

---

# UNIT 4 ACT (BEING) AND POTENCY (BECOMING)

---

## Contents

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 The Operative Level
- 4.3 The Level of Essence
- 4.4 The Existential Level
- 4.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.6 Key Words
- 4.7 Further Reading and References
- 4.8 Answers to Check Your Progress

---

## 4.0 OBJECTIVES

---

Insight into, and understanding of the basic structures of ourselves as beings, and of the realities around us, is the main objective of this unit. This unit explains how act and potency are the two ultimate co-principles of all that comes into being. For an initial meaning of the words “act” and “potency” just look up any Standard English dictionary. What they mean in metaphysics will soon be clear. You know that “act” may be just another word for activity or actualization, or action; and “potency” is another word for power, capacity, ability or faculty.

After completing this unit, the student must be able to:

- Understand his/her own potentialities better, as well as their in-built limitations ; select the potentialities it would be better for him/her to actualize
- See oneself and others not only as human beings, but as beings sharing in the universal condition of all finite composite, changing, limited beings, subject to spatial and temporal conditions, and depending on many interrelations
- Realize the truth that whatever comes into being, whatever belongs to the created world, is constituted of act and potency, not only at the operative, but also at the essential and existential levels
- Explore the nature of causality in its various manifestations, and to distinguish final from efficient causality...and embark on the search for the Absolute, without whom finite being cannot be.

---

## 4.1 INTRODUCTION

---

We are dealing here with the metaphysical structure of finite being. After having studied the relation of substance to accidents and matter to form in the previous units, we now come to the ultimate constitutive co-principles of finite being. Finite beings are characterized by their limitations, changeability, composite nature, and interdependence. From these very characteristics, we have to conclude – as we shall show in the following

pages – that all finite beings are constituted of act and potency at the operative, essential and existential levels. These three levels are really inseparable, but we consider them separately just for a better understanding of the co-principle of all finite reality.

Act and potency are technical terms. Potency is a term that may refer to: capacity, ability, power, possibility. Act is associated with: action, activity, actualization, actuality, perfection, realization, since they are applicable at different levels of reality, they are susceptible to analogical predication.

The operative level is the level of action and capacity for activity. The essential level is deeper than the operative, and deals with the intrinsic constitution of material beings. The existential or entitative level refers to the relation between essence and existence. The terms act and potency are therefore analogical since their significance is similar at different levels. In general, potencies are called active potencies when they are used for action and activity. Potencies are passive when they are acted upon. Both kinds of potencies belong — as properties, accidents or attributes to material as well as spiritual substances. Substances therefore are in potency with reference to these properties. Substances do not act immediately through themselves, nor do they actualize themselves except through their potencies. Potencies and acts are not substances, but co-principles of finite substances at the operative as well as existential level. “Dunamis” is the word used by Aristotle, for potency; and “energeia”, for act.

---

## 4.2 THE OPERATIVE LEVEL

---

In order to get at the metaphysical structure of beings like ourselves, let us start with the operative level, which is the sphere of activities that are manifest to the senses, and more or less evident to everyone. At the ports ships are arriving and departing; and at the air-ports, the planes. The metaphysicians see all this as the operative level of reality, and set themselves to understand and explain the basic reasons for it all.

### *Movement and Change – Act and Potency*

Movement and Change are so obvious, so constant, and so inevitable, that it is taken for granted by Eastern as well as Western philosophies. The Vedic elements, earth, air, fire, water, are moving and movable. In Samkya, ‘prakrti’, for instance, is constantly undergoing evolution. The Vaisheshika atoms are also ever on the move. The Buddha, too, saw the passing nature of everything that came to be. The Sarvastivada school of Hinayana Buddhism also maintained that there was neither being nor non-being, but constant becoming.

Many thinkers may not speak explicitly of act and potency, but they do speak of change and evolution, and process as pervading all natural reality, and remind us at least remotely of Heraclitus whose over-all vision of the world was opposite to that of Parmenides. Wherever there is process or change or movement, there is interplay of act and potency. Potency as well as act interplay in the various kinds of change and movement that we see in the world around us:

*Local change:* One kind of change is local change, which means change of place. Nature has not given plants and trees the potencies for local movement as she has given to animals; nor has Nature given human beings, abilities to fly, as she has given to birds. But, in giving humans intelligence, she has given them the remote active potency: human beings naturally cannot fly, but actualizing the potentialities of the mind, human beings can now fly higher and faster than many birds.

