Midwestern Journal of Theology 23.2 (2024): 43–67

Pure Omnipotence: Understanding God's Power Through the Lens of *Actus Purus*

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Introduction

The doctrine of omnipotence is a wide area of study that boasts countless books, articles, blogs, and blurbs. However, within the literature today, there remains a gaping neglect as to how the notion of *actus purus* directly affects one's understanding of God's power. An embrace of *actus purus* has far-reaching implications for how one understands the doctrine of omnipotence, as it pertains directly to who God is in his nature. A focused study on *actus purus* and the doctrine of omnipotence will provide a fuller account of how we understand God's power in light of the creator-creature distinction, the nature of God, and the concept of divine freedom.

God having power is far from being a foreign concept in the Bible. Throughout both the Old and New Testaments, the concept of God's having a distinct and unique power that transcends all of creation is made abundantly clear. Ironically, the quintessential passage revealing the power of God does not include the term *power* at all. Genesis 1:1 states, "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." The creation account of Genesis establishes God's power in the simple fact that everything that exists finds its source and origin in the power of God. This passage further highlights what Christians have traditionally known as *creatio ex nihilo*, in which God creates everything out of nothing.[1] Unlike the conception of Plato, God did not

[1] Augustine directly connects the concept of *creatio ex nihilo* to the doctrine of divine omnipotence when stating "Lord God almighty, you it is who have created something out of nothing .... Apart from yourself nothing existed from which you might make them, O God, undivided Trinity and threefold Unity, and therefore you made heaven and earth out of nothing—heaven and earth, a great thing and a small thing, because you are omnipotent and your

bring the universe into being by shaping eternally existing materials, but through his power made everything to be that is (Col 1:16–17). Moreover, God's power continues to supersede creation in every way. This is not only evident from God being the origin and source of creation, but also due to creation's continual dependence upon God for its con existence (e.g. Acts 17:28; Col 1:17; Heb 1:3).

Based on the biblical text, it seems fairly incontrovertible to argue that God has power in some sense. Yet, the question here is not so much whether or not God has power but rather what that power is and to what extent God has it. This question has stirred conversation and debate for centuries and has led to various conclusions as to the extent and degree of God's power.[2] The position that will be assumed here is that of the traditional strand of orthodoxy as particularly articulated by Augustine and Thomas Aquinas. As Augustine puts it, God is "rightly called omnipotent, though He can neither die nor fall into error. For He is called omnipotent on account of His doing what He wills, not on account of His suffering what He wills not; for if that should befall Him, He would by no means be omnipotent. Wherefore, He cannot do some things for the very reason that He is omnipotent."[3]

Aquinas adds to the Augustinian notion of omnipotence by stating that "this phrase, 'God can do all things,' is rightly understood to mean that God can do all things that are possible; and for this reason He is said to be omnipotent."[4] Thus, for God to be omnipotent is to have the power to bring about any possible state of affairs that he should will in accordance with his divine nature. With this notion of omnipotence in the foreground, *actus purus* functions as a sort of norming principle for understanding how God's power is uniquely distinct from the

goodness led you to make all things, a mighty heaven and a tiny earth." See Augustine, *Confessions* 12.7.

[2] For a survey on the general conversation on omnipotence see Gijsbert van den Brink, *Almighty God: A Study of the Doctrine of Omnipotence* (Kampen: Kok Pharos Publishing, 1996.); Anna Case-Winters, *God's Power: Traditional Understandings and Contemporary Challenges* (Louisville: John Knox, 1990); Howard A. Redmond, *The Omnipotence of God* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964); Brian Leftow, "Omnipotence," *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophical Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

[3] *City of God* 5.10

[4] *Summa Theologica* 1.25.3.

creature, coincides with God's nature, and allows for freedom in the divine will.

God's Power as Distinct from the Creature

One of the greatest issues revolving around the contemporary discussion of God's power is that of collapsing the creator-creature distinction. In the modern abandonment of classical Christian metaphysics, there has been a diminishment in the recognition of the necessary qualitative differences between God and creation. God has almost invariably become a being that is distinguished from creation by merely being greater in degree rather than kind.[5] Thus, it is proper to begin this study by framing God's power in light of the distinction that exists between the creation and the one who created. It seems that what is at the heart of this distinction is the concept of *actus purus*. Without the conception of *actus purus* in the theological framing of God's nature, there cannot be a true and robust distinction between God and creatures.[6] Thus, for those who reject the concept of *actus purus* and its presupposed metaphysics, there is an inevitable collapse of the creator-creature distinction specifically in reference to God's power.[7]

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[5] For a greater explication of the abandonment of classical metaphysics, see James E. Dolezal, *All That is in God*: *Evangelical Theology and the Challenge of Classical Christian Theism* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2017).

[6] It should be noted that *actus purus* need not necessarily be explicitly formulated to have a proper understanding of the creator-creature distinction. For instance, Augustine and Anselm did not use this term, yet the implicit notion of *actus purus* was present in their thinking, which allowed them to properly understand God as distinct in more ways than simply quantitative differences. See Augustine, *The City of God* 9.10; *The Trinity* 5.2.3;, Anselm, *Monologion* 16.

[7] Many contemporary theologians never explicitly reject *actus purus*, which often requires one to read between the lines on their other doctrinal positions. For example, Wayne Grudem never seems to mention *actus purus* at all but makes his denial apparent in his rejection of the doctrine of impassibility. See Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 1994), 165–6. Similarly, Millard Erickson's brief reference to impassibility and what he deems "the strange doctrine of simplicity" seems to imply a rejection of *actus purus*. See Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker

This flattening of the creator-creature distinction, however, is often implicit in the contemporary treatment of omnipotence. For instance, popular theologians, such as Grudem and Erickson, classify omnipotence among what are known as the "communicable attributes" of God.[8] In classifying omnipotence as a communicable attribute, it seems that God's power is something that differs primarily in degree from that of creation. Grudem states, "We do not, of course, have infinite power or omnipotence any more than we have infinite freedom or any of God's other attributes to an infinite degree. But even though we do not have omnipotence, God has given us *power* to bring about results…."[9] In this framing, infinitude is understood in merely quantitative terms; humans have the power to bring about some results, while God has *more* power, so as to bring about any

Academic, 2013), 235–6; 268–9. Although Erickson does briefly mention pure actuality elsewhere, he seems to implicitly reject it as an Aristotelian concept necessitating a static god. See Millard Erickson, *God the Father Almighty* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 100, 112. See also John Frame, *The Doctrine of God: A Theology of Lordship* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2002), 224.

