of being seen but is not actually being seen.

1831. But the *infinite* is not said to exist potentially in the sense that it may sometimes have separate actual existence alone; but in the case of the infinite, actuality and potentiality

are distinguished only **in thought** and in knowledge. For example, in the case of the infinite in the sense of the infinitely divisible, actuality and potentiality are said to exist at the same time, because the capacity of the infinite for being divided never comes to an end; for when it is actually divided it is still potentially further divisible. However, it is never actually separated from potentiality in such a way that the whole is sometimes actually divided and is incapable of any further division.

And the same thing is true of the *void*; for it is possible for a place to be emptied of a particular body, but not so as to be a complete void, for it continues to be filled by another body; and thus in the void potentiality always continues to be joined to actuality.

The same thing is true of *motion and time* and other things of this kind which do not have complete being.

Then at the end he makes a summary of what has been said. This is evident in the text.

Lesson 6

Potency proximate to act

1832. Having shown what actuality is, here the Philosopher intends to show both when and in virtue of what sort of disposition a thing is said to be in a state of potency for actuality. In regard to this he does two things.

First (1832), he states what he intends to do. He says that it is necessary to determine when a thing is in potency and when it is not. For it is not at just any time and when disposed in just any way that a thing can be said to be in potentiality even to what comes from it; for it could never be said that earth is potentially a man, since obviously it is not; but it is rather said to be potentially a man when the seed has already been generated from a preceding matter. And perhaps it never is potentially a man, as will be shown below.

1833. Second, he answers the question which was raised; and in regard to this he does two things. First, he explains the sort of disposition which matter must have in order to be said to be in potency to actuality. Second (1839), he shows that it is only what is in matter that gets its name from matter disposed in some particular way.

In regard to the first it must be understood, as he said above in Book VII (1411), that the effects of certain arts may also come about without art; for while a house is not produced without art, health may be produced without the art of medicine through the operation of nature alone. And even though what comes to be by nature may not be fortuitous or a result of chance, since nature is an efficient cause in the proper sense, whereas fortune or chance is an efficient cause in an accidental sense, nevertheless, because the one who is healed by nature is healed without the application of any art, he is said to be healed by chance. For nothing prevents an effect which is not fortuitous in itself from being said to be fortuitous in relation to someone who does not consider the proper cause of such an effect.

1834. Hence he says that it is not just anyone at all or anyone disposed in any way at all who is healed by medicine or by chance; but it is someone having the capability by reason of a **definite disposition** who is healed either by nature or by art; for to all active principles there correspond definite passive principles. And it is the thing having this capability, which nature or art can bring to a state of actual health by a single action, that is potentially healthy.

1835. And in order that this kind of capability or potency may be more fully known he adds its definition both with reference to the operation of art and to that of nature. (1) Hence he says that the capable or potential is what comes to exist actually from existing potentially as a result of **intellect or art**. For “the intelligible expression,” or definition, of the capable is this: it is something which the artist immediately brings to actuality when he wills it if no external impediment hinders it. And the patient is then said to be potentially healthy, because he becomes healthy by a single action of art. (2) However, in the case of those who are healed by **nature**, each is said to be potentially healthy when there is nothing hindering health which has to be removed or changed before the healing power within the patient produces its effect in the act of healing.

1836. Now what we have said about the act of healing, which is brought about by the art of healing, can also be said about the other activities produced by the other arts. For matter is potentially a house when none of the things present in the matter prevent the house from being brought into being immediately by a single action, and when there is nothing that should be added or taken away or changed before the matter is formed into a house, as clay must be changed before bricks are made from it; and as something must be taken away from trees by hewing them and something added by joining them so that a house may be brought into being. Clay and trees, then, are not potentially houses, but bricks and wood already prepared are.

1837. And the same holds true in the case of other things whether their principle of perfection is outside of them, as in the case of artificial things, or within them, as in the case of natural things. And they are always in potency to actuality when they can be brought to actuality by their proper efficient principle without any external thing hindering them.

However, seed is not such, for an animal must be produced from it through many changes; but when by its proper active principle, i.e., something in a state of actuality, it can already become such, it is then already in potency.

