

# The Interdependency Between Aquinas's Doctrine of Creation and his Metaphysical Principle of the Limitation of Act by Potency

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Josef Pieper claims that while St. Thomas did develop a thorough doctrine of creation, the important relationship between that doctrine and the rest of his basic philosophical concepts has remained unexplored. He says:

Did not Thomas develop fully and explicitly a doctrine of creation? That naturally is true and quite well known. None the less, it is equally true, though not so well known, that the notion of creation *determines* [my emphasis] and characterizes the interior structure of *nearly all* the basic concepts in St. Thomas's philosophy of Being. And this is *not* evident; it is scarcely ever put forward explicitly; it belongs to the unexpressed in St. Thomas's doctrine of Being.<sup>1</sup>

I share this insight of Pieper's and, as a consequence, in this paper I want to explore St. Thomas Aquinas's doctrine of creation and its relation to what has been admitted by most Thomistic scholars to be the "keystone of the Thomistic metaphysical system,"<sup>2</sup> namely, his metaphysical principle of the limitation of act by potency. I want to argue for two conclusions: (1) that an important logical interrelation exists between St. Thomas's metaphysical principle of the limitation of act by potency and his doctrine of creation; and (2) that St. Thomas's doctrine of creation illuminates his metaphysical principle of the limitation of act by potency in such a way that a *full* understanding and appreciation of it is impossible without first having a proper understanding of his doctrine of creation.<sup>3</sup>

The paper is divided into three sections. In the first section, I will trace the origin of the principle of the limitation of act by potency. In the second section, I will argue that St. Thomas provides an original account of the principle of the limitation of act by potency, and that the foundation for his original formulation of the principle is his philosophy of existentiality. Finally, in the third section, I will elucidate St. Thomas's doctrine of creation and analyze its relation to the principle of the limitation of act by potency.

Clarke develops what he considers to be even a stronger argument that is based on the Greek conception of infinity as something that is incomplete and imperfect. Clarke describes it as follows:

According to this [the Greek] conception, the infinite is identified with the formless, the indeterminate, the unintelligible—in a word, with matter and multiplicity, the principles of imperfection—whereas the finite or limited is identified with the fully formed, the determinate, and therefore the intelligible—in a word, number, form, and idea, the principles of perfection. It is evident that within such a frame work of thought the notion of a principle of perfection as of itself unlimited [i.e., infinite or pure actuality or pure *esse*] and receiving limitation from a principle of imperfection would be quite meaningless. The relations are just the reverse.<sup>8</sup>

Again, this argument is based on a controversial view. Aristotle does seem to have a conception of the primary, eternal, and perfect being as infinite. Aristotle says:

It is evident, then, from what has been said that there is a primary being, eternal and unmovable and separate from sensible things. It has also been shown that this primary being cannot have magnitude, but is without parts and indivisible. For the unmoved mover moves in unlimited time, and nothing limited has unlimited power. Since every magnitude is either unlimited or limited, the prime mover cannot have a limited magnitude for the reason given, and he cannot have an unlimited magnitude, because there is no such thing as an unlimited magnitude. It has also been shown that the first mover cannot be moved and is unalterable; for all movements are posterior to locomotion. It is clear, then, that these things are as they are.<sup>9</sup>

Moreover, Thomas does seem to attribute to Aristotle's view the conception of an infinite perfect being. In the *Commentary on Aristotle's Metaphysics*, when commenting on book 12, section 8, Thomas says: "Moreover, the power of this substance is not said to be infinite in a privative sense, in the way that infinity pertains to quantity; but the term is used in a negative sense, i.e., inasmuch as it is not limited to some definite effect."<sup>10</sup>

Nevertheless, Clarke goes on to conclude that the principle of the limitation of act by potency could not have been Aristotelian.<sup>11</sup> He argues that in fact the authentic origin of the infinite as perfect, and the principle of the limitation of act by potency, is Neo-Platonic. He says:

The search for such a framework forces us now to leap five centuries down to Plotinus and Neoplatonism. It is in this profoundly different intellectual and spiritual atmosphere that there appeared for the first time in Western thought a doctrine of participation linked with a wholly new concept of infinite and finite, correlated now with the perfect and the imperfect respectively in a complete reversal of the age-old classical Greek tradition.<sup>12</sup>