[8] Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 216–18; Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 237. The very distinction of God's attributes as communicable and incommunicable seems to be a somewhat unhelpful and even a potentially problematic view of God's attributes. In dividing God's attributes in such a way, it seems to imply the false view that there are certain attributes of God that differ from humans by degree rather than kind. In this understanding, there are attributes that are not shared with humanity (i.e., different in kind; eternity, simplicity, immutability, etc.) and there are attributes that are shared with humanity (i.e., different in degree; omnipotence, omnipresence, omniscience, etc.). As regards those attributes which we do share with God, humans have some ability to exercise that attribute in a limited capacity, whereas God has an unlimited capacity to exercise that attribute. This is problematic, as it seems to undermine the notion that all of God's attributes are distinct from the creature in way of kind due to God himself being distinct from creation. The concept of *analogia entis* recognizes that we share in God's being and thus experience a sort of communication of God's attributes, but this communication is only understood in light of the greater dissimilarity in the nature of God. See n12.

[9] Grudem, *Systematic Theology,* 218.

result. What is implicit in this conception of God's power is that it is essentially univocal to that of creaturely power.[10]

With a univocal view of power implicitly in the background, the contemporary conversation surrounding omnipotence tends to merely focus on what God can and cannot do.[11] While this is, of course, an aspect of omnipotence that must be considered, it is the metaphysical question of *how* God's power works that most clearly delineates how God's power differs from that of the creature. With the inclusion of *actus purus* as a philosophical lens, God's power can be contemplated in a way that goes beyond simply considering what God can and cannot do. *Actus purus* helps to show how God's power functions in a way that is unique to him rather than simply being greater in degree than creatures.[12] Although there are many ways in

[10] Thomas addresses the problem of univocal predication in multiple places. See, e.g., *Summa Contra Gentiles* 1.32.; *Summa Theologica* 1.13.5.

[11] For example, see Erickson, *God the Father Almighty*, 165–83; Frame, *Doctrine of God*, 513–42; Richard Swinburne, "Omnipotence" *American Philosophical Quarterly* 10, no. 3 (July 1973): 231–37; and Edward R. Wierenga, *The Nature of God: An Inquiry into Divine Attributes* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 12–35.

[12] Considering the uniqueness of God's power places creatures in an epistemological conundrum. If God's power ontologically differs from that of the creature, how can the creature, in any real sense, contemplate or understand that power? The answer that will be assumed in this study is that of analogical predication. While there is some similarity between God's power and that of creatures, analogical predication entails that this similarity should be viewed in light of an ever-greater dissimilarity. See Erich Przywara, *Analogia Entis: Original Structure and Universal Rhythm*, trans. John R. Betz and David Bentley Hart (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 232–33. While God's essence as pure act sets him as being completely transcendent over creation, there is a sense of participation between being in act and He who is pure act. See Thomas Joseph White, *Wisdom in the Face of Modernity: A Study in Thomistic Natural Theology* (Ave Maria: Sapientia, 2016), 84–5; John R. Betz, *Christ, the Logos of Creation: An Essay in Analogical Metaphysics* (Steubenville: Emmaus Academic, 2024), 384. Within this participatory relationship, as beings in act, creatures can know in a finite and limited degree that God is act in the purest and fullest sense of the term. As analogical knowledge, the positive claim that God is pure active potency must be continually tempered by the apophatic reality of God's incomprehensibility. See Betz, *Christ, the Logos of Creation*, 380.

which this is the case, the focus here will be on the uniqueness of God's power in relation to reciprocity, energy, and time.

Reciprocal Actualization

In considering God as *actus purus*, it is necessary to understand a particular facet within the distinction of act and potency. Although the categories of act and potency arose with Aristotle, there has been a wide embrace of these metaphysical distinctions of being, most notably in Thomas, the Reformed Orthodox, and subsequent Thomistic theologians.[13] However, something that does not seem to be considered in the schema of act and potency is the reciprocal actualization that occurs when a being in act brings about the actualization of a passive potency.

As is properly understood in the framework of act and potency, creatures have an established set of passive potencies that limit what they can and cannot become.[14] These passive potencies can only be brought into reality by a being in act that has the active potency to actualize a particular potential.[15] For instance, a piece of paper has the potential to be written on, but that potential is only actualized when a being in act (a person) uses an active power (the ability to write) on an agent that has a particular potency (the paper). Most often, this is where the articulation of actualization ends. However, the actualization of potential does not end once the direct object (the paper, in this instance) is actualized. Since the acting agent also has passive potency to be other than it is, there is a reciprocal actualization that also occurs on the acting agent through the actualization of the direct object. Continuing with the illustration of paper being written on, once the active agent actualizes the potential

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[13] Act and potency are fundamental categories of being within Thomistic and Scholastic thought. See W. Norris Clark, *The One and the Many: A Contemporary Thomistic Metaphysics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 2014), Ch. 7; Henri Renard, *Philosophy of Being* (Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1947), Sec. 1.

[14] Bernard Wuellner, S.J., *Summary of Scholastic Principles* (Fitzwilliam: Loreto, 2023), 120.

