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[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

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THE THOMISTIC DOCTRINE OF PRIME MATTER

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RÉSUMÉ : On a prétendu que l'interprétation scolastique classique de la notion de matière première chez Aristote est incohérente. Laissant en grande partie de côté la question historique et exégétique de savoir quelle(s) opinion(s) Aristote soutenait lui-même, le présent article s'applique à réfuter l'accusation sérieuse d'inconsistance en tentant une exploration fouillée de la position de Thomas d'Aquin.

ABSTRACT : It has been alleged that the standard Scholastic interpretation of Aristotle's notion of prime matter is incoherent. Prescinding for the most part from the historical-exegetical question of what view(s) Aristotle himself actually held, this paper endeavors to refute the serious charge of inconsistency by undertaking a thorough exploration of Thomas Aquinas's position.

That Thomas Aquinas embraces a full-fledged theory of prime matter cannot be contested : the testimonial texts suffer no dearth, being prolific and eminently unequivocal. Unlike the situation for Aristotle, we are inundated with an embarrassment of treasures for which no search in the darkness of opaquely terse language is demanded. Instead, it is hard to decide where to begin an exposition, because Aquinas repeats his same interpretation of Aristotelian doctrine in many works containing parallel passages replete with allusions to a definitive position on prime matter.

Perhaps the most suitable compilation of the apposite texts would be to arrange them in a coherent thematic or topical order. Thus, we will start with passages presenting some central ideas, and then quickly proceed to those capital texts propounding important arguments (the "analogy" and "regression" proofs for the fundamental substrate of becoming and the "subtraction experiment" for the basic subject of predication in a physical being). After that task is accomplished, we adduce numerous references emphasizing the essential characteristics of matter. From there we deal with the questions of causation and sequential development. We then propose what we consider Aquinas's most forceful demonstration for the reality of prime matter. The second section addresses the issue of separability of matter and form. The third section is devoted to an axiomatic development of the standard Scholastic perspective on prime matter, together with an ensuing dialectical defense

of its intelligibility. We close with a reflection on the applicability of a radical theory of prime matter to a crucial eschatological dogma.

I

In a compact synopsis, Aquinas distinguishes between the key notions of matter, form, and composite :

Matter is that which of itself is not a determinate thing but is only in potency to be a particular thing. Form is that by which it is already a particular thing in act. Substance is the composite, which is a particular thing [...] complete in being and species [...]. There is, then, a difference between matter and form, because matter is being in potency, while form is entelechy, that is, *act*. Through it matter is actualized. The composite which results is being in act.¹

But, of course, the insistent question of the extramental reality of prime matter, beyond its mere concept, looms ever before us. Convincing evidence is required. Aquinas initially responds that it is knowable, not directly, but by an analogical inference (taking his cue from Aristotle's *Physics* I,7), reasoning from the ratio between accidental form and its subject-substrate of actual substance :

[T]he nature which is first subject to mutation, i.e., primary matter, cannot be known of itself, since everything which is known is known through its form. Primary matter is, moreover, considered to be the subject of every form. But it is known by analogy, that is, according to proportion [...]. This "something," then, is related to these natural substances as [...] anything material and unformed to form. And this is called primary matter. This, then, is one principle of nature. It is not one as a "this something," that is, as some determinate individual, as though it had form and unity in act, but is rather called being and one insofar as it is in potency to form. The other principle, then, is the nature or form, and the third is privation, which is contrary to the form.²

This argument is reiterated in another commentary (this time on Aristotle's *Metaphysics*) :

[Matter] does not of itself have any traits by which it may be known, since the principle of knowing is form. But it is known by means of an analogy ; for just as sensible substances of this kind are related to artificial forms, [...] so also is first matter related to sensible forms.³

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1. *In Aristotelis Librum de Anima* (hereafter *In De An.*), II, trans. by Herman Reith, in *An Introduction to Philosophical Psychology*, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, Prentice-Hall, 1956, lect. 1, n. 215, p. 46-47. Cf. also a parallel passage in *On Spiritual Creatures* (hereafter *DSC*), trans. by Mary C. FitzPatrick and John J. Wellmuth, Milwaukee, Marquette University Press, 1949, a.1, c, p. 21 : "[...] since potency and act are divisions of being, and since any genus whatever is divided into potency and act, the term 'prime matter' is generally used to mean something which is in the genus of substance as a kind of potency, which is understood as excluding every species and form, and even as excluding privation, and yet is capable of receiving both forms and privations [...]."
 2. *In octo libros Physicorum Aristotelis Expositio* (hereafter *In Phys.*), I, trans. by Blackwell, Spath, and Thirlkel, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963, lect. 13, n. 118, p. 56.
 3. *In duodecim libros Metaphysicorum Aristotelis Expositio* (hereafter *In Meta.*), VII, trans. by John Rowan, Chicago, Henry Regnery Comp., 1961, lect. 2, n. 1296, p. 501. Note that in his commentary *In Meta.*, XII, lect. 2, n. 2431, p. 859, Aquinas yet again employs the analogy argument based on proportional similarity between accidental and substantial change, concluding with the statement : "[...] in the gen-

A second argument utilized by Aquinas (having its ancestry in Aristotle's *Physics* I, 9) purports to arrive at an ultimate residual subject incapable of generation or corruption :

[...] in a certain respect matter is corrupted and in a certain respect it is not. For insofar as privation is in it, it is corrupted when the privation ceases to be in it. [...] But in itself, insofar as it is a certain being in potency, it is neither generated nor corruptible. This is clear from the following. If matter should come to be, there would have to be something which is the subject from which it comes to be. [...] But that which is the first subject in generation is matter. For we say that matter is the first subject from which a thing comes to be *per se*, and not *per accidens*, and is in the thing after it has come to be. [...] It follows, therefore, that matter would be before it would come to be, which is impossible. And in like manner, everything which is corrupted is resolved into primary matter. Therefore, at the very time when primary matter already is, it would be corrupted ; and thus if primary matter is corrupted, it will have been corrupted before it is corrupted, which is impossible. Therefore, it is impossible for primary matter to be generated and corrupted. But by this we do not deny that it comes into existence through creation.⁴

This argument seems to beg the question of the real existence of an absolutely primary matter understood as the final substrate from which all change ultimately stems, unless we read into it the repudiation of an implicit infinite regress in the downward direction toward formlessness. We speculate that this is probably what both Aristotle and Aquinas had in mind.

The third major argument derives its lineage from Aristotle's famous "subtraction" thought-experiment of *Metaphysics* Z 3, which bears some resemblance to the preceding method of descent. All sensible qualities and quantitative dimensions are mentally removed from a physical substance, until we conceive what is left : "But when these dimensions are taken away, nothing seems to remain except their subject, which is limited and differentiated by dimensions of this kind. And this subject is matter [...]"⁵ It is of this "subject" that substance is predicated, as Aristotle maintained. Aquinas warns, though, that this predication is not "univocal" or "essential," because the matter attained is (as Aristotle had indicated) "neither a quiddity [substance] nor any of the other categories." Rather, the predication is what Aquinas calls "denominative," akin to the manner "in which accidents are predicated of substance."⁶ This "concretive" way of predicating "shows that, just as substance differs essentially from accidents, in a similar fashion matter differs essentially from substantial forms." Aquinas draws the Aristotelian conclusion that this "ultimate subject [...]" 'is neither a quiddity,' i.e., a substance, nor a quantity nor any of the other things

eration of substance the matter, as the subject of generation and destruction, is of itself in potentiality both to form and to privation, and has actually of itself neither form nor privation."