In this section, I want to emphasize the distinctions between Thomas's and Aristotle's use of the act-potency principle, and Thomas's and Plotinus's notion of the first cause and their use of the limitation principle. I want to argue that the distinctions are essential and if emphasized and taken seriously, lead to what most Thomistic scholars have claimed to be the most original philosophical contribution of Thomas—his existentialism.<sup>15</sup>

First, the significant departure from Aristotle's use of the act-potency principle concerns the context in which the principle is employed. For Aristotle, the principle is set exclusively within the context of the phenomenon of change. For Thomas, the function of potency takes on a new interpretation, "the static 'vertical' function of receiving subject limiting a higher plenitude in a participation framework."<sup>16</sup> But, of course, this was also true for Plotinus. Therefore, the question is: How does Thomas's limitation-participation structure differ from Plotinus's?

According to Clarke, the main distinction lies in the fact that Plotinus's hierarchy of the limitation-participation structure was still heavily influenced by Plato's forms, and that the primacy of essence over existence was such that Plotinus identifies being as essence.<sup>17</sup> Thomas, on the other hand, replaces the forms with existence as the fundamental ontological perfection of the universe.<sup>18</sup> This distinction, as stated, is vague. I am not questioning the degree of essentialism in Plotinus's philosophy *per se*, nor the existentialism of Thomas, instead my problem is with Clarke's description of the distinction; it does not explain how or why Plotinus's limitation-participation structure is more essentialist and less existentialist than Thomas's.

Clarke, unfortunately, does not elaborate this distinction further. If one were to suggest that the distinction between Thomas and the Neo-Platonists resides in the fact that the Neo-Platonic notion of the first cause is identified with essence, then I would disagree. The evidence for this is twofold: first, because Thomas clearly states: ". . . in the commentary on the ninth proposition of the *Liber de Causis*, it is said that the First Cause, being purely and simply the act of existing, is individualized by its very unalloyed perfection";<sup>19</sup> second, because Plotinus clearly denies that the First Cause should be interpreted as an essence or ultimate form. He says:

The essence which is generated from the One is Form (one could not say that what is generated from That Source is anything else), not the form of some one thing but of everything, so that no other form is left outside of it. The One therefore must be without form, and if It is without form It is not an essence: for an essence must be one particular thing, something, that is, that is defined and limited.<sup>20</sup>

It [the real distinction between essence and existence] does not mean that existence is distinct from essence as a thing from another thing. Once more, existence is not a thing but the act that causes a thing both to be and to be what it is. This distinction merely expresses the fact that, in our human experience, there is no thing whose essence it is 'to be,' and not 'to be a certain thing.' The definition of no empirically given thing is existence; hence its essence is not existence, but existence must be conceived as distinct from it.<sup>25</sup>

### 2.1.2 The Notion that the Essence of Creation Is Viewed as Beings (*Entia*) that Participate in Being (*Esse*)

The second philosophical notion of Thomas's existential limitation-participation structure, that the essence of creation is viewed as beings (*entia*) that participate in being (*esse*), is intimately related to the real distinction between essence and existence. The claim that there is a real distinction between essence and existence in a given being is equivalent to the claim that the being (*ens*) participates in being (*esse*). Clarifying the meaning of "participating" can further elucidate this equivalence.

Thomas claims that essence is that "through which a thing is knowable and fixed in its species."<sup>26</sup> The essence "is what the definition of a thing signifies."<sup>27</sup> There are two exhaustive and mutually exclusive ways we can describe existence as belonging to a being: (1) by participation, or (2) essentially. If existence is said to belong to a being essentially, then it pertains to the being's essence, and it is part of the definition of what it is to be that being in question. If existence is said to belong to a being by participation, then it does not belong essentially to that being, and it is possible to conceive of that being (i.e., the definition of the being) as lacking existence. Therefore, the claim *that the essence of created beings are distinct from their existence*, meaning that existence is something received and thus not a part of the created being's essence, is *equivalent* to the claim that existence does not belong essentially to created beings, and that it is possible to conceive of created beings as lacking existence, i.e., *that created beings participate in being (esse)*. This is why Thomas says:

