



**Henry of Ghent and Roger Marston on Rationes Seminales**



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# A Long-Standing Debate

Are there pre-existing forms in matter?

Cf. Duns Scotus, *Lectura* II.18.1 (pp. 155 / 170)

Yes!

“Otherwise a natural agent would create a form, since to create is to produce from nothing; but if there were not any seminal reason in natural matter, which is part of the form, then the form would be produced from nothing, because nothing of it would pre-exist; therefore, etc.”

No!

“If we posit something pre-existing, then either something new is generated (which was not there before) or not. If so, then positing the pre-existing does not help. If not. . . then there will be no generation. . . since no new entity is produced.”

**What is the issue?**

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# Reminder: The Problem of Parmenides

Parmenides's argument against change: (cf. Fragments 2 & 8)

$P_1$  Non-being cannot exist.

$P_2$  Generation is only possible if there is non-being.

$C_1$  Thus, generation is not possible. [MT:  $P_1, P_2$ ]

$P_4$  Change is only possible if generation is possible.

$\therefore$  Therefore, change is impossible. [MT,  $C_1, P_4$ ]

- The argument is valid.
- Justification for the premises:

$P_1$ : Self-evident; if something exists, it is not a non-being.

$P_2$ : Generation = coming to be *from non-being*.

$P_4$ : Change is a kind of generation.

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# Aristotle's Reply

## *Physics* I.7, 190a7–16

“Of what we call the simple coming-to-be things, one remains when it comes to be, and the other does not. . . . In all cases of coming to be. . . there must always be something underlying which is the coming-to-be thing, and this, even if it is one in number, is not one in form.”

## *Physics* I.7, 190b10–13

“[I]t is clear that that which comes to be is always composite, and there is one thing which comes to be, and another which comes to be this, and the latter is twofold: either the underlying thing, or the thing which is opposed. By that which is opposed, I mean the ignorant of music, by that which underlies, the man; and shapelessness, formlessness, disarray are opposed, and the bronze, the stone, the gold underlie.”

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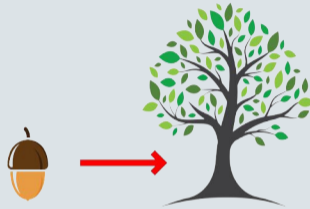
### Takeaways

# Aristotle's Reply: Matter and Form

We need to distinguish between **qualitative change** and **generation**:



**Qualitative change:** the quality of something existing changes  
We need an underlying object (e.g., an apple), which can take on various properties while remaining the same.



**Generation:** something new is generated  
We also need something underlying, and something to make the change happen: **matter** (ύλη), taking on a new **substantial form** (μόρφη)

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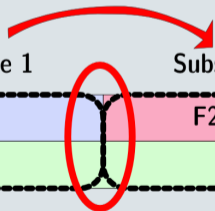
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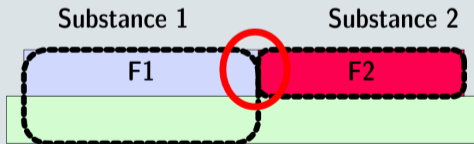
# Some Questions / Problems

- What is the underlying matter like? (Is that a well-formed question?)
- Does the underlying matter have any actuality? If yes, what, and how can it form a real union with form? If not, how can it perform any function? (How can it even underlie?)
- Does positing matter and form composition help at all?

substantial change



underlying substrate (prime matter)



underlying substrate (prime matter)

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# Rationes seminales

**Proposal:** this framework only helps if we don't treat the form as something entirely new – instead, it pre-exists in matter, inchoately (= *ratio seminalis*).

## Defenders:

This is the only way to avoid the absurdity that every change implies creation.

## Adversaries:

The view reduces substantial change to alteration; or assumes grades of form.

- In fact, most reject the proposal: Aquinas, **Henry of Ghent**, Duns Scotus, and most 14th-century authors (?).
- Accepted by a few: Bonaventure, John Pecham, **Roger Marston**, James of Viterbo, perhaps some others.
- How should we understand these inchoations?
- **Why care?** – it can illuminate some important concepts: matter, change, potentiality, powers, . . .

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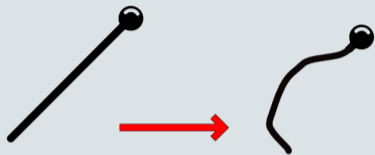
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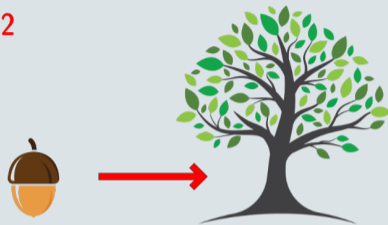
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# Examples & Desiderata

E1



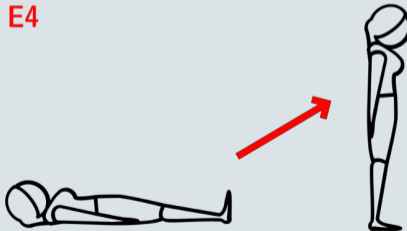
E2



E3



E4



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- no incoations of form in matter: prime matter is only potency, having no form, but only a passive potency to receive it
- if we want to accept some *rationes seminales*, we need to take them as just causal powers that are due to the form in the semen.
- inchoations of forms lead to all kinds of difficulties:
  - all change will be alteration (i.e., *D1* cannot be satisfied)
  - there will be a gradation of substantial forms
- **The Master-Argument: Positing *rationes seminales* simply does not solve the problem it is supposed to solve.**

