

## The Limitation of Act by Potency: Aristotelianism or Neoplatonism

*by W. Norris Clarke, S. J.*

IN A CHALLENGING paper which Dr. Charles A. Hart presented for discussion last year at a regional meeting of the American Catholic Philosophical Association, entitled "Footnotes to the Five Thomistic Ways," he prefaced his exposé with the following remarks:

Perhaps the most important change in the understanding of the fundamental structure of Thomistic metaphysics in recent times is the recognition of the primacy of the decidedly Neoplatonic influence in the formation of that fundamental structure as opposed to the traditional view that Aristotelian influences were the most important. I refer, of course, to the Neoplatonic doctrine of participation. . . . This view of Thomism with participation as the center doctrine would make that system primarily radically revised Platonism expressed in Aristotelian notions of potency and act with an extension of the meaning of these latter notions which is not found in Aristotle but is original with St. Thomas. In this light we would consider the metaphysics of St. Thomas to be a highly original synthesis with Platonic influence superseding that of Aristotle in view of the central character of the doctrine of participation for St. Thomas.<sup>1</sup>

Although the present writer, in evaluating the results of the above-mentioned movement, would prefer to elevate the influence of Aristotle nearer to equality with that of Neoplatonism, Dr. Hart's statement as a whole is an admirably clear and succinct résumé of an important recent trend among Thomistic scholars in the interpretation of the genuine historical filiation and inner intelligibility of the metaphysical system of St.

<sup>1</sup> This paper was delivered at the Dec. 1, 1950, meeting of the Maryland-District of Columbia Conference, held at Georgetown University. The conclusions of the paper are also condensed in the article of Dr. Hart, "Twenty-Five Years of Thomism," *THE NEW SCHOLASTICISM*, XXV (1951), 3-45.

Thomas. The best-known names of scholars associated with this movement have thus far been in France, Belgium, and Italy.<sup>2</sup> But after this article was almost completed my attention was called to the work of an Irish Thomist which has just come out and which pushes even more strongly in the same direction. It is significant to note that his research was carried out independently of the continental writers and almost finished before he became acquainted with their published works, with which he agrees on most substantial points. His study, however, limits itself to the analysis of the role of participation within the system of St. Thomas himself and touches only incidentally on the historical roots of the doctrine.<sup>3</sup>

Thus far there has appeared in English no detailed summary of the historical evidence upon which this new trend of interpretation is founded. The purpose of the present article is to fill this lacuna. Our method will be to select as focal point of investigation what is generally conceded to be the keystone of the Thomistic metaphysical system, the well-known principle of the limitation of act by potency. Our aim will be to discover precisely what elements go to make up this theory, what are their historical roots, and in the light of these sources to discern the full meaning of this extremely rich and pregnant principle.

The peculiar interest of selecting the doctrine of act and potency as center of attention lies in the fact that it constitutes one of the most obvious and apparently exclusively Aristotelian elements in the Thomistic synthesis. If, then, it develops from our investigation that even such a principle cannot be fully understood and justified in terms of purely Aristotelian meta-

<sup>2</sup> To mention only the best known: L.-B. Geiger, O. P., *La participation dans la philosophie de S. Thomas d'Aquin* (Paris, 1942); J. de Finance, S. J., *Etre et agir dans la philosophie de Saint Thomas* (Paris, 1945); L. De Raeymaeker, *Philosophie de l'être* (2e éd., Louvain, 1947); A. Hayen, S. J., *L'intentionnel dans la philosophie de S. Thomas* (Bruxelles, 1942); C. Fabro, *La nozione metafisica di partecipazione secondo s. Tommaso d'Aquino* (2a ed., Torino, 1950).

<sup>3</sup> Arthur Little, S. J., *The Platonic Heritage of Thomism* (Dublin, 1949).

physics but requires the introduction of the Neoplatonic theory of participation, the reader will have before him at once an interesting test case and a summary of the general position that the doctrine of participation plays a central role in the metaphysics of St. Thomas.

Such a study, too, may add an at least partly original contribution to the investigations already made in this direction. For it is a surprising fact that, although the historical sources of several of the main applications of the act-potency principle, such as the compositions of essence and existence and matter and form, have been the subject of much able scholarly research for many years, there exists nowhere as yet any detailed analysis along similar lines of the act and potency principle itself. This paper, therefore, will attempt to sketch the outline of this fascinating and as yet unwritten history.

#### THE PROBLEM

Perhaps the best way to open our study is to point out the main problem which forces one into historical investigation in order to find its solution. The problem is this. It is commonly admitted by both defenders and opponents of Thomism that the keystone of the Thomistic metaphysical system is the celebrated and much fought over principle, "Actus non limitatur nisi per potentiam," i. e., no act or perfection can be found in a limited degree in any being unless it is conjoined with a really distinct limiting principle whose nature is to be a potency for that act.<sup>4</sup> Now what has up till recently been the traditional and almost unchallenged interpretation of this principle is the following. The doctrine in all its essentials was already contained in Aristotle. St. Thomas took it over directly from him, but in

<sup>4</sup> E. g., I. Gredt, O. S. B., "Haec propositio constituit fundamentum philosophiae aristotelico-thomisticae" ("Doctrina thomistica de actu et potentia contra recentes impugnaciones vindicatur," *Acta Pontificiae Academiae Romanae S. Thomae Aquinatis*, I [1934], 35). This is freely admitted by one of the most searching critics of the Thomistic system, L. Fuetscher, S. J., *Akt und Potenz* (Innsbruck, 1933), p. 68.

so doing developed it and extended it so as to include in its applications the essence and existence composition which was his own original contribution. The extension introduced by him, however, was only an explicit unfolding of what was already implicit in the original Aristotelian insight, all the implications of which Aristotle himself was not yet able to discern clearly. Thus the principle even in its Thomistic form, according to this interpretation, remains essentially Aristotelian in origin and inspiration.

