Matter and potentiality, privation and desire

In his commentary on the Aristotelian passage about chance, the subject of the last chapter, besides affirming that chance is an accidental, not an essential cause, Averroes also seeks to prove that all causes serve the foremost cause, which is the final cause. In particular, he like Avicenna rejects the view, propounded by some Presocratics, that matter is the sole cause behind all natural phenomena and that it is alone the agent of change in the natural world. The Andalusian philosopher claims that the final cause, not the material cause, ultimately accounts for natural processes. The only cause of chance, through which a natural agent may fail to produce its usual effect, is matter, more specifically the failure of matter to support form.

In the same way that it was necessary to analyse Avicenna’s theory of matter to ascertain that it is not at variance with his determinism, it is now necessary to ascertain whether Averroes’ theory of matter is consistent with his analysis of chance. Does matter have a purely passive role, or is it in any way active?

Like Avicenna, he holds that matter qua matter is essentially in potentiality and does not exist without form. As such, it is not a body or a substance which subsists independently.

There is a being which is in potentiality all substantial and accidental dispositions. And this is called prime matter... It is clear that this matter does not shed corporeality, because then it would have a substantial disposition, and it would have a name and a definition... one who thinks that this nature is a body errs.¹

Matter does not actually exist except in combination with a form. If prime matter existed on its own, it would have a name, definition,

¹ Averroes, *Long Commentary on the Physics*, 38C–D. For the view that matter is not a body, see also, Averroes, *Long Commentary on the Metaphysics*, p. 80. According to Averroes, from matter alone nothing comes to be in actuality, *Long Commentary on the Metaphysics*, p. 96. It does not produce anything actual.
and as such would not be able to receive all dispositions. Prime matter, then, is not a particular physical body.

Averroes further states, following Aristotle, that prime matter is not generable. Generation only occurs when matter and form are combined in one single particular substance.\(^2\)

In another passage, Averroes expands on the nature of prime matter.

This nature, which is prime matter, is a principle (*principium*) common to all perishable beings . . . but it is not one in itself such that it would be a simple substance existing in actuality, or such that it would be something composed of matter and form. For if it had its own form it would never receive another one while that [form] remained; instead it would immediately pass away as soon as another form was generated. Whatever receives something does not receive it inasmuch as it [itself] is in actuality but inasmuch as it [itself] is in potentiality. If then [the function] of prime matter is to receive all forms, it is necessary that it should be in potentiality all forms, and that it should not have in its substance its own form . . . Indeed if it were something existing in actuality, that is having a form, then . . . the forms would be accidents.\(^3\)

In spite of being indeed a principle for beings, matter is not an active principle. For Averroes as for Avicenna before him, matter is a principle of change in corruptible beings, but not a principle of existence. Prime matter, then, is the substratum that underlies the four elements of which all mutable beings are composed.\(^4\) As receptacle of all forms in principle, prime matter cannot have its own constitutive form. If it had a form of its own, it would be unable to receive other forms. Also, it cannot be conceived of as substrate, of which the forms would be accidents. Rather the forms are the essential, actualising element within the material compound. In consequence, the characteristic of prime matter is pure receptivity and

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2 Averroes, *Long Commentary on the Physics*, 46K.
4 There is one common matter existing for all four elements, *Short Commentary on De Caelo*, p. 73. The true ‘element’ (i.e., matter) is shared by all composite existents. All are composed of prime matter and dissolve into it, and prime matter is the cause in the remaining elements, i.e., the four elements, *Long Commentary on the Metaphysics*, p. 505. For the view that there is a matter common to things that change into one another see *Long Commentary on the Metaphysics*, 1299.