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Abstract

The active/passive distinction, once a hallmark of classical metaphysics, has largely been discarded from contemporary thought. The revival of powers theory has not seen an equally vigorous rehabilitation of the real distinction between active and passive powers. I begin an analysis and vindication with a critique of E.J. Lowe's discussion. I then argue that the active/passive problem is a *metaphysical* one, not a logical or logico-linguistic one, and so logic is impotent to solve it. Following this is a discussion of the rights and wrongs of Aristotle's and Aquinas's (identical) defence of the distinction. We will see that one main part of their analysis is a bright red herring while the other part contains the solution to the problem. I then state and clarify the key Scholastic principle concerning action and passion, which I call the Fundamental Thesis – one that will appear scandalous to contemporary ears, yet from which we can derive the tools needed to understand action and passion in the right way. I end with a definition of what I call the Minimal Metaphysical Agent, where the formulation is to be understood as an epistemic criterion for identifying agent and patient in a given causal interaction.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Few propositions seems to be more deserving of the label 'metaphysical truism' than the thesis that there is a difference between what things *do* and what merely *happens* to them. There is a

world of difference between hitting a ball and being hit by one. I would rather eat than be eaten. One loves, and one hopes to be loved in return. Water breaks the ionic bonds of a salt crystal but water molecules themselves are broken by an electric current. Such phenomena – the stuff both of science and of everyday life – carve what seems like a real joint in nature, that between the *active* and the *passive*. If I push the door open, I exercise an active power – the power to do something *to* something else. If someone pushes the door into me, then although *they* exercise an active power, *I* display – 'exercise' is not the right word – a passive power, in other words, the capacity to be acted upon by something else. The active and passive voice, universal or near universal across natural languages, broadly marks this metaphysical distinction.

That said, the active/passive distinction – speaking now of metaphysics only – has been the object of some scepticism, and for good reason since it brings with it thorny problems that can make one wonder whether it should be ditched altogether. For a start, whereas it seems evident that there is a real difference between my pushing someone and my being pushed by someone, it is less clear that there is such a difference between my pushing someone and *their* being pushed by *me*. Teaching and learning seem really distinct: a person can enjoy one but find the other tiresome. Yet if Fred teaches Wilma ancient Greek, how can this be really distinct from Wilma's learning ancient Greek at the hands of Fred? Why should the linguistic difference of voice mark anything more real than a mere difference of perspective, emphasis, or interest? The temptation to treat action and passion as merely notionally different has been yielded to by Aristotelian-Scholastic philosophers with impeccable credentials no less than by metaphysicians of other stripes.[1] We should, I will argue, resist the temptation.

In what follows (section 2) I first locate the active/passive distinction within a broader discussion of causation. The traditional view sees the distinction as one between different kinds of *power*. We can recover this view from a critique of E.J. Lowe's fourfold classification of powers. Moreover, as one of the few philosophers to have discussed that distinction at any length, he provides a useful starting point for analysis. Lowe's account, however, suffers from some serious misconceptions about the relation between action, passion, and causation. Once cleared up, the traditional distinction comes into better focus. I move on (section 3) to argue that the problem of how to understand the active/passive distinction is, contrary to what some have argued, a *metaphysical* one, not a logical or logico-linguistic one, and that logic (with or without some added philosophy of language) is thereby impotent to solve it. Following this (section 4) is a discussion of the rights and wrongs of Aristotle's and Aquinas's (identical) defence of the distinction. We will see that one main part of their analysis is a bright red herring while the other part contains the solution to the problem. I then (section 5) state and clarify the key Scholastic principle concerning action and passion – what I will call the Fundamental Thesis. This thesis will seem scandalous to contemporary ears, yet I submit it gives us the tools we need to understand action and passion in the right way. I then provide (section 6) a definition of what I call the Minimal Metaphysical Agent, where the formulation is to be understood as an epistemic criterion for identifying the agent and the patient in a given interaction. I end with brief speculation on the historical origins of scepticism about the distinction between action and passion.

[1] Wuellner (2011, p. 14), principle 28: 'Action and passion are not really distinct'; for other sceptics, see (Mumford and Anjum, 2018, p. 269); (Martin, 1993, p. 182); (Ingthorsson, 2002, pp. 107-9); (Williams, 2019, p. 125) (who regards the active/passive distinction as 'dangerous'). There is disagreement over whether to attribute this position to St Thomas Aquinas himself: compare, e.g., (Löwe, 2018) to (Frost, 2018, p. 55). Although I side with Frost, she does not handle the question well, insisting that in the relevant context Aquinas *does* mean to assert a real distinction between action and passion, whereas she should, more cautiously, have said that this is what he *ought* to have meant.

2 | ACTIVE AND PASSIVE, CAUSAL AND NON-CAUSAL

We begin with the truism that some things act – they attract, they crush, they dissolve other things. Some are acted on – they are attracted, crushed, dissolved. It should be emphasized that although the tradition speaks of agents and patients, the distinction we should focus on is between things *inasmuch as* they exercise (manifest, display[2]) active or passive *powers*. Something is an agent inasmuch as it exercises an *active power*, and a patient inasmuch as it manifests a *passive power*. This framing naturally raises the question of how to interpret the active/passive distinction in terms of *causation*. E.J. Lowe is one of the few contemporary philosophers to have addressed the distinction explicitly, and moreover to have related it to the more familiar causal idiom of analytic metaphysics. For these reasons his account is an instructive jumping-off point for our discussion.

Lowe distinguishes between what he calls the 'active' and the 'passive' on one hand and the 'causal' and the 'non-causal' on the other (2013a, pp. 173–7; 2013b, pp. 153–60).[3] A causal power's manifestation consists in its 'acting on one or more other individual substances (or sometimes on itself) so as to bring about a certain kind of change in them (or it)' (2013b, p. 157). The manifestation of a non-causal power 'does not consist in its bearer bringing about any distinctive kind of change in anything' (2013a, p. 174). A typical example of a causal power is that of water to dissolve salt, and of a non-causal power that of a spherical object to roll down an inclined plane. The object might crush something in its path but this is not part of the manifestation of the power to roll. (These are Lowe's examples: 2013a, pp. 173–4; 2013b, pp. 157–8.)

What characterises an active power for Lowe is that it 'has a *manifestation* type, but no *stimulus* type' (2013b, p. 159). It is a power 'whose characteristic manifestation never needs to be "triggered"' (2013a, p. 174) by being acted upon by something else. By contrast, a passive power's manifestation 'always needs to be *caused* by one or more substances acting on its bearer' (2013b, p. 159). Thus salt has the passive power of dissolving in water since its manifestation has to be triggered by coming into contact with water. Radium's power of radioactive decay, by contrast, is for Lowe 'spontaneous', that is, untriggered and so 'active' (2013a, p. 174; 2013b, p. 159).

