



UNIVERSITÀ
DEGLI STUDI
DI PADOVA

Università degli Studi di Padova

Padua Research Archive - Institutional Repository

The Notion of Being as Act in Neoplatonism and Its Transmission in the Translatio Studiorum

Original Citation:

Availability:

This version is available at: 11577/2483371 since: 2018-09-27T08:47:01Z

Publisher:

-BRILL ACADEMIC PUBLISHERS, PLANTIJNSTRAT 2, P O BOX 9000, LEIDEN, NETHERLANDS, 2300 PA -

Published version:

DOI:

Terms of use:

Open Access

This article is made available under terms and conditions applicable to Open Access Guidelines, as described at <http://www.unipd.it/download/file/fid/55401> (Italian only)

(Article begins on next page)

THE NOTION OF BEING AS ACT IN NEOPLATONISM AND ITS
TRANSMISSION IN THE *TRANSLATIO STUDIORUM*

Rita Salis

1. *Introduction*

The problem of the origin of the concept of *actus essendi* constitutes one of the central themes in the history of ancient philosophy, and is one of the most important in the process known as *translatio studiorum*. The idea that Thomas Aquinas was the first to consider this concept has been contrasted with the idea that *actus essendi* was already present in Neoplatonism. In fact, the concept of “being” in Thomas Aquinas’s philosophy has been interpreted in many different ways over the years, especially in relation to Aristotle’s concept of being. In his book on being according to Thomas, Giovanni Ventimiglia recognizes three generations¹ within the historiography of Thomistic ontology. The first generation, begun by Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, lasted until the end of the 1930s and maintained that the being of Thomas equated with that of Aristotle.² During the second generation, lasting from the beginning of the 1930s to the end of the 50s and whose main exponent was E. Gilson, the being of Thomas was seen as the *actus essendi*. These scholars therefore interpreted it as a completely new and original concept compared to both Aristotle’s being and the Neoplatonic school of thought, by which Thomas may have been influenced.³ Lastly, the third generation—in which Thomas’s concept of

¹ See Giovanni Ventimiglia, *Differenza e contraddizione: Il problema dell’essere in Tommaso d’Aquino: esse, diversum, contradictio* (Milano: Vita e Pensiero, 1997), 5. The author also specifies here that in using the term “generations” he does not intend to indicate a rigid chronological-generational division, but different ways of interpreting Thomistic ontology that have developed through the years.

² *Ibid.*, 7–8 and notes, refers to Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, *Les sens commun, la philosophie de l’être et les formules dogmatiques* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1909), 138ff., and includes in the first generation Francesco Olgiati, *L’anima di S. Tommaso: Saggio filosofico intorno alla concezione tomista* (Milano: Vita e Pensiero, 1923), 17; Antonin D. Sertillanges, *St. Thomas d’Aquin* (Paris: Alcan, 1910), 1: 14–20; Gallus M. Manser, *Das Wesen des Thomismus* (Freiburg i.d.S.: St. Paulus-Druckerei, 1932), *passim*; Aimé Forest, *La structure métaphysique du concret selon saint Thomas d’Aquin* (Paris: Vrin, 1931), 36.

³ The texts referred to by Ventimiglia, *Differenza e contraddizione*, 10ff. and notes, are: Étienne Gilson, *God and Philosophy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1941), 144ff., in

being is considered to be unoriginal, having been elaborated within the world of Neoplatonism—originated at the beginning of the 1970s and persists to this day. Werner Beierwaltes and Klaus Kremer, among others, have led this most recent generation.⁴

However, together with Ventimiglia,⁵ it is necessary to recognize the importance that the publication of two other works had on the assertion made by the “third generation.” These works are P. Hadot’s two volumes on *Porphyre et Victorinus*, published in 1968,⁶ and Beierwaltes’s book entitled *Platonismus und Idealismus*, published in 1972.⁷ In the latter’s book, the author demonstrates that the identification of God with being had been made by Plutarch and Porphyry as well as by Philo of Alexandria, Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa, Victorinus and Augustine. In Hadot’s volume, together with the observation that this identification had been expressed in Neoplatonism, the definition of being as act is also traced back to the same period.