Long before Newton formulated the basic laws of mechanics, Aristotle had attempted to describe motion and change metaphysically in terms of act and potency. “Motion is the act of a being in potency in so far as it is in potency.” The take-off of an airplane from Delhi for Bangalore is an act of a being in potency for Bangalore. It is a being coming-to-be in Bangalore. It continues to be in potency till it alights, and finds itself actually in Bangalore. When actually in Bangalore, a plane, or bus, or passenger, or whatever, may be potentially elsewhere.

*Quantitative Change:* This kind of change refers particularly to physical growth: increase or decrease in quantity. This kind of change is constantly taking place among the minerals, the metals; among non-living things as well as living things. Living things – including ourselves – grow in height, weight, strength, from childhood to maturity. This growth takes place in time. Trees, which don’t have the potencies for local movement, have more potentialities for quantitative growth than animals and human beings. Trees also have potentialities for living longer than animals or human beings.

*Qualitative change:* As in the case with local change and quantitative change, qualitative change is seen and experiences in Nature’s works as well as in human affairs. The qualities of fruits and vegetables, for instance, can change, depending on the rainfall, the soil, the season; they can deteriorate with the passage of time. They can improve through the agricultural sciences. Success, progress, advancement — all depends on actualization of potentialities. These are all acts of beings in potency in so far as they are in potency. When that potency is actualized, they will be in act, but in potency to some other act.

Within ourselves and our consciousness,, in our environment, in others, in the areas of health, education, economics, politics, music, technology, etc. there are not only local and quantitative changes, but any number of qualitative changes. The interplay of act and potency is everywhere around us.

At the operative level, change, motion, movement is an act of a being in potency in so far as it is in potency. Hence, all these beings and their operations are a mixture of act and potency, activity and passivity, actuality and possibility, activity and passivity.

**Check Your Progress I**

**Note:** a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answer with those provided at the end of the unit.

1) Mention three words associated with “act”.

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

2) What is change? Mention three kinds of change.

Potencies: Passive and Active.

Nature, working like an artist under the supervision of her Creator, equips her products with the means for acting and functioning in harmony with their respective natures. Individuals, we see, when they begin to be, need to be brought passively into being. They are equipped with potencies to be activated, and changed into active potencies. It is very evident that no one does what he or she cannot do. What people could not do, or make, or understanding at one time, they can at another. Time has an important part to play in the activation and actualization of potencies and their activation.

Acts presuppose active potencies. Whoever actually speaks, CAN speak. Whoever actually sees, can see. Whoever actually invents, CAN invent... From the act and the fact, we rightly conclude that there is some potency or potencies which make that act or activity, possible. Acts, therefore, presuppose potencies as well as their activation.

This is clear from the behavior of non-living as well as living beings. Living things, like plants, are endowed with potencies for feeding, growing and multiplying. Animals, fish and birds are equipped with potencies for self-movement, sense-knowledge, and other faculties for the preservation of individual and species. While moving themselves, they are also moved by their desires for food, security, reproduction.

Human beings are more richly endowed by Nature than other creatures. Our five senses and mind are potencies for knowing; our hands, for doing and making; our feet, for walking, running, local movement; our wills, for choosing how and when to use our other endowment. Our will is therefore the queen of our potencies. There is no activity without the potency for that activity. It follows that for each of our activities, personal, social, professional, etc. we need as many potencies.

Human intelligence is full of a great variety of potentialities, talents, abilities, for self-actualization through a great variety of arts, crafts and skills in farming, building, dancing, driving, and hundreds of thousands of activities including flying. It is easy to understand that without eyes, we cannot see; without ears, we cannot hear; without wings, we cannot fly; without intelligence, we could never have invented flying machines.

What is the purpose of these relatively active potencies? Their purpose is their corresponding activity or ACT. What can see (active potency) and what can be seen (passive potency), meet in the ACT of seeing. What can hear (active potency) and what can be heard (passive potency), meet in the ACT of hearing, and so on.