4. *In Phys.*, I, lect. 15, n. 139., p. 65-66. Cf. also *On the Principles of Nature* (hereafter *DPN*), trans. by Vernon J. Bourke, in *The Pocket Aquinas*, New York, Washington Square Press, 1960, p. 65-66 : "[...] that matter which is understood without any form and privation but which is the subject of form and privation is called prime matter because there is no other matter prior to it."
5. *In Meta.*, VII, lect. 2, n. 1283, p. 499. Cf. also *DSC*, a.2, c, p. 37 : "[...] it is essential to matter that it not be in anything else, but that it should itself be the primary subject."
6. *In Meta.*, VII, lect. 2, n. 1289, p. 500.

contained in any genus of beings.”⁷ So this argument also shares, in common with the first one, a technique of analogy. Thus, it combines aspects of both arguments from the *Physics*: analogy and descent.⁸

The point of Aristotle’s exclusion argument in *Metaphysics Z 3* is to prove that matter is not substance in the richer sense of the composite or even the form. As Aquinas explains :

[T]here are two characteristics which seem to belong most properly to substance. The first is that it is capable of separate existence, for an accident is not separated from a substance, but a substance can be separated from an accident. The second is that substance is a determinate particular thing, for the other genera do not signify a particular thing. Now these two characteristics — being separable and being a particular thing — do not fit matter ; for matter cannot exist by itself without a form by means of which it is an actual being, since of itself it is only potential. And it is a particular thing only by means of a form through which it becomes actual. Hence being a particular thing belongs chiefly to the composite.⁹

At any rate, the three arguments expounded aim to vindicate the judgment that prime matter exists as the fundamental substrate of unqualified change and the ultimate physical subject of predication and being.

We have relied thus far mainly on Aquinas’s Aristotelian commentaries. Lest anyone think, though, that Aquinas’s conclusions are simply his constructions of what he believes Aristotle’s opinions were, we now collect passages from numerous Thomistic sources converging at the same description of prime matter. These without doubt display Aquinas’s own doctrine on the essence of matter.

First, there can be found, in addition to those we have already seen, a sizable group of passages stressing that prime matter is essentially pure potency in the category of substance.¹⁰

Second, a series of texts depicts the utter formlessness of prime matter.¹¹ Hence, it has a kind of unity in a negative sense — as homogeneous in its universal lack of

7. *Ibid.*

8. For a treatment of Aristotle’s text referring to an ultimate subject of which nothing else can be predicated “derivatively,” see AQUINAS’s *In Meta.*, IX, lect. 6, n. 1839-1841, p. 680-681.

9. *In Meta.*, VII, lect. 2, n. 1291-1292, p. 501.

10. *In Phys.*, I, lect. 15, n. 131, p. 62 : “[...] matter in its very substance is potency for substantial being.” *In Meta.*, XII, lect. 2, n. 2435, p. 860 : “[...] matter [...] is in potentiality to all forms [...]” *In Meta.*, XII, lect. 2, n. 2437, p. 860 : “[...] matter itself, [...] taken in itself, is not an actual being but a potential one.” *DSC*, a.3, ad 21, p. 55 : “[...] that potency itself which is in the genus of substance is matter, as form is act.” *Questions on the Soul* (hereafter *QDA*), trans. by James H. Robb, Milwaukee, Marquette University Press, 1984, q.12, ad 12, p. 160 : “Prime matter is in potency to substantial act, which is form ; consequently potency itself is prime matter’s very essence.” *Summa Theologiae* (hereafter *ST*), I, trans. by Fathers of the English Dominican Province, Westminster, Maryland, Christian Classics, 1981, q.77, a.1, ad 2 : “The act to which primary matter is in potentiality is the substantial form. Therefore the potentiality of matter is nothing else but its essence.” *ST*, I, q.90, a.2, ad 2 : “The production of act from the potentiality of matter is nothing else but something becoming actually that previously was in potentiality.” *ST*, I, q.115, a.1, ad 2 : “[...] primary matter [...] is a pure potentiality, just as God is pure act.” *Summa contra Gentiles* (hereafter *ScG*), II, trans. by English Dominican Fathers, London, Burns Oates & Washbourne, 1923, c.40[1] : “[...] nothing determinate can proceed from matter except by chance, because matter is in potentiality to many things [...]”

11. *ST*, I, q.47, a.1, c : “[...] matter is formless, in order that it may be accommodated to different forms.” *DSC*, a.3, ad 20, p. 54 : “[...] matter, when looked at by itself, is related to all forms indifferently [...]”

differentiation.¹² Therefore, it demands form to determine or specify it in an absolute, unqualified way.¹³ In fact, Aquinas identifies having form with being in act¹⁴ and possessing knowability.¹⁵ The act-potency relation of form to matter involves a mutually limiting interplay whereby form perfects matter and matter constricts form.¹⁶ This is the true meaning of hylemorphism.

Concerning the origin of prime matter, St. Thomas explains that God causes all things to exist, not only insofar as they are qualified by accidental forms or specified by substantial forms, but also insofar as they are in *any* way. He asserts that the latter conclusion implies God's creation of prime matter. It is understood by contrast, then, that prime matter lacks all form and hence is real solely as potential being.¹⁷

Since God is Subsistent Being Itself, whose Essence (as Pure Actuality) is to exist,¹⁸ creatures by nature analogically approach the Divine excellence to the degree that they are actual.¹⁹ Therefore, no aspect of reality can be as remote in dignity from the Deity as prime matter. And since a being can act only inasmuch as it is in act, prime matter must be wholly inert (considered in itself).²⁰

