

AQUINAS ON SUBSTANCE AND PRIME MATTER*

Commentary on Metaphysics 7.3 1029a5–30

[1278] Aristotle compares the parts of the division [form/matter/composite] to one another, and he does three things:

- (1) He shows [in A] that form is more substance than the composite.
- (2) He shows in [B]–[C] that matter is substance most of all, which was the view of some [philosophers].
- (3) He shows in [D] that the composite as well as the form is more substance than matter.

[A]

ACCORDINGLY, IF THE SPECIES IS PRIOR TO THE MATTER AND MORE A BEING, THEN IT WILL BE PRIOR TO THIS THAT IS FROM BOTH. NOW THEN, IT HAS BEEN STATED WHAT SUBSTANCE IS AS A TYPE, SINCE IT IS NOT OF A SUBJECT BUT OF WHICH OTHER THINGS ARE; HOWEVER, IT MUST NOT BE ONLY SO, FOR IT IS NOT SUFFICIENT, AND INDEED THIS IS OBVIOUS.

[The Form is Prior to the Matter]

Therefore, [Aristotle] says first of all that THE SPECIES, *i. e.* the form, IS PRIOR TO THE MATTER. For matter is a being in potency, and the species is its act. Yet act is naturally prior to potency. And simply speaking, [act] is prior [to potency] in time too, since potency is not moved to act except by an actual being—even though in one and the same [being] that is sometimes in potency and sometimes in act, the potency may precede the act in time.

[The Form is More a Being Than the Matter]

Accordingly, it is clear that the form IS PRIOR TO THE MATTER, and it is also MORE A BEING than [the matter], for this reason: that on account of which any given thing is, it is also more it; yet the matter becomes an actual

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being only through the form; accordingly, the form must be MORE A BEING than the matter.

[The Form is Prior to the Composite]

[First Argument]

[1279] A further point follows from this, [namely] that by the same argument the form is PRIOR TO the composite OF BOTH, inasmuch as there is some matter in the composite. And thus [the composite] shares in something that is posterior according to nature, namely in matter.

[Second Argument]

Again: it is clear that matter and form are the principles of the composite; yet the principles of something are prior to it; and so, if form is prior to matter, it will be prior to the composite.

[The General Definition of 'Substance']

[Statement of the General Definition]

[1280] Since it could seem to someone that from the fact that the Philosopher presents all the ways in which 'substance' is said, that this would be sufficient for knowing what substance is, he for this reason adds the remark that NOW THEN, IT HAS BEEN STATED WHAT SUBSTANCE IS AS A TYPE, *i. e.* it has been described only in the universal case that substance is WHAT IS NOT said OF A SUBJECT BUT OF WHICH OTHERS are said.

[Insufficiency of the General Definition]

But IT MUST NOT BE ONLY SO that one knows substance and other things, namely by a universal and logical definition, FOR IT IS NOT SUFFICIENT for knowing the nature of a thing, since INDEED THIS formula that is given for a definition of this sort IS OBVIOUS. For the principles of a thing, upon which the cognition of a thing depends, are not touched on in a definition of this kind. Rather, some common condition of the thing is touched on, by means of which such knowledge is provided.

[B]

[1281] Aristotle shows that matter is substance most of all. And he does two things with regard to this:

- (1) He presents [in B] the argument of the Ancients by which they maintained that matter most of all, and [matter] alone, is substance.
- (2) He makes it known [in C] what matter is.

AND FURTHER, MATTER IS SUBSTANCE—INDEED, IF IT IS NOT, WHAT ELSE IS ESCAPES US; FOR WERE THE OTHERS TAKEN AWAY, NOTHING APPEARS TO REMAIN. FOR THE OTHERS ARE BODILY ATTRIBUTES AND PRODUCTIONS AND POTENCIES. NOW LENGTH, WIDTH, AND DEPTH ARE CERTAIN QUANTITIES, BUT NOT SUBSTANCES. QUANTITY IS NOT SUBSTANCE, BUT RATHER THAT IN WHICH THESE ARE PRESENT AS PRIMARY IS SUBSTANCE. BUT WITH LENGTH, WIDTH, AND DEPTH TAKEN AWAY, WE SEE NOTHING REMAINS, UNLESS IF THERE IS ANYTHING DETERMINED BY THESE. ACCORDINGLY, MATTER ALONE SEEMS NECESSARILY TO BE SUBSTANCE TO THOSE THINKING IN THIS WAY.