We here call them relatively active because these and other potencies that, at first sight, appear active may sometimes need to be activated. In such cases, they are passive, rather than active. The eyes, for instance, are active, when seeing and looking,

but they may need light to activate them. This means that some passive potency can be activated and so become active.

What is in act in one sense at one time may be in potency at the same time in another sense; but nothing can be in act and in potency in the same sense, at the same time.

### **The Language Connection**

Although language cannot be taken as a sure guide to the understanding of reality, we admit that some features of reality are reflected in language. Verbal constructions and expressions sometimes picture the construction of reality.

In English, adjectives ending in -ble, often affirm or deny potency, possibility, capacity, ability, potency: able, unable, capable, incapable; visible, invisible: legible, illegible: audible, inaudible; curable, incurable, etc...

Verbs often refer to acts, actions, and activities. Moreover, most English verbs have active and passive voice. Their usage very often corresponds either to activities, or to active potencies, on one hand, and passive potencies on the other. For example: active voice: You are reading this. Passive voice: This is being read by you..

There are also verbs that indicate potency. CAN is the principal verb in English that indicates potency or possibility. When someone tells you: You CAN succeed. It means you have the power, the ability to succeed. Possible = can be = possible cannot be = impossible.

### **Potency, Act and Purpose/Finality**

Purpose means aim, goal, and intention. We introduce here the notion and reality of “purpose” because it has an extremely important role to play in the works of Nature, and also of human affairs.

Nature urges her products to actualize their various potentialities in order that they may flourish. Living organisms are instinctively moved to change and move themselves from place to place in search of food, shelter, security, and whatever is good for them. This characteristic of Nature to direct particularly living organisms towards an end or goal is known as teleology.

In view of the intentions she had for each class of her products, Nature inscribed her intentions into class of her products. Grass was given its properties for the good of cows and for their nourishment. Cows were provided with the active potencies of digesting the grass without cooking or boiling it. Nature has written her intentions into the very structure of the human body, in which are planted its active and passive potencies. As Socrates pointed out, the mouth is placed just below the eyes and the nose, so that whatever enters the mouth can be seen and smelt in advance.

Potencies for sensing and feeling and moving, draw animals, fish and birds to the food and the good that they desire and need for the actualization of their potentialities and maintenance of their lives. In other words, they are moved by their desires towards what is good for them and away from what would injure them.

Humans also are moved towards food and pleasure and towards the fulfilment of their aspirations partly by Nature, partly by culture and have some purpose, aim and goal and intention for all their activities. As potencies are intended for acts, so acts are intended for actualization and fulfilment.

Human purposes are to increase individual and social well-being and happiness, and to progress in every field of human activity: economic, political, commercial, artistic, etc. The invention and manufacture of goods never loses sight of the purpose. The organization of games and sports and entertainments always keeps in mind the purpose. Two-wheelers, three-wheelers, four-wheelers, have their purpose written into their wheels. Spoons and forks and knives have their purposes written into their structures. And so with all that men manufacture: shoes, watches, TVs, generators, etc... Since everything in Nature and in human affairs is ruled by finality, we can take it as a principle that whatever is moved is moved by another. In other words, final causes and purposes have active potencies to move by attracting and drawing desires, emotions, moving and motivating intentions. From experience we know that beauty, goodness, honour, glory, and many other things – including movies – have the power or potency to move and draw thousands of people to themselves. That precisely is the meaning of the principle: Whatever is moved is moved by another. What is moved has passive potency that which moves, has actuality and promises actualization and fulfilment.

There can be series of final causes, like aiming at getting through pre-university, graduate, post-graduate, attainments with a view to securing a highly lucrative or prestigious position in society. This would mean a graded actualization of potentialities — each comparable to a movement moved forward by the actualization of a previous potentiality. Actualization is achieved in grades and stages.

Both in the operations of Nature or of human beings, the goal is some good — whether implanted by Nature into her products, or chosen by human beings, who are the products, not only of Nature, but also of culture and free choice. In the latter case, the good may be real or apparent. That is why act is said to be a perfection and fulfilment of potency.