This position is reaffirmed unhesitatingly by one of the most distinguished and widely recognized leaders of modern Thomism, Fr. Garrigou-Lagrange, O. P., in his latest book just translated into English under the title, *Reality : A Synthesis of Thomistic Thought*. He writes as follows of the principle of the limitation of act by potency :

Aristotle already taught this doctrine. In the first two books of his *Physica* he shows with admirable clearness the truth, at least in the sense world, of this principle. Act, he says, is limited and multiplied by potency. Act determines potency, actualizes potency, but is limited by that same potency. . . . Aristotle studied this principle in the sense world. St. Thomas extends the principle, elevates it, sees its consequences, not only in the sense world, but universally, in all orders of being, spiritual as well as corporeal, even in the infinity of God.<sup>5</sup>

On the other side of the picture, however, are a number of facts calculated to arouse suspicions as to the accuracy of the above interpretation. First, it is noteworthy that, despite the categorical assertion of Fr. Garrigou-Lagrange in the above quotation, neither here nor anywhere else in his numerous writings on this doctrine does he ever quote or refer to any precise text where Aristotle himself affirms the limiting role of potency with regard to act. What is more disconcerting, a careful examination of the entire first two books of the *Physics*,

<sup>5</sup> (St. Louis, 1950), pp. 43-44. Similar affirmations can be found also in P. Dezza, S. J., *Metaphysica Generalis* (Roma, 1945), p. 124; and in C. Giacon, S. J., *Atto e potenza* (Brescia, 1947), p. 46.

referred to as teaching the doctrine clearly, reveals that nowhere in them does there occur any mention of the word or the idea of limit in connection with potency. Nor have I been able to find in any other Thomistic author a precise reference to any text of Aristotle which would bear out the above position.

These puzzling facts led the present writer to undertake a direct examination of all the passages in Aristotle which deal with either act and potency or its applications. The results were entirely negative. Nowhere could we discover any text from which one could conclude, in accord with the accepted norms of objective historical interpretation, that Aristotle himself ever held the doctrine that potency plays the role of limiting principle with respect to act, which if unmixed with potency would be unlimited.

This textual analysis receives strong confirmation from the fact that if we turn to the modern scholarly studies of Aristotle as well as to his ancient commentators we find that not one of them so much as mentions the principle of the limitation of act by potency as forming part of the Aristotelian teaching on act and potency.<sup>6</sup> What is even more decisive, to my mind—and surprising, though I have never seen it reported anywhere—is the fact that throughout the entire extent of St. Thomas' own commentaries on Aristotle, not excepting that on Book IX of the *Metaphysics*, which deals exclusively with act and potency, there is not a single mention of potency as limiting act nor is there any occurrence of the classic formulas expressing the limitation principle which abound in his independent works.<sup>7</sup>

Such a consistent silence in the commentaries of St. Thomas

<sup>6</sup> This is true even of the few direct and detailed studies of the Aristotelian doctrine done by Thomists: e. g., A. Baudin, "L'acte et la puissance dans Aristote," *Revue thomiste*, VII (1899), 39-62, 153-72, 274-96, 584-608.

<sup>7</sup> There is one text linking essence and existence with act and potency in terms of a participation argument: *In VIII Phys.*, c. 10, lect. 21, nn. 12-13 (ed. Leonina). But here St. Thomas is meeting a difficulty brought up by Averroes and develops his own answer far beyond the text of Aristotle; he is careful not to attribute his own answer directly to Aristotle.

regarding one of his central metaphysical principles, supposed to have been drawn directly from Aristotle, surely cannot be the result of mere accidental omission. The fact that St. Thomas is here in agreement with all the other scholarly commentators on Aristotle, both ancient and modern, in not attributing this doctrine to his master cannot but lead us to suspect that the inspiration of the act-potency limitation principle is perhaps not so obviously and exclusively Aristotelian as many modern Thomists seem to have taken for granted, and that the Angelic Doctor is perhaps a more accurate historian of the source of his own doctrine than certain of his disciples today.

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? In the limited space which follows we can do no more than present a schematic outline of this long and interesting history.<sup>8</sup>

The first requisite for unravelling the complex threads which interweave to make up the Thomistic act and potency doctrine is to recognize that it contains two distinct elements. The first is a composition of two correlative metaphysical principles called act and potency, first introduced by Aristotle to explain the process of change. The second is the relating of these two principles to each other in terms of a theory of infinity and limitation, which, it must be admitted by all, cannot be found explicitly in Aristotle. The historian of St. Thomas must trace the origins of both these elements and not take it for granted that because the two are inseparably united in Thomistic metaphysics they must also have been so joined from their first appearance in the history of thought.

<sup>8</sup> The author hopes to publish later a full-length study on the history and meaning of the Thomistic act-potency limitation theory.

FINITE AND INFINITE IN THE PRE-SOCRATICS

The first of the two above-mentioned elements to emerge in the history of Western thought was the theory of infinity and limitation.<sup>9</sup> The term infinite (*apeiron*) first appears in Greek philosophy with the Pre-Socratic Anaximander, who identified it with the primal principle of all things:

1. The Non-Limited is the original material of existing things; further, the source from which existing things derive their existence is also that to which they return at their destruction, according to necessity. . . .

3. This [the Non-Limited] is immortal and indestructible.<sup>10</sup>

The concept at first remains vague and unanalyzed. Its function is to express the hypothesis of an inexhaustible womb of nature from which proceeds the endless sequence of generations of new beings but which itself can be no particular one of the elements and qualities which successively inform it. Anaximander himself seems to manifest a certain awe and reverence before this mysterious, *quasi*-divine first principle. The Greek mind at this initial stage seems to be hesitating, not yet committing itself as to whether the infinite should be identified with the supremely perfect or with the supremely imperfect.

<sup>9</sup> There is but scanty detailed and reliable work on the history of these notions. The following are the most useful, though not always well documented and reliable: J. Cohn, *Geschichte des Unendlichkeitsproblem im abendländischen Denken bis Kant* (Leipzig, 1896); R. Mondolfo, *L'infinito nel pensiero dei Greci* (Firenze, 1934); H. Guyot, *L'infinité divine depuis Philon le Juif jusqu'à Plotin*, avec une introduction sur le même sujet dans la philosophie grecque avant Philon (Paris, 1906); C. Huit, "Un chapitre de l'histoire de la métaphysique," *Rev. de philosophie*, IV-2 (1904), 738-57; V-1 (1905), 44-66; P. Descoqs, S. J., *Praelectiones Theodiceae Naturalis* (Paris, 1935), II, 600-22: "Notes sur l'histoire des notions d'infini et de parfait"; R. Eisler, *Wörterbuch der philosophischen Begriffen* (4 Aufl., Berlin, 1930), III, 306-20; J. de Finance, *Etre et agir*, Ch. II, Sect. 1: "L'acte et la limite."

<sup>10</sup> Fragments 1-3 in H. Diels, *Fragmente der Vorsokratiker* (5 Aufl., ed. W. Kranz, Berlin, 1934), I, 89, trans. by K. Freeman, *Ancilla to the Pre-Socratics* (Cambridge, Mass., 1948), p. 19.

But the inability of the early Greek thinkers to transcend material categories or to distinguish between philosophy and natural science, their growing preoccupation with astronomical problems, and the very manner in which they framed their fundamental problem, "What is the first principle *out of which* all things are formed?", gradually led them—if not Anaximander, at least his successors—to identify the infinite with the indeterminate, formless substratum or raw material of the universe, the primeval chaos of matter in itself, as yet unperfected by the limit of form. Emerging out of it and opposed to it was the finished or perfect cosmos, formed, limited and intelligible.