Therefore, [Aristotle] says first of all that not only is form substance, and the composite, but also MATTER IS SUBSTANCE according to the aforementioned argument. Indeed, IF matter itself WERE NOT substance, WHAT ELSE substance IS, apart from matter, WOULD ESCAPE US. For if THE OTHERS that plainly are not substance WERE REMOVED from sensible things in which there clearly is substance, NOTHING WOULD REMAIN, it seems, except matter.

[1282] In the case of sensible bodies, which all admit are substances, there are some things such as BODILY ATTRIBUTES (*e. g.* hot, cold, and the like), and it is clear with regard to these that they are not substances.

There are also some PRODUCTIONS (*i. e.* generations and corruptions and motions) in them, and it is also plain with regard to these that they are not substances.

There are also POTENCIES in them, which are the principles of the generations and corruptions and motions mentioned above—namely the potencies that are in things for acting or for being-acted-upon—and it is also obvious that these are not substances, but rather are classified under the genus of Quality.

[1283] After all these, dimensions are found in sensible bodies—that is, LENGTH, WIDTH, AND DEPTH, which ARE CERTAIN QUANTITIES AND NOT SUBSTANCES. Indeed, it is clear that QUANTITY IS NOT SUBSTANCE, BUT THAT IN WHICH THESE aforementioned dimensions ARE PRESENT, AS their PRIMARY subject, IS SUBSTANCE. BUT WITH these dimensions REMOVED, NOTHING SEEMS TO REMAIN EXCEPT their subject, which is DETERMINED and distinct BY THESE dimensions. Yet this is matter. For dimensive quantity seems to be immediately present in matter, since matter is not divided so as to receive diverse forms in its diverse parts except through this sort of quantity. And so, by a consideration of this kind, it seems to be necessary

not only that matter be substance, but that it alone is substance.

[The Mistake of the Ancient Philosophers]

[1284] Ignorance of the substantial form misled the ancient philosophers bringing in this argument. For they had not yet advanced so far as to raise their understandings to something that is beyond the sensible. Hence they considered only those forms that are proper or common sensibles. However, it is clear that the like are accidents—*e. g.* white and black, large and small, and things of this sort. Now substantial form is sensible only per accidens, and so they did not get all the way to a cognition such that they would know how to distinguish [substantial form] from matter. Instead, they said that the whole subject—which we for our part hold to be composed of matter and form—is prime matter, *e. g.* air or water or something of the sort.

Furthermore, they called ‘forms’ what we call ‘accidents’, *e. g.* quantities and qualities, the proper subject of which is not prime matter but the composite substance that is a substance in act. For every accident exists due to the fact that it is present in a substance, as we have maintained.

[C]

[1285] Since the argument described [in B] above, showing that matter alone is substance, seems to have proceeded due to the ignorance of matter (as mentioned), [Aristotle] for this reason consequently says what matter is in point of fact, as set forth in *Physics* 1.1 [190^b25]. For matter in itself can be sufficiently known only through motion, and the investigation of it seems to pertain especially to physics.

HOWEVER, I SAY THAT MATTER IS WHAT IN ITSELF IS CALLED NEITHER A WHAT NOR A QUANTITY NOR SOMETHING ELSE OF THESE BY WHICH BEING IS DETERMINED. FOR THERE IS SOMETHING OF WHICH ANY OF THESE IS PREDICATED, [SOMETHING] FOR WHICH THE *esse* IS DIVERSE FROM THAT FOR ANY ONE BELONGING TO THE CATEGORIES. SURELY THE OTHERS ARE PREDICATED OF SUBSTANCE, WHEREAS THE LATTER [IS PREDICATED] OF MATTER. ACCORDINGLY, WHAT IS THE ULTIMATE IN ITSELF IS NEITHER A WHAT NOR A QUANTITY NOR SOMETHING ELSE. NOR INDEED IS IT THE NEGATIONS, FOR THESE TOO WILL BE ACCIDENTAL. FOR THOSE THINKING ON THESE LINES, IT TURNS OUT THAT MATTER ALONE IS SUBSTANCE.

Accordingly, the Philosopher here accepts of matter points that are investigated in physics, saying: HOWEVER, I SAY THAT MATTER IS WHAT IN

ITSELF, *i. e.* considered according to its essence, is NEITHER A WHAT, *i. e.* not a substance, NOR A QUANTITY¹ NOR SOMETHING BELONGING TO other genera BY WHICH BEING IS DETERMINED or divided.

[The Physical Proof]

[1286] This is especially apparent with regard to motion. For the subject of change and motion, strictly speaking, must differ from each terminus of the motion, as proved in *Physics* 1.7 [190^b34]. Accordingly, since matter is the primary subject standing under not only the motions that are according to quantity and quality and other accidents, but also the changes that are according to substance, matter must differ in its essence from all substantial forms and from the privations of them (which are the termini of generation and corruption), and not only that it be different from quantity and quality and other accidents.