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12. *ST*, I, q.16, a.7, ad 2: "[...] primary matter is said to be one, not because it has one form, [...] but by the absence of all distinguishing form." *On Being and Essence* (hereafter *DEE*), trans. by Armand Maurer, Toronto, Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1983, c.2[10], p. 42: "[...] primary matter is said to be one because of the elimination of all forms [...]."
13. *In Meta.*, VIII, lect. 4, n. 1743, p. 642: "[...] matter has actual being only through form [...]." *ScG*, II, c.40[5]: "[...] form is more noble than matter, since it is its perfection and act."
14. *In De An.*, II, lect. 1, n. 234, p. 51: "Matter united to form is the same as matter existing in act." *In Phys.*, I, lect. 15, n. 135, p. 63: "[...] each thing, insofar as it is in act, has form. Form is very good because act is the perfection of potency and is its good; and it follows as a consequence of this that form is desirable, because every thing desires its own perfection." Cf. *ST*, I, q.5, a.3, ad 3. *DSC*, a.1, c, p. 23: "[...] matter does not of itself participate in actual existence, but it does participate therein through form; for the form coming upon the matter makes the matter itself actually exist [...]." *DSC*, a.1, ad 5, p. 25: "[...] matter is being in potency and becomes actual being through the coming of the form, which serves as the cause of existence in its regard."
15. *DPN*, p. 66: "Now, since every definition and act of knowing depends on form, prime matter cannot be known or defined in itself but only in terms of the composite, as it may be said that prime matter is that which is related to all forms and privations. [...] In this sense it is called prime without qualification." Cf. also *DEE*, c.2[1,2,3], p. 34-36, where Aquinas explains that the essence of composite substances consists of both matter and form. Neither alone suffices. Matter, as purely potential, cannot place a substance in its proper species and is unknowable in itself. Yet, though not sufficient, it is necessary, because a physical substance is not definable solely by form. Thus, "through form, which actualizes matter, matter becomes an actual being and this particular thing." Furthermore, any form accruing subsequent to the substantial form is an accidental qualification — a crucial Thomistic thesis, as we shall see.
16. *ST*, I, q.7, a.1, c: "Now matter is in a way made finite by form, and the form by matter. Matter indeed is made finite by form, inasmuch as matter, before it receives its form is in potentiality to many forms; but on receiving a form, it is terminated by that one. Again, form is made finite by matter, inasmuch as form, considered in itself, is common to many; but when received in matter, the form is determined to this one particular thing." Cf. *ScG*, I, trans. by Anton Pegis, Notre Dame, Indiana, University of Notre Dame Press, 1975, c.43[6]. *DSC*, a.1, c. p. 22: "[...] prime matter receives form by contracting it to the individual being."
17. Cf. *ST*, I, q.44, a.2, c.
18. Cf. *ST*, I, q.4, a.1, ad 3; q.3, a.4, c; q.8, a.1, c, ad 1; *DEE*, c.4[7], p. 56-57; *ScG*, I, c.15[5], 16[7], 22.
19. Cf. *ST*, I, q.4, a.3, c, ad 3.
20. *ST*, I, q.115, a.1, ad 4: "A body is not that which is most distant from God; for it participates something of a likeness to the Divine Being, forasmuch as it has a form. That which is most distant from God is primary matter, which is in no way active, since it is a pure potentiality." Cf. also *ST*, I, q.4, a.1, c: "[...] a

With regard to the development of material substance, Aquinas's theory follows Aristotle's model in positing an order of forms of progressive complexity actualizing the potentiality of prime matter, beginning with the elementary bodies.²¹ Aquinas elaborates in the passage below.

[A]ll things come from the same first material principle, namely, first matter, which has no form of its own, or from the same material principles [...] (which is added because of the four elements, the material principles common to all generable and corruptible things) [...]. [F]irst matter and the elements are universally related to things composed of the elements [...].²²

Clearly, we can prescind from the outmoded and dispensable chemistry of the four elements. What is at stake here is the purely potential, formless substrate on which all superior organization is imposed in essentially different ways. Thus, the substantial multifariousness of physical entities mandates that the common material "origin" be more proximately disposed *qua* subject to a diversity of forms.²³

This proportional correspondence between matter duly arranged and the substantial form responsible for the inner design is obviously not arbitrary. In fact, the process of development is uni-directional, and can be reversed only if there is a preliminary relapse into the potency of prime matter, in order that a previous specific form may recapture its grip on matter.

[W]hatever matter is disposed to different forms in a certain order, it cannot be brought back from a subsequent state to one that is prior in that order [...] unless these [substances] are resolved into their first matter; because for each thing there is a definite mode of generation [...]. Therefore from such privations there can be a return to a prior form only when such things are dissolved into first matter.²⁴

This furnishes an adequate account of Aristotle's pithy insight of *Metaphysics* H 5, where the philosopher proclaims a reversion to matter in all unqualified change.²⁵

material principle is most imperfect. For since matter as such is merely potential, the first material principle must be simply potential, and thus most imperfect. Now God is the first principle, not material, but in the order of efficient cause, which must be most perfect. For just as matter, as such, is merely potential, an agent, as such, is in the state of actuality." Cf. too *ScG*, I, c.16[5]: "[...] each thing acts insofar as it is in act." And *ScG*, I, c.17[2-3]: "Whatever matter is, it is in potency. Matter, furthermore, is not a principle of acting. That is why, according to Aristotle, the efficient cause and matter do not coincide." Finally, cf. *ScG*, II, c.40[2]: "[...] matter does not become an actual cause except insofar as it is moved by an agent [...]."

21. *ScG*, III, trans. by V. Bourke, Notre Dame, Indiana, University of Notre Dame Press, 1975, c.22[7]: "[...] prime matter is in potency, first of all, to the form of an element [...]." *ScG*, II, c.90[3]: "The nearer a body is to primary matter, the less noble it is, according as it is more in potentiality and less in complete actuality. Now the elements are nearer than mixed bodies to primary matter, since they are the proximate matter of mixed bodies."

22. *In Meta.*, VIII, lect. 4, n. 1729, p. 640.

23. *In Meta.*, VIII, lect. 4, n. 1730, p. 640: "[...] there is one first matter for all generable and corruptible things, but different proper matters for different things."

24. *In Meta.*, VIII, lect. 4, n. 1753, p. 644.

25. See *Meta.*, VIII, 5: 1045a4. To view another text where Aquinas addresses the same theme, cf. *In Meta.*, XII, lect. 2, n. 2438, p. 860-861: "For even though first matter is in potentiality to all forms, it nevertheless receives them in a certain order. For first of all it is in potency to the forms of the elements, and through the intermediary of these, insofar as they are mixed in different proportions, it is in potency to

We witness the orderly cycle of substantial transformations in the physical world via the continuous processes of intussusception (usually involving death), whereby plants assimilate minerals, animals incorporate vegetables, humans ingest animal flesh, and all corpses decompose into the molecular compounds and elements constituting the soil and the air.²⁶ Through the last step alone can previous stages be, in some manner, susceptible to reversal.

Aquinas's own principal argument in favor of the reality of prime matter, though, follows from his rejection of the theory of a plurality of substantial forms specifying a substance. For a multiplicity of substantial forms would destroy the essential unity of a being, since the act of existence is given through the first or fundamental form.²⁷ Moreover, any form superadded to the initial one (say, a mineral, vegetable, or sentient form supervening on some primordial form of corporeity, hypothesized as already constituting an actual body) would merely endow the physical substance with some accidental modification, because only the original form confers being absolutely, whereas subsequent forms just qualify the actual subject in secondary ways.²⁸

As a consequence of the uniqueness of substantial form within an individual physical substance, the matter determined to be a definite kind of body by that form cannot already be informed in any manner whatsoever; hence, it must be a purely potential principle. This result safeguards the ontological hierarchy of natures from collapsing into an atomistic reductionism and the ultimate levelling inextricably bound up with materialistic monism, for which any change would be relegated to the status of mechanical locomotion.²⁹

II

We already know that "[p]rimary matter does not exist by itself in nature, since it is not actually being, but potentially only [...]."³⁰ Such matter "cannot exist in nature

different forms. Hence not everything can come to be directly from everything else unless perhaps by being resolved into first matter."