The Pythagoreans gave a further impetus to the same orientation of thought by their doctrine that all things are composed of two sets of opposing principles: a principle of limit or perfection, identified with the odd numbers, the good, the male, light, etc., and a principle of illimitation or imperfection, identified with the even numbers, the evil, the female, darkness, etc. The finished cosmos is formed by a process in which the primal Monad, or One, the principle of limit, progressively extends its ordering and limiting activity outward from the center on the formless infinity of the surrounding nebula or space.

The same conception reappears as fundamental also in the thought of the first metaphysician, Parmenides. The great sphere of the totality of Being, he tells us, must be limited all around precisely because it is complete and perfect; for if it were unlimited it would necessarily be unfinished and imperfect.<sup>11</sup> A similar association of limit with perfection and of infinity with imperfection could be traced through most of the

<sup>11</sup> Frag. 8 (Diels), trans. by J. Burnet, *Early Greek Philosophy* (4th ed., London, 1930), p. 176: ". . . hard necessity keeps it in the bonds of the limit that holds it fast on every side. Wherefore it is not permitted to *what* is to be infinite; for it is in need of nothing; while if it were infinite, it would stand in need of everything."



other Pre-Socratics, as, for example, in the Heraclitean notion of the fundamental principle, fire, which is kindled and extinguished according to measure and limit, or in the infinite space of the Atomists, identified with non-being and opposed to the being of the solid, limited atoms.<sup>12</sup>

Thus, after a first moment of hesitation, the Greek mind set firmly in a conception of the finite and the infinite which was to dominate the entire current of classical thought up to Neoplatonism in the second century A. D. According to this 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, with number, form, and idea, the principles of perfection. It is evident that within such a framework of thought the notion of a principle of perfection as of itself unlimited and receiving limitation from a principle of imperfection would be quite meaningless. The relations are just the reverse.

### PLATO

Plato, following closely in the footsteps of the Pythagoreans, takes up the same basic doctrine and makes it one of the central pieces in his metaphysical blueprint of the universe. He calls it:

. . . the parent of all the discoveries in the arts . . . a gift of heaven, which, as I conceive, the gods tossed among men by the hands of a new Prometheus, and therewith a blaze of light; and the ancients, who were our betters and nearer the gods than we, handed down the tradition, that

---

<sup>12</sup> For the doctrine on the finite and the infinite in the Pre-Socratics mentioned above, cf. the works mentioned in note 10 *supra*, and the standard general studies of the Pre-Socratics, such as Burnet, *Early Greek Philosophy*, and, for what is perhaps the most succinct and objective summary of all the ancient testimony available, K. Freeman, *The Pre-Socratic Philosophers: A Companion to Diels Fragmente der Vorsokratiker* (2d ed., Oxford, 1949).

all things of which we say "they are" draw their existence from the one and the many, and have the finite and infinite implanted in them.<sup>13</sup>

According to the Platonic metaphysics, all realities below the supreme idea of the Good (or the One) are a "mixture" of two opposing principles, the limit and the unlimited, which reappear with analogical similarity on all the levels of reality from the world of ideas to the half-real world of sensible things. The principle of limitation is consistently identified with number, form, idea, and being, as the source of intelligibility and perfection. The principle of illimitation, on the other hand, is identified with the formlessness and indeterminacy of pure matter and multiplicity as such, and therefore with "otherness" or non-being, as the source of unintelligibility and imperfection. Thus at all levels it is the principle of limit or measure which, imposed on the wilderness and chaos of the infinite, i. e., on the indeterminate substratum of matter, multiplicity, and non-being, delimits, determines, and defines it, thus conferring upon it form, intelligibility, and being.<sup>14</sup>

We see here emerging in sharp relief the irresistible tendency of the classical Greek mind (and one of its great weaknesses)—reflected in its art and in a thousand different cultural manifestations—to identify perfection with clear-cut limited form, to identify intelligibility as such with the human mode of intelligibility, i. e., with definition by distinct, clearly delimited concepts. In such a perspective, where finite essence is taken

<sup>13</sup> *Philebus*, 16c (trans. of B. Jowett, *Dialogues of Plato*, 3d ed., London, 1892).

<sup>14</sup> We have here summarized Plato's synthesis of the theory of finite and infinite and the theory of ideas. The sources for the latter doctrine are well known and can be found in any standard study. The main sources for the former, which are not so well known, are the following: *Philebus*, 16-18; 23c-30; 61-67; *Politicus*, 283b-285a; *Laws*, IV, 716c. The integration of the two theories into a synthesis is already indicated clearly in the *Sophist*, 256e, but was not worked out fully, it seems, till the later teaching as reported by Aristotle, e. g., in *Met. A*, ch. 6, 9; *M*, 4, 5, 8. The best exposé of the full Platonic metaphysical synthesis that we know is that of L. Robin, *Platon* (Paris, 1934), Ch. IV.

as the type of perfect being, it is clear that the relations between being and non-being will be quite different from those between *esse* and essence in the Thomistic outlook. In the Platonic framework it is participation in the idea of being which makes a particular idea to be precisely *what* it is, i. e., this particular well-defined essence. It is participation in non-being or otherness which, by negating the indeterminate or infinite multitude of all other ideas, preserves this particular essence distinct from all the others and prevents it from melting into them in a blur of unintelligible confusion. Thus, disconcerting as it may appear to a Thomistically trained mind, and difficult to think through for anyone, Plato clearly situates the limit on the side of being and infinity on the side of non-being: "In every idea there is a definite amount of being and an infinity of non-being."<sup>15</sup>

What has happened seems to be this. Although Plato had the genius to discover the doctrine of participation in general and the necessity of some principle of negation or imperfection in reality, his equally deep-rooted conception of perfection as distinct form, and hence of finite and infinite as correlatives of perfect and imperfect, prevented him from carrying through his analysis of participation to its more natural consequence, i. e., to expression in terms of a limitation of the higher by the lower. It is essential to remember this if we wish to avoid the overzealous attempts of certain modern Thomists to find in Plato's doctrine of being an anticipation, defective principally in terminology, of the Thomistic limitation of *esse* by essence.<sup>16</sup> The spirit of the two doctrines is profoundly different, and is rooted in far more than mere terminology.

<sup>15</sup> *Sophist*, 256e. Cf. A. Diès, *La définition de l'être et la nature des idées dans le Sophiste de Platon* (2e éd., Paris, 1932), p. 127; also the commentary of F. Cornforth, *Plato's Theory of Knowledge* (London, 1935).

