

# *How Many Matters? The Problem of Celestial Matter in Some Fourteenth-century Dominican Thinkers*

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**Pure Potency Thesis:** Prime matter is pure potency.

**Distinction Thesis:** There are various [types of] prime matter.

*D1:* Spiritual matter is different from corporeal matter. (Auriol, Petrus Trabibus, etc.)

*D2:* Celestial matter is different from terrestrial matter. (Aquinas, Hervaeus, Peter of Palude, late Durand)

1. “Therefore, since matter is the first subject underlying not only changes that are according to quality and quantity and the other accidents, but also changes that are according to substance, it must be the case that matter is different according to its essence from all substantial forms and their privations, which are the endpoints of generation and corruption.”  
Aquinas, *In Meta.* VII.2.17: Unde, cum materia sit primum subiectum substans non solum motibus, qui sunt secundum qualitatem et quantitatem et alia accidentia, sed etiam mutationibus quae sunt secundum substantiam, oportet, quod materia sit alia secundum sui essentiam ab omnibus formis substantialibus et earum privationibus, quae sunt termini generationis et corruptionis.
2. “But substantial form [as opposed to accidental ones] does not come to a subject that preexists in act, but only to one existing in potency, namely to prime matter.”  
Aquinas, *In De an.* II.1.14: Forma autem substantialis non advenit subiecto iam praeexistenti in actu, sed existenti in potentia tantum, scilicet materiae primae.
3. “But in the case of natural but eternal substances another account must be given. For perhaps some have no matter, or not matter of this sort but only such as can be moved in respect of place” (Arist., *Meta.* VIII, 1044b6–8 (Barnes 2:1649); cf. AL, tr. Moerbeka: In naturalibus quidem sempiternis autem substantiis alia ratio. Forsan enim quedam non habent materiam, aut non talem sed solum secundum locum mobilem).
4. “Necessarily, then, movements also will be either simple or in some sort compound simple in the case of the simple bodies, compound in that of the composite. . . . Supposing, then, that there is such a thing as simple movement, and that circular movement is simple, and that both movement of a simple body is simple and simple movement is of a simple body. . . , then there must necessarily be some simple body which moves naturally and in virtue of its own nature with a circular movement.” (Arist., *De caelo* I, 269a2–7 (Barnes 1:448)).
5. “[W]e assert that the proposition ‘the celestial body is not composed of matter and form in the manner of the transient ones’ is true beyond the shadow of doubt” (Aver., *De subst. orbis* I.2 (Hyman, 74)).
6. “Now it seems that quantity obtains on account of matter; either because matter is the reason by which the composite has quantities, or if the form is the reason of having quantity, it seems that this is because it is a material form. . . . But in the heavens it obviously appears that there is quantity; therefore etc.”  
Hervaeus, *In Sent.* II.12.3: Nam videtur quod quantitas se teneat ex parte materiae, quod quia vel materia est ratio qua compositum habet quantitates, vel si forma est ratio habendi quantitatem, videtur quod hoc sit ratione qua est forma materialis. . . . Sed in caelo manifeste apparet quod est quantitas; ergo etc. (1647, 237b).