The distinction between causal and non-causal powers is doubtful.[4] Unless we are simulating the rolling of a sphere down an incline, say digitally, it is hard to see how the power to roll does not entail, as part of its manifestation, the power to bring about change. The point is not that the rolling power constitutively has two manifestations – a certain movement and the causing of a certain physical change. Rather, the rolling Lowe has in mind is *physical* rolling, and physical rolling just *is* the kind of movement that imparts forces on other objects, at a minimum the physical surface on which the object rolls. This minimal change – pressing against the surface – is essentially causal; it is not a mere incidental correlate of the sphere's motion.

Although the general claim would require separate treatment, it is hard to think of any kind of physical power whose manifestation does not essentially involve some kind of causation, in other words production of change.[5] Perhaps the hardest examples involve mental powers – loving someone from afar, wanting dinner, despairing at the thought of a long workday ahead. Yet

[2] I will not make anything of the appropriate verb to use in a given context, the differences being mainly ones of connotation or implicature rather than metaphysics.

[3] In-text citations without author names refer to works by Lowe.

[4] At least if we confine ourselves to the material world.

[5] An interesting suggestion I cannot pursue here involves *prevention*. Consider stable configurations of objects (e.g. a stone arch) where the components prevent collapse. Isn't prevention a kind of causation *without* change? In reply, prevention is not only consistent with the production of change but *must* involve it. The components of a structure that prevent

to the extent such powers are physical – involving bodily operations – they must also involve the bringing about of change, at least to *oneself*. In loving, desiring, despairing, and so on, a person gets their body into a certain state, readies themselves for prospective action, behaves in certain characteristic ways. All of this is familiar to behavioural psychology and none of it shows that the exercise of mental powers is purely physical, or reducible to some base level of chemical or hormonal action. All it suggests is that the effecting of change is a constitutive *part* of such exercise. Again, consider the causal relations between mental states. Despair might incidentally[6] cause me to overeat but it constitutively causes me to worry, to be anxious, to obsess over the object of my lost hope. If causation obtains in these difficult cases, it should be even more apparent in the case of common or garden physical causation.

Lowe's idiosyncratic classification of 'active' and 'passive' powers is equally dubious. He singles out salt as having the passive power of dissolving in water, but the same applies to water:[7] its power of dissolving salt is also passive albeit causal, on Lowe's account, since its manifestation requires triggering by exposure to salt. Lowe thus ends up with what looks like a picture of 'mutual manifestation partners',[8] each triggering the other, with neither substance exercising a 'dominant' power;[9] yet the asymmetry of agent and patient is still buried within, albeit under the guise of the causal and the non-causal. The cross-cutting distinctions Lowe makes between active/passive and causal/non-causal introduce, I suggest, more confusion than they dispel. Matter's gravitational power of attraction is classified as active and causal since 'all matter, by its very nature, is always exercising or manifesting this power' (2013b, p. 160). Yet matter will not manifest its attractive power unless in the presence – triggered by the presence of – other matter, so surely its power is 'passive' on Lowe's definition even if the power happens always to be manifested.

His paradigm of an 'active' but 'non-causal' power is that of a radium atom to undergo spontaneous radioactive decay. Radium has a fixed half-life so there is an objective probability of an atom's decaying according to that half-life. Nothing, explains Lowe, *causes* the atom to decay; there is no stimulus. Moreover, such decay does not cause anything either, so the decay power is active and non-causal. Of the latter point there is no room here for discussion, but I note that if it is true that radioactive decay constitutively does not cause anything, one might wonder whether it looks rather like a passive power after all, at least from a more Aristotelian perspective. On the latter conception, the manifestation is what *happens* to something rather than what it *does*, a distinction to be explained in more detail later. But for Lowe, this *would* require the atom to be triggered into decay, which he denies.

Radioactive decay is too difficult an example to make Lowe's point that active powers in his sense exist. One problem is that he limits the triggering to 'external circumstances or conditions'

its collapse can only do so by causing various changes, e.g. stones exerting pressure on neighbouring stones – which involves friction, compression at the surfaces, and corresponding reactions (hence the stability). These relatively small-scale changes can be observed in such configurations. The same applies at the very large scale, where orbital perturbations (changes in motion) are caused by the behaviour of planets in stable configurations, whose gravitational attractive powers prevent each other from escape or deviation into alternative trajectories. It also applies at the very small scale, for example in the case of a stable configuration of particles in a magnetic field: continuous perturbations are caused by the mutually preventive behaviour of the particles. One can perhaps have ideal scenarios in which such perturbations are eliminated, but ideal scenarios are ipso facto not real so I am content to put them to one side. Thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing me on this point.

[6] *per accidens*, as a Scholastic would put it.

[7] As he notes in his diagram at (Lowe, 2013b, p. 160).

[8] See, e.g., (Martin, 1993), (Heil, 2012, p. 119).

[9] (Williams, 2019, p. 125: 'dominance').

(2013a, p. 174; 2013b, p. 159). There is, however, no good reason to restrict the stimulus to an external one. Alpha decay[10] is generally accepted as involving the overcoming of the strong nuclear force by the electromagnetic force (Krane, 1988, p. 174 and chap. 8). Beta decay[11] involves the overcoming of the strong force by the weak force (Krane, 1988, pp. 174–5 and chap. 9). Both involve internal interactions such that a force that tends to destroy the particle overcomes one that tends to keep it together. In gamma decay,[12] the forces are indeed applied from outside – high-energy bombardment in the case of *induced* nuclear fission, and collision in the case of fusion, though the mechanism of *spontaneous* fission is more like that of alpha decay. Therefore, it is tendentious to suppose that radioactive decay requires no stimulus[13] and hence is an example of an active power in Lowe's sense.