Now, every essence or quiddity can be understood without anything being known of its existing. I can know what a man or a phoenix is and still be ignorant whether it exists in reality. From this it is clear that the act of existing is other than essence or quiddity, unless, perhaps, there is a being whose quiddity is its very act of existing. And there can be only one such being, the First Being.<sup>28</sup>

It follows, therefore, that if existence does not belong to created beings essentially, then it must belong through participation.

the same three philosophical notions that constitute Thomas's existential limitation-participation structure arise: (1) the notion that the essence of God is identical with His existence; (2) the notion that the essence of creation is viewed as beings (*entia*) that participate in being (*esse*); and (3) the notion that the act of existence is the fundamental ontological perfection of the universe. If these notions logically stem from Thomas's doctrine of creation and they are, furthermore, the foundation for his metaphysical principle of the limitation of act by potency, then the question arises: Is Thomas's metaphysical principle of the limitation of act by potency grounded in theological doctrine?

We have to be careful before answering this question. There are two possible interpretations to the question. The first interpretation questions the logical relation between the doctrine of creation and the principle of the limitation of act by potency. A second interpretation questions *Thomas's view* of the relation between his doctrine of creation and the principle of the limitation of act by potency. I will attempt to give a response to both interpretations, but first I must show how the three philosophical notions above are derived from Thomas's doctrine of creation.

### 3.2 The Essence of God, the Essence of Creatures, and the Act of Creation

First, I will address propositions (1) that God is a self-subsisting being, and (2) that creatures participate in being, and explain their logical relation to the Christian Doctrine of Creation. The claim that creatures participate in being implies that the existence of every creature is distinct from its essence. The claim that God is self-subsistent implies that the essence of God is identical with His existence. The latter is intimately related to creation since a being cannot give what it does not have. If the essence of God were not existence, then the doctrine of creation would collapse. Gilson expresses this idea in his comparison of the Christian God with Aristotle's unmoved mover. Gilson says: "Now nothing can't give what [it] has not. Because the supreme Thought of Aristotle [Aristotle's unmoved mover] was not 'He who is,' it could not give existence: hence the world of Aristotle was not a created world."<sup>31</sup>

The second claim, that creatures participate in being, implies that in creatures there is a real distinction between essence and existence. I want to argue that the truth of the real distinction between essence and existence follows from the Christian Doctrine of Creation. John Noonan, when describing Gilson's understanding of the real distinction says:

The two preliminary questions settled, we must now determine on what basis the fundamental distinction between essence and existence is made. Historically speaking, as Gilson is the first to emphasize, the distinction is due to revelation rather than to properly philosophical discovery. It is the Christian

The doctrine of creation, therefore, posits existence as the foundation upon which our relation with God is formed. Existence is that act that we freely *receive* from God in the act of creation.<sup>43</sup> In conclusion, I argue that insofar as existence is the most universal effect of the most universal cause, and insofar as existence is the foundation for the real relation between creatures and their Creator, it is the fundamental perfection of the universe.

#### 4. Conclusion

I have argued that the role of existence or being (*esse*) in Thomas's metaphysical principle of limitation of act by potency is an original and distinguishing mark of Thomistic metaphysics. I began by presenting an analysis of the principle of the limitation of act by potency and showing that it is constituted from three fundamental philosophical notions: (1) the identification of the essence of God with His existence; (2) that existence is that in which all created beings participate; and (3) that existence is the most universal effect involved in the act of creation. I have also argued that (2) (that created beings participate in being [*esse*]) is logically equivalent to (4) Aquinas's real distinction between essence and existence. Furthermore, I have shown that the truth of these four philosophical notions is sufficient for the truth of the principle of the limitation of act by potency. Finally, I have argued that all four, and thus the principle of the limitation of act by potency as well, logically follow from Thomas's doctrine of creation. Can we conclude, therefore, that Thomas's metaphysical principle of limitation of act by potency is founded on theological grounds?<sup>44</sup>

