



ARTICLES



THE ONTOLOGICAL STATUS OF THE BODY IN AQUINAS'S HYLOMORPHISM

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1. INTRODUCTION: THE BODY AS AN ONTOLOGICAL PROBLEM

Hylomorphism is a term originating from the Greek words *ύλη* (timber, matter) and *μορφή* (shape, form), which was introduced by the neo-scholastics at the end of 19th century to characterize a metaphysical position under the dominant influence of Aristotle.¹ According to hylomorphism, a natural body is a metaphysical compound, consisting of two intrinsic principles: matter and form. Form determines its actual features, especially the essential ones, while matter serves as their substratum.

It goes without saying that such a rough definition serves merely as the starting point and needs further refinement by conceptual analysis and rigid arguments. In the High Middle Ages, with the circulation of the Aristotelian corpus as a whole, this metaphysical picture occupied the predominant position in the Latin tradition.² Thomas Aquinas was no excep-

¹ Cf. Ludger Oeing-Hanhoff, "Hylemorphismus", in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, Band 3, (Basel: Schwabe Verlag, 1974), col. 1236ff. For a more critical account of the history of this term, see Gideon Manning, "The history of 'hylomorphism'", *Journal of the History of Ideas* 74, 2 (2013): 173–187.

² For the influence of Aristotelian hylomorphism in the High Middle Ages see Catherine König-Pralong, *Avènement de l'aristotélisme en terre chrétienne: L'essence et la matière* (Paris: Vrin, 2005).

tion.³ Although Aquinas did not endorse the doctrine of 'universal hylomorphism' popular in his time, which insists upon the existence of matter in spiritual beings such as angels and human rational souls,⁴ he expressed no doubt about the Aristotelian division of the human being as a natural substance into matter and form.

In the second book of *De anima*, Aristotle points out that natural beings having life are compounds consisting of soul and body, where the body functions as a subject or matter, while the soul is primarily defined as "the form of a natural body which has life in potentiality" (εἶδος σώματος φυσικοῦ δυνάμει ζωὴν ἔχοντος).⁵ Similarly, Aquinas maintains that the human rational soul is combined with the body as its form, or more precisely as its substantial form defining the essence of this specific sort of natural body.⁶

Therefore, hylomorphism is central to Thomistic philosophical anthropology, which has generated serious discussions from the contemporary phil-

³For a general introduction to Aquinas's hylomorphic ontology, see for instance John F. Wippel, *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas: From Finite Being to Uncreated Being*, (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2000), esp. 295–375. For a more systematic approach, see Jeffrey E. Brower, *Aquinas's Ontology of the Material World: Change, Hylomorphism, and Material Objects*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

⁴This theory was popular among Franciscans in particular. For instance, Bonaventura believed in the existence of spiritual matter. See id., *Commentaria in Quatuor Libros Sententiarum* II, dist. 3, par. 1, q. 1, a. 1. Medieval philosophers often traced this position back to the Jewish philosopher Avicbron (or Ibn Gabirol), who had been strongly influenced by Neoplatonism. See Avicbron, *Fons Vitae*, IV, 6. However, some modern scholars also emphasize the direct influence from Augustine. See Roberto Zavalloni, *Richard de Mediavilla et la controverse sur la pluralité des formes* (Louvain: Éditions de L'Institut Supérieur de Philosophie, 1951), 422. For recent studies defending the medieval account, see John F. Wippel, "Metaphysical Composition of Angels in Bonaventure, Aquinas, and Godfrey of Fontaines", in *A Companion to Angels in Medieval Philosophy*, ed. Tobias Hoffmann (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 45–78, esp. note 2 for further references. As Paul Vincent Spade noted, this position was often associated with the pluralism of substantial forms, claiming that there is a plurality of substantial forms in a material substance, "*Binarium Famosissimum*", in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2008 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2008/entries/binarium/>.

⁵Aristotle, *De anima* [DA] II, cap. 1, 412a 20–21. The English translation is cited from *Aristotle's De Anima*, transl. Christopher Shields, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2016).