1838. But those things which have to be changed before they are immediately capable of being brought to actuality require a different efficient principle, namely, the one **preparing the matter**, which is sometimes different from the one **finishing** it off, which induces the final form. For example, it is obvious that earth is not yet potentially a statue, for it is not brought to actuality by a single action or by a single agent; but first it is changed by nature and becomes bronze, and afterwards it becomes a statue by art.

Lesson 7

Priority of act in time

1844. Having established the truth about potency and actuality, the Philosopher now compares one with the other; and this is divided into two parts. In the first part he compares them from the viewpoint of priority and posteriority; in the second (1883), in terms of being better or worse; and in the third (1888), in reference to knowledge of the true and the false.

In regard to the first he does two things. First, he explains his aim, saying that, since it has been established above, in Book V (936), that the term prior is used in different senses, it is evident that actuality is prior to potency in different ways. And we are now speaking of potency not only inasmuch as it is a principle of motion in some other thing as other, as active potency was defined above (1776), but universally of every principle, whether it be a principle that causes motion or a principle of immobility or rest or a principle of action devoid of motion (e.g., understanding), because nature also seems to belong to the same thing as potency.

1845. For *nature* is in the same genus as potency itself because each is a principle of motion, although nature is not a principle of motion in some other thing but in the thing in which it is present as such, as is made clear in Book II of the *Physics*. However, nature is a principle not only of motion but also of immobility.

Hence actuality is prior to all such potency both in intelligibility and in substance. And in one sense it is also prior in time, and in another it is not.

1846. Second he proves his thesis. First, he shows that **actuality is prior to potency in intelligibility**. Second (1847), he shows how it is prior in time, and how it is not. Third (1856), he shows how it is prior in substance.

The first is proved as follows: anything that must be used in defining something else is prior to it in intelligibility, as animal is prior to man and subject to accident. But potency or capability can only be defined by means of actuality, because the first characteristic of the capable consists in the possibility of its acting or being actual. For example, a builder is defined as one who can build, and a theorist as one who can theorize, and the visible as what can be seen; and the same is true in other cases. The concept of actuality must therefore be prior to the concept of potency, and the knowledge of actuality prior to the knowledge of potency. Hence Aristotle explained above what potency is by defining it in reference to actuality, but he could not define actuality by means of something else but only made it known inductively.

1847. Then he shows how actuality is prior to potency **in time**, and how it is not. In regard to this he does two things. First, he makes this clear in the case of passive potencies; and second (1850), in the case of certain active potencies.

He accordingly says, (+) first, that actuality is prior to potency in time in the sense that in the same **species** the agent, or what is actual, is prior to what is potential; but (~)

in **numerically one** and the same thing what is potential is prior in time to what is actual.

1848. This is shown as follows: if we take **this man** who is now actually a man, prior to him in time there was a matter which was potentially a man. And similarly seed, which is potentially grain, was prior in time to what is actually grain. And “the thing capable of seeing,” i.e., having the power of sight, was prior in time to the thing actually seeing. And prior in time to the things having potential being there were certain things having actual being, namely, **agents**, by which the former have been brought to actuality. For what exists potentially must always be brought to actuality by an agent, which is an actual being. Hence what is potentially a man becomes actually a man as a result of the man who generates him, who is an **actual** being; and similarly one who is potentially musical becomes actually musical by learning from a teacher who is actually musical. And thus in the case of anything potential there is always some first thing which moves it, and this mover is actual.

It follows, then, that even though the same thing numerically exists potentially prior in time to existing actually, there is still also some actual being of the same species which is prior in time to the one that exists potentially.

1849. And because someone could be perplexed about some of the statements which he had made, he therefore adds that these have been explained above; for it was pointed out in the foregoing discussions about substance—in Book VII (1383; 1417)—that everything which comes to be comes from something as matter, and by something as an agent. And it was also stated above that this agent is specifically the same as the thing which comes to be. This was made clear in the case of univocal generations, but in the case of equivocal generations there must also be some likeness between the generator and the thing generated, as was shown elsewhere (1444-47).

1850. He explains the **temporal sequence** of actuality and potency in the case of certain active potencies; and in regard to this he does three things.

First, he explains what he intends to do. For it was said above (1815) that there are certain operative potencies whose very actions must be understood to be performed or exercised beforehand, as those acquired by practice or instruction. And with regard to these he says here that in those things which are **numerically the same, actuality is also prior** to potency. For it seems impossible that anyone should become a builder who has not first built something; or that anyone should become a harpist who has not first played the harp.

