Introduction: Special Issue on Powers and Essences

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The natural world, as Latin medieval Aristotelians see it, is a dynamic place.* Material substances are endowed with real active and passive powers or potencies (*potentiae*), which enable them to produce and undergo changes, respectively. For example, according to medieval thinkers, if a fire burns a log of wood, this occurs due to the log’s passive power of combustibility as well as the fire’s active power of heat. These natural powers, scholastic philosophers hold, are present in virtue of the very essences (*essentiae*) of their bearers, that is, in virtue of those features that make their bearers the kinds of things they are. Fire’s active power of heat, for instance, follows from the very nature of fire, and the combustibility of wood derives from its essence.

How are we to understand these essences that empower material substances? Most Latin medieval Aristotelians conceive of them *hylomorphically*.¹ On their account, the essence of a material substance, be it inanimate or animate, involves two different types of components: matter and at least one substantial form, though some medieval thinkers countenance more than one such form.² Very roughly, a substance’s matter accounts for its being a *material* substance, while its substantial form(s) account(s) for its being the *specific kind* of material substance it is, say, a piece of wood or a cat.

According to medieval Aristotelians, both types of components are intimately connected with powers, but with different ones. Matter has a power or potency (the latter term being more commonly used in the secondary

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1 Here they are no doubt following Ibn-Sinā (Avicenna), who writes in his *Liber De Philosophia prima* V, c. 5, 275^{71–73}: “Composito etiam non est haec intentio quia composita est ex forma et materia; haec enim est quidditas compositi et quidditas est haec compositio.”

2 For discussions of the debate between unitarianism vs. pluralism in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, see, e.g., Zavalloni, *Richard de Mediavilla*; De Boer, *The Science of the Soul*, 216–226; Pasnau, *Metaphysical Themes*, ch. 25.

literature on matter) to be informed by a substantial form. For example, a cat's matter has the potency to be informed by the substantial form(s) of a cat, but it can also take on the form of a corpse, which it does when the cat dies. A substantial form, in contrast, endows the material substance with a number of powers that are characteristic of that substance's kind. For example, the substantial form(s) of a cat endow it with characteristically feline powers, such as sight and smell.

While much of the above was commonly accepted by Latin medieval Aristotelians, they fiercely debated the precise relation that each of the two essential components bears to its respective powers. Is matter the same as its potency to receive a form, or do they differ? If they differ, then what kind of entity is this potency in matter? And what about substantial forms? Is such a form just the set of kind-specific powers that it bestows upon a hylomorphic composite? Or are these powers distinct from, and dependent on, the form, and if so, what is the nature of this dependence relation? Further, must a given form bestow upon one and the same composite the same powers, or might it bestow different powers on it under different circumstances? And how are we to think of the distinction between active and passive powers in this light? Do active powers derive from one of the essential components of a material substance, say, its form, while its passive powers derive from another, say, its matter, or is there no such correlation?

This special issue offers a window into some of these debates. It contains six articles, the majority of which are based on papers read at the 2018 workshop "Theories of Causal Powers in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Century" held at the De Wulf-Mansion Centre at KU Leuven. The authors that the papers discuss were active in the period between, roughly, 1250 and 1350, and the focus on this period is motivated by the fact that it saw one of the liveliest debates about powers and essences in the Middle Ages – a debate that owes in no small part to the reception of the works on natural philosophy by Aristotle, Ibn-Sīnā (Avicenna) and Ibn-Rushd (Averroes), which became widely available by the 1250s.³

About one half of the articles in this special issue focuses on medieval discussions of matter and its power(s), while the other half focuses on medieval theories of substantial form and its power(s). This even distribution is rather fortunate, because it allows the reader to get a balanced picture of the essence-power relation in material substances, as medieval thinkers see it – a picture

3 For the reception of Aristotle's natural philosophy, see, e.g., Weisheipl, "The Interpretation of Aristotle's *Physics*." For the reception of Ibn-Sīnā's works, see, e.g., Janssens and De Smet, eds. *Avicenna and his Heritage*. For the reception of Ibn-Rushd's thought in the Latin West, see, e.g., Bakker, ed. *Averroes' Natural Philosophy*.

that shows how both types of essential components relate to their respective powers.⁴ Of course, the present issue can only offer a glimpse into the vast medieval debate about this topic, but we have striven to cast our net widely at least when it comes to the selection of authors. The issue includes articles on well-known figures like Thomas Aquinas and William of Ockham, but it also includes articles on understudied authors, such as James of Viterbo, Peter of Palude, or Gerald Ot. What follows is an overview of the individual contributions, which are arranged according to chronological order.

