In the course of his treatment of material causes and material causation, Suárez writes that:

It should therefore be said, first, that matter is not called pure potency with respect to every metaphysical act, that is, because it does not include any metaphysical act. For this cannot be true.1

For a person familiar with traditional Aristotelian philosophy, this might appear a bit paradoxical. As is evident from this quote, Suárez does indeed consider prime matter to be pure potency (“pura potentia”). However, the status of being in pure potency – or in pure potentiality – does not exclude matter being actual ‘metaphysically’. It does include it being in pure potency ‘physically’, though, as we will see.

In this way, Suárez solves – or rather dissolves – what has been called “the central paradox” that was attached to prime matter within Scholastic philosophy. This paradox is expressed in the following way by Robert Pasnau:

By common consensus, forms are what give a thing its nature, or more generally its properties and characteristics. Yet, also by common consensus, prime matter is that which underlies all forms and so is of itself free of those forms. So how can prime matter be real – that is, how can it exist – without having some character? Surely nothing can exist without existing in some way or another.2

In what follows, we will see how Suárez steers clear of this paradox exactly by separating metaphysical act from physical act.

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1 *DM* 13.5.8 (Vivès 13.5.9) [25.416]: “Dicendum est ergo primo, materiam non vocari puram potentiam respectu omnis actus metaphysici, id est, quia nullum actum metaphysicum includat: hoc enim verum esse non potest.”

In order to understand just how he does this, we shall follow Suárez’s treat-
ment of the material cause of substances – which he equates with prime mat-
ter – from his treatment of causes in general, through the basic distinctions
and theses concerning prime matter, to his conclusion that it indeed includes
some actuality. We shall also see where this places prime matter with respect
to substantiality, as well as what his view on prime matter implies for heavenly
bodies and their heavenly matter.

1 A Cause among the Causes

Suárez’s definition of a cause is that it is a “principle in itself influencing being into
another” (“principium per se influens esse in alium”).3 Under this general heading,
Suárez then gives a number of different subdivisions of the causes. Since these are
made before his treatment of the material causes and material causation, the way in
which the material causes are ordered and treated among causes generally sets the
stage, so to say, for his ‘proper’ treatment of material causes (although, of course, this
preliminary treatment of material causes is also at least partly dependent on his later,
‘proper’ treatment of material causes and material causation – there is an interesting
reciprocal relationship between these treatments).

There are particularly two contexts in which material causes are included in
different constellations together with other causes, namely, (i) as contributing
real influence when they cause (together with formal and efficient causes, but
in contrast to final causes), (ii) as causing by intrinsically constituting the ‘effect’
(as the formal cause, but in contrast to the efficient and final causes which
influence extrinsically).

So, first, the material cause contributes real influence when it causes.4

Another division of the causes can be thought out [sc. which is] more
immediate [sc. than the division into four causes]. For the three causes
beside the final cause are alike in that they contribute by real influence to
the being of the effect, and therefore require real existence for their [sc.
respective kind of] causality, as we will see later, whereas the final cause
influences intentionally, and can therefore influence before it exists.5

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3 DM 12.2.3 (Vivès 12.2.4) [25.384], Cf. Ch. 1 above, though. See also Erik Åkerlund, ‘Nisi temere agat’: Francisco Suárez on Final Causes and Final Causation, Dissertation (Uppsala, 2011), Ch. 1.
4 Cf. Åkerlund, ‘Nisi temere agat’, p. 33.
5 DM 12.3.19 [25.394]: “posset alia divisio causae immediatior excogitari: nam tres aliae causae praeter finalem, convenient in hoc, quod conferunt ad esse effectus per realem influxum,