More specifically, this paper will discuss the section of Hadot’s study which appears in the appendix of the second volume, containing the text and the translation of the fragments of the anonymous commentary on

which the scholar, diverging from the initial viewpoint which highlighted Thomas’s Aristotelianism as opposed to his Platonism (see Étienne Gilson, “Pourquoi saint Thomas a critiqué saint Augustin,” *Archives d’histoire doctrinale et littéraire du Moyen Âge* 1 (1926–27), 125), no longer identifies Thomas’s being with Aristotle’s, but with the *Old Testament* God in *Exodus* 3:14, a verse read as “I am the being,” Étienne Gilson, *Le Thomisme. Introduction à la philosophie de Saint Thomas d’Aquin* (Paris: Vrin, 1942), in which even the concept of the act of being is stated once again. Ventimiglia also reveals the profound influence that J. Maritain exerted on Gilson’s theory.

⁴ Ventimiglia sees the forerunner of the new current as Cornelia J. de Vogel, “Ego sum qui sum’ et sa signification pour une philosophie chrétienne,” *Revue des sciences religieuses* 34–35 (1960–61), 348, in which the following points are put forth: (1) the Greeks were the first to identify God with being, and this concept was unknown to Hebrews; (2) the Greeks (i.e. Plato and the Platonists, Plutarch, the second century Platonists of Asia Minor, Plotinus and the Neoplatonists) acknowledge that the perfect, eternal, intelligible and transcendent Being is divine; (3) the identification of God as being was unknown to Moses’ audience; (4) the 70, representatives of the rather syncretist society of third century Egypt, who translated the Bible from Hebrew, were most likely influenced by Greek thought when they translated the verse from Exodus with: *egô eimi ho ôn*. These assertions found their highest recognition in, for example, Werner Beierwaltes, “Der Kommentar zum ‘Liber de Causis’ als neuplatonisches Element in der Philosophie des Thomas von Aquin,” *Philosophische Rundschau* 2 (1963), 215; Klaus Kremer, *Die neuplatonische Seinsphilosophie und ihre Wirkung auf Thomas von Aquin* (Leiden: Brill, 1966), 377–78. See Ventimiglia, *Differenza e contraddizione*, 22ff. and notes, which may also be consulted for a detailed reconstruction of the debate which followed on Thomas’s being.

⁵ See Ventimiglia, *Differenza e contraddizione*, 27ff. and notes.

⁶ Pierre Hadot, *Porphyre et Victorinus* (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1968).

⁷ Werner Beierwaltes, *Platonismus und Idealismus* (Frankfurt a.M.: Klostermann, 1972).

Plato's *Parmenides*. The introductory essay added to the Italian translation of this section will also be considered⁸ It is thanks to Hadot and the exponents of Ventimiglia's "third generation" that the *communis opinio*, according to which the concept of *actus essendi* can first be found in the philosophy of Thomas, was disproved. Hadot in particular demonstrated that the notion of "act of being" originated from both the anonymous commentary to the *Parmenides* by Plato, which he attributes to Porphyry, and the *Enneads* by Plotinus. This paper will first examine the fragments of the commentary in order to show that in it may be found both the identification of God with being and the concept of being as *actus essendi*. An analysis of *Enneads* 6.8 and 7 will follow. This is one of the passages in the work by Plotinus which most deserves to be considered in order to verify the effective anticipation of Neoplatonism in a doctrine that has traditionally been deemed to be of Thomistic origin. Finally, of particular interest is the comparison between being as interpreted by Neoplatonism, especially by Plotinus, and act as conceived by Aristotle, unanimously recognized as its discoverer.

2. *The Anonymous Commentary to Plato's Parmenides*

The commentary on Plato's *Parmenides*, which Hadot ascribes to Porphyry, was written on a few palimpsest folios of an evangeliary of Bobbio, preserved in the National Library in Turin, but destroyed by fire in 1904. In 1873, Bernardino Peyron was the author of the first edition,⁹ while the first critical edition was published in 1892 by Wilhelm Kroll.¹⁰

The first fragment probably refers to the section of the *Parmenides*¹¹ in which Plato places the hypotheses related to the One. The author attributes the notion of "One" to God,¹² and states that the One eliminates

⁸ Porfirio, *Commentario al "Parmenide" di Platone*, a cura di Pierre Hadot (Milano: Vita e Pensiero, 1993).