There are three concerns related to this question. The first is whether it is the case that knowledge of the truth of the Christian Doctrine of Creation is dependent on revelation?<sup>45</sup> Because the Christian Doctrine of Creation consists of four tenets, the same question should be asked of each specific tenet. With respect to this first concern, there are two possible interpretations. The first interpretation can be stated as follows: Did *Aquinas* view any of the four tenets of the Christian Doctrine of Creation as dependent on revelation? This is a historical question. The second interpretation is ahistorical and can be expressed as follows: Is the Christian Doctrine of Creation dependent on revelation? Regardless of this distinction, it should be emphasized that this first concern is futile for the Christian person that accepts revelation with the same conviction as demonstrated claims. From a Christian perspective, it may be argued that the reverse of the forgoing question is more significant, i.e., not whether the doctrine of creation is demonstrable, but rather whether it is part of Divine revelation? For the Christian person, the demonstrability or indemonstrability of the doctrine of creation will not

by potency is epistemologically grounded in the doctrine of creation. Finally, to conclude that *for Aquinas* the principle of the limitation of act by potency is epistemologically grounded in his doctrine of creation and thus in revelation, one would first have to show that *Aquinas believed* that the tenets involved in creation can only be known through revelation<sup>48</sup> and, even if this were true, it would also require that one demonstrate that the principle of the limitation of act by potency could be grasped only via the doctrine of creation.

In this paper, apart from analyzing the logical relation between Thomas's doctrine of creation and his principle of the limitation of act by potency, I hope I have shown the consistency of these two doctrines, and how an understanding of the former provides for a deeper insight into Thomas's metaphysical thought, especially his existentialism. This supports Pieper's insight that "in the philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas, there is a fundamental idea by which almost all the basic concepts of his vision of the world are determined: the idea of creation, or more precisely, the notion that nothing exists which is not *creatura*, except the Creator Himself; and in addition, that this createdness *determines entirely and all-pervasively the inner structure of the creation* [my emphasis]."<sup>49</sup>

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### Notes

1. Josef Pieper, *The Silence of St. Thomas*, translated by John Murray, S.J., and Daniel O'Connor (South Bend: St. Augustine's Press, 1999) p. 48.
2. See Norris W. Clarke, "The Limitation of Act By Potency: Aristotelianism or Neoplatonic," *New Scholasticism* 26 (1952): 167. For further discussion on this topic see (listed in chronological order): William A. Van Roo, "Act and Potency," *The Modern Schoolman*, 18 (1940): 1-4; Dr. Hart, "Twenty-five Years of Thomism," *New Scholasticism* 25 (1951): 3-45; George Lindbeck, "Participation and Existence in the Interpretation of St. Thomas Aquinas," *Franciscan Studies* 17 (1957): 1-22; Reginald A. Redlon, "St. Thomas and the Freedom of Creative Act," *Franciscan Studies* 20 (1960): 1-18; Cornelio Fabro, "The Intensive Hermeneutics of Thomistic Philosophy: The Notion of Participation," *Review of Metaphysics* 27 (1974): 449-490; Octavio N. Derisi, "La existencia o Essé Imparticipado Divino, Causa de Todo Ser Participado," *Sapientia* 31 (1976): 109-120; Christopher Maloney, "Esse in the Metaphysics of Thomas Aquinas," *New Scholasticism* 55 (1981): 159-177; Charles P. Bigger, "St. Thomas on Essence and Participation," *New Scholasticism* 62 (1988): 318-348; Walter Patt, "Aquinas's Real Distinction and Some Interpretations," *New Scholasticism* 62 (1988): 1-29; Lawrence Dewan, O.P., "St. Thomas, Metaphysical

10. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's Metaphysics*, Book 12, Lesson 8, translated and introduced by John Rowan (Notre Dame: Dumb Ox Books, 1955), p. 809. It has been argued that St. Thomas did attribute a doctrine of creation to Aristotle. See Mark F. Johnson, "Did St. Thomas Attribute a Doctrine of Creation to Aristotle," *New Scholasticism*, 63 (1989): 129-155.
11. Clarke says, "It seems undeniable, therefore, that we are in the presence of a genuine and intriguing historical problem. Just what is the authentic historical parentage of the Thomistic limitation principle and what light does this shed on the inner character of the Thomistic synthesis itself?" "The Limitation of the Act by Potency: Aristotelianism or Neoplatonic," 175. Interestingly enough, the new perspective, according to Clarke, was not the result of some philosophical insight, but instead the result of a new conception of the divine as mysterious and infinite. Clarke claims that the Christians were not at the forefront of this new conception; instead, in Clarke's words, "Christian thinkers followed rather than led the movement. The first Christian texts calling God infinite do not appear till the fourth century, and [more interesting] precisely in those circles which are known to have been influenced by Neoplatonism." Clarke, "The Limitation of Act By Potency: Aristotelianism or Neoplatonic," 184.
12. Clarke, "The Limitation of Act By Potency: Aristotelianism or Neoplatonic," 184.
13. See *The Book of Causes (Liber De Causis)*, translated by Dennis J. Brand (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1981).
14. St. Thomas Aquinas, *On Being and Essence*, translated with an Introduction and Notes by Armand Maurer (Toronto: The Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1949), 51.
15. Dominic Bañez (1528-1604) was one Neo-Scholastic who was aware of Aquinas's existentialism. Benjamin S. Llamzon says of Bañez, "While the philosophical winds around him were gathering and heading towards the remote regions of static essences, Bañez, in opposition, presents (or rather re-presents) a view of being as inexhaustibly powered by a principle other than essence. He [Bañez] writes, 'This is what St. Thomas repeatedly asserts; namely, that *esse* is the actuality of every form or nature, yet Thomists refuse to listen.'" See "The Specification of *Esse*: A Study in Bañez," *The Modern Schoolman* 41 (1964): 127. See also Dominic Bañez, *The Primacy of Existence in Thomas Aquinas: A Commentary on Thomistic Metaphysics*, translation with an Introduction and Notes by Benjamin S. Llamzon (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company), 1966. Gilson says of Bañez, "... by far the most Thomistic of Thomists whom it is my privilege to know and this section on *esse* is a practically indispensable starting point for an understanding of St. Thomas' notion of being." Professor Norris Clarke says, "The genius of St. Thomas is to have concluded that if you can't reduce existence to anything else more basic, why not turn the tables completely and reduce all other perfections to that apparently so lowly and easily overlooked, yet strangely unbanishable, 'is' of existence, conceived now not as a minimum brute fact but as the intensive plenitude of all perfections?" *Explorations in Metaphysics*, 14. For further discussion on this topic



and Aquinas: *An Essay On Overcoming Metaphysics* (Bronx: Fordham University Press, 1982).

24. The history and disagreement over the correct interpretation of the Aquinas's real distinction between essence and existence is long and complicated. The disagreements can be summarized as follows. Aquinas's distinction between essence and existence was interpreted as a mental distinction by Henry of Ghent, Durandus (d. 1334), Gabriel Biel (d.1495), Peter Aureoli, and Harvey Nédellec; it was interpreted as a formal distinction by Francis Vitoria (1483–1546), Dominic de Soto (1494–1560) and Melchoir Cano (1509–1560); it was interpreted as a real distinction (as one reality from another) by Giles of Rome (1247–1318), Capreolus (1380–1444), Cajetan (1469–1534), Sylvester of Ferrara (1474–1528), Paul Soncinas (d. 1414), Chrysostom Javelli (c. 1470–c. 1538), Dominic Bañez (1528–1604), and Peter of Ledésma. Bañez and Ledesma also found the Scotus's formal distinction as a possible interpretation. See Leonard A. Kennedy, "Peter of Ledesma and the Distinction Between Essence and Existence," *The Modern Schoolman* 46 (1968): 25–38. Finally, Francisco Suárez's interpretation is nebulous, since in disputation 7 he refers to the formal distinction as a kind of mental distinction. As a consequence, when, in disputation 31, he claims that the distinction between essence and existence is a mental distinction, it remains unclear if he means a pure mental distinction or a formal distinction. See for further discussion on this topic: William L. Reese, "The 'Real Distinction' of Essence and Existence," *The Modern Schoolman* 38 (1961): 142–148; Leonard J. Eslick, "The Real Distinction: Reply to Professor Reeses," *The Modern Schoolman* 38 (1961): 149–160; Josef Seifert, "Disputed Questions Concerning Essence and Existence," *Aletheia* 1 (1977): 467–480; Walter Patt, "Aquinas' Real Distinction and Some Interpretations," *New Scholasticism* 62 (1988): 1–29; Joseph Owens, "Quiddity and Real Distinction in St. Thomas Aquinas," *Medieval Studies* 27 (1965): 1–22; John Wippel, "Aquinas's route to the Real Distinction: A Note on *De ente et essentia*," *The Thomist* 43 (1979): 279–295.