<sup>16</sup> E. g., C. Giacon, *Il divenire in Aristotele* (Padova, 1947), pp. 42-45; Dezza, n. 5 *supra*; P. Geny, S. J., "Le problème métaphysique de la limitation de l'acte," *Rev. de philosophie*, XIX (1919), 138.

But, it may be objected, what of the supreme idea of the Good or the One in Plato? Is it not above being and essence, as he says in the *Republic*,<sup>17</sup> and hence infinite? It is certainly not a mixture of limit and infinity, like the other ideas, since it is absolutely one and simple. But the fact is that Plato never calls it infinite. Indeed, in view of his habitual notion of the infinite as correlated with indeterminacy and imperfection this would surely have seemed to him a kind of blasphemy. On the other hand, neither does he call it explicitly finite. Perhaps the most accurate answer is to say that he was groping for a new category to express the absolute and the transcendent and that the inadequacy of his metaphysical terminology, chiefly his concept of infinity, did not allow him to formulate satisfactorily what he dimly intuited. But if we must choose, it seems more probable, arguing from the rest of his doctrine on the correlation of idea with number as principle of limit and intelligibility, to conclude that the supreme One was somehow linked in his mind with the notion of supreme Measure or Limit as such, source of all other limitation and hence of intelligibility and perfection.<sup>18</sup>

We are still far, however, from any positive conception of infinity as linked with perfection as such.

#### ARISTOTLE

We come now to Aristotle. In the light of the deeply-rooted Greek tradition before him, it should come as no surprise to discover that his own theory of infinity remains dominated by the same inspiration. In fact, he is obviously proud of the fact that he is the first to follow the latter out to its rigorous logical conclusions in what is undoubtedly the most complete analysis

<sup>17</sup> *Rep.*, VI, 509b.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. the penetrating remarks along this line by De Finance, *Etre et agir*, p. 48. Robin, however, tries to argue that the Good must be above the Limit: *Platon*, pp. 156, 169.

of the notion of infinity in ancient thought.<sup>19</sup> The result of this analysis is that the essential nature of the infinite is to be that which is of itself the incomplete, the indefinite, or the indeterminate, and hence the imperfect. It is an attribute of time, as without end, of the series of numbers, as capable of indefinite augmentation, and of matter, as being formless and indeterminate in itself, considered apart from form. Its proper definition is that which always has some part of itself outside of itself.

No complete substance, therefore, can exist as actually infinite.<sup>20</sup> The terms are mutually exclusive. For the perfect, which is but a synonym for the complete or finished, is precisely that which has an end, and the end, he says, is a limit.<sup>21</sup> The very words in Greek derive from the same root (*telos*: end, and *teleios*: complete or perfect) and betray the close affinity between the two concepts. This allows Aristotle to make a rich play on words in a sentence which sums up admirably the classical Greek notion of infinity: "Nature flies from the infinite, for the infinite is unending or imperfect, and nature ever seeks an end."<sup>22</sup>

Let us apply this theory now to the doctrine of act and potency. In the light of what has gone before we should expect *a priori*, if Aristotle is to be consistent with himself and with the almost unanimous Greek tradition before him, to find the principle of limit identified with perfection or act and illimitation with imperfection or potency. We are not disappointed. In what is the type par excellence of act and potency for Aristotle, namely, the composition of form and matter, he tells us explicitly that the role of form or act is to impose a limit on the formless infinity of matter in itself and thus confer upon it determination and intelligibility:

<sup>19</sup> Principally in *Phys.*, III, ch. 4-8; *Met.*, K, 10; a, 2.

<sup>20</sup> *Phys.*, III, 5; *Met.*, K, 10.

<sup>21</sup> *Phys.*, III, 6, 207 a 14.

<sup>22</sup> *De gen. anim.*, I, 1, 715 b 14 (*Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. R. McKeon (New York, 1941), p. 666).

It [the infinite] is unknowable *qua* infinite; for the matter has no form. (Hence it is plain that the infinite stands in the relation of part rather than of whole . . .). . . . But it is absurd and impossible to suppose that the unknowable and indeterminate should contain and determine. . . . For the matter and the infinite are contained inside what contains them, while it is the form which contains.<sup>23</sup>

We recognize here immediately the classic Platonic notion of form conceived as principle of limit and hence of intelligibility.

St. Thomas takes over intact this perspective into his own system. But he adds to it another dimension, so to speak, in which the relations are reversed and matter also appears as limiting form.<sup>24</sup> This new dimension, however, can have meaning only within the framework of some kind of participation doctrine, where form itself would be conceived either *modo Platonico*, as subsisting separately in its own right as a perfect plenitude or, for St. Thomas, as pre-existent idea in the mind of a Creator.

There is no room for such a perspective in the universe of Aristotle. He has closed the door to it by his explicit rejection of all ontological participation or transcendence of material forms.<sup>25</sup> It is quite true that he does teach explicitly that forms of themselves are unique and can be multiplied only by reception in matter.<sup>26</sup> But nowhere does he say or imply that such multiplication involves a process of limitation by matter of a form which by itself could be called infinite. On the contrary, he insists against Plato that every specific form is received whole, entire, and equally in every individual of the species.<sup>27</sup>

The guiding image here is clearly not that of matter or

<sup>23</sup> *Phys.*, III, 6, 207 a 30-37 (*Basic Works*, p. 267).

<sup>24</sup> Cf. *ST* I, 7, 1-2; III, 10, 3 ad 1; *Quodl.* III, 2, 3: "Sicut ergo materia sine forma habet rationem infiniti, ita et forma sine materia. . . ."

<sup>25</sup> *Met.*, A, 6 and 9.

<sup>26</sup> *Met.*, Lambda, 8, 1074 a 33; Z, 8, 1034 a 5-8.

<sup>27</sup> *Cat.*, 5, 3 b—4 a.

potency as a container which contracts the plenitude of form or act; it is rather that of form as a stamp or die, fully determined in itself, which is stamped successively on various portions of an amorphous raw material such as wax or clay. Such a multiplication can appear rather as an expansion than as a limitation of the form. The two perspectives are quite different, though, as St. Thomas has shown, by no means mutually exclusive. It is poor history, therefore, to argue from St. Thomas's much richer analysis of multiplication of form in terms of participation and limitation to the conclusion that Aristotle also must have understood his own theory of multiplication in the same way. The fact is that there is no trace of such an interpretation in the commentaries on Aristotle until the advent of Neoplatonism.