[15] For a more detailed analysis of act and potency, see Edward Feser, *Scholastic Metaphysics: A Contemporary Introduction* (Piscataway: Rutgers University, 2014), 36–8; Reginald Marie Garrigou-Lagrange, O.P., *Reality: A Synthesis of Thomistic Thought* (St. Louis: B. Herder, 1950), 37–60.

of the paper by writing on it, the active agent's passive potency to become a writer is subsequently actualized. Thus, not only is the direct object (paper) being actualized, but the active agent (person) is actualized through the expression of their active potency. Thus, in the actualization of a potential, the actualizer is reciprocally actualized in the process.[16]

The concept of reciprocal actualization effectively illustrates how creatures are not only affected by the actions of other agents but are also affected by every action they themselves precipitate. There is no instance in which a creature can actualize potential in a way that is divorced from their own admixture of active and passive potency; passive potency and active potency are coexisting in creation in such a way that one cannot exercise active potency apart from their own potential to be actualized. This reciprocal actualization, however, is often neglected and inadvertently projected onto God. This can be seen in contemporary conversations surrounding the creation account. For example, when Thomas F. Torrance talks about creation, he argues that in bringing creation into being, God subsequently *becomes* creator.[17] In other words, before the moment of creation, God necessarily could not be described as a creator since He had not created anything. The implication in this is that God is actualized in some way when He brings about creation. In other words, for God to do something realizes the potential in God for having done that thing; although nothing happens to God directly from another agent, there is

[16] Dolezal briefly mentions a similar formulation when stating "the creature is ontologically correlative to those things upon which its active power operates so that effecting new forms of reality in others entails the appearance of a new relation in the creaturely agent." James E. Dolezal, *God Without Parts: Divine Simplicity and the Metaphysics of God's Absoluteness* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2011), 39. Peter Weigel also briefly touches on this in stating, "Active potency *is* attributed to God as the first efficient cause of all things, although not according to the same concept applicable to creatures. In creatures the operation of active potency involves the agent becoming more complete or actualized by the operation." Peter Weigel, "Aquinas on Simplicity—No Simple Matter" (PhD diss., Yale University, 1999), 58.

[17] Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God, One Being Three Persons* (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016), 208.

the implicit notion of an actualization that reciprocally occurs as a result of God's own action.[18]

One problematic implication of Torrance's perspective, as well as any perspective that introduces potentiality in God, is that it undermines the traditional notion of immutability. As seen in Thomas's *Summa Theologica*, *actus purus* and immutability are intrinsically linked. Thomas states that God "must be pure act, without the admixture of any potentiality, for the reason that, absolutely, potentiality is posterior to act. Now, everything which is in any way changed is in some way in potentiality. Hence, it is evident that it is impossible for God to be in any way changeable."[19] For God to be immutable is to be *actus purus* and for him to be *actus purus* is to be immutable; any compromise of one will inherently undo the other. Thus, for potentiality to be introduced in God, even in the subtlest of ways, introduces a level of change in God that undoes the notion of immutability.[20]

Furthermore, the notion of God being actualized can only be brought forth in lieu of a genuine creator-creature distinction. One must assume a flattening of the distinction between God and his creation in reference to power to make the claim that God is affected through expressing his power in the same way that creatures are affected by expressing their power. In light of this, it becomes clear that univocal predication is presupposed. *Actus purus*, however, entails that God's power is distinct as it lacks any passive potentiality. As pure actuality, God cannot be affected by any reciprocal actualization as He has no admixture of passive potencies to be actualized. Thus, it is improper to presuppose that God's actions affect God in a reciprocal manner (e.g., God becoming creator after creation).[21]

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[18] This also has direct implications on the eternality of God, which will be discussed later.

[19] *Summa Theologica* 1.9.1.

[20] See also Thomas G. Weinandy, *Does God Change: The Word's Becoming in the Incarnation*, Studies in Historical Theology 4 (Still River: St. Bede's, 1985).

[21] Dolezal rightly notes that "our God-talk must eschew any notion of change in God. Whatever we are to say of God's work in the world—creation, judgement, redemption, consummation—we must insist that this work produces no change in Him." Dolezal, *God Without Parts*, 80.

Considering God's power in light of *actus purus* creates an inherent distinction between God's power and the creature's power. God's purely actual power cannot have a reciprocal effect but only causes an effect in the direction of the creature. While actualization occurs horizontally across creatures both actively and reciprocally, for God it only occurs downward to the creature. If one rejects *actus purus* as an inappropriate conception of God, one is left without a metaphysical basis to defend the idea of God being unaffected by his own actions in the way that creatures are. This then creates the opportunity to introduce change in God, such as the case with God becoming a creator at the point of creation.[22]

Energy

Understanding God as *actus purus* is indispensable for articulating the creator-creature distinction in reference to God's power, as it is a power that cannot bring change upon the actor. Within this conception, *actus purus* must also lead to the conclusion that there is no exertion or expenditure of energy in the acts of God. Any exertion or loss of energy on the part of God necessarily entails change and potentiality since it would mean that God's capacity has the potential to be more or less. In contrast, as creatures imagine the actualization of potential in their mind and will it to be done, they can only actualize that potential through the expenditure of energy and the exertion of power. However, there is a very real possibility of that potential remaining unactualized due to a lack of energy or power on the part of the acting agent.[23] This possibility of not actualizing potential stems from an admixture of active and passive potencies; creatures are limited by the potential of other objects, their own potential, and, subsequently, a finite level of active power. This, however, is not the case with God. If God wills something to be, there is no possibility of

[22] One could also see how this creates complications in articulating the incarnation in such a way that does not introduce change into God's nature.
[23] John F. Wipple, "Thomas Aquinas on Demonstrating God's Omnipotence" *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 52, no. 204 (June 1998): 229.

that thing not being as God had intended.[24] God's power will always bring into reality that which God wills.[25]

This being the case, God's actions in no way bring about a lessening of God's energy nor does God have to exert himself in any way outside of simply willing what he desires. While creatures expend energy in the exercise of power, God, as *actus purus*, has no limit of energy to be expended. As Thomas says, "active power exists in God according to the measure in which he is actual."[26] As pure actuality, God has no capacity to be or have less than what he is. If his power is commensurate with his actuality, as Thomas says, then his power must be seen as equally infinite and incapable of diminishment. It is not as if God simply has *so much* energy that he practically loses nothing, as a human practically loses zero calories by flicking a finger. God's energy is not properly understood as being quantitatively infinite so as to be able to exert energy without ever running out. Rather, God cannot lose anything in the exercise of power because, as *actus purus*, he has no level of energy that can be diminished. His energy is not limitless in quantity as if any amount that is lost is completely dwarfed by how much remains. Rather, his power is qualitatively different from the creature so as to not lose anything whatsoever. Unlike the creature, God's power is not like a filled bucket in which a drop is removed when he acts but an infinite, immutable, undiminished, and wholly complete power that is unaffected in any way by the actions he brings forth.