7. “Moreover, if it were posited that the form of the celestial body by its perfection satisfies the whole potency of matter, even then it is necessary that the matter that underlies the elemental form be in potency to the form of the celestial body, and it would be reduced to act by the action of the power of the celestial body; and thus the celestial body would be generable and corruptible. And thus he meant that the superior and inferior things do not share in matter at all; and this seems more probable.”
8. “It is necessary that matter, considered in itself, be in potency to the forms of all those things of which it is a common matter. . . . Therefore, matter that is under the form of an incorruptible body, will be also in potency to the form of a corruptible body. . . . Therefore, it is impossible that there be one matter of bodies corruptible and incorruptible by nature.”
9. “I say also that the argument [for the opposite] assumes something false, because the matter of the heavens and the matter of the elements are not pure potencies, but rather have being.”
10. “Therefore, it is more reasonably said with the others, that matter, if it is posited in the heavens, is of a different nature than the matter of inferior things. . . . Nor will this matter be pure potency, since pure potency is said relative to the first act, which is being, and its opposite, namely non-being; for what is in pure potency, is not determined to either but is related indifferently to both. And thus in whatever there is pure potency, is a possible being and not a necessary one. But the heavens are a necessary being, since they are incorruptible by nature. . . .”
11. “To the third, it should be said that according to Avicenna, we should not account for the difference by certain acts unless in those that share in one potency. For the species that share in one potency of a genus are distinguished by the specific differences; but those different things that do not share in a genus, . . . are distinguished by themselves – similarly also the most general genera are not distinguished by some differences but by themselves. Similarly also, composites that share in matter are distinguished by the diverse forms; but the different matters themselves are distinguished by analogy to the different acts, inasmuch as a different grade [*ratio*] of possibility can be found in them.”
12. “To the fourth it should be said that since potency is said [to be directed] to act, being in potency is diverse for the reason that it is directed to diverse acts; just as sight to color, and hearing to sound. Thus, the matter of celestial bodies is different from the matter of an element for the reason that it is not in potency to the form of an element.”
- Aquinas, *In Sent.* II.12.1: Et praeterea si ponetur quod forma caeli per suam perfectionem, totam materiae potentiam terminaret, adhuc oporteret quod materia stans sub forma elementari, esset in potentia ad formam caeli, et reduceretur in actum per actionem virtutis caelestis; et ita caelum esset generabile et corruptibile. Et ideo ipse vult, quod nullo modo in materia conveniant superiora et inferiora corpora: et hoc videtur probabilius.
- Aquinas, *ST* I.66.2: Oportet ergo quod materia, secundum se considerata, sit in potentia ad formam omnium illorum quorum est materia communis. . . . Sic ergo materia, secundum quod est sub forma incorruptibilis corporis, erit adhuc in potentia ad formam corruptibilis corporis. . . . Impossibile ergo est quod corporis corruptibilis et incorruptibilis per naturam, sit una materia.
- Gonteri Brito, *In Sent.* II.12.3.2: “Dico etiam quod in argumento falsum assumitur, quia materia caeli et materia elementi non sunt purae potentiae, immo habent entitatem (Breslau, Univ. 195 (I F 184), fol. 504ra).
- Nicholas Trivet, *Quodl.* IV.19: Igitur rationabilis videtur dicendum cum aliis, quod materia, si ponatur in caelo, erit alterius rationis a materia inferiorum. . . . Nec etiam erit haec materia potentia pura, quia potentia pura respectiva primi actus dicitur, quae est esse, et eius opposita, scilicet non esse; quod enim est in pura potentia, neutrum sibi determinat, sed se habet per <in>differentiam ad utrumque; et ideo in quocumque est potentia pura, ipsum est ens possibile et non necessariam. Sed caelum est ens necessarium, cum secundum sui naturam sit incorruptibile. . . . (Basel UB IV B4, fol. 42va).
- Aquinas, *In Sent.* II.12.1.1, ad 3: Ad tertium dicendum, quod secundum Avicennam, non est quaerenda differentia per aliquos actus nisi in illis quae in una potentia conveniunt: species enim quae conveniunt in una potentia generis, distinguuntur specificis differentiis; sed ipsae differentiae quae non conveniunt in genere . . . seipsis distinguuntur: similiter etiam genera generalissima non dividuntur aliquibus differentiis, sed seipsis: similiter etiam composita quae conveniunt in materia distinguuntur per formas diversas; sed diversae materiae seipsis distinguuntur secundum analogiam ad diversos actus, prout in eis diversa ratio possibilitatis invenitur.
- Aquinas, *ST* I.66.2, ad 4: Ad quartum dicendum quod, cum potentia dicatur ad actum, ens in potentia est diversum ex hoc ipso quod ordinatur ad diversum actum; sicut visus ad colorem, et auditus ad sonum. Unde ex hoc ipso materia caelestis corporis est alia a materia elementi, quia non est in potentia ad formam elementi.