1851. He draws this conclusion from the points laid down above; for it was said above (1848) that one who is potentially musical becomes actually musical as a result of someone who is actually musical—meaning that he learns from him; and the same thing holds true of other actions. Now one could not learn an art of this kind unless he himself performed the actions associated with it; for one learns to play the harp by playing it. This is also true of the other arts. It has been shown, then, that it is impossible to have

potencies of this sort unless their actions are also first present in one and the same subject numerically.

1852. Second, he raises a sophistical objection against the above view. He says that “a sophistical argument arose,” i.e., an apparently cogent syllogism which contradicts the truth, and it runs as follows: one who is learning an art exercises the actions of that art. But one who is learning an art does not have that art. Hence one who does not have a science or an art is doing the thing which is the object of that science or art. This seems to be contrary to the truth.

1853. Third, he answers this objection by stating a position which was discussed and proved in the *Physics*, Book VI; for there he proved that being moved is always prior to having been moved, because of the division of motion. For whenever any part of a motion is given, since it is divisible, we must be able to pick out some part of it which has already been completed, while the part of the motion given is going on. Therefore whatever is being moved has already been partly moved.

1854. And by the same argument, whatever is coming to be has already partly come to be; for even though the process of producing a substance, with reference to the introduction of the substantial form, is indivisible, still if we take the preceding alteration whose terminus is generation, the process is divisible, and the whole process can be called a production. Therefore, since what is coming to be has partly come to be, then what is coming to be can possess to some degree the activity of the thing in which the production is terminated. For example, what is becoming hot can heat something to some degree, but not as perfectly as something that has already become hot. Hence, since to learn is to become scientific, the one learning must already have, as it were, some part of a science or an art. It is not absurd, then, if he should exercise the action of an art to some degree; for he does not do it as perfectly as one who already has the art.

1855. But in reason itself there are also naturally inherent certain seeds or principles of the sciences and virtues, through which a man can pass to some degree into the activity of a science or a virtue before he has the habit of the science or the virtue; and when this has been acquired he acts perfectly, whereas at first he acted imperfectly. Lastly he summarizes the above discussion, as is evident in the text.

Lesson 8

Priority of act substantially

1856. Having shown that actuality is prior to potency in intelligibility and in one sense in time, the Philosopher now shows that it is prior in substance. This was the third way given above (1845) in which actuality is prior to potency.

This is divided into two parts. In the first part he proves his thesis by arguments taken from things which are sometimes potential and sometimes actual. In the second part (1867) he proves his thesis by comparing eternal things, which are always actual, with mobile things, which are sometimes actual and sometimes potential (“But actuality”).

And since to be prior in substance is to be prior in perfection, and since perfection is attributed to two things, namely, to the form and to the goal [or end], therefore in the first part he uses two arguments to prove his thesis. The first of these pertains to the **form**, and the second (1857) to the goal, given at the words, “And because.”

He accordingly says, first, that actuality is prior to potency not only in intelligibility and in time “but in substance,” i.e., in **perfection**; for the form by which something is perfected is customarily signified by the term *substance*. This first part is made clear by this argument: those things which are subsequent in generation are “prior in substance and form,” i.e., in perfection, because the process of generation always goes from what is imperfect to what is perfect; for example, in the process of generation man is subsequent to boy, because man comes from boy; and human being is subsequent to seed. The reason is that man and human being already have a perfect form, whereas boy and seed do not yet have such a form.

Hence, since in numerically one and the same subject actuality is subsequent to potency both in generation and in time, as is evident from the above, it follows that actuality is prior to potency in substance and in intelligibility.

1857. Here he proves the same point by an argument involving the **goal** of activity. First, he sets forth the argument. Second (1858), he explains one of the principles assumed in his argument (“For animals”). Third (1862), he settles an issue which could cause difficulty in the above argument (“But while”).

He accordingly says, first, that everything which comes to be when it moves towards its goal moves towards a principle. For a goal, or that for the sake of which a thing comes to be, is a principle because it is the first thing intended by an agent, since it is that for the sake of which generation takes place. But actuality is the goal of potency, and therefore actuality is prior to potency and is one of its principles.