There is a real difference between efficient causes on one hand, and final causes, on the other. In both cases, whatever is moved is moved by another. Drivers, carpenters, masons, pilots, surgeons can become efficient causes, because of their active potencies. But unless they are driven to work by some desirable goal, such as need for bread, or love, or prestige, or money, or pleasure, they may prefer to remain idle. Their potencies are active as far as their work is concerned, but passive with respect to their motivation.

Conclusion 3: Act and potency are co-relative, that is, they match each other and are made for each other and meant for each other.

### **Potency, Act and Efficiency**

As we have just seen, whatever is moved is moved by another.

*Explanation: what IS moved has passive potency.*

*.....by another: having active potency ...*

This “—other” may be another part of the same being, or another being.

We have shown above how this applies not only in the sphere of final causes. This principle is operative also in the sphere of efficient causes, as will be made clearer from the following.

Inanimate things, like tables and chairs, instruments and books, cannot move themselves. Passive potency can be compared to inertia. Newton would say that they need a force to move them. That force can be compared to active potency.

Things that cannot move themselves or even people who cannot move themselves fast enough and far enough are sometimes carried about as cargo in trucks or trains. The trucks and trains are equipped with engines and motors. In such cases, whatever is moved is moved by a motor. Engines and motors have the active powers and potencies to be movers.

As in the case of final causes, so too in the case of efficient causes, whatever is moved, is moved by another. “Another” means an agent with active potency such as a motor. A good illustration for this is a railway train consisting of many coaches. What moves the engine driver to be efficient in his job, is some final cause, some motivation, such as sense of duty, or service of commuters. The engine has active potency, while the coaches have passive potency. The engine is the efficient mover (efficient cause), and when it moves the first coach is moved (passivity) and moves the second coach, which, in its turn is moved, and moves (activity) the third coach, and so on.. A running train is a fine example of moved movers, moving movers, in the sense that the coaches immediately after the engine are moved by the engine, while moving the coaches that come after them. In this way, passive potencies of the coaches are turned into active.

Living beings – as we have just seen — are distinguished from non-living, because they have active potencies for self-movement, potencies for self-actualization. In so far as they move themselves, they are active and in act. In so far as they are moved, they are passive, and in potency. Senses and sensations are accompanied by motor neurons in the nervous systems that move my right hand to strike dead, the mosquito sucking the blood from the back of my left palm.

*In such a case as this, it may be a bit difficult to distinguish efficiency from finality. But the distinction is clear in the case of an engine driver, who moves the train at the signal from the guard or station-master, for the purpose of the good, or even for fear of losing his job. Whereas the railway engine moves the coaches because of its efficiency, the station-master moves the engine driver by a kind of moral force, which can be reduced to final causality, as has been explained above (4.2.3)... Whereas final causes move by appealing in some way to desire, appetite, hope for something good, efficient causes usually move to act and work and bring about desirable changes.*

Living things can also be efficient causes in generating other living beings. Hens, for instance, have active potencies for laying eggs. Eggs have potentialities to grow from hens in potency into hens in act. From this it might appear that act presupposes potency. That is very true. All our activities presuppose that we have the ability, capacity, or competence for those activities. But it is also true that absolutely speaking, potency presupposes act. In other words, though the egg comes before the full-grown hen, — potency before act – without the actual hen, there would be no egg. Act comes and must come, before potency.

Conclusion 4: Whereas, absolutely speaking, act precedes potency in the sphere of nature, intention and finality, potency precedes act, relatively and temporally, in the sphere of efficient causality.

**Check Your Progress II**

- Note:** a) Use the space provided for your answer.  
b) Check your answer with those provided at the end of the unit.
- 1) Do non-living things have active potencies? Give reasons for your answer.
- .....
- .....
- .....
- .....
- .....
- 2) Do human beings move themselves, or do they have potencies that are moved by some thing outside themselves?
- .....
- .....
- .....
- .....
- .....

**4.3 THE LEVEL OF ESSENCE**

Let us now proceed from the operative to the essential level of finite beings. That is like proceeding from the fruits of the tree to the roots of the tree, from the behavior to the nature, from the more evident to the less evident, from the operations and accidents to the essence and substance.

As you already know from a previous unit in this block, material substances are composite beings constituted of two co-principles, matter and form. Act and potency, at this level, acquire new shades of meaning. “Potency “means “the material co-principle”; and “form”, the first act at the essential level. This is not the external, accidental, form, but the internal, substantial form of material being.

