

A Demonstration That Act Is Limited Only by Potency

xxx analogy and religious language, May 21, 80

Assume someone has never heard of analogy or of the problem of religious language, nor had read anything of Aquinas. She then picks up a copy of the summa and began reading part one question 13. He would get to article three (if that's the one on predicates being said "properly" of God) and would ask further about what is said there, especially in the first reply (if I recall correctly). In answer to his question he would be told about pure and mixed perfections, not about analogy.

May 31, 2005

Not only is analogy not the solution to the problem of how our predicates can be truthfully asserted of infinite being but analogy is one of those characteristics of our mode of signifying that follows from the finitude of our mode of signifying. Aquinas distinguishes the mode of signifying, which does not apply to God, from that which is signified, which can apply to God. Analogy belongs to our limited mode of signifying.

Just as the point of Aquinas asking whether the names of God are synonymous depends on it already having been established that it is legitimate to attribute human names to God, so the question of whether the names of God are univocal or analogous arises only because the propriety of using names of God has already been established. It is already established that names can be said of God "properly."

xxx limitation of act by potency, May 27, 2005

The core of Aquinas's solution to the problem of religious language is the doctrine that act is limited by potency and only by potency. So if there is a kind of act found in creatures that does not imply potency in its structure, there is nothing contradictory if that act exists in infinite state. So there is nothing contradictory in predicating that kind of act of God if other evidence gives us reason to do so.

Since the thesis that act is limited only by potency is the cornerstone of Aquinas's solution to the problem of religious language, we need a better defense of that thesis than has so far been given. The doctrine that act is limited by potency and only by potency has never been shown to be self-evident by reduction to absurdity or derivable from the self-evident. The following thoughts I think are sufficient evidence to show the necessary truth of that principle, at least in the case of a pure act of existence. The idea is to translate one thing's being infinitely beyond another into its being immeasurably beyond another, and then to relate the notion of measurement to the notion of being received in a potency.

We can put the question this way. Given that act is made in some way measurable by being received in potency, could a totally unreceived act still be measurable in another way? Given the way potency makes act measurable, does it make any sense for there to be another way in which a pure act is measurable?

- 1.

Why must acts be limited by potency? The question translates to "why cannot a pure act be measurable by mixed act/potency combinations?" If act is limited in some way by potency, it is made measurable in that way by potency. How does potency make act measurable? By allowing us to compare two or more act-potency couples a finite number of times?(E.g., laying down a yard stick next to a wall the number of times necessary to measure the length of the wall.)

An act is multiplied by being restricted by reception in a potency. A mixed act is "so much" of a separated act. A separated act is not "so much" of a mixed act, because "so much" comes from the potency limiting the act, is caused by potency limiting the act. Whatever kind of limitation the potency causes, an act separated from the potency has none of it. Whatever kind of restriction that is, the act does not possess it in itself, but gets it from the potency. Just as matter is not actualized by itself but by form, so form is not individualized by itself but by matter. (See the question on the simplicity of God in the first part of the summa and question seven, article one, "whether God's infinite.") This can be generalized for any multipliable act, any kind of act multiplied by being received in a correlative principle that is a principle of potency. By hypothesis, the principle of act does not of itself have the kind of limitation, restriction, that derives from the potency.

A separated whiteness may be finite from some point of view, but not with respect to the kind of so much that is caused by being received in a subjective potency. A whiteness separated from a kind of potency that allows it to be multiplied in subjects would lack entirely whatever kind of restriction it is that permits whiteness to be multiplied in those subjects. A received whiteness is so much whiteness. A separate whiteness is not "so much" whiteness in the same way. It cannot have the kind of "so much" that derives from a subjective, receptive, potency.

Hence a separated act and a received act are incommensurable. The separated act is not measurable by the received state of act. The separated act cannot be "so much" of the act as it exists in the received state. Why? Because of the separated act does not have that kind of "so much" that derives from the potency.

That kind of so much is what we measure by comparing one so-much-whiteness to another. When we measure one mixed act by another, we are comparing limited states of act

deriving from the potency. Otherwise, there could be no comparison; any measurable whiteness must lack the whiteness by which it is measured, lack whatever whiteness by reference to which it is measured. Were there no other whiteness outside it, it could not be measured.

By adding together received whitenesses, we get so much whiteness plus so much whiteness to get only another so much whiteness. So a separated act cannot be exhausted by its received counterparts. Relative to them it is inexhaustible. No number of received versions can exhaust the unreceived. The number of the received is potentially infinite, and only a (per impossibile) actual infinite number could exhaust the unreceived.