25. Étienne Gilson, *God and Philosophy*, 70–71. See also Thomas Aquinas, *On Being and Essence*, translated with an Introduction and Notes by Armand Maurer (Toronto: The Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1949), 50–54.

26. Thomas Aquinas, *On Being and Essence*, 50.

27. Thomas Aquinas, *On Being and Essence*, 30.

28. Thomas Aquinas, *On Being and Essence*, 46.

29. See Thomas Aquinas's "Treatise on Creation" *Summa Theologica*, Pt. 1, Q. 44–49; and *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Bk. 1, ch. 15, "That God is to all things the cause of Beings;" ch. 16, "That God brought things into being from nothing;" ch. 17, "That creation is neither motion nor change;" ch.18, "How objections against creation are solved;" ch. 19, "That in creation no succession exists;" and ch. 21, "That the act of creation belongs to God alone."

30. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I, Q.44, A.1C., p. 229.

31. Gilson, *God and Philosophy*, 66.

44. Thomas sometimes argues the reverse, namely from the philosophical notions to the conclusion that God must have created the world. He claims that necessarily all *existing* beings are created by God because: (1) the creature's participation in being; (2) the fact that anything that participates in something must be caused by that which that something belongs to essentially; (3) God is a being to which existence essentially belongs, i.e., God is self-subsistent; and therefore, (4) all existing beings are caused by that to which existence essentially pertains, and this is God. Aquinas says, "It must be said that every being in any way existing is from God. For whatever is found in anything by participation, must be caused in it by that to which it belongs essentially. . . Therefore, all beings apart from God are not their own being, but are beings by participation." St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Pt. I, Q. 44, A. 1C, p. 229. Gilson, like Aquinas, argues that an existential world implicates an existential God; however, he argues that in fact the discovery of the existentiality of the world has occurred through the revelation of the existentiality of God. He says, "A world where 'to be' is the act par excellence, the act of all acts, is also a world wherein, for each and every thing, existence is the original energy whence flows all that which deserves the name of being. Such an existential world can be accounted for by no other cause than a supremely existential God. The strange thing is that, historically speaking, things seem to have worked the other way around. Philosophers have not inferred the supreme existentiality of God from any previous knowledge of the existential nature of things; on the contrary, the self-revelation of the existentiality of God has helped philosophers toward the realization of the existential nature of things. In other words, philosophers were not able to reach, beyond essences, the existential energies which are their very causes, until the Jewish-Christian Revelation has taught them that 'to be' was the proper name of the Supreme Being. The decisive progress achieved by metaphysics in the light of Christian faith has not been to realize that there must be a first being. . . but that this first being was Pure Act in the order of existence." Gilson, *God and Philosophy*, 66. Gilson may be right that an existential world implies an existential God, but the claim that it implies a created world's participation in being, which is essential to the principle of the limitation of act by potency, is more controversial.

44. Josef Pieper is sensitive to this same difficulty in his analysis of Aquinas's doctrine of truth and its relation to his doctrine of creation. He says, "This may perhaps suggest that St. Thomas's theory of truth is not strictly 'pure philosophy' but something philosophical-theological. The question can here remain open; its answer will depend upon one's interpretation of the idea 'creation'. Is it philosophical or theological?", *The Silence of St. Thomas*, 50.

45. John Noonan, "The Existentialism of Etienne Gilson," *The New Scholasticism* 24 (1950): 420.

46. *Ibid.*, 423.

47. Aquinas says, "Now, this truth is confirmed by divine authority; for it is said in the Psalm (145:6): 'Who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all the things that are in them'; and 'All things were made by Him, and without Him was made nothing'