⁹ "Notizia di un antico evangelario bobbiese che in alcuni fogli palimpsesti contiene frammenti d'un greco trattato di filosofia," *Rivista di Filologia e d'Istruzione classica* 1 (1873), 53–71.

¹⁰ Wilhelm Kroll, "Ein neuplatonischer Parmenidescommentar in einem Turiner Palimpsest," *Rheinisches Museum* 47 (1892), 599–627.

¹¹ See Plato *Parmenides* 136A–137C; Pierre Hadot, *Commentario al "Parmenide" di Platone*, a cura di Pierre Hadot, 20.

¹² In translating *ô theos* by "God" with a capital "G" and without the article, instead of "the god," I follow the thesis supported by Enrico Berti in relation to the god of Aristotle as opposed to that of Neoplatonism. Berti, against the widespread habit among scholars to translate *ô theos* with "God," believes that this way of rendering the Greek expression

any multiplicity and composition from God, making Him appear simple and as the origin of other things. God is ascribed infinite power (*apeiron dunamin*) and is said, due to the fact that He is neither one nor many, to be beyond not only the notion of multitude, but also that of one. Finally, the commentator claims that God is ineffable, so it will be possible “to stay in non-apprehensive apprehension and in a conception which conceives nothing.” This is the only way “to rest at the ineffable implicit notion of him.”¹³

The second fragment seems to refer to the first hypothesis of the *Parmenides*—if One is—and also appears to allude to the part of the dialogue in which it is said that the One is neither one nor many, neither similar nor dissimilar.¹⁴ The question is raised whether or not God therefore would be dissimilar to the Mind, that is to say from the second hypostasis according to the Neoplatonists. The answer given is that, as in the case of the sunset, in which the sun is neither illuminated nor darkened, but these are conditions (*pathêma*) of those on earth; or, as people sailing along the land think that it is the land which is moving when they themselves are moving, so God is neither similar nor dissimilar, because He is without relationship to the things subsequent to Him. Rather, all the things which are, since they are unlike Him, seek to attach themselves to Him, thinking that their relationships are reciprocal also to Him. God has being as something inseparable from Himself and not as an addition, because that would mean that God has being imperfectly, or rather as an addition to His own perfection. It is not God who is nothing for those who want to know Him, but we and all things which are, are nothing in relation to Him. It is for this reason that we cannot know Him, because human mind grasps the like through the like. The commentator answers the question whether or not God knows by saying that He has knowledge, but not the kind gained following ignorance; He knows by transcending (*huperechôn*) all knowledge. God’s knowledge cannot be compared to that

brings the Aristotelian god closer to the God of monotheistic religions. The result is then a confusion of the kind of causality of Aristotle’s unmoved mover with a creationist or Neoplatonic concept of divinity (see Enrico Berti, “Ancora sulla causalità del motore immobile,” *Methexis* 20 (2007), 26–28). My choice of translating *ô theos* with “God” in a Neoplatonic context does not indicate tacit consent with the common translation of the Greek expression, rather a choice dictated by the necessity to distinguish it from the god of Aristotle.

¹³ Porphyrius *In Platonis Parmenidem commentaria* 1.1–2 (see Gerald Bechtle, *The Anonymous Commentary on Plato’s “Parmenides”* (Bern-Stuttgart-Wien: Haupt, 1999), 39–43.