What, then, is the genuine meaning and purpose of the act and potency composition in Aristotle? There is only one: as function of the problem of change. Whatever is capable of change of any kind—and only that—must have within it in addition to its present act a principle of potency, or capacity to receive a further act. It is this potency which enables a being to be inserted in the endless cosmic cycle of change; it is therefore essentially forward-looking and involves as one of its constituent notes the property of remaining always “in potency,” that is, capable of becoming what it is not as yet. Act, on the other hand, is always identified with the fully complete, the actually present. Pure act, therefore, is simply a correlative of the immutable, i. e., of pure actualized form, complete in all that is proper to it and incorruptible. It is this immutability, self-sufficiency, and incorruptibility which for Aristotle is the primary characteristic of the “divine” and the perfect.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>28</sup> The doctrine of act and potency is developed principally in *Phys.*, I-II, esp. I, 6-9; *De gen. et cor.*, esp. I, 3-4; *Met.*, Θ. The best collection of texts is in E. Zeller, *Die Philosophie der Griechen* (4 Aufl., Leipzig, 1921), II-2, Kap. 6-7. Cf. also, in addition to the works mentioned in note 6 *supra*,

In the notion of act so conceived there is no necessary implication of infinity, at least in the substantial order.<sup>29</sup> In fact, Aristotle has no difficulty in admitting some fifty-five of his prime movers, each one pure act or pure form but in virtue of its form distinct from all the others.<sup>30</sup> Substantial infinity would simply have no meaning in this Aristotelian universe; there is no ultimate common perfection deeper than form, such as existence for St. Thomas, in which the hierarchy of forms could participate according to different degrees or limits. Each form is an ultimate and an absolute in its own right. Correspondingly potency can have no connotation of limiting a plenitude which would be found elsewhere in a higher degree.<sup>31</sup>

The accuracy of the above interpretation of Aristotelian act

W. Ross, *Aristotle* (2d ed., London, 1930); L. Robin, *Aristote* (Paris, 1944); O. Hamelin, *Le système d'Aristote* (Paris, 1920); A. Rivaud, *Le problème du devenir et la notion de la matière dans la philosophie grecque depuis les origines jusqu'à Théophraste* (Paris, 1906); A. Mansion, *Introduction à la physique aristotélicienne* (2e éd., Louvain, 1945); and the very useful and penetrating study of J. Le Blond, S. J., *Logique et méthode chez Aristote* (Paris, 1939), pp. 306-431.

<sup>29</sup> Aristotle does argue that the prime mover must have an infinite power of moving, in *Met.*, A, 7, 1073 a 5, and in detail in *Phys.*, VIII, 10. Though an important affirmation for the history of thought and significant in later developments, in Aristotle himself it is geared to a purely mechanical problem, deduced from purely physical and highly sophistical arguments (a limited force cannot move through an infinite time), and has no echoes in the rest of his system. In fact, since the prime mover moves only as final cause, without consciousness or efficient activity on its part, it is hard to see what positive, literal meaning the word "power" could have here.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. P. Merlan, "Aristotle's Unmoved Movers," *Traditio*, IV (1936), 1-30.

<sup>31</sup> After this article was completed our attention was called to the splendid work just published by J. Owens, *The Doctrine of Being in the Aristotelian Metaphysics* (Pont. Inst. of Med. Studies, Toronto, 1951), one of the first really scholarly and historically objective studies of Aristotle by a Thomist, which confirms our own interpretation of Aristotle's conception of being and perfection as radically "finitist." Cf. pp. 305, n. 19, and 297: "Perfection is equated with finitude, act coincides with form. This philosophy of act does not lead in the direction of the omnipotent Christian God."



and potency can be strikingly verified by examining a test case where the conditions for Thomistic potency are fulfilled but not the Aristotelian. If it is true that potency for Aristotle signifies always and only the capacity of a being for future change in a given order, it should follow that where there is a being with no possibility of change in a particular order there can be no potency in it in that order, even though the being in question is clearly what a Thomist would call limited in perfection in the static hierarchy of essences. Such a test case is found made to order in the Aristotelian heavenly bodies. According to his cosmology these were subject to change only in the accidental order of local motion, but were immutable and incorruptible in their essences. Aristotle does not hesitate to draw the rigorous consequence, disconcerting and embarrassing though it may be to a Thomist. It follows, he says, that there is no potency in them in the substantial or essential order but only an accidental potency to local motion, even though their essences are evidently of the corporeal order and less perfect than the immaterial intelligences which move them.<sup>32</sup>

It seems undeniable, therefore, that the notion of a potency which would be a purely static receiving and limiting principle, excluding all possibility of change in the same order—such as is the essence of pure spirits in the Thomistic system—would have no place whatever in the Aristotelian plan of the universe and would probably have appeared quite unintelligible to him, if not an open contradiction in terms: a non-potential potency! A moment's analysis, in fact, of such a principle will reveal that it would be quite meaningless and superfluous unless it played the role of limiting subject in a participation framework; and with this, of course, Aristotle would have nothing to do.

<sup>32</sup> *Met.*, Θ, 8, 1050 b 6-34; H, 5, 1044 b 27. Cf. St. Thomas's solution of the difficulty by essence and existence: *In VIII Phys.*, c. 10, lect. 21, nn. 12-13.

## PLOTINUS AND NEOPLATONISM

The search for such a framework forces us now to leap five centuries down to Plotinus and Neoplatonism. It was 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>33</sup>

The emergence of the new notion of infinity seems to have been provoked not by any internal progress of philosophical speculation by itself but by the impact of the mystery religions of the East, now infiltrating the Roman Empire on all sides. The latter brought with them a new notion of the divinity, a divinity of power and mystery, master of the limitless spaces of the heavens discovered by the new Syrian astronomy, above all rational human concepts, but with whom the believer could enter into salvific personal union by mystical or other non-rational means.<sup>34</sup> The center of the new thought was Alexandria, melting pot of east and west. The influence of Judaism, too, was not inconsiderable, chiefly through Philo, who appears to have been the first recorded thinker in the west to apply to God a synonym for infinite: uncircumscribed (*aperigraphos*).<sup>35</sup>

<sup>33</sup> For the history of this remarkable revolution in thought, cf. the works cited above in note 10. As Brunschvicg aptly sums it up: "Enfin le cours de l'histoire se transforme lorsque, dès les premiers siècles du Christianisme, l'infini cesse décidément d'être l'imparfait et l'inachevé, principe de désordre et de mal qu'il faut dompter et limiter pour la soumettre à la loi de la mesure et de l'harmonie. Le Divin change de camp: il passe du fini à l'infini" (*Le rôle du Pythagorisme dans l'évolution des idées* [Paris, 1937], p. 23).