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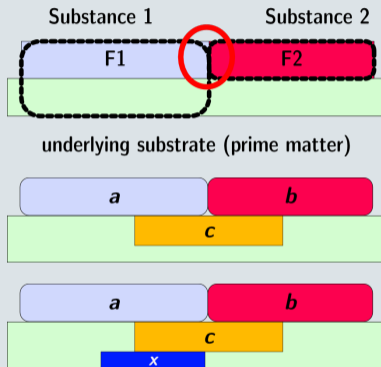
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# The Master-Argument

- P1.* Let's posit that form *b* is generated from form *a*, via some *c*.
- P2.* *c* was either generated in matter or concreated with it.
- P3.* If it was generated, then either something preceded it, or not.
- P4.* If the former, then either infinite regress, or the process stops at *x*.
- P5.* If *x* could be generated in matter, then by the same reason so could *b* itself be generated.
- P6.* Hence, if *c* was generated in matter, then there was no reason to posit it. [3–5]



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# The Master-Argument

*P7.* If *c* was concreated with matter, then *b* is either generated from it insofar as it is itself *c* or insofar as it is something else, say *d*.

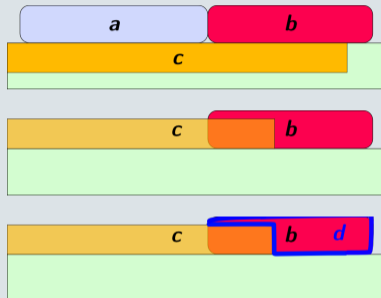
*P8.* Not the former, since it would imply that something is generated from itself etc.

*P9.* *c* is either something of *d* or not.

*P10.* If *c* is something of *d*, then the same impossibility follows as in *P8*.

*P11.* If *d* could be generated from *c* insofar as it is nothing of *c*, then by the same reason so could *b* be generated from *a*.

*P12.* Hence, if *c* was concreated with matter, there was no reason to posit it. [7–11]



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C. Hence, there is no reason to posit *c*. [2,6,12]

## *Quodlibet*, IV.14 (Wilson-Etzkorn, 200)

“*Pace* the view that posits inchoations of forms in matter as seminal principles, it is necessary that the natural generation [of *F*] be from nothing, that is, from something that is not something of itself [*F*]. Therefore, it is not necessary to posit seminal principles in matter in order to avoid this, since a form is no less from nothing of itself by positing such inchoations of forms, than if we do not posit them.”

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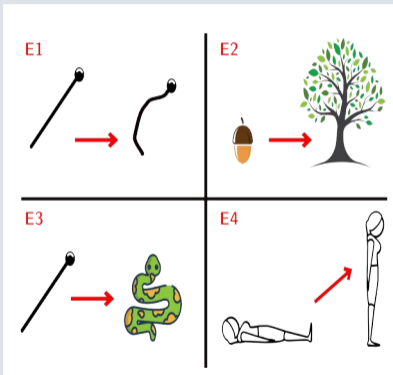
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# Distinguishing between Kinds of Change

**D1:**  $E1 - E4$  is explained by passive (obediential) potency, except they are not obediential in the same way.  $E1$  does not imply the advent of a new substantial form into that potency, but  $E2$  does.

**D2:** While  $E2$  and  $E3$  both assume active and passive powers, they are governed by different laws (natural vs. supernatural).

**D3:**  $E4$  does not presuppose a composite when the form is created; the other cases do.



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# Marston's View

- The more specific forms are present in potency in the more general forms.
- 4 kinds of potency in a change:
  - 1 purely passive (prime matter with respect to the first form);
  - 2 purely active (external agent);
  - 3 the potency of the incomplete form;
  - 4 a mixed (active-passive) potency of matter – initially incomplete but brought into completion by the external agent.
- **Main argument:** the other view is not consonant either with Augustine (*creatio tota simul*), or with Aristotle (*ex nihilo...*); and also cannot account for the desiderata.



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457, 7v.

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# Response to the Master-Argument

- The argument assumes that *b* is generated from *a*, and yet they have nothing in common – but this is false: *b* is already in *a* in some way.
- The argument proceeds as if the essence of *b* were in *c* in act, whereas this is false: *b* really is in *c*, but only in potency. (Questioning *P7* – *P11*.)
- This also means rejecting *P8*: *b* can be generated from *c* insofar as it is itself *c*, in potency.
- Overall, the argument is mistaken in assuming that a form can either exist (in act) or not exist (in act); whereas it can also exist in potency, which is not reducible to either of these two.

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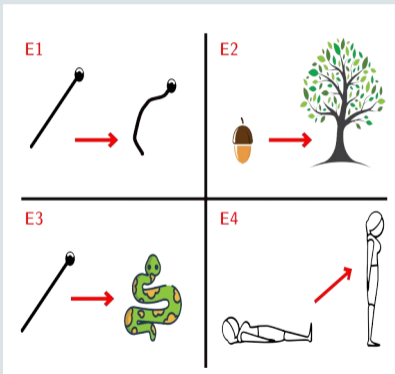
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# Distinguishing between Kinds of Change

- D1:** In *E1*, the underlying subject is the same specific thing, while in *E2* it is only the same in genus.
- D2:** Both *E2* and *E3* occur by seminal reasons, but *E2* happens more often than *E3*, and also, miracles can expedite what nature would do more slowly (as in water to wine).
- D3:** Since *E1* – *E3* happen by seminal reasons, they do not imply creation from nothing, only *E4* does.



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- Origin of the disagreement: perhaps differing notions of potency and act, and differing notions of *esse*.
- Defenders of *rationes seminales* can account well for the difference between natural change and creation *ex nihilo* (although since only God can do the latter, Marston at least posits that there are *rationes seminales* even in miraculous cases). But they have to posit that what changes in a substantial change is just a mode of being.

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