13. “To the third we should say that when one matter is in potency to one form to which another matter is not in potency, then by this they differ substantially. . . . And this is how it is with the matter of superior and inferior bodies, because neither can the former receive the form of the elements, nor the latter the celestial form.”

Peter of Palude, *In Sent.* II.12.1: Ad tertium dicendum quod quando una materia est in potentia ad unam formam ad quam alia materia non est in potentia, ex hoc ipso differunt substantialiter. . . . Et sic est de materia superiorum et inferiorum, quia nec illa suscipit formam elementi, nec ista formam caeli (Basel UB BII 22, fol. 82ra).

14. “Now every distinction between potencies is in virtue of the act as a final cause, but nevertheless, the potencies are distinguished by their essence intrinsically and in reality, so that they have different grades in their essences.”

Hervaeus, *In Sent.* II.12.3: Nunc etiam omnis distinctio potentiarum est propter actum sicut propter causam finalem, et tamen potentiae aliquo distinguuntur essentiis suis intrinsece et realiter, ita quod in essentiis suis habent diversos gradus (239b).

15. “To the fourth we should say that that diversity is intrinsically and absolutely in those matters, not as according to actual being but potential being. And thus they are not relations either in act or in potency, but are substances, not in act but in potency. And one is a corruptible substance in potency, that is, [a potency] to actual corruptible being; the other is an incorruptible substance in potency as for which it is [potency].”

Peter of Palude, *In Sent.* II.12.1: Ad quartum dicendum quod diversitas ista est intrinsece et absolute in ipsis materiis, non quidem secundum esse actuale sed potentiale. Et ideo non sunt relationes nec actu nec potentia, sed sunt substantiae non actu sed potentia. Et una est substantia corruptibilis in potentia, i.e. ad esse actuale corruptibile; alia substantia incorruptibilis in potentia, hoc est ad esse incorruptibile; et utraque seipsa non aliquo addito est in potentia ad id ad quod est (82ra).

16. “Those two matters, or more of them if there are (which I say because of the celestial bodies, supposing that each differs from the others in species) have different essential grades, according to which, by the essential nature of those potencies or matters, these matters are distinct.

Hervaeus, *In Sent.* II.12.3: [I]llae duae materiae vel plures si sint (quod dico propter corpora caelestia, supposito quod omnia differant specie abinvicem) habent diversos gradus essentialia secundum quos ex natura essentiali ipsarum potentiarum sive materialium, ipsae materiae sunt distinctae (239a).

17. “According to their reasoning it follows that just as corruptibles and incorruptibles do not share the same matter, nor do those incorruptibles with one another; but there are as many prime matters as there are celestial bodies. . . . To this argument it can be said that celestial bodies are not transmutable to one another, even though they share the same matter, because they do not differ in species but in number.”

Durand of St.-Pourçain, *In Sent.* II.12.1: Secundum rationem eius sequitur quod sicut corruptibilium et incorruptibilium non est eadem materia, ita nec ipsorum incorruptibilium ad inuicem; set erunt tot materie prime quot sunt corpora caelestia. . . . Posset dici ad hanc rationem quia corpora caelestia non sunt inuicem transmutabilia, licet communicant in materia, quia non differunt specie, set numero (M226ra, transcr. Th. Jeschke).

**Pure Potency Thesis:** Prime matter is pure potency.

*PPT1:* Prime matter is in potency to any substantial form.

*PPT2:* Prime matter is in potency to all forms of the kind appropriate to the matter.

*PPT3:* Prime matter has an essence that is potential instead of actual.

**Distinction Thesis:** There are various [types of] prime matter.

- perhaps (infinitely?) many (Hervaeus)
- hierarchy of potential essences