1898. He now explains the position which he maintained above, namely, that actuality is the goal of potency. He makes this clear, first, in the case of **natural active potencies**. He says (~) that animals do not see in order that they may have the power of sight, but (+) they rather have the power of sight in order that they may see. Thus it is clear that potency exists for the sake of actuality and not vice versa.

1859. Second, he makes the same thing clear in the case of **rational potencies**. He says that men have the power of building in order that they may build; and they have “theoretical knowledge,” or speculative science, in order that they may speculate. However, they do not speculate in order that they may have theoretical knowledge, unless they are learning and meditating about those matters which belong to a speculative science in order that they may acquire it. And these do not speculate perfectly but to some degree and imperfectly, as has been said above (1853-55), because speculation is not undertaken because of some need but for the sake of using science already acquired. But there is speculation on the part of those who are learning because the

need to acquire science.

1860. Third he makes the same point clear in the case of **passive potencies**. He says that matter is in potency until it receives a form or specifying principle, but then it is first in a state of actuality when it receives its form. And this is what occurs in the case of all other things which are moved for the sake of a goal. Hence, just as those who are teaching think they have attained their goal when they exhibit their pupil whom they have instructed performing those activities which belong to his art, in a similar fashion nature attains its goal when it attains actuality. Hence it is made evident in the case of natural motion that actuality is the goal of potency.

1861. Fourth, he proves his thesis by an argument from the **untenable consequences**. He says that if a thing's perfection and goal do not consist in actuality, there would then seem to be **no difference** between someone wise, as Mercury was, and someone foolish, as Pauson was. For if the perfection of science were not in the one acting, Mercury would not have exhibited it in his own science, if he had "internal scientific knowledge," i.e., in reference to its internal activity, "or external," i.e., in reference to its external activity, as neither would Pauson. For it is by means of the actual use of scientific knowledge, and not by means of the potency or power, that one is shown to have a science; because activity is the goal of a science, and activity is a kind of actuality.

And for this reason the term actuality is derived from **activity**, as has been stated above (1805); and from this it was extended to **form**, which is called completeness or perfection.

1862. He explains a point which could cause a difficulty in the foregoing argument. For since he had said that some **product** is the goal of activity, one could think that this is true in all cases. But he denies this, saying that the ultimate goal or end of some active potencies consists in the **mere use** of those potencies, and not in something produced by their activity; for example, the ultimate goal of the power of sight is the act of seeing, and there is no product resulting from the power of sight in addition to this activity. But in the case of some active potencies something else is produced in addition to the activity; for example, the art of building also produces a house in addition to the activity of building.

1863. However, this difference does not cause actuality to be the goal of potency to a lesser degree in the case of some of these potencies and to a greater degree in the case of others; for the activity is in the thing produced, as the act of building in the thing being built; and it comes into being and exists simultaneously with the house. Hence if the house, or the thing built, is the goal, this does not exclude actuality from being the goal of potency.

1864. Now it is necessary to consider such a difference among the aforesaid potencies, because (1) when something else is produced besides the actuality of these potencies, which is activity, the activity of such potencies is **in the thing being produced** and is their actuality, just as the act of building is in the thing being built, and the act of weaving in the thing being woven, and in general motion in the thing being moved.

And this is true, because when some product results from the activity of a potency, the activity perfects the thing being produced and not the one performing it. Hence it is in the thing being produced as an actuality and perfection of it, but not in the one who is acting.

1865. But (2) when nothing else is produced in addition to the activity of the potency, the actuality then exists **in the agent** as its perfection and does not pass over into something external in order to perfect it; for example, the act of seeing is in the one seeing as his perfection, and the act of speculating is in the one speculating, and life is in the soul (if we understand by life vital activity). Hence it has been shown that happiness also consists in an activity of the kind which exists in the one acting, and not of the kind which passes over into something external; for happiness is a good of the one who is happy, namely, his perfect life. Hence, just as life is in one who lives, in a similar fashion happiness is in one who is happy. Thus it is evident that happiness does not consist either in building or in any activity of the kind which passes over into something external, but it consists in understanding and willing.

1866. Lastly he retraces his steps in order to draw the main conclusion which he has in mind. He says that it has been shown from the above discussion that a thing's substance or form or specifying principle is a kind of actuality; and from this it is evident that actuality is prior to potency **in substance** or form. And it is prior **in time**, as has been stated above (1848), because the actuality whereby the generator or mover or maker is actual must always exist first before the other actuality by which the thing generated or produced becomes actual after being potential.