Moreover, when creatures exercise power and expend energy, there is a necessary exertion that occurs; creatures must struggle, even in the slightest sense, to act upon other agents. Creatures are always working against the power of other objects of creation to bring about the actualization of a potential.[27] God, in his actions, is never attempting to overpower anything in the way that a creature is

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[24] *Summa Theologica* 1.19.6.

[25] Dolezal makes a similar argument when discussing the eternal act of God producing temporal effects: "The divine act of creation is nothing other than the eternal action of God's immutable will. Thus, there is no distinction in agency between God's will to create and the act of creating." Dolezal, *All That is in God*, 100.

[26] *Summa Theologica* 1.25.2.

[27] Wipple, "Thomas Aquinas on Demonstrating God's Omnipotence," 229.

required to (i.e., as a force overpowering another force). God is not akin to a river that overpowers a car due to the sheer amount of force that overwhelms the power of the car. Rather, God's power, as a purely actual power, has no potential in relation to other active potencies; God's power does not have the passive potentiality or limit so as to be thwarted by another power. This is a key aspect of God's power that was often recognized in the classical formulation of God's omnipotence.[28] For God to be truly omnipotent, He must have a power that can accomplish all that He wills, as well as a power that cannot be undone or undermined by any other being. As *actus purus*, both of these realities are true of God; God's power is purely actual in such a way that it is the actualizing force of all created beings as well as lacking all potentiality so as to be unaffected by any other active power. As God has no quantitative energy limiting his power, all other power, which *is* limited by quantitative energy, is inherently impotent in the shadow of God.

Temporality

Another clear distinction between the power of God and the power of creatures is the relationship to time. Creaturely power is thoroughly temporal. There can be no instance of creaturely power that is not dependent and limited by time. Aristotle helpfully explains that time is to be understood as the measurement of change.[29] Thus, time is not possible without change and change is not possible without time. This sequence of time is seen in the process of actualization as a creature begins with intending a change, exerting themselves in effort to bring that change about, the following expectation for the change to occur following the exertion of energy, and the reciprocal actualization on the acting agent. None of this process is possible without a sequence of time. In reference to actualizing potential, and by extension reciprocal actualization, time is necessarily implied, as cause and effect can only happen within the context of a temporal reality. Cause and effect cannot exist in one moment as one thing, nor can effect precede cause. To say anything to the contrary of this, such

[28] See Augustine, *The City of God* 5.10; John of Damascus, *An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith* 1.8; Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* 3.21.2.
[29] *Physics* 4.12.

as a piece of paper can have writing on it before having been written on, is absurd and undermines any ability to understand change or reality in any intelligible sense.

Thus, for creatures, all actions brought about through power necessarily occur within a temporal framework.[30] The very temporality of creatures is a necessary consequence of having passive potentiality. Without passive potency, there would be no potential to be changed, and without change, there is no passive potency which could be actualized. This includes even the minute change of moving from one moment in time to another. Even if every aspect of the creature were to remain constant, there is still a potential in relation to time being actualized in the creature. For example, consider John existing at a particular time (t_1). While John currently exists at t_1, he has the potential to exist at t_2. When John arrives at t_2, he also has the potential to be at t_3. Regardless of what time John is currently existing, there is always a passive potency to exist at another time. Thus, passive potency is required to exist in time, as it necessitates potentiality in relation to time.[31]

In light of the temporality of passive potency and actualization, creaturely power must inherently be temporal in nature. Actualization, for creatures, can only ever be characterized by being and action that occur in time. Thus, creaturely power is limited by temporality. There is no creaturely actualization that occurs instantaneously, but it always requires a sequence of cause and effect. Creaturely power is thus limited by the creature's temporal nature. If such temporality were introduced to God, God would necessarily have passive potency in relation to each moment of time. In turn, this would

[30] Keith Ward highlights this fact in stating, "God does not first perform an act of intending, which causes a further state of affairs to exits. He simply brings a state into being, in virtue of his knowledge of its nature and for a reason." While a creature's intention is a separate act from the act itself, requiring a temporal sequence, God's intention and act are one and the same and function without temporal sequencing. Keith Ward, *Divine Action* (London: Flame, 1990), 18–19. See also Katherin A. Rogers, *Perfect Being Theology* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), 98.

[31] See Edward Feser, "Actuality, Potentiality, and Relativity's Block Universe" *Neo-Aristotelian Perspectives on Contemporary Science,* Routledge Studies in the Philosophy of Science (New York: Routledge, 2019), 35–60.

limit God's power in such a way as to make it temporal, further flattening the creator-creature distinction.

In spite of all of this, the inherent temporality within the acts of creatures seems to be commonly projected onto the acts of God.[32] However, as *actus purus*, having no passive potency entails that God cannot exist in time or be affected by time in any way; for it to be argued that God has potentiality would require that God exist in some sort of temporal sequence. Rather, if God is atemporal due to him being *actus purus*, then it must follow that his power is atemporal and is free from any temporal actualization of potential. Although from the creature's perspective God's power is expressed through the manifestation of particular acts at particular times, it is not as if God were doing such acts in time.[33] God's power is not distinct from God's nature so as to be temporal when God is not. Rather, God's power is expressed in a single act in himself and is manifested in a sequential manner within a temporal world.[34] Thus, God bringing about his will through his power must be an eternal act in God himself. As Augustine states, "There was neither precedence nor subsequence in Him to alter or abolish His will, but all that ever He created was in His unchanged fixed will eternally one and the same: first willing that they should not be, and afterwards willing that they should be, and so they were not, during His pleasure, and began to be, at His pleasure."[35] God's power is an atemporal power, further delineating it from the power of the creature.