26. *ScG*, III, c.22[4]: "[...] prime matter tends toward its perfection by actually acquiring a form to which it was previously in potency, even though it then ceases to have the other form which it actually possessed before, for this is the way that matter may receive in succession all the forms to which it is potential, so that its entire potentiality may be successively reduced to act, which could not be done all at once."

27. *ST*, I, q.76, a.3, c.

28. *ST*, I, q.76, a.4, c. Cf. also *In De An.*, II, lect. 1, n. 224, *op. cit.*, p. 49: "We should know the difference between substantial and accidental form. Accidental form does not simply make something *exist*, but makes it be of such a kind, or so much [...]. Substantial form, on the other hand, simply makes something exist. Accidental form, then, is added to a subject that is already existing. A substantial form is not added to a subject actually existing but only to one existing only in potency, namely, prime matter. It is evident, then, that one thing cannot have many substantial forms. The first form would make a thing simply exist; all the others would be added to a subject already existing in act. For this reason they would be added accidentally to a subject already existing in act, and would not make it simply be, but be in some way." The same argument refuting Avicbron's theory of the plurality of forms occurs in *DSC*: cf., *op. cit.*, a.1, ad 9, p. 26-27, and a.3, c, p. 47-48. Also, *DEE*, c.2[2], p. 35.

29. Cf. *DSC*, a.3, c, p. 49.

30. *ST*, I, q.7, a.2, ad 3.

unless it receive formation from some form : since whatever exists in nature exists actually, and actual existence comes to a thing from its form which is its act, so that nature does not contain a thing without a form.”³¹

The necessary concomitance of form with matter goes beyond the factual condition of matter. According to Aquinas, “matter becomes an actual being only by means of form.”³² Indeed, “matter is being in potency and becomes actual being through the coming of the form, which serves as the cause of existence in its regard.”³³ This is the case, because it is universally true that “each thing, insofar as it is in act, has form.”³⁴ Hence, “matter has actual existence by the substantial form, which makes it to exist absolutely [...]”³⁵

For Aquinas, “[p]rimary matter has substantial being through its form,” and without a concreated form “it would not be in act.”³⁶ Nevertheless, this asseveration does not preclude the potentiality of matter to other forms while simultaneously existing under a given form.³⁷ The potentiality of matter considered in itself, though, does obviate the possibility of its separability, since it cannot be a “particular thing” unless it is a composite, which form alone renders actually existent.³⁸ The following passage emphatically makes this point.

Again, we should note that although prime matter includes no form or privation in its essential meaning, yet it is never stripped away from form and privation. Sometimes it exists under one form, sometimes under another. But it can never exist by itself because, since it has no form within its own essence, it possesses no actual existence, for to be in act is impossible without a form ; it is in potency only. So, whatever is in act cannot be called prime matter.³⁹

Lest it be objected that Aquinas is referring solely to the natural state of prime matter in these quoted excerpts from his writings, we close this topic with a discussion of two texts irrefutably proving his commitment to the thesis of the utter inseparability of matter — even by Divine power. The principal setting is an article in his work *On Truth*, in which he asks whether there is an idea of prime matter in God’s Mind. St. Thomas responds that, since matter is caused by God, there must somehow be an exemplar of it in the Divine Intellect, because the Supreme Intelligence would necessarily contain a likeness of whatever His creative agency causes. Aquinas draws a distinction, however. If “idea” is taken strictly, then prime matter in itself has no idea in God distinguishable from the idea of the form or of the composite. For an

31. *On the Power of God* (hereafter *DPD*), trans. by English Dominican Fathers, London, Burns Oates & Washbourne Ltd., 1933, q.4, a.1, c. p. 9.

32. *In Meta.*, VII, lect. 2, n. 1278, p. 498. Cf. also *DEE*, c.6[4], p. 68 : “[...] matter has being only through form.”

33. *DSC*, a.1, ad 5, p. 25.

34. *In Phys.*, I, lect. 15, n. 135, p. 63.

35. *ST*, I, q.76, a.6, c. Cf. also *ST*, I, q.76, a.4, c : “Now the substantial form gives being simply [...]”

36. *ST*, I, q.84, a.3, ad 2.

37. *Ibid.* Cf. also *DSC*, a.3, c, p. 49 : “And because matter is never denuded of all form, on this account whenever it receives one form it loses another, and vice versa.”

38. *In Meta.*, VII, lect. 2, n. 1292, p. 501.

39. *DPN*, p. 66.

idea, properly speaking, concerns something insofar as it is producible in being. But "matter cannot come into existence without a form" (nor conversely). Hence, an idea does not properly correspond to matter only (nor to form only); rather, one idea relates to the total composite. Yet if "idea" is understood in a wide sense as indicating merely some sort of rational similitude, then both matter and form have of themselves ideas which can be considered distinctly, "although they cannot exist separately." In this way, even though prime matter cannot exist by itself, nothing prevents it from being thought in itself, according to an intelligible likeness whose prototype is the Deity. Nevertheless, matter has no act of existence except in the composite substance proceeding from God, and only in this manner does it reflect a Divine idea (properly speaking). Neither does matter have an essence (in the strict sense), since it is just a part of the essence of the whole compound.⁴⁰

To clinch the argument, we adduce a final piece of evidence supporting our exegesis of Aquinas on this question. Suppose someone protests that God could create matter prior to any form. St. Thomas replies as follows.

[I]f formless matter preceded in duration, it already existed; for this is implied by duration, since the end of creation is being in act: and act itself is a form. To say, then, that matter preceded, but without form, is to say that being existed actually, yet without act, which is a contradiction in terms.⁴¹

It is clear that Aquinas's conclusion asserting the absolute inseparability of matter from form hinges on the key premise that every act of existence (for creatures) comes through the form; this thesis could be expressed by the statement that every act is formal.⁴² Since prime matter is devoid of form, according to his metaphysics it lacks all act in itself. Thus, it would indeed be contradictory to maintain that prime matter could be endowed with (existential) act apart from substantial form, even by God.⁴³

This result bespeaks no debility or defect in Divine power; it does not detract from God's omnipotence. For the Deity can do any *thing* and can make any (intelligible) reality. But a complex idea whose constituent notes are incompatible does not represent a *thing* at all: it is a meaningless, nonsensical hodge-podge, a non-being or nothing. As Aquinas phrases his celebrated dictum about contradictions: "It is better to say that such things cannot be done, than that God cannot do them."⁴⁴

Next, we glance at Aquinas's position on the possibility of the separability of form from matter. Of course, God and the angels are entirely spiritual beings, and

40. *On Truth* (hereafter *DV*), q.3, a.5, trans. by Robert W. Mulligan, Chicago, Henry Regnery Comp., 1952, p. 160-161. Cf. also *ST*, I, q.15, a.3, ad 3: "Since [...] we hold matter to be created by God, though not apart from form, matter has its idea in God; but not apart from the idea of the composite; for matter in itself can neither exist, nor be known." As an adjunct, cf. *ST*, I, q.44, a.2, ad 3: "[...] matter [...] is not created without form [...]."