It is important to remember that when we deal with matter and form as potency and act at the essential level, we are dealing not with being as being, but being as material. Finite spiritual beings are simple, and therefore not composed, at what has been called the essential level...

As you may remember from what you have already learnt, Parmenides and Zeno had challenged change and plurality, while maintaining the being was unchanging and one. Aristotle countered this double challenge by inventing a two-lever key to unlock the mystery of being — i. act and potency; and ii. Analogy. In fact, it is better to consider these solutions, not as inventions but as discoveries, because as you have seen up till



now, that inter-play of act and potency is so manifest and evident, that if Aristotle had not discovered it, one of us would have done so.

It is easy to see that wherever there is change, there is composition, because in change, there is a term away from which, a term to which and something underlying. This means that there is composition of the underlying substratum; wither with the first term, or the second. This is precisely what you will notice, if you peruse once again what you have read above, Local, quantitative, and qualitative changes have places, quantities and qualities respectively as their terms away from which and to which. The underlying substratum is the substance. What happens if substantial change takes place? That brings us from the operative to the essential level, and to matter as underlying substantial change.

### **Matter as Passive Potency**

To begin with, let us consider human inventions and man-made articles and items, such as crockery, cutlery, machinery, footwear, etc. Everything made or manufactured by human beings presupposes some raw material out of which new products are made.

Raw material is pre-required for the manufacture of slippers, spoons, motors, airplanes. From where does this raw material come? From Mother Nature. It is she who supplies about 92 elements and billions of compounds and mixtures for the manufacture of millions of products by human beings. The stuff out of which, products are made, came to be known as the material cause. Here the word “cause” is used analogically. The material cause is not the efficient cause.

From where does Nature get her raw material for the manufacture of the 92 or so elements? What is the stuff out of which, Nature makes her products?

That was the question ancient sages in East and West put to themselves. The earliest recorded Greek philosophers, the Milesians, were greatly interested in the material out of which nature made her products. Just as humans manufactured new products from pre-existing raw materials, they suspected that Nature too was using some more elementary material. Was it water, air, something boundless? Empedocles believed that earth, air, fire and water were the four basic elements. That search led to the 92 natural elements of today’s chemistry.

In ancient India, the satkaryavadins maintained that the effect (karya) pre-existed in the cause. ...”the effect, before its manifestation is potentially contained in its material cause. Production is only an actualization of the potential (shaktasya shakua karanat).”

Texts such as this make it clear that there were Indian thinkers who perceived the difference between act and potency. Kumarila and some Jainas hold that the effect is both real and unreal before its production. Apparently “real and unreal” could be taken to mean “actual and potential”. These references show that the ancient Indian sages had observed the inter-play of act and potency in the realities around them, though they had not systematically analyzed it.

A further question would be: Are the elements the ultimate stuff out of which Nature makes all her products. The answer is: NO. First, because the elements are already formed, with their nama and rupa. Whatever has a clearly and distinct identity, with properties and characteristics of its own, is already formed matter. Each element has

its own distinctive features. Some, like uranium, have active potencies such as radioactivity. So the elements are not the ultimate stuff or primary matter.

Secondly, there is possibility of transmuting the elements into one another. In other words, substantial change can take place between the elements. The possibility of substantial change of one element into another is an indication that there is still some underlying substratum that is neither this nor that. It is pure potency. This is what Aristotle called primary or entirely unformed matter.

By pure potency, we mean potency unmixed with act of any kind, and therefore lacking all active potencies. Since existence is an act, primary matter does not exist independently by itself, but only co-exists with the form. Hence, we cannot even focus on primary matter, without speaking of form. Only the atoms and subatomic particles, out of which the elements are made, can be considered the primary matter and pure potency.

Primary matter is that which underlies all the 92 or more elements, and permits their transmutation into one another. As already mentioned earlier, the elements are NOT primary but secondary matter, since they already have nama-rupa, name and form, and are clearly distinct from one another. But the sub-atomic particles, which have NO independent existence, may be considered the primary matter thought of by Aristotle.<sup>1</sup> This is the view of Heisenberg, an awardee of the Nobel Prize for physics.

