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# The Principles of Nature

*A Plain English Chart*

ACT & POTENCY · THE THREE PRINCIPLES · THE FOUR CAUSES · THE TEN CATEGORIES · THE  
MODES OF PREDICATION

## I. ACT & POTENCY

*"Some things can be, although they are not, and some things now are."*

TERM	WHAT IT MEANS	NOTE
<b>Act</b>	The perfection a thing actually possesses.	Form is the act; it is what makes a thing exist in act.
<b>Potency</b>	The real capacity for further perfection.	Whatever is in potency can be called matter.
<b>Substantial existence</b>	That a thing simply <i>is</i> what it is.	"Man exists." Existence in the unqualified sense.
<b>Accidental existence</b>	That a thing is <i>some way</i> — has some feature.	"The man is white." Existence in a certain respect.
<b>Matter from which</b>	What is in potency to substantial existence.	Properly called <b>prime matter</b> . The form gives it existence.
<b>Matter in which</b>	What is in potency to accidental existence.	Properly called the <b>subject</b> . It gives existence to the accident.

### THE KEY DISTINCTION

The matter from which has incomplete existence on its own — it depends on the form to be anything at all. The subject already has complete existence in itself, and only takes on or loses accidental forms. So **form gives existence to matter**; but **the subject gives existence to the accident**.

## II. THE THREE PRINCIPLES OF NATURE

Whenever something comes to be, three things are at work: the matter it comes from, the form it takes on, and the privation of that form which is replaced.

PRINCIPLE	ROLE	STATUS	IN A BRONZE STATUE
<b>Matter</b>	The substrate that persists through change; being in potency.	An <b>essential</b> principle. Operates in becoming and in being.	The bronze.
<b>Form</b>	That by which a thing is the kind of thing it is.	An <b>essential</b> principle. It is the act.	The shape of the statue.
<b>Privation</b>	The absence of the form in a subject apt to receive it.	An <b>accidental</b> principle. Operates in becoming, not in being.	The shapelessness of the bronze before it is sculpted.

### PRIVATION VS. NEGATION

Negation can be said even of non-beings ("the chimera does not see") or of subjects not apt to the form ("stones do not see"). **Privation is said only of a subject apt to receive the form** — blindness only of what is naturally able to see. Generation begins from privation, not bare negation.

### SAME SUBJECT, DIFFERENT DEFINITION

Matter and privation are the *same in subject* but *differ in definition*. The bronze and the shapelessness are physically one thing, but called bronze for one reason and shapeless for another. Hence privation is reckoned a principle **per accidens**, not in its own right.

## III. THE FOUR CAUSES

Matter and form are not enough: what is in potency cannot reduce itself to act. So there must also be an agent; and because every agent acts for something, an end.

CAUSE	QUESTION	LOCUS	DEFINITION	IN THE STATUE
<b>Material</b>	That out of which?	<b>Intrinsic</b>	The substrate in potency to the form.	The bronze.
<b>Formal</b>	What is it?	<b>Intrinsic</b>	That by which the thing is what it is.	The shape of the statue.
<b>Efficient</b>	By what brought about?	<b>Extrinsic</b>	The principle of motion; the agent.	The sculptor.
<b>Final</b>	For the sake of what?	<b>Extrinsic</b>	The end at which the agent's action terminates.	The honor of the one depicted.

### PRINCIPLE, CAUSE, ELEMENT

A **principle** is anything primary, whether or not the existence of a posterior follows from it — privation can be a principle in this sense. A **cause** is more specific: that from whose existence another's existence follows. An **element** is more specific still: that of which a thing is primarily composed, which *remains* in it, and which is not divided into parts of a different form.

## IV. RELATIONS AMONG THE CAUSES

### THE END IS THE CAUSE OF CAUSES

The efficient cause makes the end actual, but does not cause the end to be an end.

The end causes the efficient cause to be an efficient cause, the matter to be matter, and the form to be form — for matter receives form only for the sake of the end, and form perfects matter only through the end.

### TWO KINDS OF PRIORITY

**Prior in generation and time:** matter and the efficient cause come first — the imperfect precedes the perfect on the way to it.