The first article is by me, **Can Laurens Löwe**, and titled “Bonaventure on the Soul and Its Powers.” It deals with Bonaventure’s discussion of the question as to whether the soul, that is, the substantial form of a living being, is identical to or distinct from its powers. Bonaventure wants to strike a middle path between two views, one being that the soul is completely identical to its powers and the other being that its powers are accidents distinct from the soul. He argues that the soul’s powers are not identical to the soul but that they are not accidents either. Rather, he contends that the soul’s powers are in the same category as the soul itself, namely, substance, albeit in a different manner, namely “by reduction.” My article discusses the “reductive category membership” of the soul’s powers, as I call it, and considers Peter John Olivi’s objection to this theory, according to which Bonaventure’s view is, ultimately, incoherent.

Gloria Frost’s article “Aquinas on Passive Powers” examines Aquinas’s account of the passive powers of material substances and argues that these powers derive from matter. As Frost specifies, these powers do not originate in prime matter, but rather in a substance’s “proper matter” (*materia propria*), which is matter under a certain form. In a second step, Frost discusses Aquinas’s view of how these passive powers are to be individuated. She shows that this requires appeal both to the actualizations of passive powers as well as to their corresponding active powers. Finally, Frost investigates whether passive powers for undergoing change are the same as powers for existing in determinate ways, for instance, whether the power to be heated is the same as the power to be hot. She contends that Aquinas takes these powers to be really identical and to differ merely conceptually.

4 I should note here that there have already been several studies dedicated to examining medieval debates about the relation between substantial forms and their powers. The medieval discussion of the relation between matter and its potency has also received some, though less, scholarly attention. But these two debates have usually been treated in isolation, and the present issue aims to consider them in conjunction. For literature on the relation between substantial forms and powers, see the references in D. Simpson’s contribution (especially note 7) and in mine (especially notes 2 and 3). For literature on the relation between matter and its potency, see the references in M. Gossiaux’s (especially notes 3 and 5) as well as in R. Friedman’s article (especially notes 6 and 19).

Mark Gossiaux's article "James of Viterbo on Seminal Reasons as *inchoation-nes formarum*" continues the foray into medieval views on matter. Gossiaux focuses on James of Viterbo's account of how forms are drawn out or, in medieval terminology, "educed" (*educuntur*) from the potency of matter in substantial change. As Gossiaux shows, James takes seriously the idea that such forms cannot be created *ex nihilo* by the agents that draw them out. For this reason he argues that these forms must somehow preexist in matter in potency. Relying on Simplicius, James conceptualizes such forms in potency as "inchoations of," or "aptitudes for," forms in act. For James, these forms in potency are identifiable with the potencies of matter for specific types of actual forms. He distinguishes these specific potencies from another, more general potency of matter, which enables matter to bear precisely these specific potencies.

In "Perfect Subjects, Shields, and Retractions: Three Models of Impassibility," **Zita Toth** turns our attention to medieval views of the bodily powers of human beings. She examines these powers in the context of Aquinas's, Durand of St.-Pourçain's, and Peter of Palude's respective discussions of bodily impassibility, i.e., the inability of a resurrected body to undergo any harmful change. As Toth argues, for Aquinas, our this-worldly and resurrected bodies are numerically the same, but have different active and passive powers. This is because the resurrected body is more perfectly dominated by the soul than the current one, and this entails that the resurrected body lacks passive powers harmful to its nature. Toth shows that Durand and Peter both take issue with this account, claiming that a body's active and passive powers are necessarily linked to its substantial form, so that our glorified bodies must have the very same passive powers as our this-worldly ones. To explain impassibility, Durand argues that God creates a shield in the next life, so that the passive powers whose manifestations are harmful to us will never be manifested. Peter, in contrast, maintains that, rather than adding a shield to the problematic passive powers, God will retract his concurring activity whenever an active power that can act upon such a passive power approaches us.

In "*Potens per accidens sine accidentibus*: Ockham on Material Substances and Their Essential Powers," **Daniel Simpson** explores the relation between substantial forms and powers in Ockham. Through a close examination of Ockham's account of *propria*, Simpson shows that for Ockham not all powers of substances are accidents. Rather, some powers coincide with substantial forms. Thus, substances are powerful *sine accidentibus*. However, Ockham also maintains that substances themselves are not properly speaking powerful; rather their substantial forms are, and this on account of Ockham's reductionistic view of material substances. Thus, Simpson argues that while a material substance is powerful without any accident, it is so only *per accidens*, where

this does not mean that a substance is powerful in virtue of an accident, but rather that it is powerful in virtue of a non-identical part, its substantial form, which is intrinsically powerful.