God's Power in Relation to the Divine Nature

Having established that God's power is distinct from that of the creature, there must be consideration as to how God's power should be understood in light of his own nature. As has been stated, God as

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[32] See Isaak August Dorner, *Divine Immutability: Critical Reconsideration*, Fortress Texts in Modern Theology, trans. Robert R. Williams and Claude Welch (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 143; William Lane Craig, *Time and Eternity: Exploring God's Relationship to Time* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2001), 30–32.

[33] Edward Feser, *Five Proofs of the Existence of God* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2017), 201.

[34] Feser, *Five Proofs*, 201.

[35] *City of God* 12.17.

actus purus entails that God has no passive potency in his being to be other than what he already is. God is all that he is to the fullest and purest extent. God cannot be more than he already is, not because he has reached some sort of limit, but because God in himself is limitless and infinite. Thus, God's nature is defined by the infinitude of his being. Furthermore, as *actus purus*, God's attributes cannot exist in a potential relationship but must be inherently unified.[36] Nothing can be conceived of God apart from who he is. This entails, then, that God's power cannot be abstracted nor understood apart from the whole nature of God, because God is metaphysically simple. Divine power, then, must also be understood as a simple power that is perfectly and wholly united with the nature of God. Just as God's power is limitless and infinite due to his nature being such, so God's power is likewise simple and unified in his nature.[37]

The neglect of God as *actus purus* through the abstraction of God's power from the rest of his nature is one of the chief errors of the late-

[36] To conceive of God's attributes as being parts of God would necessarily undermine the concept of *actus purus*, as it would entail that God's attributes either actuate themselves or exist as parts that are potential to the whole. See Dolezal, *God Without Parts*, 33–4.

[37] Thomas naturally situates divine simplicity in relation to divine power. In Thomas's explication of power in his *Summa Contra Gentiles* and *The Power of God*, Thomas connects divine power with divine simplicity. This is done to protect against the idea of God's power being other than God himself as well as an addition to God's nature. Thomas states "Now God is very act; nor is he being in act by some act that is not himself; since in him there is no potentiality […] Therefore he is his own power." And again, "Whatever is powerful and is not its own power is powerful by participating in another's power. But nothing can be ascribed to God by participation, for he is his own being […]. Therefore he is his own power." *Summa Contra Gentiles* 1.8. Furthermore, Thomas argues, "Accordingly we ascribe being and substance to God; but substance by reason of subsistence not of substanding; and being by reason of simplicity and completeness, not of inherence whereby it inheres to something. In like manner we ascribe to God operation by reason of its being the ultimate perfection, not by reason of that into which operation passes." *The Power of God* 1.1. In other words, God's power being simple and unified with his nature entails that the effects of God's power do not imply a potentiality on God's end.

medieval nominalists.[38] The nominalists held to an understanding of omnipotence that freed God from any and every constraint.[39] This supposes that having all power must mean that God is not limited by anything. Thus, God must be free to bring about any possibility as well as any seeming impossibility. For example, God could bring about contradictions such as making a circle square, commanding evil, making that which is true false, and so on.[40] As Bavinck succinctly puts in, within this schema, "God is pure arbitrariness, absolute potency without any content, which *is* nothing but can *become* anything."[41] Ultimately, the nominalist conception of God's power inherently separates God's power from the rest of His nature, namely goodness, perfection, omniscience, and simplicity. Contra nominalism, *actus*

[38] As the name *nominalist* suggests, the underlying metaphysics is that universals are merely names and are not grounded in reality. Ultimately, the denial of universals renders an arbitrariness to creation and the acts of God. Nominalism holds that there is no underlying nature within creation that associates each individual thing with a foundational reality. Rather, nominalism sees each individual thing as an independent and isolated occurrence. When nominalists conclude that all things are ultimately arbitrary, the resulting consequence is that God's acts are arbitrary; if what is made is arbitrary, then what God does is arbitrary. Metaphysical realism, on the other hand, affirms the reality of universals in which particulars participate. Realism undermines any arbitrariness in the acts of God because it affirms that all universals have their origin in God. The realist metaphysics undergirds the entirety of the *analogia entis* as all of creation is derived from God and analogically participates in him. As will be seen, a proper understanding of God as *actus purus* entails an adherence to realism as the foundational metaphysics because it reinforces, rather than undermines, God's lack of potentiality in his nature by substantiating the existence of universals in the nature of God himself. Nominalism, however, inevitably leads to the introduction of potentiality through the arbitrariness of his acts. For more on nominalism and realism, see Heiko A. Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology: Gabriel Biel and Late Medieval Nominalism* (Durham, NC: The Labyrinth, 1983); Etienne Gilson, *Thomist Realism and the Critique of Knowledge*, trans. Mark A Wauck (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1983).

[39] L. A. Kennedy, "The Fifteenth Century and Divine Absolute Power," *Vivarium* 27. no. 2 (1989), 125–52.

[40] Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, Vol. 2: God and Creation*, trans. John Vrien, ed. John Bolt (Grand Rapids: Baker Academics, 2004), 247.

[41] Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, Vol. 2*, 247.

purus is a norming principle that defines how we understand God's power, and by extension, omnipotence, in light of God's nature. God's power cannot abstracted from his nature, but must be understood in light of his unified, simple, and purely actual being.

God's power, then, cannot be conceived of apart from his other attributes, because God's power is not something that exists in a potential relationship to those other attributes. In other words, God's power cannot be conceived as something logically or temporally prior to his goodness, love, omniscience, and so on, as if those are somehow lesser parts of God compared to his power. Furthermore, conceiving of God's power as disconnected from the rest of his nature entails that God's power is actualized or completed once it is brought into relation with those other attributes.[42] This would mean that God's power, considered absolutely, could be evaluated apart from the rest of God's nature, entailing that the nature of God, in some way, actualizes God's power. In this framework, God's power exists in potency and is actualized by what is, or determined by God to be, good, loving, true, and so on. To hold to any view of omnipotence that abstracts God's power apart from his nature, one necessarily must reject the doctrine of *actus purus* because such an abstraction necessitates that God's power has potentiality.