41. *ST*, I, q.66, a.1, c.

42. Cf. *ScG*, II, c.54[5]: "[...] in things composed of matter and form, the form is said to be the principle of being, for the reason that it is the complement of substance, whose act being is [...]."

43. Cf. *ST*, I, q.7, a.2, ad 3: "Primary matter [...] is [...] concreated rather than created."

44. *ST*, I, q.25, a.3, c; cf. also a.4, c, ad 1,2. Also, *ScG*, II, c.25.

therefore pure subsistent forms.⁴⁵ Aquinas, however, clarifies the obscurity in Aristotle's treatment of the celestial intelligences (in *Metaphysics* Λ 8) regarding their relation to the Prime Mover, by showing that in God there is no distinction of essence and existence, whereas the angels are entitatively composed of a limiting essence and a received act of existence.⁴⁶ Consequently, the sheer actuality of God implies infinity of existence, whereas the angels are creatures, thus finite.⁴⁷ Moreover, the human soul is itself naturally incorruptible, hence a separable form.⁴⁸ Therefore, Aquinas concludes, "Matter [...] cannot exist without some form, but there can be a form without matter : form as such does not depend on matter."⁴⁹

The forms alluded to above are all spiritual, though. The critical question centers on the separability of strictly material forms, although we must now appreciate that the possibility of supernatural Divine conservation looms to complicate the issue. Aquinas concurs with Aristotle that the sentient souls of brute animals cannot survive death, since all their psychic powers are intrinsically dependent on corporeal organs for their operation and being.⁵⁰ This verdict applies *a fortiori* to all lower creatures : "And just as the parts of the soul other than the intellect do not continue to exist after the composite substance has been destroyed, in a similar fashion neither do other forms of perishable things."⁵¹

Aquinas insists that such a material form "is not separable and a particular thing," becoming a real being only in a composite.⁵² These material forms, like accidents, "are called beings, not as if they themselves were, but because something is by them."⁵³ They are non-subsistent aspects of things, and so they "co-exist rather than [...] exist" and are "concreated" rather than created (properly speaking).⁵⁴

Again, to surmount any countervailing argument that Aquinas leaves open the theoretical possibility that God could miraculously preserve a separated material substantial form in existence, we need only invoke his treatment of prime matter in *On Truth*. There, in the context of the exemplary Divine ideas, he explicitly avers that such a form simply cannot exist apart from matter.⁵⁵ Indeed, from other sources we learn that the opposite hypothesis would entail a violation of the law of non-contradiction : "[...] substantial form and the matter correlative to it are interdepend-

45. Cf., e.g., *ST*, I, q.3, a.1, 2 ; q.50, a.1, 2, 5 ; q.51, a.1 ; *ScG*, I, c.17, 20 ; *ScG*, II, c.49-51, 91 ; *DSC*, a.1, 5.

46. Cf., e.g., *ST*, I, q.3, a.4 ; *ScG*, I, c.22 ; *ScG*, II, c.52-53 ; *DEE*, c.4[6,9].

47. Cf. *ST*, I, q.7, a.1-2.

48. Proofs for the spirituality of the human intellect, along with the subsistence and immortality of the human soul, can be found in various texts of Aquinas. Cf., e.g., *ST*, I, q.75, a.2, 5, 6 ; *ScG*, II, c.49-51, 79-81 ; *QDA*, q.14 ; *DSC*, a.1 ; *In De An.*, III, lect. 7 ; lect. 10, n. 742-745.

49. *DEE*, c.4[3], p. 53. Cf. also *DSC*, a.1, ad 6, p. 25 : "For since matter has existence through form, and not conversely, there is nothing to prevent a given form from subsisting without matter, although matter cannot exist without form."

50. Cf. *ST*, I, q.75, a.3 ; *ScG*, II, c.82.

51. *In Meta.*, XII, lect. 3, n. 2451, p. 865.

52. *In Meta.*, VII, lect. 2, n. 1293, p. 501.

53. *ST*, I, q.45, a.4, c.

54. *Ibid.*

55. *DV*, q.3, a.5, c. See the text corresponding to note 40.

ent, so that one is not intelligible without the other, because the appropriate act is in its appropriate matter."⁵⁶ Furthermore :

As a substantial form does not have being in itself, independent of that to which it is united, so neither does the matter to which it is joined. From their union results that being in which the reality subsists in itself, and from them is produced something essentially one.⁵⁷

In sum, "both the ultimate matter, which is appropriated to a form, and the form itself are the same ; for one of them is as potentiality and the other as actuality."⁵⁸ We must beware of reifying these principles into separable entities. Only in the case of certain (i.e., spiritual) forms do we have sufficient and adequate warrant for pronouncing the reality of ontological separation, and such forms are naturally competent for existence apart from matter. In the case of material forms, not even Divine might can commit the contradiction of conserving what is intrinsically (according to the created order of God's own universe) incapable of separate being.

III

Can the reality of prime matter, according to the Thomistic understanding of it, be rigorously deduced from a set of tenable premises ?

Consider the following four propositions :

- (A) Every physical substance has a substantial form ;
- (B) Substantial form is unique for a given substance ;
- (C) All change requires a persistent substrate ;
- (D) Substantial changes occur.

The truth of (A) follows from the Scholastic axiom, used heuristically by Plato⁵⁹ and Aristotle⁶⁰ centuries before Aquinas's constant appeal to it : "*agere sequitur esse*." Indeed, being and action are correlative. For we know the way something *is* by the manner in which it tends to *act*. Now we observe that physical things exist which *act* in radically diverse ways, and so they must *be* essentially different kinds of things. But substantial form is precisely that intrinsic principle which makes a thing be the specific kind of entity it is or, in other words, which puts it in its proper species. Hence, there is a genuine variety (even a generic hierarchical order) of substantial forms defining distinct natures (at least according to generic tiers of superiority).

(B) follows because the inner springs of activity (and passivity) for a being must ultimately reduce to one primary internal source structuring the entity according to a

56. In *librum Boethii de Trinitate Expositio*, q.5, a.3, c, in *The Division and Methods of the Sciences*, trans. by A. Maurer, Toronto, Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1963, p. 33.

57. *DEE*, c.6[2], p. 67.

58. In *Meta.*, VIII, lect. 5, n. 1767, p. 649.

59. See PLATO, *The Phaedrus*, 270d1-8.

60. Cf. ARISTOTLE, *On the Soul*, I,1, 402b22-25 ; II,4, 415a14-19 ; and *On the Heavens and the Earth*, III,8, 307b20-23.

determinate type of existence, whereby it is enabled to act (and to receive) in characteristic ways.

So from (A) and (B) together, every physical substance has one and only one substantial form.

