

METAPHYSICS

THE DEPTHS OF ACT & POTENCY

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SEMINAR SYLLABUS

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DESCRIPTION

We may spend our whole lives pursuing answers; but if we are asking the wrong questions, even the very best of our answers will lead us astray.

What is change? What are “powers”? What is the meaning of unity, the meaning of plurality? Why is there something, rather than nothing? Is the universe intelligible—and if so, why and how? The great questions of antiquity may have been asked in different words or different languages, and they have received many answers, but they recur continually. Were the answers inadequate? Were the questions wrongly asked?

In this seminar, we will undertake an *inquiry* into the **depths of act and potency**, as the correlative principles which must be themselves understood rightly to answer satisfactorily any of these other questions. That these difficulties continue to arise stems not from an inadequacy of the answers—that is, as though the answers given by Aristotle or Thomas Aquinas or those in their tradition are inaccurate—but rather from the very nature of the human mind. The difficulty consists, that is, in first rightly understanding the question: which is a difficulty that no *answer* in a book can provide us, though the right answers should help us discover the correct formulations of the question.

Put otherwise, we need to learn how to ask: what is act, what is potency, and how are these principles explanatory for knowledge and being? Discovering these questions is the aim of this course. Thus, we will ask across the eight weeks: how is *form* a cause of being and of knowing? How is it a *principle* of composite beings? How are we to understand the *one and the many*? What is the definition and what are the distinctions to be made concerning *potency*? How is potency *possible*? What does it mean to ascribe an *analogical primacy to act*? In what sense is act *explanatorily primary*? And, finally, what unites the divisions of being according to the ten categories (substance and the nine accidents), act and potency, and truth and falsity?

Through these eight weeks, we will uncover the reality of act and potency, thereby discovering them as suprasensible principles which not only illumine the sensible world in an intelligible light, but open the way toward investigating and understanding the depths of that suprasensible intelligibility itself.



METHOD

The seminar is 8 weeks long, with one recorded lecture and one discussion session each week. Each discussion session is structured around a reading from Aristotle's *Metaphysics* and commentaries and other contributions given in the tradition. Participants are expected to have read the assigned reading and listened to the lecture prior to the session, so that they may engage in a semi-structured discussion directed and moderated by the instructor. As this is an advanced seminar, one *cannot* participate well without a *deep engagement* with the assigned reading. Moreover, *continual discussion* will foster that participation and engagement throughout the week. Participants will be expected to partake in these discussions on a regular basis, and will be challenged to do so directly.

READING

The primary texts for this seminar are Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, Thomas Aquinas' *Commentary on the Metaphysics*, and Joseph Owens' *Doctrine of Being in the Aristotelian Metaphysics*. Various translations of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* are acceptable, with a recommendation of Joe Sachs'. PDFs of Aquinas and Owens (and any supplemental readings decided on during the course of the seminar) will be made available. To facilitate entry into the seminar, a range of preparatory readings is recommended (all of which are available in PDF to all participants upon registration). These are selections from:

- R.P. Phillips 1962, *Modern Thomistic Philosophy, v.2: Metaphysics*.
- Norris Clarke 1995, *Explorations in Metaphysics*.
- Norris Clarke 2001, *The One and the Many* (2 chapters).
- Oliva Blancehette 2003, *The Philosophy of Being* (4 chapters).

LECTURE

Each week there will also be a 40+ minute audio lecture, posted to Teams at the beginning of the week. This lecture will be based upon the assigned reading, but will also stray into related topics, or may use the reading as a launching point for addressing some related issue (perhaps one more general, or perhaps one more specific). The primary (but not sole) purpose of these lectures is to help clarify some of the more difficult concepts and arguments contained within the reading, as well as to raise specific questions that should help structure and guide our discussion sessions.

There *may* be accompanying visual aids (not necessarily) in order to provide some clarity as to textual points, but one *should* be able, in most cases, to simply listen to the lecture (and perhaps consult the visual aids later). This should allow more flexibility: making the lectures suitable accompaniment for a commute, while doing chores, going for a run, etc.