In considering God's power in relation to his nature, the distinction of *potentia absoluta* and *potentia ordinata* are helpful categories for showing how God's power can be both purely actual as well as acting upon creation.[43] Without this distinction, theologians can find

[42] This is not to say that the nominalists conceived of God's power as actually existing before the other attributes chronologically. It does, however, imply that there was a sense in which they abstracted God's power in a way that allowed it to be considered logically prior to the other doctrines of God, thus being able to be conceived in a way that is unaffected by attributes such as goodness or truth.

[43] The origin of the *absoluta*/*ordinata* distinction is often erroneously attributed to William of Ockham and the nominalists. For example, see Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 523; Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, Vol. 2*, 247. While it is clear that the nominalists appealed to this distinction in their formulation of God's power, they did so by distorting the intended purpose of the distinction, which had been established by the beginning of the thirteenth century. See W. J. Courtenay, "Dialectic of Divine Omnipotence," *Covenant and Causality in Medieval Thought,* Studies in

themselves overemphasizing God's action in the world to the point of ascribing potentiality to his power, or they may conflate God's power with his acts in such a way that his acts become indistinguishable from who God is. Furthermore, the distinction is helpful in being able to contemplate God's power as that which is pure, unchanging, infinite, and unactualized, while also being a power that brings about particular realities at particular moments in time.

The notion of God's *potentia absoluta* is understood as referring to God's power without reference to what God has willed and done in creation.[44] In this way of considering God's power, it is fairly easy to conceive of it as being fully actualized without any passive potency or potentiality that is not bound, determined, or brought forth by anything external to God. God's *potentia ordinata*, on the other hand, is understood as referring to what God has ordained and willed to be in creation.[45] Ultimately, the *absoluta*/*ordinata* distinction provides us with a category to distinguish between God's power understood in himself and his power expressed in the world.[46] It is worth

Philosophy, Theology, and Economic Practice (London: Variorum Reprints, 1984), 4–5; Van den Brink, *Almighty God*, 84; Francis Oakley, *Omnipotence and Promise: The Legacy of the Scholastic Distinction of Powers,* The Etienne Gilson Series 23 (Ontario: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2002).

[44] Courtenay, "Dialectic of Divine Omnipotence," 5.

[45] Courtenay, "Dialectic of Divine Omnipotence," 5.

[46] It is important to note that the Protestant Reformers rightly rejected the nominalist abuse of the *absoluta*/*ordinata* distinction while not rejecting the distinction wholesale. Stephen Charnock appealed to the *absoluta*/*ordinta* distinction as a means of distinguishing between what God could do and what God has ordained to be. *Existence and Attributes of God*, 10.2. Francis Turretin, likewise, concludes that "we must remark that from the absolute power to the work, […] God can do many more things than he actually does." *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* 3.31.3. The major rejection of the distinction on the part of the Reformers was not a rejection of the classical understanding of *potentia absoluta*/*odinata* as put forth by Lombard and Aquinas but of the abuses found in *via moderna*, particularly from thinkers such as Ockham and Biel. For example, Turretin makes note of Calvin's departure from the *potentia absoluta* and *potentia ordinata* distinction. However, he states that Calvin only does so in response to those who made erroneous conclusions based on an abuse of the distinctions. Turretin asserts that Calvin was "unwilling to deny that God (by his absolute power) can do more things than he really does by his actual power." See *Institutes of Elenctic*

mentioning, however, that is not an actual distinction or separation of God's power per se, but an artificial construction for reflecting on how the effects of God's power are actualized in time.[47]

Thomas helpfully tempers the temptation to overemphasize the *absoluta*/*ordinata* distinction when stating:

> What is, however, attributed to the divine power, according as it carries into execution the command of a just will, God is said to be able to do by His ordinary power. In this manner, we must say that God can do other things by His absolute power than those He has foreknown and pre-ordained He would do. But it could not happen that He should do anything which He had not foreknown, and had not pre-ordained that He would do, because His actual doing is subject to His foreknowledge and pre-ordination, though His power, which is His nature, is not so. For God does things because He wills so to do; yet the power to do them does not come from His will, but from His nature.[48]

As Thomas shows, it is possible to consider God's power in light of his infinite and purely actual nature, but we should be careful to temper that recognition with the fact that God has willed creation to be set and actualized in a particular way in accordance with his

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Theology 3.21.5; see also John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 3.23.2. Calvin and others, Turretin insists, did not reject the distinction "absolutely, but relatively, with regard to the abuse of the Scholastics who deduced from it many monstrous doctrines." *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* 3.21.5. Likewise, Richard Muller shows how Petrus van Mastricht did not reject the distinction *per se* but the abuses found in the Weigelians and Cartesians. Richard Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725*, vol. 3. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 535.

[47] Van den Brink, *Almighty God*, 74. This is not dissimilar to when theologians distinguish between the attributes of God in light of simplicity. It is recognized by classical theologians that these attributes are not real distinctions in God but artificial distinctions to help composite creatures understand a simple God using composite language. See Dolezal, *God Without Parts*, 125–26.

[48] *Summa Theologica* 1.25.5.

nature.[49] We can conceive of God's power in light of his nature absolutely, but we cannot act as if God's absolute power and ordained power are two separate things that can be truly distinguished as two separate powers.