[1287] But still, the Philosopher does not prove the diversity of matter from all forms by the way of motion, which is in fact the way of natural philosophy, but rather by the way of predication—which is appropriate to logic, which he says in *Metaphysics* 4 to have an affinity with this science.

[The Logical Proof]

[1287] Therefore, [Aristotle] says that there must be SOMETHING OF WHICH all the aforementioned are PREDICATED, yet such that THE *esse* IS DIVERSE for the subject of which they are predicated and for any one of them that are predicated of it, *i. e.* the quiddity and essence [of each] is diverse.

[Rejection of Univocal Predication]

[1288] Yet it should be known that what is said here cannot be understood with regard to univocal predication, according to which genera are predicated of the species into the definition of which they are put, since animal and man do not differ by essence.

[Denominative Predication]

Instead, this passage must be understood with regard to denominative predication—*e. g.* when white is predicated of man, for a different quiddity belongs to white and to man. Accordingly, [Aristotle] adds that OTHER genera ARE PREDICATED in this fashion OF SUBSTANCE, namely denominatively, WHEREAS substance [IS PREDICATED] OF MATTER denominatively.

[1289] Therefore, it should not be understood that an actual existing substance (of which we are speaking here) is predicated of matter by a univocal

¹ Reading *quantitas* here for *qualitas*; see §1289.

predication, or one that is by the essence For [Aristotle] had already said above that MATTER is NEITHER A WHAT NOR one of the others. Instead, this should be understood with regard to denominative predication, and it is through this mode that accidents are predicated of substances. Indeed, just as this is true:

Man is white

but not this:

Man is whiteness

or:

Humanity is whiteness

so too this is true:

This materiate is man

but not this:

[This] matter is man

or:

The matter is man

Therefore, this concretion or denominative predication shows that just as substance differs by essence from accidents, so too matter differs from substantial form by essence.

ACCORDINGLY, it follows that WHAT IS THE ULTIMATE subject, strictly speaking, IS NEITHER A WHAT, *i. e.* a substance, NOR A QUANTITY NOR SOMETHING ELSE in any genus of beings.

[Rejection of Plato's View]

[1290] Nor can the negations themselves be predicated per se of matter. For just as forms are beyond the essence of matter, and so are somehow related to it per accidens, so too the negations of forms—which are in fact privations—are present in matter accidentally. Indeed, if they were present in matter per se, forms could never be received in matter with the matter preserved.

The Philosopher says this to get rid of the view of Plato, who did not distinguish between privation and matter, as maintained in *Physics* 1.9 [192^a3]. Finally, [Aristotle] also concludes that FOR THOSE THINKING according to the arguments described above, IT TURNS OUT THAT MATTER ALONE IS SUBSTANCE, as the argument brought forward previously concluded.

[D]

BUT THIS IS IMPOSSIBLE. FOR IN FACT ‘SEPARABLE’ AND ‘THIS-SOMETHING’ SEEM TO BELONG TO SUBSTANCE MOST OF ALL. ACCORDINGLY, THE SPECIES AND THE COMPOSITE OF BOTH WILL SEEM TO BE SUBSTANCE MORE THAN MATTER DOES.

[1291] Aristotle shows the contrary of the conclusion [stated in §1290], saying that IT IS IMPOSSIBLE that matter alone be substance, or even that it is substance most of all.

[The Proper Characteristics of Substance]

There are two things that seem to be especially proper to substance:

(1) that [substance] be separable

Indeed, accident is not separated from substance, but substance can be separated from accident.

(2) that substance is picked out as a this-something.

In fact, other genera do not signify a this-something.

[Proofs that Matter is not Substance]

[1292] Now (1)–(2) [in §1291], namely to be separable and to be a this-something, are not suitable to matter.

[Matter is not Separable]

For matter cannot exist *per se* without the form through which it is an actual being, since of itself it is only in potency.

[Matter is not a This-Something]

Also, [matter] is a this-something only by means of the form through which it becomes actual; accordingly, to be a this-something is especially fitting to the composite.

[Conclusion]

[1293] Hence it is clear that THE SPECIES, *i. e.* the form, AND THE COMPOSITE OF BOTH, namely [the composite] of matter and form, SEEMS TO BE SUBSTANCE MORE THAN MATTER DOES, since the composite is both separable and a this-something. Now the form, although it is not separable and a this-something, nevertheless through it the composite becomes an actual being, so that it can in this way be separable and a this-something.