⁶See *Summa contra gentiles* [SCG], cap. 69; *Summa Theologiae* [STh] I, q. 76, a. 1; *Quaestiones disputatae de anima* [QDA], q. 1; *Quaestio disputata de spiritualibus creaturis* [QDSC], a. 1.

osophical perspective.⁷ However, most of the research focused on Aquinas's theory of the soul, in particular on the compatibility of its immortality with its function as the substantial form of a mortal body, with little attention to the body itself. Even when the body was touched upon, as Linda Farmer rightly observed, scholars tended to consider the mind-body relationship from the viewpoint of soul or mind, without providing a detailed analysis of the ontological status of the body.⁸

The neglect and misunderstanding of Aquinas's conception of the body might be related to the theological background of his account of human beings. When introducing his reflections on the human nature in the *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas stresses that a theologian should focus exclusively on the soul and should consider the body only when it is related to the soul.⁹ However, one should not therefore forget that, as a natural philosopher and metaphysician, Aquinas follows Aristotle in criticizing Plato and other pre-Socratic philosophers for not defining "which body is appropriate to which soul, and how and in what sort of existence the one is united with the other."¹⁰ Aquinas also insists that when claiming that the body is the

⁷The literature on Aquinas's philosophy of soul is so rich that I can only mention some recent titles here: Anthony Kenny, *Aquinas on Mind* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993); Robert Pasnau, *Thomas Aquinas on Human Nature: A Philosophical Study of 'Summa Theologiae' Ia 75–89* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); John Haldane, ed., *Mind, Metaphysics, and Value in the Thomistic and Analytical Traditions* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002); Bernardo-Carlos Bazàn, "The Human Soul: Form and Substance? Thomas Aquinas' Critique of Eclectic Aristotelianism", *Archives D'Histoire Doctrinale et Littéraire du Moyen Age* 64 (1997): 95–126; Bernardo-Carlos Bazàn, "The Creation of the Soul according to Thomas Aquinas", in *Philosophy and Theology in the Long Middle Ages: A Tribute to Stephen F. Brown*, ed. Kent Emery, Jr., et alii (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 515–569; James D. Madden, *Mind, Matter, and Nature: A Thomistic Proposal for the Philosophy of Mind* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press), 2013; Fabrizio Amerini, *Aquinas on the Beginning and End of Human Life*, transl. Mark Henninger (Harvard University Press, 2013).

⁸Linda Farmer, *Matter and the Human Body According to Thomas Aquinas*, Ph.D. Thesis, (University of Ottawa, 1997), 2–5.

⁹*STh* I, q. 75, pr.

¹⁰See *Sentencia libri De anima [InDA]* I, cap. 8. Unless otherwise specified, translations of Aquinas's texts are mine.

matter of the soul, one should inquire further what sort of matter or substratum the body is.¹¹

However, like opening Pandora's Box, such an inquiry might bring forth an inherent difficulty of Aquinas's hylomorphism: as I will argue, Aquinas maintains that the body as the substratum of the soul or life is nothing but prime matter in the sense of pure potentiality. The latter is a concept most modern scholars shudder at for its inconsistency, because it seems to talk about a thing that is both real and not real, as I will show in the following section. Even Aquinas's own contemporaries tended to believe that prime matter as something created by God should have some minimal actuality. However, if the notion of prime matter is self-contradictory, then there will be nothing or little in Aquinas's conception of the body that deserves defence today.¹²

Fortunately, there is still hope in this Pandora's Box. Even though Aquinas did not consider the possible paradox inherent in the concept of prime matter, his ontological reflections on the body provide some important clues for us to cope with it. In this paper, I shall first clarify that prime matter is a necessary consequence of some of the basic principles of his ontology. On this basis, by proposing a more determinate description of prime matter, I will show how the conception of body as prime matter

¹¹ *QDSC*, a. 3. As Carlos Steel and Guy Guldentops noticed, the Leonine edition of this work contained quite a few mistakes, see "Critical Study: The Leonine Edition of *De spiritualibus creaturis*", *Recherches de théologie et philosophie médiévale*, 68 (2001): 180–203. Here I follow the revised text as found in *Les créatures spirituelles*, texte latin et traduction française par Jean-Baptiste Brenet (Paris: Vrin, 2010), 110.

