

How Things Really Are Actually and Potentially

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May 30, 2017

1 Introduction

There is a great war raging. It is a cultural war between Western civilization and her enemies. By “Western Civilization” I mean what eventually emerged from the confluence of ideas in ancient Israel and classical Greece. First, these ideas became intertwined in the writing of the Septuagint. Then they were united in the minds of Christians, who converted the declining Roman empire to the Faith, defended Europe against the onslaught of Muslim invaders, and finally established a new civilization, among whose fruits are modern science¹ and laws respecting the rights of man. Western civilization has many enemies. For example, Islam, in its main Sunni and Shiite forms, remains opposed not only to the religious but also to the philosophical underpinnings of Western civilization.² I shall focus here, however, on a different enemy, on a particular, modern form of atheism that presents an existential challenge to the West. The New Atheists³ deny the Aristotelian metaphysical basis for understanding reality while claiming for themselves, much as the Soviet Communists did during the Cold War, the mantle of science. The present talk is motivated by my interest in the attack on the Aristotelian philosophical foundation of Western Civilization ironically by the those who imagine

¹The terms “science” and “scientific” are by etymology misleading. In Latin, the verb “scire” means “to know,” but what we call a “scientific theory,” is in many cases something that can never be known as a truth. There are, of course, truths in modern science; primarily, these are *observational* truths: Every repeatable observation is a truth of modern science. Further, a scientific theory that refers only to perceptible things might in principle be a truth, if it be a descriptive theory, such as the arrangement of the bones in the human body. However, a scientific theory that refers to something imperceptible, like the electron for example, might some day be superseded by a new theory making no reference to the imperceptible thing. Its existence in reality is not certain, and so the theory referring to it cannot be known as a truth.

²At least one idea at the root of Western civilization is opposed to a fundamental teaching of Islam. The Western idea that every human being is made in the image of God is the foundation of universal human rights. However, the idea that man is made in the image of God is blasphemy under Islam.

Although Aristotle had been lost to the West during the early Middle Ages and was reintroduced because early Islamic philosophers had studied and preserved his work, this is ironic. Just as Aristotle was being incorporated into Christian thought, Aristotle was being purged from Islamic thought. The Islamic tradition, which stresses the power of God, sees Aristotle’s view of nature as competitive with the idea of God’s omnipotence. Islamic thought became dominated by occasionalism after about the year 1000 AD.

³“New Atheism” is a term widely used to refer to ideas popularized by Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett, and Christopher Hitchens in the first decade of the 21st Century.

themselves to be advocates of modern science. I point to a philosophical front in the war: the conflict over how things really are.

The story of the conflict begins in ancient Israel. The relevant idea from *Genesis* is that things have not always existed. God, Who is not a thing, initially created things from nothing. A new thing, such as a pot, might come into existence by transformation from a pre-existing thing, such as a lump of clay. However, according to God's revelation, there was in the past a beginning when the first things were created *ex nihilo*, not by transformation. The fundamental distinction made by the ancient Israelites is between God and what God creates.

Another thread of the story begins in classical Greece. The early philosophers struggled to understand how things change, and their tradition culminated in the writing of Aristotle. Aristotle explained that for a thing to change is for what existed only potentially in the thing to become actual. The fundamental distinction is between actuality and potentiality. This distinction is the root of what has come to be called "Aristotelian metaphysics."⁴

When, after having been lost for a time, Aristotle was reintroduced into the West by Saint Thomas Aquinas, he perfected the metaphysical theory so that it could explain not only change by transformation but also creation *ex nihilo*. Aquinas showed how, even if there had been no beginning in time, there would still be creation *ex nihilo* at every moment in time! Although Aristotle's metaphysical theory naturally led to the emergence of modern science in the West, Aristotle's opponents in the present conflict ironically mount their attack ostensibly under the banner of science. The self-proclaimed "science advocate," opposing the Aristotelian position, typically proposes two main errors:

1. *scientism*, according to which everything that exists is describable by modern science, and
2. *scientific realism*, according to which an imperceptible thing proposed as part of a scientific theory is certain to exist.

We shall see in what follows how Aristotelian metaphysics provides powerful arguments against these errors. First, however, we must explore the key Aristotelian distinction, which allowed Aquinas to form a synthesis of the Judeo-Christian idea of creation and the Greek explanation of change.

⁴The word, "metaphysics," originates from the accidental fact that in the traditional list of Aristotle's writings, his writing on the distinction between act and potency came after (meta) his writing on nature (physics). These days, any theory about what lies at the root of being or becoming is called "a metaphysical theory."

2 Act and Potency

2.1 The General Theory

2.1.1 Example: Silly Putty

2.2 Causal Powers and Laws of Nature

3 Efficient and Final Causality

4 Formal and Material Causality

5 Essence and Existence

References

Feser, E. *Scholastic Metaphysics: A Contemporary Introduction*. editiones scholasticae (www.editiones-scholasticae.de). Heusenstamm. 2014.