### **Form as Act**

From the foregoing, you already know that all material substances are constituted of two co-principles: matter and form. The elements are the building blocks of our material world; and they themselves have matter and form in their very essence and constitution.

To have a better idea of form, let us look again at the manufacturing business: All the vehicles coming out of the same factory are of the same kind or form or model or design. The job of a factory is to assemble materials into the form selected by the firm or company. There are Fords, Boleros, Chevrolets, Volvos, etc. A Volvo bus may be damaged or destroyed or discarded; but the form of the model that is with the company continues to manufacture NEW Volvos, and so can replace the old. Factories, therefore, join matter and form. The raw material they use can be considered relatively primary. This, however, is NOT pure potency.

All this is possible because the form is one and relatively unchanging; while the materials are manifold and changing all the time. The quantity and number of Volvos, Boleros, Boeings, AK rifles, depends on the matter. In this sense, matter is sad to the principle of individuation, which accounts for the plurality of individuals, participating in one form.

Nature, too, seems to work according to plans and models, classifying her products into solids, liquids, gases; plants, mammals, birds, and many species within each genus. Materials are assembled in a great diversity of ways and moulded into different forms. In these forms are rooted the properties and active [potencies referred to in 4.2 above. What Nature manufactures, far surpasses man-made factories and their products. The latter are extrinsically assembled, and cannot multiply themselves or repair themselves, or direct themselves at least till today. But Nature's forms act as final, as well as efficient causes. This is more manifest in living things, whose substantial

forms are called souls. Into the very heart of the form of the egg, Nature has written the programme to be followed for the actualization of the potentialities of the respective eggs. That is why the substantial form is called the first act of the essence, making the essence such, and locating it in the hierarchy of being. Here, “act” does not mean activity in the operative sense; neither is it actuality in the existential sense, but a possible and feasible organization of the material in view of its functions and activities, and its possible actualization in existence. In 1900, Wilbur Wright, one of the inventors of the airplane, wrote to a French aviation pioneer, Chanute, “...flight is possible for man.” In 1903, flights became actual.

---

## 4.4 THE EXISTENTIAL LEVEL

---

After considering the inter-play of act and potency on the operative and essential levels of beings, let us now probe their mutual relations and roles at the existential level, which is sometimes called entitative.

It is obvious that the operative and essential levels can without difficulty be merged into the existential. At the operative level, Nature as well as human beings can do many things, and also make many things because of their active potencies. When it comes to making new things – as Nature does through reproduction, and factories do through production – we have the passage from the operative to the essential levels. Both operations as well as new products and inventions take place on the existential level, and are sometimes inseparable from it but distinct from it, as act and potency are always distinct, but sometimes inseparable from each other.

### Essence as Potency for the Act of Existence

At the existential level, the preferred meaning of potency is possibility or capacity, while the preferred meaning of act is actuality, reality, fulfillment, realization.

Essences as you already know from a previous unit, is not the same as existence. When you ask: What is this; your question refers to essence, not to the existence, which is presupposed, but to the nature of the thing before you. When you ask: Is there life on Mars? You are referring to existence.

There is a difference and real distinction between essence, on one hand, and existence on the other. There were no cars or flying machines in the time of Aristotle, Aquinas, or Leonardo da Vinci. But today they exist. This means that their essences were in potency. Had they not been possible, they would never have been actual today. Apply the same to ourselves. Thirty, forty years ago, today’s students were not existing; they were possibilities. Today they are actualities. Every finite possible essence needs an actually existing active potency to bring it from possibility into actuality. Nature has given human as well as other living beings the active potencies to bring new living beings of their own species into existence. Human beings, as we saw, brought cars, planes, etc. from possibility into reality.

### Potency Limits Act

Being is like an immense ocean. This ocean cannot be contained in any finite essence. Finite essences can be compared to dams or tanks, or water-containers great and small. All containers have limited capacity. It is true that active potencies give power for action. The greatest active potency in the natural world is the human intelligence. But even human intelligence is rooted in human nature and essence, and is therefore

limited. And this essence has a limited as well as limiting capacity for containing the vast ocean of being and existence and actuality.