And this goes on until one comes to the first mover, which is actuality alone; for whatever passes from potency to actuality requires a prior actuality in the agent, which brings it to actuality.

Lesson 9

Act prior in incorruptible things

1867. Aristotle proved above that actuality is prior to potency in substance, definition and perfection, by arguments drawn from corruptible things themselves; but here he proves the same point by comparing eternal things with corruptible ones.

This part is divided into two members. In the first (1867) he proves his thesis; and in the second (1882), by the thesis thus proved, he rejects a certain statement made by Plato ("If, then").

In regard to the first he does two things. First, he proves his thesis. This he does by the following argument: eternal things are compared to corruptible ones as actuality to potency; for eternal things as such are not in potency, whereas corruptible things as such are in potency. But eternal things are prior to corruptible ones in substance and perfection; for this is evident (1856). Hence actuality is prior to potency both in substance and perfection. He says that his thesis is proved in a more proper way by this argument, because actuality and potency are not considered in the same subject but in

different ones, and this makes the proof more evident.

1868. Second, he proves one assumption which he made, namely, that nothing eternal is in potency; and in regard to this he does two things. First, he gives an argument to prove this, and it runs as follows: every potency is at one and the same time a potency for opposite determinations. Now he does not say this about active potency, for it has already been shown (1789) that irrational potencies are not potencies for opposite determinations; but he is speaking here of **passive potency**, on the basis of which a thing is said to be capable of being and not being either absolutely or in a qualified sense.

1869. Now the claim which he made he proves by an argument to the contrary; because where such potency does not exist, neither of the opposite determinations is possible; for what is incapable of being never exists in any way. For if a thing is incapable of being, it is impossible for it to be, and it is necessary for it not to be. But what is capable of being may possibly not be actual. Hence it is evident that what is capable of being may either be or not be; and thus the potency is at one and the same time a potency for opposite determinations, because the same thing is in potency both to being and non-being.

1870. But what is capable of not being may possibly not be, for these two statements are equivalent ones. Moreover, what may possibly not be is corruptible either absolutely or in a qualified sense inasmuch as it is said to be possible for it not to be. For example, if it is possible for some body not to be in place, that body is corruptible as far as place is concerned; and the same applies to quantity and quality. But that is corruptible in an absolute sense which is capable of not existing substantially. Therefore it follows that everything potential inasmuch as it is potential is corruptible.

1871. Second, he draws from the foregoing the conclusion at which he aims; and in regard to this he does three things. First, he concludes to this thesis about eternal things, inferring from the observations made above that, if everything potential is corruptible, it follows that nothing which is incorruptible in an absolute sense is a potential being, provided that we understand incorruptible things in an absolute sense and potential being (~) in an absolute sense in reference to **substance**.

1872. But nothing prevents something that is incorruptible in an absolute sense from being potential (+) in a **qualified** sense, in reference either to quality or to place. For example, the moon is in a state of potency to being illuminated by the sun; and when the sun is in the east it is in a state of potency with regard to being in the west. It is evident from what has been said, then, that all eternal things as such are actual.

1873. Second, he comes to the same conclusion about **necessary** things as he did about eternal things, because even in corruptible things there are certain necessary aspects; for example, man is an animal, and every whole is greater than its part. Hence he says that nothing necessary is potential; for necessary things are always actual and incapable of being or not being. And those things which are necessary are the first

of all things, because if they ceased to exist, none of the others would exist; for example, if essential predicates, which are referred to a subject necessarily, were taken away, accidental predicates, which can be present and not present in some subject, could not be present in any subject. It follows, then, that actuality is prior to potency.

Lesson 10

Act is better in good things

1883. Having compared actuality and potency from the viewpoint of priority and posteriority, the Philosopher now compares them from the viewpoint of good and evil; and in regard to this he does two things.

First, he says that in the case of good things actuality is better than potency; and this was made clear from the fact that the potential is the same as what is capable of contrary determinations; for example, what can be well can also be ill and is in potency to both at the same time. The reason is that the potency for both is the same—for being well and ailing, and for being at rest and in motion, and for other opposites of this kind. Thus it is evident that a thing can be in potency to contrary determinations, although contrary determinations cannot be actual at the same time. Therefore, taking each contrary pair separately, one is good, as health, and the other evil, as illness. For in the case of contraries one of the two always has the character of something defective, and this pertains to evil.