Russell Friedman's "Is Matter the Same as Its Potency? Some Fourteenth-Century Answers" concludes this issue by returning to the topic of matter. Friedman discusses three fourteenth-century accounts of the relation between matter and potency: a Scotistic one defended by Gerald Ot, an Averroan one endorsed by John of Jandun and Peter Auriol, and a nominalist one adopted by John Buridan. As Friedman shows, each view, in its own way, answers the question as to whether matter is the same as its potency with some form of "yes and no." Gerald Ot maintains that while prime matter *is* really the same as its potency, it *is not* quidditatively and formally (in the Scotistic sense of 'formal') the same as its potency. John of Jandun and Peter Auriol argue that we must distinguish between two meanings of the term 'potency' (*potentia*). This term may mean the respect of potentiality or the foundation of that respect. In the first sense, prime matter's potency is not the same as prime matter, but in the second sense it is. John Buridan, finally, maintains that prime matter is strictly identical to its potency. However, Buridan also countenances "dispositive active potencies," which dispose prime matter towards receiving specific forms. According to Buridan, these potencies are accidents, and rather surprisingly he takes them to directly inhere in prime matter.

To the medievalist with a liking for metaphysics, the topics covered in the articles of this issue will, in all likelihood, be intrinsically interesting. But a better understanding of powers and essences in medieval thought is, arguably, also relevant for the investigation of other areas in medieval philosophy, in particular, natural philosophy and philosophy of mind, as I shall briefly indicate here.

Medieval natural philosophy investigates the nature of change, and on the medieval picture, any change involves the actualization of powers. Medieval natural philosophy also crucially relies on the notion of a "natural" as opposed to a "violent" change, i.e., a change that occurs in accordance with the essence of a substance as opposed to against its essence. To understand what such a natural change is and what power(s) it involves, it is clearly helpful to understand what powers are, generally speaking, and how they relate to the essences of their bearers.

Medieval philosophy of mind is concerned with examining various types of mental states, such as sensation, intellection, and volition, and it also considers the various relations of dependence these states bear to one another. For medieval philosophers, mental states are, like natural changes, actualizations of powers that cognizant beings possess in virtue of their essences, such as the

intellect or the sense of sight. Accordingly, a discussion of mental states and their interrelation will also benefit from a more general understanding of powers and their connection to essences.

The medieval discussion of powers and essences is also interesting for another, non-medieval reason. The notions of power and essence have enjoyed something of a renaissance in recent metaphysics, and some contemporary philosophers have explicitly noted a connection with medieval Aristotelianism. In a lecture from 1981, for instance, Hilary Putnam remarked (with a slight note of disdain):

[W]e now find many materialists employing metaphysical vocabulary that smacks of the fourteenth century: materialists who talk of ‘causal powers’ ... even materialists who speak unabashedly of ‘essences’.⁵

In a more recent interview for Richard Marshall’s philosophy blog *3:16 AM*, the metaphysician Stephen Mumford offers a similar historical diagnosis, albeit in more positive terms. He characterizes contemporary theories of causal powers, including his own, as “a revival of an old picture of reality – one found in Aquinas and Aristotle, for instance.”⁶

How did this surprising resurgence of a broadly Aristotelian metaphysics come about? There are several reasons for this.⁷ To wrap up this introduction, I will briefly consider one. My discussion of it will be rather sketchy, but it will suffice, I hope, to drive it home that there are some noteworthy points of contact between the medieval and the contemporary debate.

The story begins with Gilbert Ryle’s *The Concept of Mind* (1949). In this work, Ryle renewed philosophical interest in statements ascribing powers or, in now common parlance, “dispositions” to objects, such as ‘this log is combustible’ or ‘this vase is fragile’. Ryle was particularly interested in the logical form of these statements. He argued that counter to what their grammatical surface structure may suggest, these statements should not be read as attributing combustibility and fragility as real properties to objects. He rejected this reading because, on his view, we should only admit actually existing items in our ontology. But combustibility and fragility, understood as properties, seemed to him not to be anything actual, but “mere would-be things and could-be happenings.”⁸

5 Putnam, “Why There Isn’t a Ready-Made World,” 207.

6 Marshall, “Hidden Powers,” accessed on November 24th, 2020. Thanks to Gloria Frost for drawing my attention to this interview.

7 For a very detailed and helpful discussion of the different reasons for this renaissance, see Schrenk, *Metaphysics of Science*, ch. 6. Thanks to Dominik Perler for this reference.