(C) derives from a universal inductive analysis of any natural change. For, besides the factors of privation (the absence of some actuality at the beginning of a change) and form (the new actuality arising at the end of the change), as Aristotle showed in *Physics* I there must be a continuously underlying subject which initially lacks the formal actuality it will fully acquire at the term of the change but which potentially possesses it at the beginning. Otherwise, the alleged “change” would be tantamount to a mere replacement of entities or an annihilation-and-creation, both of which clash with process as characterizing of physical events.

Let us grant (D) based on experience with drastic changes like burning to ashes, digestion of foodstuffs to the point of assimilation, and the generation and death of living organisms.

Now, take any substantial change as adduced in (D). By (C), there is a substrate (say S). Suppose S is an actual substance. Then, by (A), S must have a substantial form (say F). Since S is a substrate, S perdures throughout the change, and so is present at the beginning and at the end identically in itself. However, the change is conceded to be substantial, so that the substantial form at the beginning (say G) is different from that at the end (say H). Hence, along with F which remains, S must be endowed with at least one other substantial form (either G or H) at some time during the change — either at the start or the finish (perhaps both). For F cannot be identical to both G and H, because G and H are themselves different. But then S simultaneously possesses two distinct substantial forms (either F and G or F and H) at some point. This result contradicts (B). Therefore, the supposition that S is an actual substance, having led to an absurdity, must have been erroneous. Consequently, since S is not nothing, the only alternative is that S must be purely potential substance with no actual form of itself. This formless potentiality within the category of substance is exactly what is meant by prime matter. Thus, primary matter is a real intrinsic factor of physical substances, assuming, in accordance with postulate (D), that they are all capable of undergoing substantial change.⁶¹

We remark that this proof virtually contains Aristotle’s argument by analogy between accidental and substantial change ; or, from the reverse angle, Aristotle’s argument at least implicitly involves the four premises of this one. (Of course, it was Aquinas who championed the uniqueness of substantial form for a given substance.)

Moreover, we deduce the well-known corollary that substantial change *qua* substantial must be instantaneous. Otherwise, there would be an interval of time during which the substrate possessed two distinct substantial forms, again contradicting (B).

61. For more discussion along these lines, see John J. FITZGERALD, “‘Matter’ in Nature and Knowledge : Aristotle and the Aristotelian Tradition,” *The Concept of Matter*, Ernan McMullin, ed., Notre Dame, Indiana, University of Notre Dame Press, 1963, p. 75-98 (esp. p. 84-87).

Even though our explicit modification of Aristotle's analogy argument seems sound, with true premises and valid reasoning, we recognize that almost no philosophical argument is immune to someone's objection, however airtight it may appear. A skeptic could conceivably take exception to assenting to one or more of the four key propositions enunciated above. So we embark on another approach.

As a last-ditch attempt to exorcise the specter of primary matter, we propose to play the role of devil's advocate. Let us suppose, for the sake of hypothetical disputation, that no given essential transformation necessarily entails that the substrate revert all the way back to some state of bare potentiality or some chaotically disorganized condition of materiality, in order for a new kind of substance to issue as the product of generation. Fine ; then it is sufficient that the persistent subject (whatever it may be) merely possess a *simpler* degree of formation than the twin terms of the change. Diverse substantial changes would therefore involve variable degrees of maximal structure underlying and linking the terms of the transition — but all well above the level of so-called “utterly formless” matter. Thus, a notorious “prime matter” is not required to explain the wondrous potentiality manifested in the sensible world, where an astounding plethora of corporeal forms arises phoenix-like (at least from a global vantage point) out of material stuff, yet with definite “subsidiary” formal boundaries restricting matter's indeterminacy.⁶²

But wait. Let us exercise a bit of caution here and refrain from leaping precipitously to such a hasty conclusion. For if we consider the *totality* of all possible substantial changes (and not confine ourselves to focusing on one unqualified change at a time), might there not turn out to be an asymptotic behavior of the corresponding maximal underlying forms ? In order to decide on an answer to this question, we will mimic Aristotle by conducting the following hyperbolic thought-experiment.

Take any mass of material substance (for example, Aristotelian bronze). Subject it to high-energy disintegration (for example, burning at an extraordinarily intense temperature), carefully collecting all the residual products in a container to prevent dispersal. If there is any physical structure perduring in the remains (of course there will be, though perhaps detectable only by sophisticated measuring equipment), execute a similar procedure, utilizing an even more powerfully destructive device (like a

62. Cf. Ernan McMULLIN, “Four Senses of Potency,” *The Concept of Matter*, p. 295-315 (esp. p. 304-311 and 313-315). McMullin denies that the potency for change and for determination can be “pure” or entirely free of some form, if we are considering the subject of a particular change and not just the concept of matter in general. For example, on p. 308, he asserts that not even a series of intermediate transformations can produce certain material substances from others, due to the constraints of “fundamental quantitative laws which govern *all* changes, including unqualified changes” — regularities residing in the persistent substrate itself. Contrary to what McMullin seems to countenance here, the treacherously detrimental influence of imagination can induce one to think that some underlying structures (however rudimentary) must be transmitted in a substantial change. Nevertheless, all these determinate factors (no matter how similar their “aspect” in both the original and final substances) come under the aegis of different substantial forms, and hence cannot actually be present as such in the new substance, but at most only virtually. For a more comprehensive treatment of this topic, see John O'NEILL, *Cosmology: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Matter*, Vol. I, London, Longmans, Green and Co., 1923, p. 135-138.

laser beam or hydrogen bomb).⁶³ Continue the process *ad indefinitum* — Aristotelian subtraction with a vengeance. Whatever genuine form prevails at any stage will almost certainly be reduced to a more rudimentary type at some subsequent phase of the successive process. Obviously, so long as any real being still exists, regardless how ethereally plasmic (and we assume a law of conservation of “matter” to preclude literal annihilation), form will never be entirely canceled out or vacated — it will merely be catapulted into ever more ineffably rarefied dimensions of entropy, and so we will fail to achieve actuality’s “absolute-zero” of primary matter.

Now, nonetheless, in this sequence of substantial transmogrifications we see that form is approaching an arrantly amorphous condition. Consequently, there must be (though not in discrete act) a limiting material principle which is deprived of all form and which serves as the ground of potentiality ultimately shoring up the network of relations constituting unqualified becoming. After all, form is relative to *some* reality distinct from itself which it informs. So, adverting to the query posed earlier, we can now legitimately infer that, even though a *given* substantial change might not demand inchoate matter as its *proximate* substratum, yet the collection of all universally possible, essential transmutations does mandate prime matter as a permanent principle, because the maximal underlying structures functioning as substrata tend to a state of null actuality. Prime matter lies at this threshold or horizon of physical actuality ; it is the asymptotic limit of form, the minimal common denominator flowing through the domain of nature in a dynamic interplay with eidetic structure. In this sense is “pure potentiality” for substance or “formless matter” a physical (and not merely conceptual) reality.⁶⁴

63. We apologize for employing the technology made available by modern experimental physics within the speculative realm of philosophical physics. In our defense, though, it is intriguing to contemplate that Werner Heisenberg, in his 1958 book *Physics and Philosophy*, advocated a return to the concept of primary matter (as expounded by Aquinas) in order “to clarify present obscurities in interpretations of quantum theory.” See William A. WALLACE, *Einstein, Galileo, and Aquinas*, Washington, D.C., Thomist Press, 1963, p. 32.