¹² For a classic study on the conception of matter in the Aristotelian tradition, see Ernan McMullin, ed., *The Concept of Matter in Greek and Medieval Philosophy* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1963). For contemporary criticism of prime matter, see, e.g., Daniel W. Graham, "The Paradox of Prime Matter", *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 25 (1987): 475–490; Michael Loux, *Primary Ousia: An Essay on Aristotle's Metaphysics Z and H* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1991), 239–252. For recent research on the understanding of matter by Aquinas and other philosophers in the High Middle Ages, see König-Pralong, *Avènement de l'aristotélisme*; T. Suarez-Nani, "Introduction", in Pierre de Jean Olivi, *La matière* (Paris: Vrin, 2009), 7–60. See also Robert Pasnau, *Metaphysical Themes 1274–1671* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2011), Part I, Matter, esp. 35–52, "Theories of Prime Matter".

can be reconciled with Aquinas's other insights into the ontology of the body. Methodologically speaking, in this paper I will not be content to present Aquinas's unjustly ignored reflections on the body, but endeavour to promote a more efficient philosophical dialogue between him and us. For Aristotelian-Thomistic hylomorphism has attracted considerable attention and sharp criticism in contemporary philosophy of mind.¹³ I will try to make Aquinas's vocabulary and its philosophical framework accessible to contemporary readers and show a more defensible version of hylomorphism in understanding the mind-body problem.¹⁴

It should be noted that some scholars have noticed the ontological status of the body as prime matter in Aquinas's thought system.¹⁵ By patient and

¹³For a revival of interests in hylomorphism in general, see, for instance, Mark Johnston, "Hylomorphism", *The Journal of Philosophy* 103 (2006): 652–698; Michael Rea, "Hylomorphism reconditioned", *Philosophical Perspectives* 25, 1 (2011): 341–358; for its application in the philosophy of mind, see William Jaworski, *Philosophy of mind: A comprehensive introduction* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), ch. 10–11. For contemporary criticisms of hylomorphism, see Bernard Williams, "Hylomorphism", in *The Sense of the Past: Essays in the History of Philosophy*, ed. Myles Burnyeat (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006), 218–227, originally published in *A Festschrift for J. L. Ackrill*, ed. Michael Woods, *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 4 (1983): 337–352; Gordon P. Barnes, "The Paradoxes of Hylomorphism", *The Review of Metaphysics* 56, 3 (2003): 501–523.

¹⁴I agree with Peter King and Robert Pasnau that the contemporary mind-body problem arising from the Cartesian legacy cannot be directly applied to medieval discussions. See Peter King, "Why Isn't the Mind-Body Problem Mediaeval?", in *Forming the Mind*, edited by Henrik Lagerlund (Dordrecht: Springer Verlag, 2007), 187–205; Robert Pasnau, "The Mind-Soul Problem", in *Mind, Perception, and Cognition*, ed. H. Thijssen (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 1–17. Medieval philosophers have totally different conceptions of sensation and understanding which do not presuppose a sharp distinction between conscious activities and physical conditions. Nevertheless, since hylomorphism is still taken to be a viable option in understanding complex beings, such as humans, it does not follow that one cannot learn from medieval hylomorphists.

¹⁵Besides Linda Farmer's doctoral dissertation mentioned above, one should add some more significant research by her supervisor Bernardo-Carlos Bazán, "La corporalité selon saint Thomas", *Revue Philosophique de Louvain*, 81(1983): 369–409 and id., "A Body for the Human Soul", in *Philosophical Psychology in Arabic Thought and the Latin Aristotelianism of the 13th Century*, ed. López-Farjeat & Tellkamp (Paris: Vrin, 2013), 243–275. Moreover, although John F. Wippel did not write specifically on Aquinas's conception of the body, he already stressed that it is necessary to identify the body with prime matter. See id., "Thomas Aquinas and the Unity of Substantial Form", in *Philosophy and Theology in the Long Middle Ages: A Tribute to Stephen F. Brown*, ed. Kent Emery, Jr., et alii (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 117–154, esp. 118.

close readings of the relevant passages in Aquinas's corpus, these works have already provided strong textual supports for the conclusion I intend to defend here. Accordingly, the present paper will focus more on the fundamental theoretical presuppositions of Aquinas's hylomorphic ontology. Moreover, it will examine some textual and philosophical difficulties due to Aquinas's various uses of the term 'body' (*corpus*) which have not been taken seriously in the literature.¹⁶ This effort will not only facilitate a better account of the consistency of Aquinas's viewpoint, but also offer a possible response to an important criticism of hylomorphism from contemporary theorists such as Bernard Williams, namely, how hylomorphism can be formally consistent without slipping into the materialism or dualism it bitterly opposes.

