



Scotus on Matter



Overview

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The Problem of Prime Matter

Scotus on Matter

- Duns Scotus

- Matter exists

- Matter is actual

- Matter could exist without form

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Scholastic Philosophy

- 'scholastic' = belonging to a school
- University of Paris; Oxford (from the early 13th c.)
- 7 liberal arts; Aristotle (from the 1250s); then, onto theology, law, or medicine



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- A Question (YES/NO) – “Whether. . .”
- Objections – “It seems that. . .”
- Introducing the opposite view – “On the contrary. . .”
- **The author’s view and arguments** – “I say that. . .”
- Response to the objections – “To the first, . . .”

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What are substances composed of?

- of course: elements = **integral parts**. But what if we can show that something about a substance can change independently of its integral parts? E.g., integral parts remain while the substance changes or vice versa?
- **metaphysical parts**: parts that aren't integral parts.
- Aristotle: there are 2 of these: matter and form; we need them to account for change.

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Physics I.7, 191a8–13

“As for the underlying nature, it must be grasped by analogy. As bronze stands to a statue, or wood to a bed, or the formless before it acquires a form to anything else which has a definite form, so this stands to a reality, to a this thing here, to what is.”

Substantial change: We need something underlying, and something to make the change happen.

- The underlying thing is **matter** (ύλη)
- In generation, matter takes on a new **substantial form** (μόρφη)
- E.g.: bronze taking on the form of a statue (but this is just an analogy!!!)

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Two Theses

2 distinct claims:

1. Substratum Thesis:

All (natural) change requires something that endures through that change.

2. Conservation Thesis:

There is some one thing (call it 'prime matter') that endures through *all* change.

- (1) and (2) are not equivalent ((2) implies (1), but the reverse is not true)
- Aristotle is certainly committed to (1); not clear whether he is committed to (2)
- Most later Aristotelians take (2) for granted.

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Prime Matter as Potentiality

- Basic characteristics of PM: eternal, basic, uniform, hidden (shared by both Aristotelians and atomists!)
- Aristotelian (scholastic) PM: in potentiality to all substantial forms – this means it is entirely characterless.
- **Problem:** how can something be real and yet completely free of all character?

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What does it mean to say that matter is purely potential? Does this allow that matter can have some sort of intrinsic actuality?

- **Aquinas (13th c.):** no actuality at all. Not even God can make PM exist on its own! (But then how is PM really distinct from form?)
- **Peter Auriol (14h c.):** PM does have a character, namely that it can be determined. (To anything? Even extensionless things?)
- **Corpuscular PM (early modern):** matter is an integral part (as opposed to a metaphysical one); it is intrinsically extended. It can be either atomistic or infinitely divisible. (How can this account for unity, persistence, etc.?)

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Duns Scotus (1265–1308)

- Scotus = Scot (but, cf. John Scotus Eriugena!)
- OFM
- Studied in Oxford, then Paris, from which he gets expelled for political reasons
- Oxford, Paris, Cologne
- Nickname: *doctor subtilis*, the "Subtle Doctor"



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3 theses:

- 1 Matter exists
- 2 Matter is actual
- 3 God can/could create matter without form

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1. Matter Exists

Cf. Aristotle; generation and corruption entails the existence of prime matter:

- Generation exists
- There must be a subject remaining constant over the process of generation
- This subject has a natural inclination to the end-term of generation
- Only matter (and not form) can fulfil these criteria.

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2. Matter is Actual

Does matter have any essential properties on its own? – **Scotus: YES.** It must have a nature (contra Aquinas).

- something that's purely potential doesn't even exist
- if matter were purely potential, it could not perform the functions it is supposed to perform: that matter is a principle, a cause, a part of the generated substance, and the subject of substantial change.

Matter is potential, but this is *subjective* potentiality – a kind of potentiality that presupposes some actuality of a subject.

Matter is also intrinsically knowable, at least for intellects that are stronger than ours.

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3. Matter Could Exist without Form

- of course, matter can exist without form in the sense that for any form F , matter can exist without F .
- but can matter exist without *any form whatsoever*?
- **Scotus thinks the answer is affirmative:**
 - matter is really distinct from and naturally prior to substantial form, since it *receives* form, and the receptacle is prior to the received thing.
 - if x is really distinct from and naturally prior to y , then x can exist without y .
 - Therefore, matter can exist without form.
- Consequently, God can create and conserve individual matter directly.
- This is an unusual position in the period!

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Open Questions about Matter

- Is Scotus's conception of matter closer to the modern one? (intrinsically extended, etc.?)
- Does matter help to solve the original difficulty at all, about substantial change? (cf. next time!)
- The problem of mixture: what happens when the elements mix? What happens to their substantial form and to their matter? (cf. after next time!)
- Atomism: why is matter not composed of atoms?
- OK, matter may help to explain change. But then what about unchangeable entities? Do they have to be immaterial?

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