The ultimate objective of Lowe's fourfold classification is the characterisation of the human will as an active, non-causal power – in this respect no different to the way he understands radioactive decay. There is no room to analyse his view of the will, but the location of a precedent for such a power in physics is disputable. Further, the idea that the will is 'spontaneous', as he puts it – not triggered by *anything* – is prima facie implausible. It is the ends, purposes, objectives – 'final causes', as they were once called – that stimulate the will to action. Indeed the very idea that there are powers whose manifestation essentially causes nothing and is caused by nothing makes one wonder whether the power itself is nothing. The moral of the story is that an adherent of the active/passive distinction is, I submit, on more solid ground by collapsing Lowe's fourfold classification, treating the active powers and the causal powers as one and the same, on one hand, and the passive powers and non-causal powers as the same on the other. A more plausible interpretation of Lowe's examples would place each one exclusively in either category, without denying that every power is triggered by something or other.[14]

3 | THE IMPOTENCE OF LOGIC: A CASE STUDY

The observations made so far strongly suggest that the active/passive contrast marks a real distinction in nature. Perhaps, though, there is an alternative understanding. In particular, it might be thought that logic has an answer: the concept of *converse relations* tells us how to think about the metaphysical problem. Bertrand Russell introduced us to the concept of the converse relation.[15] The closest he gets to a definition is that it is 'the relation which holds between *b* and *a* whenever *R* holds between *a* and *b*' (Russell, 2010/1903, p. 96). He also tells us: 'if *R* be any relation, there is a relation *R'* such that *xRy* is equivalent to *yR' x* for all values of *x* and *y*'. And he gives us some examples, such as '[g]reater and less, before and after, implying and implied by' (Russell,

[10] The emission by a nucleus of an alpha particle (two protons and two neutrons bound together).

[11] The emission by a nucleus (more precisely a nuclide) of a beta particle (electron or positron).

[12] The release of energy in photons from a nucleus.

[13] Even if the stimulus only operates probabilistically on the outcome.

[14] Well, not quite. It may be that this requirement only applies to powers whose manifestations involve *changes*, since every change requires a changer (more about this later). I have suggested previously that some powers not involving changes need not have a trigger or stimulus (Oderberg, 2014).

[15] Drawing, at least in notation, on Ernst Schröder. See (Russell, 2010/1903, pp. 25, 96); (Schröder, 1895, pp. 29-30). The concept of the converse relation goes back at least to Augustus De Morgan in the 1840s and 1850s: see (De Morgan, 1966, pp. 51, 119, 174, 186, 191, 195 etc.), albeit Russell brought it into early analytic philosophy. I am grateful to Clare Hay for directing me to the sources and for discussion of the history of the concept.

2010/1903, p. 25). This is the standard proposed definition of converse, echoed by Kit Fine: it is the relation 'that holds between the objects *a* and *b* just in case the given relation holds between *b* and *a*' (Fine, 2000, p.3). Russell also tells us that the second-order relation between a relation and its converse is 'the relation of oppositeness, or difference of sense' (Russell, 2010/1903, p. 96).

The present discussion is metaphysical, not logical, so I confine my remarks to serving the end of showing that considerations of the latter kind are impotent to help us with problems of the former kind. Timothy Williamson suggests it would be arbitrary to suppose some relations had no converse (Williamson, 1985).[16] Yet although the converse of '*x* is the parent of *y*' is '*y* is the offspring of *x*', what is the converse of '*x* is the father of *y*'? There is no term for it in English, at least. Should we say that *x* is the father of *y* just in case *y* is (immediately) paternally descended from *x*? This looks like an artificial way of saying simply that *y* has *x* for their father, in other words that *x* is the father of *y*. And this is the original relation, not the converse.

Or take this example: assuming the variables to range over parts of two-dimensional polygons, suppose that *x* is a part of the same triangle as *y*[17] just in case *y* is a part of the same trilateral as *x*. Although true, sharing a trilateral is not the converse of sharing a triangle if the marker is simply 'oppositeness of sense', as Russell puts it. There is more going on since trilaterality and triangularity are not the same property, albeit necessarily coextensive. After all, *x* is a part of the same triangle as *y* just in case *y* is a part of the same triangle as *x* (mutatis mutandis for trilateral), so aren't these the real converses, especially since identity is its own converse and we are considering an identity relation? But then why not say some relations have more than one converse? Or perhaps we should say, as Williamson himself does, that a relation and its converse are identical. Yet, as Fine points out, if *R* is an asymmetrical or non-symmetrical relation and R_c its converse, then there will be something true of *R* that is not true of R_c (and vice versa) – that *R* is had by *x* to *y* but not by *y* to *x* (asymmetrical), or that *R* is had by *x* to *y* but not necessarily by *y* to *x* (non-symmetrical).

Williamson's argument for the identity of a relation and its converse is twofold. The first limb is a gesture at some metaphysics and/or epistemology, which I will consider later in this section and in the next. The second and principal limb, however, rests on the claim that denying identity leads to massive semantic indeterminacy. Consider a language *L* containing the binary predicate *X*, which refers to the stabbing relation. So in *L*, '*Xab*' means that *a* stabs *b*. But the order of the argument terms is only conventional in *L*. So imagine *L'*, exactly like *L* except that '*Xba*' also means that *a* stabs *b*. Now suppose language *L"*, exactly like *L* but in which '*X*' now stands for the converse of the stabbing relation. Williamson explains: 'the marks "*Xab*"[18] mean in *L"* what the marks "*Xba*" mean in *L*: *b* stabs *a* – or at least, they are as tightly equivalent as' the sentences 'The fork is to the left of the knife' and 'The knife is to the right of the fork'. Williamson's somewhat opaque conclusion is that the distinction between *L'* and *L"* is a 'distinction without a difference' (Williamson, 1985, p. 253). If instead of *L* we consider English and its variants *E'* and *E"*, the same applies.

The thought that *L'* and *L"*, or their natural language equivalents, are 'indistinguishable' even though it is built into the example that '*X*' stands for a *different predicate* in each one is hard to believe. Now 'different predicate' could mean two things – different linguistic expressions denoting different relations or the same linguistic expression denoting different relations. Williamson

[16] So does Fine (2000, p. 3).

[17] Or 'shares a triangle with', better to emphasize the relationality.

[18] He uses corner quotes; italics added.

is ambiguous on this point, since when he applies the example to English his claim is that 'English is indeterminate between *E'* and *E'"* (Williamson, 1985, p.254). This claim is consistent with both interpretations of 'different predicate.' Nevertheless, if 'different predicate' means that *E'* contains the reverse-order equivalent of 'stabs' and *E"* contains a distinct single-word equivalent of the passive 'is stabbed by', then evidently *neither* language is English. And if it means that both *E'* and *E"* contain the same linguistic expression, denoting the active *stabbing relation* in the former, but with reverse-order syntax, and the passive *being stabbed by* relation in the latter, then yet again *neither* language is English. To claim that either language is 'exactly like' English and then that it is indeterminate which one *is* English is of borderline coherence. Clearly both *L'* and *L"*, and *E'* and *E"*, are respectively distinguishable from each other because ex hypothesi one contains a *passive* construction and the other does not. For Williamson to suggest that this is a distinction without a difference, then, is to confuse language and metaphysics.[19]

This confusion is apparent from Williamson's discussion, for in the midst of making a point about semantic indeterminacy, he intersperses the claim that there is no *causal* distinction between Brutus' stabbing Caesar and Caesar's being stabbed by Brutus (Williamson, 1985, p. 253): the causes and effects of both are the same. Whether this Davidsonian criterion of event/action identity is correct is of no concern here; but the claim has nothing to do with semantic indeterminacy or the function of syntactic distinctions. At one point, as we saw above, Williamson asserts that 'the marks "*Xab*" mean in *L"* what the marks "*Xba*" mean in *L*: *b* stabs *a*', which is precisely to beg the question against someone who holds that they do *not* mean the same, since the first means that a certain *action* is performed and the second means that a certain *passion* is undergone. At another, he brings in epistemology: 'how could a relation be more salient than its converse?' and to 'notice' a relation is to 'notice' its converse (Williamson, 1985, p. 254). He exemplifies these bare rhetorical questions with relations such as 'is to the right/left of' and 'is before/after', as though they were no different in philosophical principle to 'stabs'.