64. For a convergent argument, see Norbert LUYTEN, “Matter as Potency,” *The Concept of Matter*, p. 122-133. Luyten vehemently rejects the criticism of A. Wenzl that prime matter is a mere “limit” notion, the “result of a regressive process of abstraction” and “an overstepping of the possibilities of conceptual thought.” According to Luyten, prime matter is an intrinsic ontological principle exhibiting the “radical” “deficiency” of material things, which grounds the possibility of “becoming another thing” and which is therefore really distinct from the basic inner determination of actual physical substances. Although he defends the standard Scholastic interpretation of the Aristotelian doctrine of matter as potency, Luyten sounds a cautionary note. Primary matter is *not* to be understood as “an original, preexisting stuff.” It is a real factor in the universe, to be sure, but can be discovered only by philosophical analysis ; it cannot be given a “concrete phenomenal meaning.” Hence, any attempt to identify it with an explanatory construct of experimental physical science, such as the root of the theory of indeterminism, is to court failure. There *may* be some nebulous connection, but there is *not* necessarily a direct one-to-one correspondence, for philosophy and contemporary science address problems on different levels and thus should expect “not incompatible, but incommensurable” answers. For two excellent articles upholding the Scholastic construction of the received Peripatetic tradition on matter, see Joseph OWENS, “The Aristotelian Argument for the Material Principle of Bodies,” in *Aristotle : The Collected Papers of Joseph Owens*, John R. Catan, ed., Albany, State University of New York Press, 1981, p. 122-135 ; “Matter and Predication in Aristotle,” p. 35-47. Owens explains how prime matter is a formally indeterminate, purely potential subject, yet still a real, positive principle of physical substances.

IV

Before tying this section in with the doctrine of prime matter enunciated in the previous sections, we synopsise Aquinas's proofs for the suitability of the resurrection of the human body. His first argument is that the human soul is immortal (forever exempt from dissolution), yet is by its essence the substantial form of the body. Therefore, it has a natural exigency for union with the body, even after death. But a state of existence contrary to nature cannot be perpetual. Hence, it is fitting that at some future date the body should be reunited to the soul.⁶⁵ Secondly, total happiness ultimately requires the perfection of the person, because, as long as some imperfection endures, natural desire is not quelled. Now the soul disjoined from the body is imperfect, since it lacks an essential part of the specific wholeness of human nature. Consequently, man cannot attain consummate beatitude unless the soul and body are once again conjoined.⁶⁶ Thirdly, the good and the wicked are not usually adequately rewarded or punished, respectively, in this life for what they have merited. Since the soul is immortal, receiving its just deserts in the afterlife, it is only right that the body, which shared in the person's deeds on earth, should likewise participate in the everlasting destiny of the soul.⁶⁷ Of course, all three arguments depend on the premises (established in several works) of the immortality of the human soul and the hylemorphic composition of the human person, as well as the intelligent and purposeful Divine arrangement and governance of the universe.

Nonetheless, Aquinas has not demonstrated that the resurrection of the human body from the dead must or will happen. He has shown merely that such an event is logically possible, philosophically justifiable, and even very reasonable. Yet its actual fulfillment at the culmination of history remains a dogma of faith, because God is under no obligation to perform such a global miracle. However appropriate, it is still contingent (considered in itself), depending entirely on the dispensation of the Divine Will. Indeed, for such an event to transpire, the omnipotence of God is demanded, since no natural agency could effect the revivification of corpses.⁶⁸ Dust and ashes have no natural inclination for reversion to the flesh of the human being who once lived in the world.⁶⁹

We must make clear that we are talking about the true individual resumption of numerically the same body — not assumption of another substantially different body (a re-incarnation via a sort of transmigration)⁷⁰ nor creation *ex nihilo*. The former is precluded by the hylemorphic doctrine, which posits an intimate, substantial nexus

65. *ScG*, IV, trans. by C. O'Neill, Notre Dame, Indiana, University of Notre Dame Press, 1975, c.79[10]; cf. also *DPD*, q.5, a.10, c, and *ST*, Supplementum (hereafter Suppl.), q.75, a.2, c. Though not directly penned by Aquinas, the Supplement to the unfinished *Summa* faithfully retrieves and records his thinking.

66. *ScG*, IV, c.79[11]; cf. also *DPD*, q.5, a.10, c, and *ST*, Suppl., q.75, a.1, c.

67. *ScG*, IV, c.79[12].

68. *ST*, Suppl., q.75, a.3, c.

69. *ST*, Suppl., q.78, a.3, c.

70. *ST*, Suppl., q.79, a.1, c, and a.2, c; *Scriptum super libros Sententiarum Magistri Petri Lombardi* (hereafter *In Sent.*), IV, d.44, q.1, a.1, sol. 1, c.

between *this* soul informing matter to constitute *this* body and no other.⁷¹ Certainly God could re-create the body out of nothing, but the philosophical problem resides in manifesting the intelligibility of asserting that it is the “same” body as before its decay and re-assembly. What are the necessary and sufficient conditions for corporeal identity once death has intervened and then reconstruction (so to speak) has occurred ?

The difficulty is occasioned by such objections as cremation, decomposition into the soil’s minerals, substantial transformation and incorporation of organic constituents into the bodies of other living things (plant, animal, or human), and especially the enigma of serial cannibalism. Exactly where are the corporeal parts that are supposed to be re-united to comprise a re-animated human being ? Furthermore, if all the cells accumulated by an individual during life on earth were restored, the person could be enormous in size.⁷²

As one solution to this quandary, Aquinas introduces his adopted theory of non-terminate dimensions, which are the basis for the division of matter, enabling it to receive diverse forms in various parts. Even after the separation of substantial form from matter, those same indeterminate dimensions remain. Thus, matter existing under those dimensions, whatever new form it may receive, bears a closer affinity to the body which was originally generated out of it. He concludes that the same matter for repairing the human body will be returned which was its prior matter, causing numerically the same individual to rise.⁷³ In another work Aquinas repeats this argument that the matter initially informed by the surviving rational soul retains the same dimensions rendering it capable of physical individuality, and hence numerical restoration upon their hylemorphic reunion.⁷⁴ In the case of cannibalism, material stuff sequentially present in a plurality of people will rise in the person to whom it belonged more perfectly and intimately.⁷⁵ Despite the qualification about indefinite dimensions, these answers seem unsatisfactory, because they fail to disclose how metamorphosed matter can be sufficiently distinguished from its multifarious dispersions to achieve recombinant bodily unity. Of course, Aquinas can and does resort to invoking Divine omnipotence for directing the process,⁷⁶ but one would prefer a more proximate explanation.

