

# The Embarrassing Relative: Teleology and the Problem of Fit

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## Buridan, *Physics*, fol. 35ra–rb

“It seems to me that everyone, by a natural impulse and by nature, accepts that the end is a cause of our operations. Thus, if you ask an old woman for what reason she goes to the church or to the market, she will tell you that in order to hear mass or to by a tunic. . . . The difficulty is only to see how that which is nothing can be a cause of those things that exist.”

Ott2020, 23

“Why does the power of fire to burn paper never run across paper with the power to turn into a chicken when encountering fire? ... That powers 'fit' in the way they do looks very much like a miracle.”



Conditions to generate the problem of fit:

1. Powers are independent;
2. Powers are intrinsic properties;
3. Powers and their manifestations are essentially linked;
4. Active and passive powers are reciprocal.



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## Williams2010, 91

“Imagine a heavy rock with the power to smash a particular martini glass. The powers of the rock  $r$  are such that when it impacts on the martini glass  $m$  with a certain high velocity  $v$  it will result in a state of affairs that is  $m$ ’s being smashed. However,  $m$ ’s powers are such that if struck by  $r$  at  $v$ ,  $m$  emits a loud ‘ping’ but does not break. Now imagine that we strike  $m$  with  $r$  at  $v$ . What happens?”

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1. Powers as purely relational (Locke, Ott) / power-holism (Williams)
2. Eliminating passive powers (Wahlberg2019)
3. Virtual causation?
4. Teleology

Aquinas, ST I-II, q. 1, a. 2, co.

“If the agent were not determined to some effect, then it would not act towards that rather than towards another: therefore, in order that it would produce a determinate effect, it is necessary that it be determined to a specific something, which has the nature [*ratio*] of an end. This determination in the rational nature is by the rational appetite, which is called will, and so too in others is by natural inclination, which is called natural appetite.”



Form

+

Matter

active powers

passive powers

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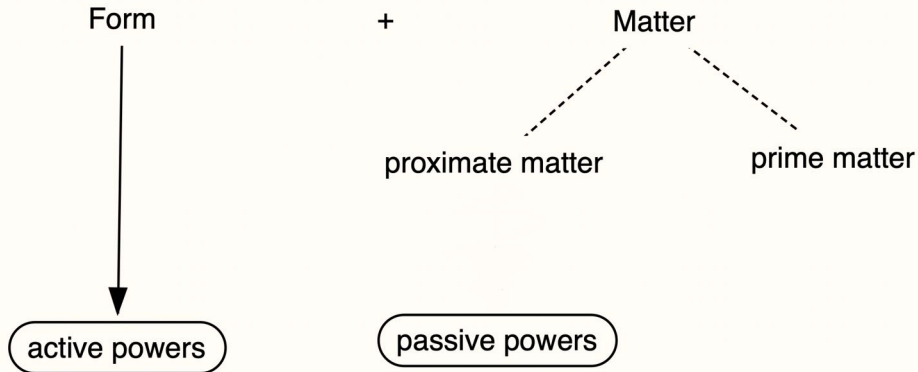
The problem of fit

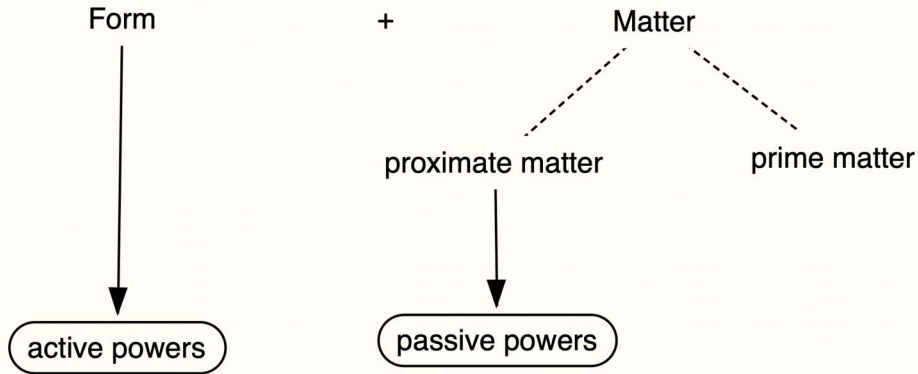
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- ▶ matter and form are not ontologically independent
- ▶ similarly, active and passive powers constitute a single potency (cf. Frost2021).
- ▶ Just as matter and form are teleologically ordered towards each other, so are active and passive power teleologically ordered towards the manifesting action.
- ▶ The problem of fit does not arise since the powers in question are not independent puzzle-pieces but are ordered towards a common end.

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Arist., *Physics* II.8, 198b34–199a5, tr. Hardie and Gaye

“For teeth and all other natural things either invariably or for the most part come about in a given way; but of not one of the results of chance or spontaneity is this true. We do not ascribe to chance or mere coincidence the frequency of rain in winter, but frequent rain in summer we do; nor heat in summer but only if we have it in winter. If then, it is agreed that things are either the result of coincidence or for the sake of something, and these cannot be the result of coincidence or spontaneity, it follows that they must be for the sake of something. . . . Therefore, the action for an end is present in things which come to be and are by nature.”

cause = that which gives being

- ▶ But how can something give being if it doesn't exist?

“**Forward-looking**”-account: it attempts to give explanations of things in terms of other things that have not come about yet, and perhaps never will, but that an agent *intends* to bring about. (Cf. Pasnau2001)

- ▶ teleology seems to be grounded in *intention*.
- ▶ How can this apply in the case of non-rational agents?

## Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I, q. 2, a. 3

“Those things, however, that do not have cognition, do not tend towards an end unless directed by another, knowing and intelligent; just as the arrow [is directed] by the archer. Therefore, there is something intelligent, by which all natural things are ordained to the end; and we call this God.”

## Aquinas, *De veritate*, q. 2, a. 3

“For it is necessary that everything that naturally tends towards something else had this direction *from something else* directing it to the end; otherwise it would tend towards it by chance. Now in natural things we find a natural appetite by which each thing tends towards its own end – and from this it follows that we have to posit, above all natural things, some intellect, which ordained natural things to their ends, and endowed them with their natural inclination.”

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Medieval solution to the problem of fit involves a universal teleology, grounded in the divine will.

The options for the contemporary metaphysician:

1. Endorse the “whole baggage” (cf. Cutter, forthcoming)
2. Endorse teleology as a brute fact, not looking for its grounding
3. Give up the univocal notion of ‘cause’, and say that teleological explanations are *sui generis*.



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