If at the essential level human nature has a limited capacity, it will inevitably follow that at the operative level, its potencies, however powerful and efficient, will be limited and finite. That is confirmed by experience. All material living forms are mortal. With the privation of the substantial form, substantial change takes place, from living to non-living matter, showing the limits of material life.

As the Buddha and many others have pointed out, whatever is born is doomed to die. And as has been pointed out above, whatever is moved is in potency, and is moved by another. So whatever is brought to birth is brought from possibility into actual existence, by some being(s) in act, otherwise what is possible would never have a chance to be. This fact and its accompanying insight has led Aristotle and others to the general conclusion that there is One, Unchanging Being Who is Pure Act, in the sense that His Essence is the very act of being and existence, unmixed with unfulfilled potentialities. This is the Supreme Being that cannot not be.

**Check Your Progress III**

- Note:** a) Use the space provided for your answer.  
b) Check your answer with those provided at the end of the unit.

- 1) Show how essence is not the same as existence.
- .....
- .....
- .....
- .....
- .....
- 2) What does Pure Act mean?
- .....
- .....
- .....
- .....
- .....

**4.5 LET US SUM UP**

The change and movement which we see all around, and also within us is the act of beings in potency, in so far as they are in potency. Whatever is moved is in passive potency. Whatever is moved, can be moved and must be moved either by itself or by another. If it moves itself, that means it has parts, some of which are moved, while others act as movers. Nature has indeed bestowed on living things potencies to move, and to be moved. Nature, however, is not infinite. Hence, the potencies given by Nature are not only limited, but also limiting. So the self-movement is limited, depending

on the energy available to the system, which needs to be re-fuelled. Hence, the organic system is moved by another, namely by some good outside itself, for instance, food, security, pleasure or whatever, according to the purposes and intentions of Nature.

In accord with these intentions, birds, animals, bees and others can proceed from the operative to the essential levels by joining form to matter, for instance, in building nests, making honey, etc., and even reproducing their species. Here, matter with its passive potentialities is acted upon by the form acting as efficient cause. All these products of Nature come into being from possibility into actuality, and continue to be constituted of potency and act as really distinct principle of their beings at the essential as well as the existential levels.

Humans, while sharing some characteristics with other products of Nature, have special potentialities rooted in their intellectual make-up, which empowers them to find new ways and means of self-actualization, brought discoveries, inventions, technologies. Through their probing into the working of Nature, and into the constitution of finite beings, they can reach out to the recognition of the Absolute and Infinite Whom Aristotle calls Pure Act (Energeia), Pure Actuality, the Unmoved Mover.

---

## 4.6 KEY WORDS

---

- Potency** : a capacity for growth or development or ability to develop.
- Essence** : the quality or nature of something that identifies it or makes it what it is.

---

## 4.7 FURTHER READING AND REFERENCES

---

David, Ross William. **Aristotle’s Metaphysics**. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1924.

Dominic, O’Meara, ed. **Studies in Aristotle**. Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1981.

Emerson, Buchanan. **Aristotle’s Theory of Being**. London: William Cloves, 1962.

Anton-Hermann, Chroust. “The composition of Aristotle’s ‘Metaphysics’”. **New Scholasticism** (1954).

Jonatha, Barnes, ed. **The Cambridge Companion to Aristotle**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

---

## 4.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

---

### Answers to Check Your Progress I

- 1) Activity, actuality and activation.
- 2) Change is the act of a being in potency, in so far as it is in potency. There is local change, quantitative change, and qualitative change.

### Answers to Check Your Progress II

- 1) Yes, non-living things do have active potencies, for instance, the sun.

**Metaphysical Structure of  
Finite Being**

- 2) Human beings, while sharing in many respects with the animals, are moved to food, pleasure, and satisfaction of needs. However, because of their rationality, they have greater capacity for self-actualization, through the free choices of their free wills.

**Answers to Check your progress III**

- 1) Generation after generation comes into being and passes away, as history shows. This means that being is not their essence. The same is true of the cosmos, as we know it.
- 2) Pure Act is a metaphysical term indicating the Supreme Being, in Whom Alone is essence identical with existence, and who, therefore, cannot not be. That is the ultimate Unmoved Mover Whose Presence moves the cosmos from generation to generation, and Who has no mixture of unfulfilled potentialities.