<sup>34</sup> The new notion of the divinity as infinite is attributed to the Syrian religions by the celebrated expert on oriental religions, Franz Cumont, *Les religions orientales dans le paganisme romain* (4e éd., Paris, 1929), pp. 117-19.

<sup>35</sup> *De opificio mundi*, VI, 23 (Loeb ed. by F. Colson and G. Whitaker, New York, 1929, I, 19); *De sacrificiis Abelis et Caini*, XV, 59 (Loeb, II, 139).

Contrary to what we might expect, Christianity itself seems to have had little traceable influence on the development of the concept. Christian thinkers followed rather than led the movement. The first Christian texts calling God infinite do not appear till the fourth century, and precisely in those circles which are known to have been influenced by Neoplatonism.<sup>36</sup> In fact, the first school of Christian philosophers, that of Clement and Origen in Alexandria just prior to Plotinus, well into the third century, were still following the old Platonic notion of infinity and holding that God's will and power should not be called infinite because they would then be unintelligible even to Himself.<sup>37</sup>

Plotinus deliberately set out to meet the challenge of his day: to integrate the essence of the new religious intuitions from the east with the old rational Platonic metaphysics, and thus to stem the invading tide of irrational superstition threatening to inundate the Roman Empire through the Oriental cults and sweep away the values of the old Hellenic civilization. The result was a powerful and original synthesis which was to exert an immense influence on Western thought ever since. It was in this context that appeared the new emanationist metaphysics of infinity and limitation correlated with participation.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>36</sup> E.g.: St. Hilary of Poitiers, *De Trinitate*, I, 5-7 (*PL*, X, 28), in the West, who began this work in 356 during his exile in the East, and in the East St. Gregory of Nyssa, *Contra Eunomium*, 1 (*PG*, XLV, 340 D), written in 381. On the latter's doctrine of infinity and relation to Neoplatonism, cf. H. Urs von Balthasar, *Présence et pensée: Essai sur la philosophie religieuse de Grégoire de Nysse* (Paris, 1942). The earliest Christian text we have thus far been able to discover is in a papyrus fragment of a Preface from the early Egyptian liturgy (ca. 300) in the *Florilegium Patristicum*, VII, 1, *Monumenta eucharistica et liturgica vetustissima*, ed. J. Quasten (Bonn, 1935), p. 38: "... Lord of all power ... Who alone without limit puts limits to all. ..." The term occurs nowhere in Scripture, even in paraphrase.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. the extremely interesting text of Origen, *De principiis*, II, 9 (*PG*, XI, 225-26), later toned down in Rufinus' text.

<sup>38</sup> For the general doctrine of Plotinus, cf. the standard works, esp. E. Bréhier, *La philosophie de Plotin* (Paris, 1928); A. Armstrong, *The Archi-*

In this view of the universe, the old Platonic order of limited, intelligible essences, composed of form as perfecting limit imposed on the infinity of sensible or "intelligible" matter, is still preserved. But their relation to the supreme One by emanation introduces a new dimension or function of the limiting principle, that of limiting what is above it as well as what is below it. In this perspective all the intelligible essences below the One now appear as limited and hence imperfect participations of this supremely perfect and absolutely simple first principle, which somehow embraces within itself the perfection of all the lower determinate essences but is none of them in particular. The One, therefore, must be above all particular intelligible determination or essence, and can be described only as a supreme indetermination or infinity, not of defect but of excess. Forced to invent a new terminology, Plotinus for the first time in western thought uses the old Greek word for the infinite, *apeiron*, to express this radically new content of indetermination as identified with the plenitude of perfection of an unparticipated source compared to the limited participations below it.<sup>39</sup>

Many of the Plotinian texts on the infinity of the One carry an astonishingly familiar ring to Thomistic ears. Even the central intuition of the Thomistic limitation principle, namely, that a perfection cannot be limited except by something else, is formulated explicitly with all the clarity and vigor desirable. For example:

It [the One] is not limited: by what indeed would it be limited? It possesses infinity because it is not multiple and because there is nothing

---

*ecture of the Intelligible Universe in the Philosophy of Plotinus* (Cambridge, Eng., 1940), and the excellent brief treatment in his *Introduction to Ancient Philosophy* (Westminster, Md., 1949), esp. p. 187.

<sup>39</sup> The best texts are: *Enneads*, IV, 3, 8; V, 5, 4-6 and 9-11; VI, 5, 11-12; 6, 2; 7, 17 and 32-42; 8, 9 to end; 9 entire (ed. E. Bréhier, *Plotin: Ennéades*, 7 vols. [Paris, 1924-38]). The following texts are the author's own translation based on that of Bréhier, since the Mackenna translation is very free.

to limit it. . . . It has therefore no limit either in itself or in something else; otherwise it would be at least double. (V, 5, 10-11).

We must examine whence come these ideas and their beauty. Their source cannot be one among them. . . . It must be above all powers and all forms. The first principle is that which is without form, not that it is lacking form, but that all intelligible forms come from it. That which is produced by that very fact becomes a particular thing and possesses a form proper to it. But who could produce the unproduced? . . . It is infinite. . . . How could anything else measure it? (VI, 7, 32).

It would be ridiculous to try to circumscribe such an immensity as belongs to the One. It is necessary, therefore, that the One be without form. And being without form, it is not essence; for an essence must be an individual, hence a determined being. (V, 5, 6).

All [the ideas] come from the same principle . . . and the same gift imparted to a multitude of beings becomes different in each one that receives it. (VI, 7, 18).

There are, of course, many profound differences between the Plotinian and the Thomistic metaphysics of being. One of the most serious is that Plotinus, still following Plato on this point, identifies being with limited essence and hence is forced to place the One above being and intelligibility and to identify the ultimate perfection of the universe as unity rather than existence.<sup>40</sup> But on the basic problem of the metaphysical significance of finitude and its relation to perfection we cannot but agree with Fr. de Finance when he says:

In asking the question, What could limit the One?, Plotinus is implicitly affirming that limitation needs to be justified, and that it can only be so by a degradation of being. The problem of the finite is posed and virtually resolved in the same way as in St. Thomas.<sup>41</sup>

This basic Plotinian intuition of participation in terms of an infinite source and a limiting participating subject is organized

<sup>40</sup> *Enn.*, V, 5, 6; VI, 2, 1. Cf. St. Thomas's elegant solution to the impasse of the "Platonici," by showing how the First Cause can be said to be above *ens*, i. e., *ens participatum*, but not above *esse*: *In lib. de causis*, lect. 6.