8 Ryle, *The Concept of Mind*, 119.

For this reason, Ryle proposed that we read disposition ascriptions differently, namely, as counterfactual conditionals. On this account, now commonly known as the “conditional analysis” of dispositions, to say that an object has a certain disposition is to say that it would behave in a certain way if a certain stimulus occurred.⁹ To say that a vase is fragile, for instance, is to say that it would shatter if struck. This analysis of disposition ascriptions does not commit us to dispositional properties. Rather, its aim is to reduce the dispositional to the non-dispositional. The dispositional predicate in the analysandum, here: ‘fragile’, is replaced in the analysans with a counterfactual statement that contains two non-dispositional predicates, ‘shatters’ and ‘is struck’.

Elegant though it may be, this analysis is false, as is now commonly agreed. This is because it admits of several counterexamples. Here is one involving what metaphysicians today call a “mask.”¹⁰ Suppose a vase is wrapped in bubble wrap. In this case, it does not shatter if struck. Nevertheless, it is true to say that it is fragile, but the bubble wrap masks the fragility, that is, prevents it from manifesting in breakage.¹¹ Accordingly, ‘the vase is fragile’ cannot be analyzed into ‘the vase would shatter if struck’. For the former statement may be true, even if the latter is false.

More sophisticated versions of the conditional analysis have been developed to deal with counterexamples such as these, but their success is controversial.¹² For this reason, a growing number of metaphysicians have found it more attractive to take powers to be real and irreducible properties of objects.¹³ As metaphysician C. B. Martin describes this trend: “if ... counterfactuality or strong conditionality cannot explain dispositions, then there is no place to turn but to actual first-order dispositions or powers.”¹⁴ The Rylean worry that this involves commitment to non-actual properties has lost traction. Of course, to ascribe a power to an object is to say something about what that

9 Ryle, *The Concept of Mind*, 31.

10 This term and the example can be found in Johnston, “How to Speak of Colors,” 233–234.

11 Masks are not the only type of counterexample to the conditional analysis. Another type involves so-called “finks,” which take a disposition away whenever its stimulus is present. Take a live wire, which, as per the conditional analysis, is live just in case it conducts electricity whenever it is touched by a conductor. Suppose now that this live wire is attached to a device that makes the wire dead whenever it is touched by a conductor. In that case, the wire is live, but it is false to say that it would conduct electricity when touched by a conductor.

12 See D. Lewis’s reformed conditional analysis in his “Finkish Dispositions.”

13 For a defense of the reality of irreducible dispositional properties, see, e.g., Mumford, *Dispositions*, 12; Ellis, *Scientific Essentialism*; Bird, *Nature’s Metaphysics*.

14 Martin, “Dispositions and Conditionals,” 7. I owe this reference to Schrenk, *Metaphysics of Science*, 225.

object would do under certain circumstances. But why should this entail that a power is itself a non-actual feature? Cannot something be actual and dispose an object to a certain type of behavior at the same time?¹⁵

Exactly what powers a metaphysician countenances in their ontology depends on their conception of properties. One popular approach today is to take the sciences as a guide. Here is a representative statement by Brian Ellis to this effect.

Scientists today certainly talk about inanimate things as though they believe they had such powers. Negatively charged particles have the power to attract positively charged ones. Electrostatic fields have the power to modify spectral lines. Sulfuric acid has the power to dissolve copper.¹⁶

The example of an electron's negative charge is of particular interest for our purposes because it leads Ellis to argue that there are powers essential to their bearers.¹⁷ No electron, he claims, could fail to have a negative charge without ceasing to be an electron. Indeed, an electron's very identity is tied to this power and, according to Ellis, science is in the business of uncovering precisely such essential powers. Far from being an outdated view, Ellis takes it that essentialism is very much in keeping with science.

This latter position is controversial, but I mention it to make it clear that the scholastic view according to which things actualize powers that they have in virtue of their essences is again given serious consideration. No doubt, our scientific outlook has changed considerably since the Middle Ages, but the metaphysical framework utilized by contemporary metaphysicians like Ellis to make sense of scientific findings is strikingly similar to the scholastic one. This makes it all the more interesting to gain insight into medieval discussions about the relation between powers and essences. To what extent contemporary philosophy can benefit from consideration of these discussions remains an open question. What I can say with a certain measure of confidence is that there has been no period in the history of Western philosophy that has investigated the metaphysics of powers and essences in as much detail as the medieval one.

¹⁵ For this point, see, e.g., Molnar, *Powers*, 99–101.

¹⁶ Ellis, *Scientific Essentialism*, 109.

¹⁷ Ellis, *Scientific Essentialism*, 117. For a critique of this essentialist view, see, e.g., Mumford, "Kinds."

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