While God's *potentia absoluta* allows for the contemplation of God's power without reference to what God has done in creation, it does not allow contemplation of God's power without reference to who God is. In light of *actus purus*, God's absolute power can only be understood in reference to the whole of God's nature. This, however, must also be understood in a way that is not actualizing God's power, as there is no temporal or logical priority in God. God's power does not exist prior to his other attributes but in perfect unity with them. God's power in himself is a power that is not distinct from goodness, justice, beauty, and truth.[50] When one abstracts the power of God from God's nature, as the nominalists tend to do, the necessary implication is that God's nature exists in parts that can be abstracted from and without reference to one another. If this is the case, then God is not simple but metaphysically composite, thus creating in God potentiality in relation to his attributes.[51]

God's *potentia absoluta*, then, must be seen as a power that is inseparable from his nature. If this is the case, then God does not have the power *de potentia absoluta* to bring about anything that would be deemed contrary to that nature, such as evil and incoherence. Rather, God's power can only be a power that is wholly inseparable from goodness, beauty, truth, justice, and so on. Contra nominalism, God's absolute power only extends to that which is consistent with his

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[49] It is noted by Lawrence Moonan that Aquinas used the *absoluta*/*ordinata* distinction over thirty times throughout his theological work. Lawrence Moonan, *Divine Power: The Medieval Power Distinction Up to Its Adoption by Albert, Bonaventure, and Aquinas* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), 229.

[50] Gabriel Biel, for example, seems to indicate priority of God's power over goodness when he states that God "could by himself produce an act of hatred of God, since God can do by Himself whatever He can do along with creatures." See Kennedy, "The Fifteenth Century and Divine Absolute Power", 132. Paul Scriptoris says likewise in reference to truth when stating, "Christ has said that there will be a Day of Judgment. But this is only a contingent matter. God could falsify this promise." See Kennedy, "The Fifteenth Century and Divine Absolute Power," 136.

[51] Dolezal, *God Without Parts,* 33–4.

nature. This maps on well with the classical conception of omnipotence as only being the ability to do all that is good and true.[52]

From this understanding of God's *potentia absoluta*, God's *potentia ordinata* can only be understood as external acts that flow from God's *potentia absoluta* as proscribed by his nature. Thus, nothing brought to be through God's *potentia ordinata* can be in conflict with God's nature. While God's acts in the world are not the extent of what God can do, there is no way in which those acts can be contrary to God's good and true power in himself. Furthermore, God's *potentia ordinata* can in no way bring about a change in God as if his works actualize him in some way.

God's Power in Relation to Divine Freedom

Opposed to the nominalist perspective of God's absolute freedom of power are those of a more platonic or neoplatonic perspective. Without reference to the *absoluta*/*ordinata* distinction, the platonic framework overly conflates God's power, will, and acts.[53] The conclusion that arises out of this is that there is no distinction between that which is possible and that which is real; that which God has not done, God could not do.[54] Any understanding of God's actions must be collapsed into God's will, subsequently making God's external works as necessary as God himself. This platonic perspective sees God's omnipotence as corresponding one-for-one with what God does. In other words, God's power cannot extend beyond what God does. Only what God wills is possible, thus God can do all that is possible because

[52] See Anselm, *Proslogion* 7; Augustine, *A Sermon to the Catechumens on the Creed* 2.

[53] Thomas helpfully establishes that there is a will in God since every intellect entails a will that is aimed toward a particular end. However, God's will is not fixed to some end outside of himself but finds its terminus in goodness itself which is God. Therefore, just as God's intellect is his own existence, so his will is his own existence. *Summa Theologica* 1.19.1. Furthermore, Francis Turretin helpfully elaborates on the will of God in his *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*. Turretin states that God's will can be understood in two senses, necessary and hypothetical. The necessary will of God relates to that which God must will, such as goodness and truth, whereas the hypothetical is that which God could have willed otherwise. *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* 3.14.1–2.

[54] Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, Vol. 2,* 247.

He does all that He wills.[55] Essentially, this understanding holds that there is nothing that God can do other than what He does. The major problem that arises with this perspective is that it erases any notion of divine freedom and subsequently collapses God's external works into God's internal essence.[56]

The first problem one will encounter in regard to denying divine freedom are the biblical passages in which God is understood to have the power to have done otherwise. One such example is that of Matthew 3. Within the context of John the Baptist's ministry, John sees the Pharisees and Sadducees and criticizes them for their presumption of believing they are right with God due to being physical children of Abraham (Matt 3:7–9) However, in the criticism leveled against the religious leaders, John claims that "God is able from these stones to raise up children of Abraham" (v. 9) In spite of God never raising children of Abraham from the stones, the language of δύναται and ἐγεῖραι have clear connotations of power and capability; just as God *did* bring Adam forth from dust, so God *could* bring Israel forth from stones.[57] The clear implication of this passage is that God could have done other than what He had clearly ordained to not be the case.[58]

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[55] Abelard is a key proponent of such a view, stating, "God cannot do more than He does, or do the things better, or cease from doing them; but that He does everything as He does by a certain necessity." Peter Abelard, "Theologiae Christianae" V., in J. Ramsay McCallum, *Abelard's Christian Theology* (Merrick: Richwood, 1976), 93. This view was also held by Spinoza and Schleiermacher. See Baruch Spinoza, *Principles of Cartesian Philosophy* 2.9; Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, §54.

[56] This also seems to lead to the logical problem of McEar, originally introduced by Alvin Plantinga. Plantinga claims that collapsing God's omnipotence to a state of only being able to do what he actually does leads to the conclusion that a being (McEar) who is only able to scratch his left ear and does so, must be considered omnipotent. Alvin Plantinga, *God and Other Minds: A Study of the Rational Justification of Belief in God* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967), 170.

[57] Charles L. Quarles, *Matthew,* Exegetical Guides to the Greek New Testament, eds. Andreas J. Köstenberger, and Robert W. Yarbrough. (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2017), 34–5.

[58] This conclusion can also be implied from Matthew 26:53, in which Jesus claims he could call twelve legions of angels to rescue him from the cross, as

Thomas Aquinas also denies the jettisoning of divine freedom on several levels.[59] First, Thomas argues that what acts out of natural necessity must be acting toward some end that has been determined by some other agent.[60] One illustration provided by Thomas is that of that natural necessity of nutrition and growth.[61] Since natural growth is neither established nor controlled by the will of the creature, there must be an external agent in which this natural necessity finds its origin. The telos, then, of a natural necessity is derived by something outside of the agent affected by the necessity. Based on this, God cannot have any natural necessity because that would imply some sort of cause that is external to God.