1884. Therefore what is actually good is good alone. But the potency may be related “to both” alike, i.e., in a qualified sense—as being in potency. But it is neither in an absolute sense—as being actual. It follows, then, that actuality is better than potency; because what is good in an absolute sense is better than what is good in a qualified sense and is connected with evil.

1885. Second, he shows on the other hand that in the case of evil things the actuality is worse than the potency; and in regard to this he does three things.

First, he proves his thesis by the argument introduced above; for what is evil in an absolute sense and is not disposed to evil in a qualified sense is worse than what is evil in a qualified sense and is disposed both to evil and to good. Hence, since the potency for evil is not yet evil, except in a qualified sense (and the same potency is disposed to good, since it is the same potency which is related to contrary determinations), it follows that actual evil is worse than the potency for evil.

1886. Second, he concludes from what has been said that evil itself is not a nature distinct from other things which are good by nature; for evil itself is subsequent in nature to potency, because it is worse and is farther removed from perfection. Hence, since a potency cannot be something existing apart from a thing, much less can evil itself be something apart from a thing.

1887. Third, he draws another conclusion. For if evil is worse than potency, and there is no potency in eternal things, as has

been shown above (1867), then in eternal things there will be neither evil nor wrong nor any other corruption; for corruption is a kind of evil. But this must be understood insofar as they are eternal and incorruptible; for nothing prevents them from being corrupted as regards place or some other accident of this kind.

Various texts

Compendium theologiae, ch. 18, par. 35

No act is found to be limited except through the potency which receives it; thus we find forms limited according to the potency of matter.

De potentia

Existence, as we understand it here, signifies the highest perfection of all: and the proof is that act is always more perfect than potentiality. Now no signate form is understood to be in act unless it be supposed to have being. Thus we may take human nature or fiery nature as existing potentially in matter, or as existing in the power of an agent, or even as in the mind: but when it has existence it becomes actually existent. Wherefore it is clear that existence as we understand it here is the actuality of all acts, and therefore the perfection of all perfections.

Nor may we think that existence, in this sense, can have anything added to it that is more formal and determines it as act determines potentiality: because existence in this latter sense is essentially distinct from that to which it is added and whereby it is determined. But nothing that is outside the range of existence can be added to existence: for nothing is outside its range except non-being, which can be neither form nor matter. Hence existence is not determined by something else as potentiality by act but rather **as act by potentiality**, since in defining a form we include its proper matter instead of the difference: thus we define a soul as the act of an organic physical body. Accordingly this existence is distinct from that existence inasmuch as it is the existence of this or that nature.

S.T. I, q.4, a.1, ad 3

Being (esse) itself is the most perfect of all things, for it is compared to all things as that which is act; for nothing has actuality except so far as it is. Hence being is the actuality of all things, even of forms themselves. Therefore it is not compared to other things (~) as the receiver is to the received, but rather (+) as the received to the receiver. When therefore I speak of the being of man, or of a horse, or of anything else, being is considered as a formal principle, and as something received, and not as that to which being belongs.

S.T. I, q.85, a.7

One may understand the same thing better than someone else, through having a greater power of understanding; just as a man may see a thing better with his bodily sight, whose power is greater and whose sight is more perfect. This same thing applies to the intellect in two ways. First, as regards the intellect itself, which is more perfect. For it is plain that the better the disposition of a body, the better is the soul allotted to it; which clearly appears in things of different species. The reason for this is that act and form are received into matter according to the capacity of matter; and thus because some men have bodies of better disposition, their souls have a greater power of understanding.

Potency	Accident	—Operation
• Active simply to do —or by disposition/habit:		—Habit
to do well		—Faculty
to resist corruption		
• Passive simply to receive —or by disposition/habit:	Substance	—Existence
to receive well		—Essence —Form
to receive evil —vulnerable		—Matter
Impotency		
• Active	Necessary	Impossible
incapable of performing	Possibly	Possibly not
non-resistant (vulnerable)		
• Passive		
cannot receive (learn)		
cannot be hurt —invulnerable		

N.B. “Potentially” implies both potency and privation. But potency does not go when it is actualized.

For a succinct summary of chapters 4 & 5, see Thomas Aquinas, *De ente et essentia*.