But what if we could add together an infinity of received whitenesses? That would be all right because it would not deny the infinity of the separate whiteness. Even if there could be an actually infinite number, that would not diminish the immeasurability, the infinity, of a separated whiteness relative to the kind of limitation each individual case of received whiteness has (and besides, an actual infinity generates contradictions).

2.

A separated whiteness could be so much of being, so much of essence and existence, but not so much whiteness the way a received whiteness is. The same must be true of existence relative to the potency for existence, namely, essence. An essence is a way of existing. A separated existence would lack entirely the kind of limitation associated with this way of existing as distinct from that way of existing. So a separated existence would be immeasurable relative to such a restricted way of existing, incommensurable with it.

But what kind of limit could a separated existence have? Not the kind that derives from essence, from that which exists, from what it is that exists, when that which is is distinct from existence. What sense would make to say there is only so much of existence in a pure existence?

Therefore it would be unlimited relative to all limited ways of existing

An act essentially relative to potency (e.g., reason as opposed to intelligence) is essentially finite. So let us assume an intelligence existing unreceived in potency, and let us attempt to measure it by an intelligence received in potency, e.g., my reason. That is, let us attempt to compare them. If my intelligence is one of a potentially infinite number of realizations of intelligence itself, there is no such thing as the highest realization; there is always a higher. But intelligence itself is always beyond the highest realization not potentially but actually. Therefore the actual distance between separated intelligence and any actual realization of intelligence in a potency is immeasurable, infinite; for infinitely more realizations of intelligence in a potency beyond the highest actual realization would still fall short of the intelligence in intelligence itself.. Hence, intelligence itself is not measurable by any of its realizations in potency. But could intelligence itself be limited relative to any higher acts?

Not if intelligence itself is identical with a pure act of existence. We can use the same argument for received and unreceived existence that we have just used for intelligence. An unreceived existence is immeasurably beyond the highest received instance of existence

But nothing is beyond existence. So separated existence is immeasurably beyond the highest instance of existence received by any other potential way of existing; beyond the highest way of having existence that is distinct from existence. And outside of existence there is no form of actuality to be had. A being is either existence itself or something that has existence and is therefore limited in comparison to the kind of act that constitutes existence itself. what can exist there is nothing.

We can perhaps imagine or conceive the juxtaposition of the 2 notes, pure actuality and limitation, but the limitation so conceived and juxtaposed with pure existence is a being of

reason and can be no more than a being of reason. For outside of the mind, there is nothing beyond existence with respect to which existence could be limited. Therefore a separate existence would be immeasurably, infinitely, greater than everything else that could exist taken together.

So God overflows all *possible* bounds. About everything else we can only say that it is no longer bounded with respect to this kind of bound or that kind of bound. If something is no longer bounded by this or that kind of bound, it is unlimited in that respect, unlimited with respect to that kind of limitation. But it's still may be bounded in other respects, with respect to other kinds of bounds. But pure existence is unbounded with respect to all other possible ways of existing. Existence itself can never be limited to a particular amount of existence, where "amount" refers to all the existence that can be received by ways of existing distinct from existence itself.

Since there can be no actual numerical infinity, there can only be a finite number of beings that are distinct from their existence, and they cannot exhaust the possibilities existence that are actual in a pure act of existence. The number of received existences is potentially infinite, and only a (per impossibile) actual infinite number could exhaust the unreceived. No amount of multiplied act of a particular kind can measure a non-multiplied act of that kind. So no amount of multiplied being can measure an unreceived, and hence non-multipliable, instance of an act of that kind. No amount of existences mixed with potency can measure a pure act of existence.

And if a pure act of existence could be limited, why couldn't it be multiplied? Why couldn't there be more than one of them? If there were more than 1, at least 1 of them could not be a pure act of existence; there must be something in it to cause its existence to be different

from the existence of the other. For if they have in common being an act of existence and nothing more they could not differ in any way. In one of them, something other than existence must have existence and so receive existence as a potential subject that would limit existence in some way. But then the other, the unreceived existence, must be unlimited in that same way, that same respect. So a pure existence must always be immeasurably greater than any other form of existence.

3.

The following thoughts, pertinent to problem of how we know the necessary truth that act is limited only by potency, comes from thinking about the nature of absolute values in ethics. An absolute value differs from a value that is merely higher relative to others in the following way. Let say we have 10 things and we assign them relative values starting from 1 to 10, with 10 being the highest. Now if value 10 is not an absolute value, not the kind of value from which all other values derive and which itself does not derive from other values, then it would be legitimate to sacrifice value 10 for some combination of other values, as long as the total of the other values was greater than 10. There would be no value that was sacrosanct. Some combination of lesser values could always trump the value that was the highest value.