2. HOW IS PRIME MATTER POSSIBLE?

One of Aquinas's earliest works is a short treatise *On the Principles of Nature* (*De principiis naturae*, around 1252–1253),¹⁷ which focuses on the ontological structure and causal principles of his natural philosophy. Aquinas's ontological approach begins with the fundamental distinction between actuality and potentiality: what already is, is in actuality (*esse actu*), while what can be but is not is said to be in potentiality (*esse potentia*).¹⁸ Since potentiality by definition is not a being in the full sense, but something toward a certain actual being, actuality and potentiality constitute an asymmetric pair, in which potentiality is defined in terms of the corresponding actuality, but not the other way around. Actuality is prior to potentiality at least in terms of definition. On the other hand, actuality (*actus*) is given as a primitive ontological concept coextensive with being: to be is to be actual or in actuality. Besides this description, it is not possible to offer any real definition

¹⁶For instance, Bazàn explicitly acknowledges that the correlate of the soul as the substantial form can only be prime matter. Nevertheless, he does not recognize prime matter as a meaning of his analogical notion of the body. See Bazàn, "A Body for the Human Soul", 251.

¹⁷For the chronology of Aquinas's works, I follow Jean-Pierre Torrell, *Initiation à saint Thomas d'Aquin: Sa personne et son œuvre*, Deuxième édition (Paris: Cerf, 2002), 634–638.

¹⁸*De principiis naturae* [DPN], cap. 1.

of actuality, just as it is not possible to define being.¹⁹ All that can be said is merely that there are as many actualities as there are beings.

Aquinas divides being into two fundamental kinds: substantial (or essential) being and accidental being of a thing. In Aquinas's own terms, the former is simple or without qualification (*simpliciter*), while the latter always refers to a particular sort of being (*esse aliquid*).²⁰ When one talks about a (or the, as I will show soon) substantial being of a thing, e.g. Socrates's being a man, this is a simple confirmation of the thing's existence without any further qualification of its specific characteristics. If P belongs to the category of substance, there will be no real difference between 'S is P' and 'S is'. In contrast, when referring to an accidental being of a thing, e.g. Socrates's being white, this signifies that the thing in question not only exists, but exists in a specific manner. As later analysis will make more evident, it will not be possible for Socrates to be white without being a man. In this case, 'S is P' will no longer be equivalent with, but rather presuppose 'S is'.²¹ Applying the notion of actuality to this fundamental division of being, one can say that a substantial being is *per se* in actuality, while an accidental being of a thing comes into actuality only when the thing itself is already in actuality as a substance. In sum, substantial being or actuality is ontologically prior to accidental being or actuality.

Within this ontological framework, Aquinas introduces the conceptual pair of matter and form to account for the properties and changes of things. Here change, or more precisely generation, is primarily understood in terms of actuality and potentiality: the process of generation is the motion of a potential being towards its actuality. However, generation can also

¹⁹ Like Aristotle, Aquinas does not take being as a genus that can be defined. See for instance, *DPN*, cap. 6 (ed. Leonina XLIII: 46): "*ens autem non est genus, quia non predicatur uniuocose analogice*".

²⁰ *Ibid.*, cap. 1. Here I followed John Wippel in assuming that Aquinas consistently defended a real distinction between substantial being and accidental being throughout his life, without advancing into the controversy over the distinction between accidental being and accidental essence. See id. *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas: From Finite Being to Uncreated Being* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2000), 253–265.