¹⁴ See Plato *Parmenides* 139B–140B; Hadot, *Commentario al “Parmenide” di Platone*, 20.

of other knowing things, because His knowledge coincides with itself, the same way an unilluminated light is not darkened, but is merely light. God is thus removed from the others, and is filled with His own unity, while the things that come into being are nothing in relation to Him.¹⁵

The third fragment is made up of the passage from the *Parmenides* which concerns the affirmation related to the first hypothesis for which the One cannot be in time,¹⁶ and a brief comment.¹⁷

The fourth fragment refers to the section of the first hypothesis of the *Parmenides* in which the One is considered to be unspeakable and unknowable.¹⁸ The exegete proposes a negative theology rather than a positive theology, because—he states—the only possible knowledge of the One is similar to the knowledge possessed by those blind from birth, who can learn the difference between colors only through the description of logical symbols. They would, in fact, understand the meaning of the colors, but they would not know exactly what they are, since they cannot perceive them. In the same way, we lack a direct perception of God, so we must admit that negative theology is better than positive theology.¹⁹

The fifth fragment concerns the beginning of the second hypothesis and its subject is whether or not the One-which-is can be and not have a participation in *ousia*.²⁰ The commentator, based on the Plotinian interpretation of the *Parmenides* which finds a hypostasis for every hypothesis,²¹ establishes a correspondence between the second hypothesis of the Platonic dialogue (if One is) and Plotinus's second hypostasis: that-which-is (the Second One). Since the Second One is *ousia* and therefore should not participate in it, the problem arises as to how the Second One can participate in *ousia*.²² The exegete proposes two solutions based on the two different meanings of "participation," that is the Platonic meaning of "take part in," which implies the relationship between two forms, and the typically Neoplatonic meaning of "to receive a transcendent Form." The commentator's first explanation attempts to avoid the absurd consequence which derives from the affirmation that the One participates in *ousia*,

¹⁵ See Porphyrius *In Platonis Parmenidem commentaria* 2.3–6.

¹⁶ See Plato *Parmenides* 141A–D.

¹⁷ See Porphyrius *In Platonis Parmenidem commentaria* 3.7–8.

¹⁸ See Plato *Parmenides* 141D–142A.

¹⁹ See Porphyrius *In Platonis Parmenidem commentaria* 4.9–10; Hadot, *Commentario al "Parmenide" di Platone*, 21.

²⁰ See Plato *Parmenides* 142B.

²¹ See Plotinus *Enneads* 6.6.1.iff.

²² See Hadot, *Commentario al "Parmenide" di Platone*, 44.

namely that the *ousia* must preexist the One. The same way in which, if in the definition of “man” one takes “animal” and says that it participated in “reasonable,” the conclusion would be that man is “reasonable animal” as a whole, since “reasonable” has changed with “animal” and, vice versa, the One has changed with substance and substance has changed with the One, imitating the simplicity of the One that is only One, which converts into the Being. Consequently, that-which-is, is the all that is composed of unity and essence.²³

The necessity of the second explanation, which refers to intelligible substances, derives from the fact that the first does not explain the essence that is added to the One.²⁴ The commentator says that, since the Second One, that is the One-being, was due to the First, that is the pure One, and the Second One is that-which-is, we must hypothesize that the First One is, in connection with the Second, the pure Being, and in virtue of its participation the Second One is also that-which-is.²⁵ Therefore the Second One that participates in the *ousia* is not simply matter that assumes form, but receives a transcendent *ousia*.²⁶ But how can the Second One receive an *ousia*, given that there is no *ousia* before it, since the First One is not being, nor substance, nor action?²⁷ The answer is found in the following lines:

But consider whether Plato does not seem to be talking in riddles, since the One that is beyond substance and beyond that-which-is, is on the one hand not that-which-is nor substance nor act (*oude energheia*), but on the other hand rather acts (*energhei de mallon*); the acting also is itself pure (*auto to energhein katharon*), so that the being itself, which is before that-which-is, is also [pure]. Participating in this, the other One has from it an extracted being, which means to participate in that-which-is.²⁸

This passage states that the One that is beyond substance and beyond that-which-is,²⁹ that is the First One, is therefore not substance, nor being, and not even act, but He himself *acts*, since his *ousia* (*i.e.* his being) consists in the pure act. The assertion that the First One is not act and the

²³ Ibid., 45.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ See Porphyrius *In Platonis Parmenidem commentaria* 5.11–12.

²⁶ See Hadot, *Commentario al “Parmenide” di Platone*, 45.

²⁷ See Porphyrius *In Platonis Parmenidem commentaria*, 5.12.23; Hadot, *Commentario al “Parmenide” di Platone*, 45.