Metaphysically, however, there is a world of difference between static relations of *position* (in time or space) and dynamic relations of *action*. Here, the concept of *directionality* produces massive confusion. For it is one thing to focus on the direction of *terms* and another to focus on the direction of *things* in the world. The common thought is that what distinguishes a relation from its converse is direction (or *order*) of terms: so '*x* stabs *y*' must be different from '*y* is stabbed by *x*', not just syntactically but semantically, so they pick out different *real* relations in the world. By parity of reasoning, then, the same should apply to '*x* is above *y*' and '*y* is below *x*', and similarly for 'before' and 'after'. Yet, says the critic, how can this be true for 'above/below' and 'before/after'? Surely in each case the pair of sentences denote the 'same situation' (Evans, 1955)?[20] But then the same must be true of 'stabs/is stabbed by'; and both sides of the debate founder because logical considerations lead them to treat different cases similarly. It is the pervasive equivalence thought that difference of order entails difference of relation and sameness of order entails sameness of relation which, I submit, leads to hopeless confusion and scepticism about the active/passive distinction. After all, we do not need hypothetical languages to know that difference of order does *not* entail difference of relation: the Latin 'Caesarem Brutus confodit' and 'Brutus Caesarem confodit' denote the same relation type and token; so also 'Caesar a Bruto confossus est' and 'a Bruto Caesar confossus est'. Of course, 'Caesarem Brutus confodit' and 'Caesar Brutum confodit' denote the

[19] A similar flavour of argument to Williamson's, albeit not cited by him, based on a 'semantic distinction without a difference' is found in (Evans, 1955), with not only the attendant confusion of language and metaphysics but also with the author's triumphantly proclaiming that 'below' is a *synonym* of 'above' (p.18). For a brief riposte, see (Church, 1956).

[20] 'stand for the same relation' (Williamson, 1985).

same relation type but different tokens despite sameness of order.[21] To the retort that Latin case implicitly marks order I would rejoinder by denying any such implication; what could that even mean? Rather, Latin case simply marks who did what to whom, and so marks the active/passive distinction, and we are back where we started.

4 | DIRECTIONALITY AND POTENTIALITY: ARISTOTLE AND AQUINAS

Exegesis and analysis of the Aristotelian-Thomistic position on action and passion require their own lengthy treatment, so I will focus only on two themes here with the aim of showing what Aristotle and Aquinas get wrong and right about the distinction.[22] Their unified position is that action is really distinct from passion.[23] Aquinas echoes Aristotle that a difference of *directionality* is at least part of the explanation. According to the latter, action differs from passion as the traversal of the interval from one to two differs from the traversal from two to one, and as the steep ascent differs from the steep descent (*Physics* III.3, 202a18-20; Ross (Ed.), 1930). Aquinas concurs, adding that comparing two to one is called double, and comparing one to two is called half (*Commentary on Aristotle's Physics* III, lec.4; Blackwell et al., 1995, p.155). Further, 'the space of rising and of descending is the same, but because of a difference in starting points and finishing points it is called ascent or descent.'[24] Again, teaching and learning, says Aristotle, are the same 'in the sense'[25] in which the road from Thebes to Athens is the same as the road from Athens to Thebes, or in the sense in which the same distance between two points means that the direction from the first to the second is the same as that from the second to the first.[26] This is echoed by Aquinas, who explains that the roads from Athens to Thebes and from Thebes to Athens are identical inasmuch as they are 'the same in subject', though they differ in essence.[27]

What, then, is the underlying identity between action and passion? Aristotle and Aquinas agree in calling it the *motion*.[28] The difference is that action is the motion 'from' and passion is the motion 'in', as for example teaching and learning. It is here that the confusion between what is correct and incorrect in their account is apparent. For motion has a *direction*, and if there is only

[21] And, of course, 'Caesarem Brutus confodit' and 'Brutus stabbed Caesar' denote the same type and token, as do 'Caesar was stabbed by Brutus' and the archaic/literary 'By Brutus was Caesar stabbed'.

[22] For a useful discussion of Aristotle, see (Marmodoro, 2007). For Aquinas, see (Frost, 2018).

[23] It is not uncommon in the Scholastic tradition to attribute to them the view that there is only a *nominal* or *conceptual* distinction between action and passion; see Wuellner (2011): n.28. I agree with Frost (2018): 55 that Aquinas believes in a real distinction, albeit the texts she proffers in her note 22 do not support the point. 'Ratio' for Aquinas means 'essence' in the passages she quotes, not 'account of something [existing in reality]'. It is less clear, in the principal Thomistic texts Frost discusses, that Aquinas reveals an explicit belief in the real distinction than that given what he says, this is the position he is *committed* to.

[24] 'similiter idem est spatium ascendentis et descendentis; sed secundum diversitatem principii et termini, vocatur ascensio vel descensio.'

[25] *hōs*.

[26] Literally, 'being here at a distance from there and being there at a distance from here': *Physics* III.3, 202b15-20 (Ross Ed., 1930).

[27] 'idem subjecto', 'secundum rationem': (Blackwell et al., 1995, p. 159). Here I disagree with the translation 'according to reason', as explained earlier. The contextual evidence is clear, since only a few lines earlier Aquinas uses 'ratio' to mean 'nature' or 'essence' when identifying *raiment* and *dress*, which usage is correct in that context.

[28] *kinēsis* (e.g. 202b22); *motus* (e.g. Blackwell et al., 1995, p. 159).

a single motion there must be only a single direction, namely *from* the agent *to* the patient, *from* the teacher *to* the learner. So the different directions as regards Thebes and Athens, or ascent and descent, or one and two, are *wholly irrelevant*, *disanalogous*, and positively misleading. It is not that the teaching is from the teacher to the learner whereas the learning is from the learner to the teacher. The teaching, rather, is *from* the teacher *to* the learner and the learning is *to* the learner *from* the teacher – namely, exactly the same in direction of motion. The correct analogies as far as direction goes, then, would be the direction from Athens to Thebes and the direction to Thebes from Athens, the ascent from A to B and the ascent to B from A, and – more awkwardly – two compared to one and one as two is compared to it.