<sup>41</sup> *Être et agir*, p. 50.

into a rigid systematization by Proclus, the "Scholastic" of Neoplatonism, in his famous textbook of Neoplatonic participation metaphysics, entitled *The Elements of Theology*.<sup>42</sup> This handy compilation in thesis form exercised a powerful influence on subsequent medieval thought. It reached the thirteenth-century Scholastics chiefly through the work of the Pseudo-Dionysius, a thinly veiled Christian adaptation of it, and the celebrated *Liber de Causis*, accepted through most of the thirteenth century as a bona fide work of Aristotle until St. Thomas himself discovered from the first Latin translation of Proclus in 1268 by his friend, William of Moerbeke, that the *Liber de Causis* was only a compilation from *The Elements of Theology*.<sup>43</sup>

Despite the often corrupt and obscure text available to the thirteenth century, this little book presents clearly enough the central participation framework of Neoplatonism in terms of infinite source and limited receiving subject:

The first Goodness pours down goodness over all things by a single influx. But each thing receives of this influx according to the measure of its own power and its own being. The goodness and gifts of the first cause are diversified by virtue of the recipient . . . some receive more, others less.

The power of the first caused being is infinite only with respect to what is below it, not to what is above it; for it is not the pure power [i. e., absolutely unparticipated] of the first cause, which is limited neither from below nor from above.<sup>44</sup>

St. Thomas appeals explicitly to the second text above as

<sup>42</sup> Cf. the excellent text with introduction, translation, and commentary, by E. Dodds, *Proclus: The Elements of Theology* (Oxford, 1933).

<sup>43</sup> On its influence, cf. the works mentioned in note 2 above, esp. that of Fabro.

<sup>44</sup> We have translated from the Latin text used by St. Thomas in his commentary, *Expositio super Librum de Causis* (ed. Mandonnet, *Opuscula Omnia* [Paris, 1927], I, 193 sq.). The texts are from Prop. 20 and 16 respectively.

authority for his own doctrine of the relative infinity of pure spirits, each in its own species.<sup>45</sup>

The implicit supposition, too, behind the whole doctrine of Boethius' influential little treatise on participation, the so-called *De Hebdomadibus*, is nothing else but the same fundamental Neoplatonic participation-limitation theory, which can be summed up in this widely repeated formula: Every pure (i. e., unparticipated) form is infinite. Therefore every finite creature must be a composite of form and receiving, limiting subject.<sup>46</sup> This basic principle, interpreted strictly, results in the Franciscan doctrine of the universal composition of form and matter in all creatures. The identical principle is taken over by St. Thomas but transposed in a highly original stroke of genius, so that the ultimate perfection now becomes the "quasi-form" of *esse*, the act of existence, instead of form-essence, and the latter becomes itself the limiting, participating principle.

The point we wish to make here is that the general structure of the limitation principle (1) is by no means original with St. Thomas; (2) is clearly Neoplatonic in origin and is so recognized by St. Thomas himself; (3) was a widely accepted commonplace both before St. Thomas and by his contemporaries. The latter point is striking illustrated by a text from St. Bonaventure which sounds as though it were a quotation from Thomas himself:

Every creature has finite and limited being . . . but wherever there is limited being, there is something which contracts and something which is contracted, and in every such there is composition and difference: therefore every creature is composite: therefore none is simple.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>45</sup> *De ente et essentia*, c. 5 (ed. Roland-Gosselin [Paris, 1926]), p. 39.

<sup>46</sup> Text and translation can be found in the Loeb edition, *The Theological Tractates*, ed. H. Stewart and E. Rand (London, 1926), under its proper title, *Quomodo substantiae*. . . . Cf. also St. Thomas's commentary on it, *Expositio super Librum Boetii de Hebdomadibus* (ed. Mandonnet, *Opuscula*, I, 162 sq.), and, for its influence, the works of Fabro and Geiger mentioned in note 2, and H. Brosch, *Der Seinsbegriff bei Boethius* (Innsbruck, 1931).

<sup>47</sup> *In I Sent.*, d. 8, p. 2, q. 2, f. 2 (ed. Quaracchi, *Opera Omnia* [1882-1902], I, 167 A).

## ST. THOMAS

In the light of the foregoing history, the elements involved in the Thomistic act-potency limitation principle now fall quickly into place. On the one hand was the central piece of Aristotelian metaphysics, the doctrine of act and potency. Its weakness was that it was geared exclusively thus far to the context of a change process. Its strength was that it was admirably adapted to express a structure of metaphysical composition within a being, while at the same time safeguarding the intrinsic unity of the composite resulting from the union of two incomplete, correlative principles. On the other hand was the central piece of the Neoplatonic metaphysical tradition, the participation-limitation framework. Its strength lay in its ability to express satisfactorily the fundamental genetic and hierarchic structure of the universe, that is, the relation of creatures to a first Source conceived at once as exemplary, efficient, and final cause of all. Its weakness lay in the fact that it habitually left vague, unexplained, and dangerously ambiguous the unity of the composite resulting from the superposition of participated on participant, whether of form on matter or of higher form on lower form.

The achievement of St. Thomas was to recognize that the strength of each doctrine remedied precisely the weakness of the other and to fuse them into a single highly original synthesis, condensed in the apparently simple yet extremely rich and complex formula: Act is not limited except by reception in a distinct potency.<sup>48</sup> In order to effect this synthesis, however, he

<sup>48</sup> In an article of summary like this it is obviously impossible to give a full textual exposé of the Thomistic synthesis of participation and act-potency. The following, however, are some of the most characteristic texts, in chronological orders, where the two elements may be seen working together: *CG* I, 43; II, 52-54; *De pot.*, I, 2; VII, 2 ad 9; *In Lib. Dionys. de div. nom.*, c. 5, lect. 1; *ST* I, 7, 1-2; 50, 2 ad 4; 75, 5 ad 1 et 4; *De spir. creat.*, 1; *De subst. sep.*, c. 3 (a remarkable tour de force attempting to



had to subject both doctrines to profound modifications. First, he had to empty the participation-limitation structure of its original Neoplatonic content, that is, of the vast hierarchic procession of reified universal concepts—the Porphyrian tree transplanted into reality—so characteristic of the whole Platonic tradition (at least in its Aristotelian interpretation), dominated by the primacy of form and the ultra-realism of ideas. In its place he substituted as the fundamental ontological perfection of the universe the supra-formal act of existence, participated first directly by essential form, as limiting potency in pure spirits, then dispersed, so to speak, in material beings, by being communicated through specific forms to their multiple participations in matter.