²⁸ Porphyrius *In Platonis Parmenidem commentaria* 5.12.22–29 (see Bechtle, *The Anonymous Commentary on Plato’s “Parmenides,”* 61–62).

²⁹ See Plato *Republic* 509B.

statement that He acts both clearly indicate that his activity is not something added to his *ousia*, but that his essence coincides with actuality. The First One is not substance, but he has the substance as act, the “pure act of being.”³⁰ He will therefore be *ousia* in his own way, that is his being is pure act. It is thus impossible not to agree with Hadot when he says that being constitutes the highest and purest act,³¹ and therefore that the concept of *actus essendi* is already present in the anonymous commentary to the *Parmenides*.

The sixth and last fragment concerns the second hypothesis of the *Parmenides*, which reads as follows:

Then what about this? If by reflection we take unity itself, which we say has a share of being, just alone by itself, without that of which we say it has a share, will it appear to be only one, or will that very thing appear many as well? One, I should think.³²

In this passage, it is Plato’s intention to separate, through a mental operation, and take the One-which-is alone, and consider it by itself. In this way, the One-which-is is considered separately from the One, in which the former participates, since it is considered independently from the many that were implied by his relationship with the Being.³³ Hadot explains that for a Neoplatonic commentator a similar argument raises the problem of how to consider the One taken separately from the One-which-is. The scholar believes that, in order to solve the problem, one must start at the end of the fragment, where the One is described as *to auto touto, this itself*. The author of the commentary says that *this itself* is different from “himself.” On the one hand, he is one and simple, on the other, since it is different from himself, it is no longer simple. Consequently, it is one and simple in its first form, that is according to the form of *this itself* considered alone. Nevertheless, when he becomes existence, life and thought, he is no longer one nor simple. So the answer Plato gives to this problem is that, if the One is considered by itself, separately from the Being, he is one and simple. On the other hand, if he participates in the Being, he is many.³⁴

³⁰ See Hadot, *Commentario al “Parmenide” di Platone*, 45.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 47f., where Hadot supposes that the origin of this doctrine can be found in the Plotinian treatise on the freedom and will of the One (see Plotinus *Enneads* 6.8.4.28).

³² Plato *Parmenides* 143A (see Reginald E. Allen, *Plato’s Parmenides*, Translation and Analysis (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), 24.

³³ See Maurizio Migliori, *Dialettica e Verità: Commentario filosofico al “Parmenide” di Platone* (Milano: Vita e Pensiero, 1990), 230–31.

³⁴ See Hadot, *Commentario al “Parmenide” di Platone*, 22–23.

However, since according to the commentator the One-which-is coincides with the Mind, the distinction made by Plato corresponds to two states of the Mind. Considered in itself, the Mind is absolutely simple:³⁵ “it is neither at rest nor in motion, neither the same nor different, neither in itself nor in another.”³⁶ In this way, it is identified with the One in its first form. Considered in its second state, the Mind “is at rest and is in motion at the same time, is in itself and in another, is a whole and has parts, and is the same and is different,”³⁷ so it is act on the level of life, thought and existence.³⁸ Thus life, existence and thought are acts that characterize the state in which the Mind emerges from its purity in order to become concrete.

3. *The actus essendi in Plotinus*

One of the passages that most deserves examination with regard to the concept of *actus essendi* is the conclusion of *Enneads* 6.8.7, in which Plotinus states:

Where—since we must use such words—the essential act (*energheia*) is identical with the being (*hupostasis*)—and this identity must obtain in the Good since it holds even in the Intellectual-Principle—there the act is no more determined by the being (*kata to einai*) than the being by the act (*kata tēn energheian*). Thus “acting according to its nature” does not apply; the act, the life, so to speak, cannot be held to issue from the being; the being accompanies the act in an eternal association: from the two (being and act) it forms itself into the Good, self-springing and unspringing.³⁹

At the beginning of this passage it is asserted that, regarding the One, existence identifies itself with act, which is true also of the Intellectual-Principle. Plotinus, in fact, had just established that both being and act coincide in Intellectual-Principle. The Neoplatonic philosopher arrived at this conclusion by raising the questions as to whether or not Intellectual-Principle possesses independence and freedom—in an act which cannot

³⁵ See Porphyrius *In Platonis Parmenidem commentaria* 6.14. 30–31.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.14.31–34 (see Bechtle, *The Anonymous Commentary on Plato's "Parmenides,"* 65).