The connection with the limitation of act by potency is this. For those 10 items to be on the same scale such that the 10th item is just a higher degree of whatever the first through the ninth have that gives them value, each member of the set must be an individual who is possession of whatever it is that gives each of them the value that is limited by being received by a potency. They are all on the same scale because something called “value” is multiplied by being received in each potential subject that limits the amount of the value that a potential subject has. Start with the assumption that we have 10 individuals whose multiplicity is the result of their potencies. It

follows that their kind of comparative value, that is, the fact that they are on a scale where some combination of lower value can be higher than the value of the highest individual, depends on the fact that each is a subject whose potency has received a certain degree of value.

Now make a different assumption: that we have a multiplicity of entities one of which so possesses the value in question that no possible combination of entities possessing that value in a lesser way could amount to more of the value than that possessed by that one entity. It would follow that the relationship between that one entity and the others is not that the one entity receives the value in question into a potency of the same kind as a potency that limits the other members of the multiplicity and puts them on a scale such that some combination of the lesser could always possess a greater value than the higher.

June 14, 88

Limitation of act by potency, 01-11-00

A. subsistent whiteness would be unbounded with respect to that kind of bound that comes from a potency to receive whiteness. In other words, the potency for receiving whiteness is potentially infinite, and no amount of that potency can ever exhaust the possibility for whiteness. Whiteness itself can never be limited to a particular amount of whiteness, where amount refers to all the whiteness that can be received by potencies for whiteness. But whiteness is still something limited in other respects; for whiteness itself is a way of receiving existence. It is a potency for existence. And so it is a limiting factor with respect to existence.

Since there can be no actual numerical infinity, there can only be a finite number of white

things, and they cannot exhaust the possibilities for white things.

xxx limitation of act by potency, November 13, 83

A multiplied act cannot measure a non-multiplied act, and vice versa. Why? Measurement measures of the way act is received. It measures not the act considered separately but the act from the point of view of the receiving subject, or the receiving subject from the point of view of the act.

outtakes:

Concerning the previous two paragraphs. In one case we have the following "if, then," relation: if the multiplication results from potency, some combination of the lower can be greater than the higher. But do we have a "only if" relation: only if the multiplication results from potency can some combination of the lower be greater than the higher?

In the other case we have the following "if, then" relation: if no amount of the lower could be greater than the higher, then the higher is not just a potential subject that receives more of the same value. But do we have and "only if" relation: only if the higher is not just a potential subject receiving the value can some combination of the lower fail to be greater than the higher?

Or, in the first case, do we have the "only if" relation: only if some combination of the lower can be greater than the higher, can the higher be just another potential subject?

Or, in the second case, do we have the "only if" relation: only if no combination of the lower can be greater than the higher is the higher not just another potential subject?

xxx limitation of act by potency, November 13, 83

A multiplied act cannot measure a non-multiplied act, and vice versa. Why? Measurement measures of the way act is received. It measures not the act considered separately but the act from the point of view of the receiving subject, or the receiving subject from the point of view of the act.

Actlimit, limitation of act by potency, infinity, Mar 5, 1998

(beyond the highest instance of it limited by being received by a way of existence distinct from existence; beyond the highest limited way of existing, of being an existent without being an existence).

A separated whiteness could be so much of being, so much of essence, but not so much of whiteness.

So the separated act does not have that kind of limit. It can have some other kind of limit.

The separated whiteness would not necessarily lack every kind of limitation but certainly that

kind of limitation.

June 13, 88

Why must acts be limited by potency? The question translates to "why cannot a pure act be measurable by mixed act/potency combinations?" Things are measured by their relative distances to or from a standard.

5-13-88, Limitation of act by potency

Why must act be limited by potency? The question translates to "Why cannot a pure act be measurable by mixed act/potency combinations?" One approach to an answer: The highest in a genus constitutes the standard by which the others are measured. They are measured by their relative distances to the standard. Why cannot a pure act constitute a standard for act/potency mixes to be measured against, or vice versa?

The genus is taken from the matter, from potency. That is, the kind is taken from the matter, the potency. The reason that no individual can be both red and green at the same time, odd or even at the same time, two, three, or four at the same time, is that potency of one kind can only be actualized in one way that the same time. Because that's what we mean by a potency of the same kind, by a potency for act that is the same kind: what we mean is that red and green are actualizations of the same potency, and as a result nothing can be red and green at the same time.

Act limited by potency, infinity, act-limit, August 8, 1997

Two things can be measured against each other only if they have some property in common (as

opposed to one of them's not having but being that property?)

February 27, 86

If act is limited in some way by potency, it is made measurable in that way by potency. How does potency make act measurable? By allowing us to compare two or more act-potency couples a finite number of times? (For example, the one foot ruler goes into the length of the yardstick three times.) (E.g., laying down a meter stick next to a wall the number of times necessary to measure the length of the wall.)