A more intellectually gratifying resolution is uncovered by a recourse to the general theory of prime matter already elaborated. It will enable us to make some meaningful sense out of the term “same body.” Aquinas explains that corporeity can be considered as simply a body’s substantial form (which is reducible to the category of substance), since a physical substance has only one substantial form and there is no

71. ARISTOTLE, *On the Soul*, I,3, 407b13-25 ; II,2, 414a17-28. AQUINAS, *ScG*, II, c.83[33,34].

72. Cf. *ScG*, IV, c.80[1-6].

73. *In Sent.*, IV, d.44, q.1, a.1, sol. 1, ad 3,4.

74. *ScG*, IV, c.81[6].

75. *ScG*, IV, c.81[13].

76. *ScG*, IV, c.81[5].

special form of corporeity.⁷⁷ So the key to understanding numerical restoration hangs on the relation between matter and form.

For Aquinas, matter and form have one common being, since matter apart from form possesses no actual existence. This hylemorphic truth, though universally applicable to all physical creatures, must be embellished in the case of man. The forms of lower things have no being except as immersed in material concreteness, for none of their operations surpass the particularizing conditions of matter. The human soul, however, can operate in a manner transcending material limitations, for the mind can apprehend the abstract and universal through general concepts. Since “*agere sequitur esse*,” the intellect is a power operating directly through no bodily organ. Hence, the rational soul itself has an act of existence of its own (i.e., spiritual), which is communicated to the matter of the living composite, but which naturally survives their severance. At the resurrection this unique *esse*, which perdured in the soul, is once again shared with the same body whose matter is re-informed.⁷⁸ There has been no interruption in the *being* of man.⁷⁹

But does the penultimate clause not beg the question? What is this “matter” composing the “same body”? Aquinas replies that, even when someone is alive, the person’s identical parts and individual unity are not impaired or compromised by mere material flux. The specific form of the body abides continuously throughout the person’s whole lifetime, even while the “matter” of the parts wanes and is replenished. Therefore, numerical restoration does not mandate that whatever materials once passed into the fabric of flesh be gathered anew, but only that the individual extract from those materials what suffices to reach a proper dimensional quantity, in accordance with the perfection of the human species.⁸⁰

The restoration of human perfection guarantees that what will rise again will be solely that which pertains to the essential truth of the individual’s human nature — the whole of whatever belongs principally, but not secondarily. The former includes physical substance and quantity, yet not signate matter (marked by the definite dimensions accruing during earthly life). It entails, as we indicated, the completion of organic parts taken formally as consonant with the human species, but not the ebb and flow of parts taken materially which are irrelevant to integral human perfection.⁸¹ The objection about enormity of magnitude is rebutted by distinguishing the real totality of human nature, which involves due quantity, shape, and orderly position of parts, from a material totality bearing no essential relation to the human soul as such.⁸²

77. *ScG*, IV, c.81[7].

78. *ScG*, IV, c.81[11]; cf. also *ST*, I, q.76, a.1, ad 4-6.

79. *ST*, Suppl., q.79, a.2, ad 1.

80. *ScG*, IV, c.81[12].

81. *ST*, Suppl., q.80, a.4, c; *In Sent.*, IV, q.1, a.2, sol. 3, c: “[...] *quidquid pertinet ad integritatem humanae naturae in resurgente, hoc totum in eo resurget* [...]” Cf. also *ScG*, IV, c.84[4,5].

82. *ST*, Suppl., q.80, a.5, c.

We submit that it is the doctrine of prime matter as pure substantial potency which provides the easiest philosophical solution to this theological problem. A beautifully instructive passage epitomizes the point.

A natural thing is what it is, not from its matter but from its form : wherefore, although that part of matter which at one time was under the form of bovine flesh rises again in man under the form of human flesh, it does not follow that the flesh of an ox rises again, but the flesh of a man [...].⁸³

As Aquinas declares, human beings can be numerically restored to bodily life after a temporal interval has elapsed, not only due to the “permanence of the rational soul,” but also on account of the “unity of matter.”⁸⁴

In other words, prime matter, because undifferentiated in itself, if informed by the same soul yields the identical body, since informative presence is accomplished in essentially the same way. Consequently, particles of actually formed matter (regardless of how minute), “shared” by more than one human being through historical sequences of change (generation and corruption), are never really numerically the same for all : their radical potentiality is always subjected to some unique individual substantial form. And it makes no difference ontologically what “matter” the resurrecting soul re-forms into its enlivened body, for through the efficient causality of God *it* becomes the formally determining actuator of a body only accidentally changed. Matter as pure potency for information by *this* rational soul to reconstitute *this* human body suffices for numerical restoration as the self-same person.

We do not claim that the preceding is the sole conceivable consistent explanation non-prejudicial to numerical identity in the resurrection. For example, God, employing ministering angels as His dispositive instrumental efficient causes, could gather the dust of all the human bodies which have ever lived,⁸⁵ reproducing all particles whose matter was ever incorporated by more than one human being and transforming such material substances into the integral unity of parts characteristic of each human person. This possibility might be even more congruent with the order of the universe, because both angels and (at least some) portions of matter once actually informed by human souls would all be involved in the Divinely orchestrated drama. Yet matter as pure potentiality for physical determination still enters the scenario, because restoration of particles merely pushes the problem of numerical identity back to an earlier

83. *ST*, Suppl., q.80, a.4, ad 1.

84. *ScG*, IV, c.81[10].

85. *ST*, Suppl., q.77, a.3, c.

stage. Pondering this eschatological riddle should restrain us from reifying matter in itself.⁸⁶

86. See Stephen T. DAVIS, "Traditional Christian Belief in the Resurrection of the Body," *The New Scholasticism*, LXII (Winter 1988), p. 72-97. See esp. p. 79, 81-90, 96-97. Davis defends as logically coherent two positions (the Patristic one also advanced by Aquinas and an updated Scholastic version at least implicit in Aquinas) on the perseverance of human numerical identity after a period of temporary disembodiment. The earlier theory envisions "personal identity [...] secured when God collects the scattered matter, miraculously reconstitutes it a human body, and reunites it with the soul." This strong material continuity obviates the possibility that resurrected bodies will be merely, as Davis phrases it, "clever replicas" of the originals. On the other hand, the modern construal of post-mortem restoration finds it incredible that God should locate every atom first belonging to a given human body in order to ensure physical integrity. Although it is conceded that Divine omnipotence can somehow re-assemble the essential components for every human body, Davis promotes the thesis that mere "qualitative similarity" between the pre- and post-resurrection bodies can be averted by embracing the simpler view that "the soul alone must guarantee personal identity." Although he does not expressly mention (prime) matter as pure potency, he sides with Aquinas's alternative reasoning that "identity of particles of bodily matter does not seem necessary to preserve the identity of an ordinary human person even during the course of a lifetime." New matter does not matter; nevertheless, the Patristic perspective is as consistent and acceptable as the neo-Scholastic revision, and is probably closer to the literal exegesis of the germane Scriptural texts.