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.14.25–29 (see Bechtle, *The Anonymous Commentary on Plato's "Parmenides,"* 65).

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.13–14.

³⁹ Plotinus *Enneads* 6.8.7.46–54 (see Plotinus, *The Enneads*, trans. Stephen MacKenna, abridged with an Introduction and notes by John Dillon (London: Penguin books, 1991), 520).

remain unreacted—and whether or not free will can be attributed to higher beings in general. Plotinus’s reasoning is as follows: since act, he argues, will be performed without reason, but is always determined by an external need,⁴⁰ if higher beings obey their own nature, how can there be freedom? Yet if, on the other hand, they do not obey an extern, how can they be called slaves? How could that which pursues the Good be subject to constraint, given that the movement occurs spontaneously only if it knows to direct itself towards the Good *qua* Good? Plotinus, in fact, intends “involuntary” as a deviation from the Good, since that which deviates from the attainment of the Good and approaches something more powerful than itself, becomes a slave of that which is more powerful. Being a slave of one’s own nature implies a duality—master and mastered. Now, Plotinus wonders, how is it possible that a simplex activity, which cannot have any difference of potentiality and act, is not free? It is not even possible to think “action according to the nature,” in the sense of any distinction between the being and its efficiency. Where act is performed neither because of anything else, nor depends on anything else, then surely there is freedom. Intellectual-Principle cannot depend on anything else, nor act according to anything else, because it is the principle. If Intellectual-Principle, Plotinus concludes, has a different principle, it is not outside of, but within the Good, and this makes it all the more free, given that everyone searches for freedom for the sake of the Good.⁴¹

The conclusion of the seventh section of *Enneads* 6.8 again concerns the freedom of Intellectual-Principle, and starts by referring to that which was established in *Enneads* 6.8.5, that is that the soul also is free, not for itself, but because it strives towards the Good through Intellectual-Principle. Instead, Intellectual-Principle, according to Plotinus, is free in itself, because its operation (*ergon*) is not applied to anything else, but coincides with Intellectual-Principle itself: “at rest in its good,” states Plotinus, “it is without need, complete, and may be said to live to its will”.⁴² Now, what Plotinus said with regard to Intellectual-Principle—that in it act and existence coincide—is true also for the One, that is for the Good. In section seven, Plotinus claims that it is absurd to think that the One-Good is not free because it generates according to its nature, since that would be like claiming that it is free only if and when it generates or acts against

⁴⁰ See Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.1.1110a2.

⁴¹ See Plotinus *Enneads* 6.8.4.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 6.8.6:35–36 (see Plotinus *The Enneads*, 518).

nature. The uniqueness of a being does not take away its freedom—a unique being would not be free if this uniqueness derived from something outside of it, or rather from an obstacle, while it is free if its uniqueness is identified with its same essence. Therefore, it is free for the fact that it is good and has no need to move towards something else. Whoever tries to reach the Good as something else would be, in virtue of that thing, deprived of freedom.⁴³ This established, Plotinus's argument continues without specifying any subject, but also without there being any reason to think that the author is not referring to the One-Good. Plotinus writes that, since, just as occurs with Intellectual-Principle, its existence is the same as its action (*autou*), if we say that "it acts in accordance with its being" this is no better than saying "it is in accordance with its act." The meaning of Plotinus's argument is that, since existence and act are identified with the One, saying that the One acts in consonance with its being is the same as saying that it is in accordance with its acting. Therefore, act is the being of the One.

The identity in the One of act and being is repeated in the final part of the passage. Plotinus asserts that the One does not possess an activity in accordance with its nature. Its activity, that is its life, was in fact born together with (*sungenomenê*) its essence from eternity. The One generates itself starting from its being and its own activity, and it belongs only to itself. In the One, therefore, act is given by being, and the generating act that the One carries out for itself is made by starting from being and act, that is from its own existence and its own activity. Just as, according to fragment five of the anonymous commentary to the *Parmenides*, activity does not add itself to and does not issue from the One, but coincides with its same being. Both passages thus constitute well-founded proof of the fact that the concept of *actus essendi*, which according to the traditional interpretation was first introduced by Thomas of Aquinas, was actually already present in Neoplatonic thought, in, for example, Plotinus and the commentator of the *Parmenides*.