²¹ Cf. Anthony Kenny, *Aquinas on Being* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), esp. 190.

be understood as a motion towards form.²² Aquinas therefore goes further to identify form with actuality and matter with potentiality. The intimate relation between form and actuality is a remarkable feature of Aquinas's hylomorphism, which has significant theoretical consequences, as later discussions will make clear. As being in actuality can be divided into substantial and accidental being, so can being in potentiality, which is defined by the corresponding actuality. A similar division applies to form and matter as well. For convenience, Aquinas proposes 'matter' as a name for the thing that is in potentiality toward substantial being (*esse*) or a substantial form, 'subject' for what is in potentiality toward accidental being or an accidental form. What is common to matter and subject is that they both underlie a certain being in actuality.²³

Aquinas does not explain why it should be necessary to assume an underlying thing, either matter or subject. However, it is not hard to understand its significance in the Aristotelian tradition of metaphysics. First of all, according to a common intuition, everything that participates in being in actuality in this world admits of generation and corruption, no matter whether it is a substantial being or an accidental one. Moreover, the Aristotelian tradition maintains that *ex nihilo nihil fit*. Therefore a being in actuality should be generated from something that already is. Furthermore, there is a widespread tendency to believe that some beings in actuality are related to each other in that they occur in the same thing—for instance, being alive and being dead, being red and being white, all these can be ascribed to a particular thing such as Socrates. To account for this ascription, it is natural for us to talk about a thing changing from one actuality to another, while the thing itself is assumed to underlie the changes and remain unchanged in the process.

However, given that matter and subject both underlie changes or beings in the actuality of a thing, what is the point of distinguishing between them? Aquinas says,

²² *DPN*, cap. 1.

²³ *Ibid.*

So, matter differs from subject in that a subject does not have being from what comes to (*advenire*) it, as it has complete being in itself (*esse completum*). For example, a man does not have his being from his whiteness. Matter, however, does have its being from what comes to it, for matter in itself does not have complete being, but incomplete being. Therefore, absolutely speaking, **form gives being to matter** (*forma dat esse materiae*), but the subject gives being to an accident, even if sometimes one term is taken for the other, i.e., 'matter' for 'subject' and vice versa.²⁴

“What comes to it” in this context clearly refers to being in actuality (*esse actu*), either substantial or accidental. However, the word “coming” should not mislead us to assume that a pre-existent matter is already there in actuality and waits for the coming of an actuality. Otherwise there would be no real distinction between the generation of a substantial being and that of an accidental being, for both would presuppose a being complete in actuality. As a result, the distinction between matter and subject would have no real foundation, and even worse, the aforementioned priority of substantial being to accidental being would collapse. If one still believes, as Aquinas does, that this sort of ontological priority makes sense, then one needs to be more careful about the ontological status of matter. Aquinas insists that it is the form that provides or completes the being of matter by making it actual.²⁵ When Aquinas insists that form gives being to matter, the verb “to give” should be understood in a sense similar to saying that Eve gives birth to Cain. There is no such person before he is born. Before obtaining a form, matter, absolutely speaking, does not exist. It is in pure potentiality. On the other hand, matter should not be identified with nothing; otherwise the generation of a substantial being would be something coming out of nothing, which contradicts the original intention to introduce matter as a thing that underlies all forms.

²⁴ *DPN*, cap. 1, The English translation of this text is cited with slight modifications from Gyula Klima, “Thomas Aquinas on the Principles of Nature”, in *Medieval Philosophy: Essential Readings with Commentary*, ed. Gyula Klima et alii (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 157–167, at 158.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

This awkward situation of matter between nothing and being makes philosophers doubtful about the necessity and validity of the concept. Before moving to a theoretical account of the notion of matter with fundamental presuppositions, the terminology needs to be defined with as much care as it was defined by Aquinas. As I pointed out at the end of the passage cited above, the terms 'matter' and 'subject' can sometimes be used interchangeably to denote all sorts of being in potentiality. Similarly, 'form', when taken as the giver of being, can denote the source from which (*a quo*) something has both substantial and accidental being.²⁶ For the sake of accuracy, Aquinas distinguishes between substantial and accidental form. Accordingly, he refers to the matter underlying a substantial form as 'prime matter (*prima materia*)' and provides a clear definition, "that matter which is understood without any kind of form or privation but as something underlying all forms and privations is called prime matter, because there is no other matter before it."²⁷