DISCUSSION

The heart of the seminar is the discussion session (**Saturdays at 3:30pm ET**): where all the thoughts emergent and encountered throughout the week—via the reading, lecture, and on-going conversations in the Teams channel—are brought into explicit conversation. This allows us to attempt a concerted effort at bringing resolution to our difficulties, and—failing such a resolution—to direct our inquiry further.

Each discussion session will begin with a brief synopsis of the week's material and a focusing on whichever aspects of that material seem most pressing. Beyond the direction provided by the instructor, participants are encouraged to bring their own concerns explicitly into view and to engage with the instructor and one another in civil debate and collective inquiry.

AUDITS OR COMPLETES

Beginning in 2022, all Lyceum Institute seminar participants will be able to either *audit* the seminar or *complete* the seminar. To **complete** the seminar, the participant **must** attend **at least six** of the eight discussion sessions live, actively contribute throughout the course, and submit an essay of 2000+ words pertaining to the subject. This essay may be evaluated for publication in *Reality* and will be included in each Lyceum Institute member's profile, along with the mark of auditing or completing. Due date for a submission is **14 December 2022**.

SESSION SCHEDULE

September 24	<p>Week 1: Form as Cause of Being & Knowing</p> <p>Lecture 1: Principle of Substance, End of Knowledge</p> <p>Readings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aristotle's <i>Metaphysics</i>, Book VII, c.17. • Aquinas' <i>Commentary on the Metaphysics</i>, lib.7, lec.17 (§1648–1680). • Owens' <i>Doctrine of Being in the Aristotelian Metaphysics</i>, c.12 (375-77).
October 1	<p>Week 2: Form as Principle of Composite Being</p> <p>Lecture 2: Intelligible Relations of Form and Matter</p> <p>Reading:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aristotle's <i>Metaphysics</i>, Book VIII, c.1-2. • Aristotle's <i>Physics</i>, Book II, c.1. • Aquinas' <i>Commentary</i>, lib.8, lec.1-2 (§1681–1702).
October 8	<p>Week 3: The One and the Many</p> <p>Lecture 3: Infinite Material Plurality</p> <p>Reading:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aristotle's <i>Metaphysics</i>, Book VIII, c.3-6. • Aquinas' <i>Commentary</i>, lib.8, lec.3-5 (§1703–1767). • Owens' <i>Doctrine</i>, c.13 (379-99).
October 15	<p>Week 4: Definition and Distinction of Potency</p> <p>Lecture 4: Discerning the Meaning of Potency</p> <p>Reading:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aristotle's <i>Metaphysics</i>, Book IX, 1-2. • Aquinas' <i>Commentary</i>, lib.9, lec.1-2 (§1768–1794). • Owens' <i>Doctrine</i>, c.14, parts I-II (403-06).
October 22	BREAK

<p>October 29</p>	<p>Week 5: The Grounds of Potency</p> <p>Lecture 5: Potency and Possibility</p> <p>Reading:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aristotle’s <i>Metaphysics</i>, Book IX, 3-5. • Aquinas’ <i>Commentary</i>, lib.9, lec.3-4 (§1795–1822).
<p>November 5</p>	<p>Week 6: Analogical Primacy of Act</p> <p>Lecture 6: The Speaking of What Is</p> <p>Reading:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aristotle’s <i>Metaphysics</i>, Book IX, 6-7. • Aquinas’ <i>Commentary</i>, lib.9, lec.5-6 (§1823–1843).
<p>November 12</p>	<p>Week 7: Explanatory Primacy of Act</p> <p>Lecture 7: The Existing of What Is</p> <p>Readings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aristotle’s <i>Metaphysics</i>, Book IX, 8-9. • Aquinas’ <i>Commentary</i>, lib.9, lec.7-10 (§1844–1894). • Owens’ <i>Doctrine</i>, c.14, part III (406-409).
<p>November 19</p>	<p>Week 8: The Divisions of Being</p> <p>Lecture 8: The Governance of Truth and Falsity</p> <p>Readings</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aristotle’s <i>Metaphysics</i>, Book IX, 10. • Aquinas’ <i>Commentary</i>, lib.9, lec.11 (§1895–1919). • Owens’ <i>Doctrine</i>, c.15 (411-14).