4. Plotinus and Aristotle

The fact that Plotinus posits the act as being of the One raises the question as to what kind of relationship exists between this idea of act and that

⁴³ See Plotinus *Enneads* 6. 8.7.36–46.

of Aristotle, who was the first to introduce the concept. Scholars widely attribute this discovery to the Stagirite, even Hans J. Krämer, who stressed Aristotle's dependence on Plato. Krämer claimed that before Aristotle there existed only a *Vorgeschichte* of the doctrine of potency and actuality, in which potency was identified as a mathematical concept emerging from Plato's unwritten doctrines, and a concept of *teleion*, developed by Speusippus, who, differently from Aristotle, gave priority to the seed and not the plant, thus assigning priority to potency.⁴⁴ Aristotle's concept of "act" is expressed in the terms *energheia* and *entelecheia*, which recur throughout most of the *Metaphysics*. The two terms, however, were not always used with the same meaning, and Berti has shown that this does not necessarily indicate a chronological evolution, but rather a logical-conceptual transition in which Berti distinguishes three main lines, identifiable within the concepts of act as motion, as being and as activity.⁴⁵

The concept of act as motion appears in Book 9 of the *Metaphysics* with the concept of potency, considered in relation to motion—that is with the concept of potency as source of change in another thing or in the thing itself *qua* other. Aristotle introduces the concept of act in order to answer the Megarians who believed in the existence of potency only when there is actuality. Aristotle asserts that it was decided to use the term *energheia* with a particular meaning, which therefore derives from a convention, that is with the meaning of *entelecheia*, and this meaning can also be attributed to other things different from motions. The Stagirite nonetheless makes this declaration in order to point out that this meaning derives from the more common one of motion. Thus, two distinct meanings of the term *energheia* emerge: one is more common, more primitive and primary, and therefore means motion, whereas the other meaning is later and derives from a linguistic convention according to which *energheia* equals *entelecheia* and means "being" or "being in action."⁴⁶ Berti observes that the interest in the original meaning of *energheia* lies in its expressing a strong way of being, a being seen as acting and being acted upon, that is a dynamic concept of being, and that this definition of *energheia*

⁴⁴ See Enrico Berti, "Il concetto di atto nella Metafisica di Aristotele," in Enrico Berti, *Aristotele. Dalla dialettica alla filosofia prima* (Milano: Bompiani, 2004), 552; Hans J. Krämer, "Das Verhältnis von Plato und Aristoteles in neuer Sicht," *Zeitschrift für philosophische Forschung* 26 (1972), 342–43.

⁴⁵ See Berti, "Il concetto di atto nella Metafisica di Aristotele," 553–54.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 555–56.

establishes the transition to the later definition, that is to say that of “being,” corresponding to the technical concept of *entelecheia*.⁴⁷

Aristotle deals with *energheia* as *entelecheia* in the sixth chapter of Book 9 of the *Metaphysics*. Here it is said that “Actuality (*energheia*) means the existence of the thing (*to huparchein to pragma*), not in the sense that we mean by potency.”⁴⁸ Berti underlines the importance of the passage for the fact that, although it does not contain a definition, since it refers to the notion of potency, which in Aristotle’s thinking presupposes that of act,⁴⁹ it does allude to a way of existing that is not only a determination, but rather is a real being. According to Berti, the missing definition of the act confirms the fact that the potency-act pair is seen as a distinction between two basic definitions of being, that is as coextensive with the whole being, since being cannot fit into any definition, which would constitute a limitation.⁵⁰

Aristotle’s act therefore expresses an existence and, nonetheless, like Berti, it should be recognized that this is not enough to identify this concept with Thomas’s concept of *actus essendi*. Act also has many meanings, since “every act is always a determinate act, that is it means a determinate existence.”⁵¹ Indeed, act and potency are the meanings of being that are predicated of all the categories,⁵² which also constitute other meanings of being, and therefore of existence.⁵³ The doctrine of the many meanings of being forced Aristotle to reject the admission of an entity which has being as its essence—what will be called in Scholasticism *Esse ipsum subsistens*. As Berti rightly pointed out, Aristotle did not ignore the concept of *actus essendi*, but conscientiously rejected it, since it was irreconcilable with his doctrine of the many meanings of being.⁵⁴

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 557.