This sameness of directionality obtains irrespectively of syntax, order of arguments, order of substitution, and so on. Yet clearly sameness of directionality does not carry over to all converse pairs,[29] since not all converse pairs involve any direction at all, except perhaps a direction not belonging to the pair such as the direction of gaze of an observer at particular relata. So when Williamson asks how a relation could be more salient than its converse, the answer is that it will depend on the relation in question. For a non-dynamic relation such as spatial position, to say for example that 'to notice, of the fork, that it is to the left of the plate is to notice, of the fork, that the plate is to the right of it' (Williamson, 1985, p. 254) may well be true. It does not follow that it will be true of action and passion, as in the case of teaching and learning; nor that it will be true of a non-dynamic relation whose truth is produced by a past case of action and passion. Charles is the parent of William due to a single directionality obtaining in virtue of a *prior* case of action and passion – William's being born of Charles and Charles' begetting William. Again, it is not the *order* that matters, as though 'Charles is the parent of William' and 'William is the offspring of Charles' clinched a metaphysical point. Whatever the metaphysics of the matter, it will be to do with the active/passive connections between them.

Nor will the metaphysics have anything to do with what is 'salient'. If I cannot help noticing *a*'s relation to *b* without noticing *b*'s converse relation to *a* and vice versa, what of it? I cannot make myself notice the sides of a triangle without noticing the angles of the same triangle, but that is not my mind's way of proving to me that sides are the same thing as angles. If Brutus stabs Caesar, then a bystander might exclaim 'Look what Brutus did!' or it might be 'Look what happened to Caesar!'; again, this tells us nothing about the metaphysical distinction between action and passion.

Nor is the action/passion distinction to be analysed by appeal to 'aspects' or 'perspectives'. Perhaps one could say that from the perspective of the knife, the fork is to its left, but from the perspective of the fork, the knife is to its right. (Imagine we are talking about people, not cutlery.) But we can also truly say that from the perspective of the knife, the knife is to the right, and from the perspective of the fork, the knife is also to the right, and conversely. Similarly, we can say that from the teacher's perspective the teacher is teaching but from the learner's perspective, the learner is being taught. But this tells us nothing about whether the teaching and the learning are the same even if the motion involved in each is the same. For the same motion does not entail the sameness of action and passion any more than the production of heat and sound by a single movement entails that heat is the same as sound.

Although we should set aside direction as a misdirection when considering action and passion, the other part of the Aristotelian-Thomistic account gets us closer to the truth: namely, that the distinction between *actuality* and *potentiality* enables us to distinguish between agent and patient and hence between action and passion. As Aristotle says, in a case of action and passion there is

[29] Shorthand for 'a relation and its converse'.

the single actualisation of two distinct powers, the active and the passive (*Physics* III.3, 202a12-18, 202b8-10; Ross (Ed.) 1930). As Aquinas puts it, two things have a single act.[30] And there is no objection to two things having a single act if it is *from* one thing and *in* another.[31] It is not that one and the same motion (change) has two aspects, but that it has two *realities*, more precisely two *properties* – that it is *from* the agent but *in* the patient. The agent, then, actualises its active power *in* the patient, for whom the very same actualisation is of its own *passive* power *from* the agent, that is, from the agent's exercise of its active power. It is the sameness of actualisation which, I submit, is what powers theorists such as John Heil are getting at when he, for instance, says that 'salt and water possess *reciprocal* powers or dispositions…[t]he salt's dissolving is a *mutual manifestation* of these dispositions' (Heil, 2012, p. 119; emphasis in original). The best sense that can be made of a mutual manifestation is by identifying it with a single actualisation, yet it is consistent with there being really distinct active and passive powers at work, contrary to Heil's own view that the distinction is 'inappropriate, a byproduct of our explanatory practices and contingencies of experimental manipulation' (Heil, 2012, p. 74).[32]

I would go further and argue that the single actualisation thesis *requires* there to be a real distinction between action and passion, because that single actualisation is always and everywhere *in the patient* alone. It cannot be shared between agent and patient in the sense of being *in* both because actualisations are individuated by the entities in which they obtain. If there were a putative actualisation that was in both the agent and the patient, it would not be one actualisation but two, no different in principle to the event of two unripe apples turning red at exactly the same time. If such were the right way to understand action and passion then the mutual manifestation idea *would*, it seems, generate the kind of symmetry that Heil and other sceptics of the agent/patient distinction claim to see when powers are at work.

Before wading into treacherous waters, there is a neat way of summarising the options when it comes to understanding action and passion. (i) David Armstrong's brief remarks on converse relations suggest he thinks that relations and their converses have different directions but are not different relations ontologically: there is no 'increase in being' (Armstrong, 1997, p. 91).[33] (ii) Charles Cross, discussing Armstrong, holds that the directions are the same but then so is the relation: in the case of *loving*, it is the one relation between lover and beloved, with the active and passive ways of stating its existence being features of surface grammar only (Cross, 2002). (iii) According to Aristotle and Aquinas, a relation and its converse have different directions and are different relations. (iv) The truth, I submit, is the fourth option: a relation and its converse have the same direction but are still different relations.

5 | THE ONTOLOGY OF ACTION AND PASSION

A sceptic about the action/passion distinction is likely to respond, and should respond, to the previous remarks about potentiality by insisting that the actualisation *must* be shared between agent and patient, with the symmetry that entails and the result that the denominations 'agent' and 'patient', whatever their function if any, do not reflect a real joint of nature. For surely the

[30] 'idem actus esset duorum': (Blackwell et al., 1995, p. 159).

[31] 'agentis quidem secundum quod est ab eo, patientis autem secundum quod est in ipso': (Blackwell et al., 1995, p. 159).

[32] Ingthorsson (2021, p. 59) thinks the 'mutual manifestation' idea is faulty because it presupposes the active/passive distinction, but Heil clearly thinks this is not the case.

[33] If the relations are different, then for Armstrong it seems to be no more than 'the usage of logicians'.

teacher, in teaching, actualises *his* active power, and the student, in learning, actualises *her* passive power of being taught. There really must, so this view goes, be two distinct actualisations in two distinct entities. The sceptic has the view of the non-philosopher on their side: isn't this simply the natural, pre-theoretical way of understanding what we think of as action and passion?

