Chapter 2

The Ontology of Prime Matter

Scotus said that we can think of matter either as a power or as a possible being.¹ In the previous chapter I examined Scotus’s characterization of prime matter as a certain kind of power, the passive power of a substance to undergo accidental and substantial change. This chapter focuses on the sense in which matter is a possible being and analyzes Scotus’s arguments that prime matter can exist by divine power all on its own, without any form, or, put another way, that there can be free-floating powers, powers that are not the powers of anything. This is a strange thought, and it is all the stranger given that for Scotus matter as such is not corporeal or extended; these features are due to forms, substantial form and the form of quantity, respectively. Matter as such does not have parts outside of parts, although it is able to have parts (habit partibilitatem).² Like Scotus, William Ockham holds that potentia is not a relation founded on matter, but is instead matter itself.³ Unlike Scotus, however, Ockham denies that there are distinct quantitative forms, holding that matter de se has parts outside of parts.⁴ For Ockham then the basic power for undergoing change is identified with a fundamental extended substratum which is determined or shaped by substantial and qualitative forms. Traditional analogues of prime matter, such as bronze or clay, are therefore useful for getting a grip on Ockham’s conception of matter. But for Scotus passive power is essentially independent from and prior to being extended; the traditional metaphors are therefore misleading for understanding Scotus’s theory of matter. Transitioning here to Scotus’s ontology of matter, it will be useful to keep in mind that Scotus’s investigation concerns whether or not a certain kind of power, passive power, can exist and not be the power of any subject. An Ockhamist enquiry into matter’s ontology on the other hand would investigate whether there can be an extended thing that did not have determinate dimensions.

i Matter as Subjective Potency

Aristotelians say that prime matter is a being in potency. Aquinas took this to mean that matter was not of itself an actual being; it depends for its actuality

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¹ Quaestiones super Libros Metaphysicorum Aristotelis IX, q.q.1–2, n.14 (Bonaventure IV, p.512).
² Reportatio Parisiensis II-A, d.12, q.2, n.7 (Wadding XI, p.322).
³ Ockham, Summula philosophiae naturalis I, c.10, ll.62–63 (OPh VI, p.183), potentia non est relatio fundata in materia, sed est ipsamet materia et non fundatur in ea.
⁴ Ockham, Summula philosophiae naturalis I, c.13 (OPh VI, pp.191–194).
on form, such that apart from form matter cannot exist, even by divine power.\(^5\) Scotus disagrees and argues that in order for matter to do all it is supposed to do, it must be an actual being off its own bat. It is a power, a cause, it persists through change, it is a part of a substance, and so on.\(^6\) So Scotus offers a different take on what it means for matter to be a being in potency.

Scotus distinguishes two senses of possible existence, the possible existence of something that can be made, such as Antichrist, and the possibility for an existing subject, such as prime matter, to be perfected by form. He calls the first **objective potency** and the second **subjective potency**:

> [**Objective potency**] is [the potentiality] of any substantial or accidental essence to its own existence, and it is founded on that essence whose proper existence it is. For thus the essence of an accident or a whiteness is in potency to its own existence, just as the essence of the soul to be created is in potency to its existence.\(^7\)

> [**Subjective potency**] is not [the potentiality] of just any being, since it does not exist except in that which, in addition to its own existence, is able to receive some being from another; and thus when it does not have that, it is in potency to it. For example, a non-white body is in potency to existing not simpliciter but existing as white, which is its existence in a qualified and extrinsic way.\(^8\)\(^9\)

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\(^6\) *Lectura* II, s.12, q.un, n.29 (Vatican XIX, p.79).

\(^7\) *Quaestiones super Libros Metaphysicorum Aristotelis* IX, qq.1–2, n.41 (Bonaventure IV, p.524–525). Prima est cuiuscumque essentiae substantialis vel accidentalis ad proprium esse, et fundatur in illa essentia cuius est illud proprium esse. Ita enim essentia accidentis vel albedinis est in potentia ad prorium esse suum, sicut essentia animae creandae est in potentia ad suum esse.

\(^8\) *Quaestiones super Libros Metaphysicorum Aristotelis* IX, qq.1–2, n.42 (Bonaventure IV, p.525). Secunda non est cuiuslibet entis, quia non est nisi illius quod, praeter esse proprium, natum est recipere aliquod esse ab alio; et ita quando non habet illus, est in potentia ad illud. Verbi gratia, corpus non-album est in potentia ut sit, non simpliciter sed ut sit album, quod est esse eius secundum quid et extrinsecum. Et ista potest dici "subiectiva."

\(^9\) Scotus also distinguishes between objective and subjective potencies in his commentaries on *Sentences* II, d.12, elaborating the idea that matter is a being in potency by saying that it has subjective instead of objective potency. See *Reportatio Parisiensis* II-A, d.12, q.1, n.11 (Wadding XI, p.317), and *Lectura* II, d.12, q.un (Vatican XIX, p.80).