⁴⁸ Aristotle *Metaphysics* 9.6.1048a30–32.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 8.1049b12–14.

⁵⁰ See Berti, “Il concetto di atto nella Metafisica di Aristotele,” 559–61.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 564.

⁵² See Aristotle *Metaphysics* 5.7.1017b2; Berti, “Il concetto di atto nella Metafisica di Aristotele,” 564.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 5.7. 1017a23–24; 8.2.1042b25–28; Berti, “Il concetto di atto nella Metafisica di Aristotele,” 564.

⁵⁴ See Berti, “Il concetto di atto nella Metafisica di Aristotele,” 565. According to Aristotle, this concept of act corresponds to substance or form, i.e., to the essence or first substance of everything (see Aristotle *Metaphysics* 7.7.1032b1–2). With regard to this, Berti observed that Aristotle’s identification of act with substance has been incorrectly contrasted with the identification of act with existence acknowledged by Avicenna and Thomas, who derived from the Bible the concept of God as *actus essendi*. While Aristotle views the substance identified with act as a substance which actually exists, essence for Avicenna and Thomas is a substance by potency, purely thought. According to Berti,

The final and most significant instance in the development of the Aristotelian concept of act is found in the doctrine of the unmoved mover contained in the second part of Book 12 of the *Metaphysics*. The existence of Aristotle's god as pure act and thinking in itself is demonstrated also on the basis of his doctrine of potency and act, seen as substance, that is as being. In chapter six, indeed, it is shown that the eternity of motion necessitates not only a mover that moves eternally without ever moving itself, but also a cause that is eternally in action since, if it were not so, the movement could cease at any time. The mover must therefore be absolutely immovable, eternal, completely without potency and immaterial, since matter is potency. The actuality of the first cause, nonetheless, is not linked to motion, rather to its being, because the necessary condition for the eternity of motion is that its substance be act.

Such an act, however, cannot be *actus essendi*, since Aristotle does not allow an entity that has only the being as its essence. The act of Aristotle's unmoved mover cannot be what he defines in the *De anima* as "first act," a simple possession of knowledge. This meaning of act indeed comes before in the generation of the individual, but in relation to the substance, it comes after the "second act," which even though in the generation follows the possession, is more important because it constitutes the realization, that is the activity.⁵⁵ The activity that belongs to God can only be of the most perfect kind, and such is thought. Thus, the unmoved mover is thought. But according to Aristotle thought is not just being, but also life. The act of thought is in fact defined as life,⁵⁶ and the life of God is ceaseless and eternal.⁵⁷ Thought, therefore, is of course being, but it is the being of the most perfect entity, not just of being.⁵⁸

If it is beyond doubt that it was Aristotle who first considered act, it is just as sure that Aristotle never conceived of an *actus essendi*, but only of an act of a certain activity like moving, living and thinking. This clearly distinguishes his concept of act from the one that can be found in Neoplatonism, which, on the other hand, acknowledges act as an act of being.

this would be proved by the fact that the form with which Aristotle identifies the basic meaning of substance, that is the first substance, is not a universal form, existing only in thought, but an individual form, existing in act (see Berti, "Il concetto di atto nella Metafisica di Aristotele," 562–63).

⁵⁵ See Aristotle *On the Soul* 2.1. 412a22ff. This fact was pointed out in Berti, "Il concetto di atto nella Metafisica di Aristotele," 566–67.

⁵⁶ See Aristotle *Metaphysics* 12.7.1072b26–27.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 107 2b29–30.

⁵⁸ See Berti, "Il concetto di atto nella Metafisica di Aristotele," 568–69.