**Prior in substance and completeness:** form and end come first — the act precedes the potency simply speaking.

### COINCIDENCE OF THREE CAUSES

When fire generates fire, three causes coincide in one thing: the **form** (it actualizes the potency), the **end** (the action terminates in it), and the **efficient cause** (it generates).

Form and end coincide *numerically*; the efficient cause coincides only *specifically* — maker and made cannot be numerically the same.

### TWO KINDS OF NECESSITY

**Absolute necessity** (the necessity of matter): from matter and the efficient cause. Mortality follows from the contrariety of the elements composing the body.

**Conditional necessity** (the necessity of the end): from form and end. *If* a man is to be generated, conception is necessary.

DIVISION OF CAUSES	SENSE	EXAMPLE
<b>Prior &amp; Posterior</b> (= Remote & Proximate)	The more universal is the remote cause; the more particular is the proximate.	Substance · animal · rational animal — substance is the most remote form of man, rational animal the most proximate.
<b>Essential &amp; Accidental</b>	A cause of a thing as such, vs. a cause coincident with the essential cause.	"The builder builds the house" (essential). "The grammarian builds" — only because <i>this</i> builder happens to be a grammarian (accidental).
<b>Simple &amp; Composed</b>	One cause acting alone, vs. several joining as cause; or one cause without addition of another.	"The builder builds" vs. "the medical builder builds." One stone vs. many stones constituting a house.
<b>In Act &amp; In Potency</b>	A cause causing now, vs. one able to cause but not now causing. Causes in act are simultaneous with their effects.	The builder building now, vs. the builder asleep.
<b>Universal &amp; Singular</b>	Universal cause matched to universal effect; singular to singular.	"A builder is the cause of a house" / "this builder is the cause of this house."

## V. THE TEN CATEGORIES

*Being is not a genus. It is predicated of substance and the nine accidents analogically: primarily of substance, and secondarily of the rest as attributed to it.*

CATEGORY	QUESTION	EXAMPLE
<b>I. Substance</b>	What is it?	a man, a horse, this stone
<b>II. Quantity</b>	How much?	six feet long, two cubits
<b>III. Quality</b>	Of what sort?	white, just, knowing grammar
<b>IV. Relation</b>	Toward what?	double, half, greater than
<b>V. Action</b>	Doing what?	cutting, burning, teaching
<b>VI. Passion</b>	Undergoing what?	being cut, being burned, being taught
<b>VII. Where</b>	Where?	in the Lyceum, at home
<b>VIII. When</b>	When?	yesterday, last year
<b>IX. Posture</b>	In what position?	lying, sitting, standing
<b>X. Habit</b>	Having what about it?	shod, armed, vested

## VI. THE MODES OF PREDICATION

*"Something is predicated of many things in three ways: univocally, equivocally, and analogically."*

### UNIVOCALLY

*same name, same nature*

Predicated of many according to the same name *and* the same definition.

"**Animal**" said of a man and an ass — each is a sensible animated substance, in the same sense.

### EQUIVOCALLY

*same name, different nature*

Predicated according to the same name but a wholly different definition.

"**Dog**" said of the barking animal and of the star (Sirius) — agreement in name only.

### ANALOGICALLY

*same name, proportioned natures*

Predicated of many whose natures are diverse but attributed to one same thing — by proportion, comparison, or agreement.

"**Healthy**" said of urine (as sign), the body (as subject), and food (as cause).

### THE THREE MODES OF ANALOGICAL ATTRIBUTION

1. **By attribution to one end.** "Healthy" is said of urine, body, and food because all are ordered to the same end — health.
2. **By attribution to one agent.** "Medical" is said of the physician, the empiric, and the instruments because all are referred to the same craft — medicine.
3. **By attribution to one subject.** "Being" is said of substance, quantity, quality, and the rest because all are attributed to the one subject — substance — of which being is said primarily, and of the others secondarily.

### WHY BEING IS NOT A GENUS

No genus is predicated of its species according to *prior and posterior*. But "being" is said of substance primarily and of the nine accidents secondarily — they are being only as attributed to substance. Therefore being is not a genus, but is predicated **analogically**. Hence substance and quantity differ *generically*, yet are the same *analogically*.

*Based on St. Thomas Aquinas, The Principles of Nature, chapters 1 through 6. · A plain English study chart.*