The Scholastic position firmly, and perhaps scandalously to contemporary ears, departs from the common view. The total effect of what the agent does must be *outside* the agent and wholly *in the patient*. And by this is meant the total *per se* effect – not any *per accidens* effects, that is, accidental as opposed to essential side effects.[34] In other words, as the Scholastics put it, the agent, insofar as it is an agent, *does not change*. As Wuellner puts it: 'The agent as agent does not change nor gain nor lose any perfection insofar as it is causing' (Wuellner, 2011, p. 14, principle 29).[35] Aquinas puts it even more illuminatingly: 'The agent, as agent, receives nothing' (*Summa Theologica* I.II q.51 a.2 ad 1; Aquinas, 1927, p. 33).[36] I will call this the Fundamental Thesis of the active/passive distinction.

This key thesis is easiest to grasp in the case of inorganic agency. If the proverbial ball breaks the proverbial window, then any change undergone by the ball is a result of the Newtonian reciprocal action of the window on it. The same when a falling rock hits the ground and also, note, when an apple hits the ground – in which latter case the organic nature of the apple is irrelevant; it might as well be a rock as far as agency is concerned. More precisely, the mutual causal interaction of two inorganic objects (or organic objects where being organic is irrelevant to the interaction) means that each is an agent on the other: whatever potency is actualised in one is wholly a result of the agency of the other; and the agency of one is wholly actualised in the potency of the other. So it is wrong to think that in such cases the Fundamental Thesis has a counterexample: the mere fact that an object changes in a causal interaction does not mean that it changes *insofar as it is acting*. Rather, it changes *insofar as it is acted upon*.[37]

The Fundamental Thesis does not entail commitment to the universal truth of Newton's Third Law, either. There is debate as to the scope of its application: for example, it may be violated in nonequilibrium systems (Ivlev et al., 2015). It applies in special relativity in the form of the conservation of momentum (Ferraro, 2007, pp. 135–7), whereas in general relativity it seems the closest one can get is that 'space acts on matter, telling it how to move. In turn, matter reacts back on space, telling it how to curve' (Misner et al., 1973, p. 5).[38] As for quantum theory, applying the law is a stretch but again the conservation of momentum, with all the calculational and probabilistic caveats, is an analogue of sorts (see further Kumar, 2018, ch.11). Fortunately, the Thesis does not depend on a justification from physics, for we know a priori that no potency can actualise itself

[34] This key point is not often enough made clear by Scholastic philosophers.

[35] Cardinal Mercier: 'l'action, même corporelle, ne modifie point l'agent' (Mercier, 1902, p. 448). See (McWilliams, 1952, pp. 208-9) for further references.

[36] 'agens, inquantum agens, non recipit aliud'.

[37] Ingthorsson (2002, 2021) denies this real distinction between directions in a reciprocal interaction, instead regarding it (in correspondence) as a 'unified phenomenon' from which different directions can be distinguished purely in thought for pragmatic reasons. To the contrary Newton's Third Law, for one, seems to be about a real rather than a merely notional or pragmatic distinction. The metaphysic outlined here makes it clear that there must be a real distinction between reciprocal interactions, based on the real distinction between act and potency. This is true even if the directions are not 'really separable' – to use a Scholastic idiom – any more than the angles and sides of a triangle.

[38] The same thought is expressed by Molnar (2003, p. 170) explicitly in terms of the 'active' and 'passive' powers distinction, albeit with scare quotes included.

or, to use contemporary terminology, no manifestation can be its own stimulus.[39] For something to be brought from potentiality to actuality, something has to *act* on it, whether a wholly different entity (hammer drives nail into wall) or a part of the entity itself acting on some other part that is in potentiality to it (I scratch my itch). So if no potentiality can be actualised by a potentiality, no potentiality can be actualised by itself. Similarly, in contemporary jargon, a manifestation of a power consists of an actuality resulting from a state of potentiality (shattering of vase *where before the action there was no shattering*). But that manifestation results only from *action* upon it (impact from hammer). The shattering cannot be caused by anything that is not an action, and that includes a state of potentiality from which the shattering itself emerges. The thought that the shattering cannot be its own stimulus because then it would, as it were, *have to occur before it occurred*, is correct but must not be understood in a purely temporal sense. The same metaphysical truth applies to any causation, including simultaneous or even wholly atemporal (divine action, let us suppose). This a priori metaphysical truth entails that radioactive decay is not a case of self-actualisation but rather one of something happening *to* the particles concerned, whether endogenously or exogenously. Further, we can know that if in a given case there is no exogenous source of actualisation – no external stimulus – then the actualisation is due to one *part* of the object whose actualisation it is acting *on* another part.[40]

At this point the critic will object that self-actualisation might not be true of inorganic agents but certainly is true of organic agents. Leaving plants to one side, it is clear, so the objection goes, that animals self-actualise through action. Whether it is hunting for food, repelling an invader, attracting a mate, buying an ice cream, or teaching a student – animals, including the rational ones, change *insofar as they act*, contrary to the Fundamental Thesis. Here, however, we run up against an objection whose plausibility is only superficial. As Aquinas perhaps awkwardly puts it, the human agent (and we should add most or all animal agents) has both an 'active principle' and a 'passive principle' of acting (*Summa Theologica* I.II q.51 a.2 resp.; Aquinas, 1927, p. 32).[41] The passive principle includes all the receptive faculties whereby action is *imprinted* in the agent – such as memory, intellect,[42] feeling or emotion, and so on. No doubt cognitive scientists will, for better or worse, point to regions in the brain where such imprinting takes place, for example in the striatum (Martiros et al., 2018). The point, however, is the same: insofar as it acts, the agent does not undergo change; insofar as it undergoes change, the agent is being changed *by* something rather than insofar as it is acting. In the case of a non-human animal,[43] its executive mechanism will leave traces in its nervous system, and this is why animals can be trained and conditioned. In the case of a human being, it is the *will* that does this executive work. The acts of the will[44] imprint various characters on the diverse receptive faculties of the human agent, which is why humans can not only be trained but acquire habits, in particular virtues and vices. So although,

[39] For the canonical historical statement of this doctrine, see Aquinas: 'nothing can be reduced from potentiality to actuality, except by something in a state of actuality' ('de potentia autem non potest aliquid reduci in actum, nisi per aliquod ens in actu') (*Summa Theologica* I.q2.a3, resp; Aquinas, 1920, p. 24). (See also I.q79.a3, resp; I-II.q9.a1, resp. and elsewhere, deriving ultimately from Aristotle's *Metaphysics* IX.8.)

[40] Mereological simples, then, if they have potencies, can only have those potencies actualised from the outside.

[41] 'principium activum et passivum sui actus'.

[42] The passive part of the intellect, of course; it also has its active part.

[43] I leave aside controversial questions about freedom in non-human animals.