Secondly, he had to disengage the Aristotelian act and potency theory from its hitherto exclusive attachment to a change context, and to add to the already existing dynamic “horizontal” function of potency a new dimension, the static “vertical” function of receiving subject limiting a higher plenitude in a participation framework. Furthermore—and this was the most violent wrench to the old Aristotelian concept—this new second function could now be found in some cases entirely separated from and

reconcile directly Plato and Aristotle, but where the Aristotelian text is stretched beyond recognition) and c. 6 (in the Mandonnet ed., c. 8 in the older editions); *In VIII Phys.*, c. 10, lect. 21; *Quodlib.*, III, 8, 20; *Comp. theol.*, 18-21. As a sample, let us quote one text that is a gem for concision and clarity in illustrating the precise genetic build-up of the synthesis: “Omnis enim substantia creata est composita ex potentia et actu. Manifestum est enim quod solus Deus est suum esse, quasi essentialiter existens, in quantum scilicet suum esse est eius substantia. Quod de nullo alio dici potest: esse enim subsistens non potest esse nisi unum. Oportet ergo quod quaelibet alia res sit ens participative, ita quod aliud sit in eo substantia participans esse, et aliud ipsum esse participatum. Omne autem participans se habet ad participatum, sicut potentia ad actum; unde substantia cuiuslibet rei creatae se habet ad suum esse, sicut potentia ad actum. Sic ergo omnis substantia creata est composita ex potentia et actu, id est ex eo quod est et esse, ut Boëtius dicit in lib. *de Hebdom.* . . .” (*Quodlib.*, III, 8, 20; quoted according to the new revised text, *Quaestiones Quodlibetales*, ed. R. Spiazzi, O. P., Marietti, 1949).

even exclusive of the first, as in the case of potency as essence of the essentially incorruptible, immutable pure spirits.

What to my mind is most revealing, and what convinces me that St. Thomas was quite conscious of the sources of his doctrine and what he was doing with them, is the fact that the study of his works in chronological order enables us to observe the synthesis actually being put together, block by block. For the surprising fact—which I have never seen mentioned anywhere before—is that throughout the early works of St. Thomas, up to and exclusive of the *Contra Gentiles*, the limitation principle is never found expressed in terms of act and potency but exclusively in its traditional Neoplatonic form or a close paraphrase, e. g., “Every abstract or separated form is infinite.”<sup>49</sup> His standard practice is then to deduce the real distinction of essence and existence from this principle in terms of participant and participated. Only as a last stage does he say that wherever there is a relation of received and recipient there must be a composition of act and potency. Thus act and potency take on the aspect of limitation only as a kind of *post factum* consequence, so to speak, not as a first principle.<sup>50</sup>

It is only from the *Summa contra Gentiles* on that he appears to realize the possibility of fusing both the limitation principle and act and potency into a single synthetic principle. Now for the first time we find appearing the well-known formulas quoted so often in Thomistic textbooks, such as, “No act is found limited except by potency”; “An act existing in no subject is limited by nothing” etc.<sup>51</sup> Here too for the first time we find explicitly stated the reason for the transposition of the com-

<sup>49</sup> E. g.: *I Sent.*, XLIII, 1, 1, sol.; VIII, 1, 2, *contra* et sol.; VIII, 2, 1-2, sol.; VIII, 5, 1, *contra* 2; XLVIII, 1, 1, sol.; *III Sent.*, XIII, 1, 2 sol.; *De ente*, 4-5; *De ver.*, II, 9; XXVII, 1 ad 8; *Quodlib.*, VII, 1, 1 ad 1; *In Boet. de Hebd.*, lect. 2.

<sup>50</sup> E. g.: *De ente*, 4; cf. the classification of arguments in Fabro, *La noz. met. di partec.*, pp. 212 ff.

<sup>51</sup> *Comp. theol.*, 18; *CG* I, 43, *Amplius*; and the other texts in note 48.

positions resulting from participation into act and potency; because only in terms of act and potency can the intrinsic unity of any composite being be maintained.<sup>52</sup>

### CONCLUSION

The final result of the fusion of the two theories into a single coherent synthesis can thus properly be called neither Aristotelianism nor Neoplatonism. It is something decisively new, which can only be styled "Thomism." It may appear, indeed, to modern Thomists that the union of the limitation principle with Aristotelian act and potency is an obvious and self-evident step. The fact is, however, that for some fifteen centuries the two doctrines had flowed along side by side in separate streams—frequently in the same thinker, for most of the Neoplatonists also used Aristotelian act and potency to explain change in the lower world of matter—without its ever occurring to anyone, it seems, to join one to the other. We believe it adds considerably to our appreciation, not only of the full extent of the genius of Thomas but of the full meaning and rich complexity of the act and potency principle, to realize that he was the first thinker in Western philosophy to be able to effectuate a successful synthesis of the two basic insights of the Aristotelian and Neoplatonic traditions and thus to fuse into one the best elements of the two main streams of western philosophical thought.<sup>53</sup>

If the foregoing analysis is correct, we find ourselves forced to the conclusion that it is no longer possible without the most serious qualifications to evaluate the philosophical contribution of St. Thomas—as some of the most distinguished modern

<sup>52</sup> E.g.: *CG* I, 18: "Nam in omni composito oportet esse actum et potentiam. Non enim plura possunt simpliciter unum fieri nisi aliquid sit ibi actus, et aliud potentia." Cf. *De spir. creat.*, 3; *In VII Met.*, lect. 13 (ed. Cathala, n. 1588); *De pot.*, VII, 1; *CG* II, 53.

<sup>53</sup> Cf. the rich concluding chapter of Fabro, *La nozione metafisica di partecipazione . . .*, p. 338: "Platonismo ed Aristotelismo. Originalità della sintesi tomista."

historians of Thomism have done—as a decisive option for Aristotle against Platonism.<sup>54</sup> On the contrary, we feel with an increasing number of contemporary Thomists that, at least in metaphysics, St. Thomas has taken Plato—or, more accurately, Plato transformed by Plotinus—into so intimate a partnership with Aristotle that the metaphysical system of the Angelic Doctor can legitimately be described, in the words of a recent historian of participation in St. Thomas, either as an Aristotelianism specified by Platonism or as a Platonism specified by Aristotelianism. And in some ways the latter is perhaps the more exact.<sup>55</sup>

Woodstock College,  
Woodstock, Maryland

<sup>54</sup> E. g.: E. Gilson, "Pourquoi saint Thomas a critiqué saint Augustin," *Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du moyen âge*, I (1926), 126; the same position has been taken even more clearly and uncompromisingly by one of Prof. Gilson's ablest collaborators on this side of the water, A. C. Pegis, in the introduction to his excellent edition of the *Basic Writings of St. Thomas Aquinas* (New York, 1945). We note that this point has been one of the few to elicit expressions of disapproval from reviewers.

<sup>55</sup> Fabro, *op. cit.*, p. 354.