The second problem that Thomas has with denying divine freedom is in relation to the end of God's will being that of divine goodness.[62] While Thomas certainly affirms that the end of God's will is divine goodness, he follows by stating, "Creatures are not commensurate with this end, so that the divine goodness cannot be manifested without them."[63] Thomas is highlighting the fact that the manifestation of God's goodness is not dependent, in an ultimate sense, upon what God has done in creation. Thus, God could will other beings and outcomes which would reveal his goodness in the same way as any other determination he could make. Thomas concludes that the error of believing God is only able to do what he has done is the error of believing "creatures to be commensurate with divine goodness, as if divine goodness could not exist without that order."[64]

Although Thomas does not mention *actus purus* in his refutation of denying divine freedom, the implications relating to it can be quickly realized. Making creatures commensurate with divine goodness necessarily imports a sense of passive potency to God's power. Within

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well as James 4:2–3, in which believers are told that God could have given them their desires should they have asked for them.

[59] Anselm also speaks briefly to this, stating, "God does nothing under compulsion of necessity —because he is in no way forced to do, or prohibited from doing, anything." Anselm, *Why God Became Man* 2.5.

[60] *The Power of God* 1.5.

[61] *The Power of God* 1.5.

[62] *The Power of God* 1.5.

[63] *The Power of God* 1.5.

[64] *The Power of God* 1.5.

the general framework of scholastic metaphysics, it is understood that the only thing which can limit act is potency.[65] To argue, then, that God's power is limited to only doing what God does, implies the function of a passive potency in some way. In other words, since God's power is limited to such a narrow outcome of only being that which God does, there must be a functional passive potentiality behind that limitation. Regardless of whether this passive potency is derived from creation or God himself, both lead to problematic conclusions. If from creation, it must be concluded that God's power is determined by something external to himself. If from himself, it must be concluded that there is, in fact, passive potency in God that limits God's being.

However, as can be expected, *actus purus* does not allow for any conclusion that leads to God's power being affected by passive potency. God's power cannot be such that it is dependent on anything external to him, nor can it be limited by some deficiency in God himself. Rather, God's power is such that it is fully and completely actualized in himself and independent of all things external to him. The notion that God's power only encompasses what God doe, is to make creation as a whole a sort of passive potency that limits God's act. In the same way that a creature's act is limited by the passive potency of the world, so God's power is limited by what seems to be some sort of passive potency of what would be willed. This creates the problem of placing potency as ontologically prior to act.[66]

Furthermore, the formulation of God's act as being necessary leads to a collapse of God's being with his works. If God acts out of necessity, then one could argue that what God has done is necessary for God to be God. Had he not done these things that are necessary, then he would be other than what he is. Thus, God's external acts and God's internal nature are inseparable from one another. Therefore, if God's nature is identical to his power, and his power is identical to his will, and his will is identical to his acts, then it would seem to be a logical conclusion that God's acts are identical to his nature. From this point, it seems difficult to avoid the conclusion that God's acts and God himself are one and the same. In the best-case scenario, this sounds

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[65] Feser, *Scholastic Metaphysics*, 36; 162.

[66] In both Aristotle and Scholastic thought, act is recognized as being ontologically prior to potency. See Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 9.8; Bernard Wuellner, *Summary of Scholastic Principles* (Fitzwilliam: Loreto, 2023), 11.

eerily similar to Karl Rahner's famous (or infamous) line: "The 'economic' Trinity is the 'immanent' Trinity."[67] In the worst-case scenario, the conflation of God's power and acts devolve into either pantheism or panentheism.[68]

Ultimately, as Thomas makes clear, we cannot attribute power to God by reason of what he does but by reason of his nature.[69] Regardless of whether God created more than what is currently known or if He created absolutely nothing, it would be irrelevant to the status of God's power and him being omnipotent. This is due to the fact that God's power is independent of anything external to God. As *actus purus* makes clear, external works in no way actuate God's power, since God's power has no potency to be actuated. Just as God is *a se*, so his power is *a se*. Thus, God's power is not conditional in some way upon creation but independent. If God were to ordain that grass be blue rather than green, this would in no way affect God's power in and of himself, as if blue or green grass actualize differing potentialities in God. While it is certainly true that God cannot do what God cannot will, such as evil or incoherence, it does not follow that God could not have willed other than what He did, so long as it is in accordance with his nature.[70]

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[67] Karl Rahner, *The Trinity,* trans. Joseph Donceel (New York: Burns and Oates, 2001), 22.

[68] John Cooper's work on panentheism helpfully elucidates how the panentheistic view imports passive potency into the nature of God, thus removing the conception of *actus purus*. Cooper states that with panentheism "God's essence is eternal and immutable, but his existence involves growth, change, and suffering. God in himself is personal, but God in actual existence acquires personhood by developing in and through the world, especially its conflict and suffering." John S. Cooper, *Panentheism: The Other God of the Philosophers* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 102. This conception of God entails that God must have an existential passive potency that allows for his growth, change, and suffering. With such an understanding, God's relationship to his creation is one in which God is dependent and molded by what is created; God could not be who he is without the actualizing effects of the created order.

[69] *The Power of God* 1.1.

[70] Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* 3.21.13.; 3.21.25.

Conclusion

Used as a lens through which to view divine power, *actus purus* serves as means of bolstering the creator-creature distinction, showing how God's power is unified to the divine nature, and upholding the notion of divine freedom. As *actus purus*, God's power is distinct in that it is without reciprocal actualization, unaffected by exertion or energy, and is not bound by the limitation of time. *Actus purus* further undergirds the unified nature of God in a way that God's power cannot be abstracted from the rest of God's nature. Lastly, God's power is seen, through *actus purus*, as not being limited to that which God has ordained to be but as infinite in God's nature.