[44] The 'rational appetite' or, as Aquinas puts it in this context, the 'appetitive power' – 'vis appetitiva', 'virtus appetitiva': (*Summa Theologica* I.II q.51 a.2 resp.; Aquinas, 1927, p. 32).

in an imprecise sense, the human agent changes when acting, she does not change *insofar* as she is acting, for example executing an act of the will, but only insofar as she is *acted* upon *by* the will.

We must, however, go further. Even though the exercise of an active power does not entail the changing of the agent insofar as it is being exercised, that exercise is *itself* still caused. This is as true for a human when they buy ice cream as it is for water when it dissolves salt. The water is certainly the agent, but it must be triggered to act by contact with the salt, as stated earlier. We are, of course, in the realm of efficient causes. Similarly, albeit not identically, your sticking a pin in my hand will make me swipe you with the other hand, whether my retaliatory act be wholly free or in part reflexive (as is more likely): I will still be agent rather than patient, albeit moved in part by an efficient cause. If we migrate to the realm of final causes, the situation is not so different. We act, paradigmatically, in light of reasons, as Lowe (2013a) strongly emphasises, but I depart from his view that the will is an active power 'whose manifestation or exercise is never caused by something acting upon the agent whose will it is' (Lowe, 2013a, p. 175). I am not thinking merely of the pin in the hand but of the *final* causes – the ends, purposes, goals, objectives for which we typically act. They truly move us to act, albeit not in the order of efficient causation, to use the Scholastic idiom. They move us in the order of final causation, and without them we are no agents at all, at least not of the recognisably human kind. The will does not change *in willing*, but rather is changed by the final cause, as the repeated striving for some goal can strengthen the will or urge it forward.

This kind of feedback applies beyond acts of will to full human acts, of which teaching is the beloved Aristotelian example. The teacher must prepare to teach, which involves getting himself into the right frame of mind, putting himself in the correct physical location, and so on. But this is not the act of teaching. In the act of teaching, the teacher changes – but not insofar as he teaches. There are *per accidens* effects of teaching on the teacher: teaching might put a smile on his face, give him a feeling of satisfaction as he sees his students' eyes light up with comprehension. This feedback is virtually simultaneous with the teaching itself, so that it seems to be an essential component of the teaching – but it is not. Similarly, the teacher has to activate his nerves and muscles – move his lips, wave his hands, write on the board, change the slide on the screen, and so on: but none of these are *proper* to teaching, or *per se* effects of what is done, which is essentially the intentional transfer of information from teacher to student. In addition, much of what the teacher does when teaching involves the production of effects in his own receptive faculties, such as making his vocal cords work harder, raising pieces of information to consciousness, working himself up or calming himself down. In all these things, the teacher is changing himself: he is being changed *by* teaching, not *insofar as* he is teaching.

We have, then, our asymmetry: the total *per se* effect of action is *in the patient*, whatever *per accidens* effects also occur in the agent and whatever *per se* effects occur in receptive faculties of the agent due to the proper operation of various active powers within the agent that are directed *at* the agent as recipient. It is this latter that Scholastics call *immanent* activity – the self-perfective operations that only living things can perform.[45] The asymmetry between agent and patient, action and passion, is *ontological* in nature, since it is about the locus of actualisation of potency. Therefore, it is a matter of ontology, not perspective or conception, that a single motion or change realises two distinct relations – the action that comes *from* the agent and the passion that is undergone *by* and *in* the patient. It is the ontology that makes it possible for the student to say truly that learning from the teacher is hard, whereas the teacher can truly say that teaching the same student is easy;

[45] For more on immanent causation, see (Oderberg, 2013).

for these are *distinct* relations albeit realised in the very same transfer of information from teacher to learner.

Even more importantly, this analysis is wholly generalisable, as already suggested. I think it is something of an apparent datum for some philosophers that we originally experience causation by feeling the power of our own, first-personal, agency. (See, for example, Fales, 1990, p. 11ff.). This is not something that Elizabeth Anscombe ever said, as far as I know, albeit it is perhaps a mistaken lesson taken from some of her remarks on causation (Anscombe, 1981). David Hume thought that all we feel when we 'overcome resistance' or 'put external bodies in motion' is a certain '*nisus* or endeavour' (Hume, 2007/1777, pp. 63, 71), yet we have no idea of power (at least no 'accurate precise' one). The truth, however, is that all we feel when we exercise our agency is the *effects* of other agents upon *us*.[46] I push on the door, thinking perhaps that I am feeling my power, yet all the while I feel nothing but the door pushing back at me. Yet I *know* I am pushing it and so exercising my own proper agency, not thanks to Newton but thanks to my own awareness of what it is I am doing – as much as I am aware of my own existence without *feeling* that I exist.[47] When the door moves, I literally *see* the total actualisation of *my* active power in the door. Any actualisation that takes place *in me* is a change brought about by something that is either not me in any way, or something that is a part of me bringing about change in another part of me. When the knife cuts the bread, or the stone breaks the window, the situation is no different. As agents, they do not change at all: it is the patients that change *in the action*. Insofar as the agent changes, it is *as patient*, whether by the reciprocal action of patient *as agent* – in that role, in that distinct causal interaction – or by the action of some other thing using the agent as an instrument, that other thing also operating as an agent.

Although this is the ontology of the agent/patient distinction, it does not pretend to be a *criterion* for distinguishing agent from patient. For that, we need to formulate a way of judging, albeit fallibly, where the agency and patiency lie in a given interaction, or rather plurality of interactions – for the idea of a single causal interaction in isolation is a mere abstraction. I will conclude with such a proposal.

6 | THE MINIMAL METAPHYSICAL AGENT

In an important recent paper defending the agent/patient distinction, Davis Kuykendall (2024) makes several suggestions as to what 'type of interaction' constitutes one involving an agent and patient – more precisely, objects performing the distinct roles of agent and patient in that interaction. He presents his remarks loosely and informally, and they are insufficient as they stand. Yet he appears to offer them as a real definition of what the distinction consists in, whereas it is better to see them as pointing to an epistemic criterion – a way in which one might judge, in particular how a scientist might judge, whether an object is behaving as agent or patient.

[46] Fales (1990, p. 12) claims: 'The sensation of force is primarily identified, insofar as we are patients, with the feeling of pressure; and insofar as we are agents, with muscular tension'. This is a specious distinction. If he means that muscular tension constitutes human agency, or at least its initiation, this cannot be right since no agency is required for our muscles to be in tension. Nor is such tension necessary: one can quite deliberately exert pressure on another object while in a wholly relaxed state. If Fales is referring instead to the agency involved in my *tensing* my muscles, then again I am not feeling my agency through the production of such tension; I am only feeling the *effect* of such production.

[47] A point nicely made by Shedd (1880).

Kuykendall asserts that an agent/patient interaction is one that occurs 'when one of the two (or more) interacting entities undergoes a change in its kind membership, structure, causal powers, or intrinsic properties as a result of the interaction, while the other does not' (Kuykendall, 2024, p. 2). He applies this to both the dissolution of salt by water's breaking the polar bonds of the units of sodium chloride and to the biological case of an enzyme's destruction of a substrate to which it binds in the catalysing of a chemical reaction. More about these shortly, but first we need a more precise and rigorous formulation of the agent/patient criterion, which I will call the criterion of the Minimal Metaphysical Agent: the entity that is an agent no matter what its essence and no matter what further characteristics it must possess in order to be an agent of a certain distinctive kind.[48]

MMA:

1. *x* is a MMA (on *y*) in a given interaction if and only if:
   1.1. *x* persists and *y* ceases to exist; or
   1.2. *x* persists and *y* comes into existence; or
   1.3. *x* does not change intrinsically but *y* changes intrinsically.
2. *x* is a MMA on itself if and only if:
   2.1. there is an interaction I(*y*,*z*: *y*,*z*<*x*); and
   2.2. *y* is a MMA on *z* or vice versa.

Here, the '<' symbol denotes the broad relation of *being a constituent*, which includes being a disjoint proper part, being a material chunk that is one of indefinitely many overlapping chunks, and being a wholly or partly immaterial entity such as an organic or psychological faculty. We should not forget[49] that agency can involve production as well as destruction – hence the need for both 1.1 and 1.2. Clause 2 is what allows us truly to say that something is both agent and patient even when exogenous agency is bracketed off: this is due to constituents within the entity being in an agent/patient relationship. Kuykendall's mention of structure or causal powers is redundant since these are both intrinsic features of a thing and so are covered by 1.3. As for kind membership, which is also intrinsic,[50] this should be interpreted as membership of an *essential* kind (whether partial, as in a generic kind, or complete, as in what the Scholastics call the *infima species* or lowest specific kind). Otherwise we would have to say that substrate *S*, which belongs to the kind *Nina's most investigated substrate*, is acted on by me when I convince her not to investigate it anymore.

As for intrinsic change, sub-clause 1.3 seems on its face unbelievable: when a piece of wood dents a piece of metal they both (let's assume) persist through the interaction yet both undergo intrinsic change (deformation), so this seems *not* to count as an agent/patient relationship on **MMA** even though it is paradigmatically so. At a smaller scale, in one kind of redox (reduction/oxidation) reaction, an electron is transferred from one atom (say, sodium) to another (say, fluorine), resulting in a molecular compound (sodium fluoride). Both atoms are intrinsically changed. So this looks like it will not count as an agent/patient relationship, only as a symmetrical causal interaction. The problem in both cases is that we will not see what is going on if we ignore the relativity to interactions: the phrase 'in a given interaction' in **MMA** is no mere decoration.

[48] Such as the Minimal *Biological* Agent, on which see (Oderberg et al., 2023).

[49] As Kuykendall seems to.

[50] At least partly intrinsic, if we allow for essential kinds that are relational.

In both the wood/metal and redox reaction examples, there are *two* interactions[51] to be analysed. Insofar as the wood dents the metal – *in that interaction* – the wood does not change, only the metal does; the full actualisation of the wood's active power occurs in the metal. Conversely, insofar as the metal chips the wood – in that *distinct* interaction – the metal does not change, only the wood; the full actualisation of the metal's active power occurs in the wood. Again, in the redox example, the reducing agent – sodium – loses an electron and reduces the fluorine. The oxidizing agent – fluorine – gains an electron and oxidizes the sodium. Both are agents on each other, in distinct interactions that cannot occur separately (any more than angles and sides in a triangle or radius and circumference in a circle can exist separately). So what looks like a case of mere symmetrical 'mutual manifestation' is in fact a case of two agents and two patients, or rather two entities performing *both* the agent and the patient functions on each other, simultaneously. All of which is a slightly fancier way of saying what chemistry itself says. (See Malone and Dolter, 2010.)

Clearly the intrinsic change condition is much harder to evaluate than the destruction and production conditions. What we know a priori is that where there is change, there is patiency: we 'simply' have to work out in a given interaction or set of interactions which entity is responsible for which change. This, fortunately for philosophers, is an empirical matter. **MMA**, as an epistemic criterion, tells you whether there *is* agency/patiency, where it is localised, of what kind it is (is there production, destruction, and/or intrinsic change?), and if necessary to investigate which parts of an entity might be acting on each other. We should, I submit, expect mutual agency/patiency to be the norm in causation, given the causal interconnectedness of all material reality. Enzymes not only break down the substrates to which they bind, but they undergo their own conformational changes due to forces from the substrate (Tsou, 1998).[52] The plurality of agent/patient relationships in a given interaction does nothing to undermine the objectivity of those relationships.

7 | CONCLUSION

By the time the Scientific Revolution had run its course and the Enlightenment had cemented its place as the organising intellectual framework of science and philosophy, the active/passive powers distinction was all but dead.[53] Its last champion, it seems, as in much else where so many nutritious remains of the Scholastic banquet are to be found, was John Locke (1975/1700, II.xxi, p. 233ff). One might have thought it was Thomas Reid, but although he recognises active powers he also says, in the course of explicit criticism of Locke, that there is 'no propriety at all in passive power; it is a powerless power, and a contradiction in terms' (Reid 2010/1788, I.iii, p. 21). Quite what he thought the ability to have a change produced in an object amounted to is not clear, but when he remarks, 'I do not remember to have met with the phrase *passive power* in any other good author' (2010/1788, I.iii, p. 21, emphasis in original), it would have served him well to have become

[51] At a minimum.

[52] Kuykendall (2024, p.16) seems to think it significant that the enzyme's active site returns to its original shape after catalysis, but it does not matter whether the enzyme is temporarily or permanently changed: either way, it is still to that extent a patient, even though also an agent on the substrate. On conformational change, see further (Copeland 2000, pp. 173, 368).

[53] A Google Ngram search of 'active power, passive power' is rather revealing, showing a decline after about 1790 until a bit of a spike around 2005, coinciding with the revival of the powers metaphysic. The other spike, around 1820, seems only to coincide with the many reprints of Thomas Reid's works.

acquainted with the writings of St Thomas Aquinas, in which he would have found hundreds of references to 'potentia passiva'.

Though George Molnar gives no more than a scare-quote-enclosed passing nod to the distinction in his by now seminal work on powers (Molnar 2003, p. 170), it seems the new generation of powers theorists has been even less inclined to resurrect the doctrine of a real distinction between action and passion. Perhaps some of the considerations I have raised here will contribute to reawakening serious attention to the matter.[54]

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