It is undoubtedly beyond the scope of this essay to discuss the long controversy over the ontological status of prime matter.²⁸ Here I only want to mention a significant argument against prime matter, which will facilitate better understanding of Aquinas's hylomorphic position. It has been argued that the notion of prime matter leads to a paradox which seems to be deeply rooted in some basic assumptions of Aristotelian metaphysics.²⁹ A revised version against the Thomistic conception of prime matter can be reconstructed as follows:

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*, cap. 2: "*Ipsa autem materia que intelligitur sine qualibet forma et priuatione, sed subiecta forme et priuationi, dicitur materia prima, propter hoc quod ante ipsam non est alia materia.*" In some manuscripts, *subiecta* reads as *subiectum*. Here I follow the Leonine edition, because Aquinas had made a clear distinction between matter and subject in earlier discussions.

²⁸ For the contemporary controversy on Aristotle's conception of prime matter, see Mary Louise Gill, "Aristotle's Metaphysics Reconsidered", *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 43, 3 (2005): 233–237. For a detailed analysis and defence of Aquinas's theory of prime matter, see Brower, *Aquinas's Ontology of the Material World*, esp. 113–129.

²⁹ For an argument against Aristotle's own conception of prime matter cf. Graham, "The Paradox of Prime Matter", esp. 490 for a summary of his argument.

- (1) Prime matter is the thing that has no form but underlies all forms.
(*a definition of prime matter*)
- (2) A thing that underlies a form is the thing that remains unchanged during the generation of the form and therefore the thing from which a form comes into being. (*meaning of underlying*)
- (3) Nothing comes from nothing. (*assumption*)
- (4) Prime matter is not nothing but something real. (1, 2, 3)
- (5) Only things with a form can have being in actuality.
(*Aquinas's definition of form*)
- (6) Prime matter has no being in actuality. (1, 5)
- (7) What has no being in actuality is not real. (*assumption*)
- (8) Prime matter is not real. (6, 7)

Among the premises mentioned above, (1), (2) and (3) seem to be generally accepted in the Aristotelian tradition, as Aquinas's own account has shown. Therefore, an easy way to block the contradiction would be to revise either Aquinas's definition of form or the premise concerning actuality and reality. As mentioned above, medieval scholastics were already aware of this problem and tried to solve it by denying Aquinas's identification of form with actuality in (5) and assigning some minimal actuality to the formless prime matter.³⁰ In contrast, Aquinas denied (7) and insisted upon the reality of prime matter as pure potential being without any form or actuality. A closer examination of this divergence will therefore enable better appreciation of Aquinas's defence of his original conception of prime matter, which will be shown to be dependent on a single basic principle mentioned earlier, viz., the ontological priority of substantial being over accidental being.

As I have argued above, the concept of matter is introduced to account for the generation of a form, or more precisely, a substantial form from potentiality to actuality. However, as Aquinas's opponents argued, it does not necessarily follow that the matter underlying the process of generation should be entirely devoid of any sort of actuality. Assuming that S is potentially

³⁰ See *supra* note 12.

A while actually B, it is conceivable that S remains actually B while becoming actually A. For instance, when the shape of Hermes comes to a lump of bronze, a bronze statue as an artificial substance comes into being. During the generation of the statue of Hermes, the bronze remains unchanged as its matter. Nevertheless, it seems absurd to say that it has no actuality at all. With respect to this example, Aquinas could argue that the bronze statue in question is not a genuine substance but merely an artificial one, whose generation is a product of art and therefore does not require substantial change, "For all artificial forms are accidental, because art works only on what is already constituted by nature in complete being (*esse*)."³¹

Nevertheless, Aquinas's adversaries can point out another example well-known in Aristotle's account of substantial change: a seed grows into a tree. They might argue that the underlying principle in this natural generation of a substance is not a pure potential being, but a thing with some minimal actuality, such as corporeity, which defines the actuality of both seed and tree as corporeal beings. It has been suggested that even Aquinas himself seemed to endorse this interpretation in his earlier work *Scriptum super Sententiis* (ca. 1254–1256), where he claimed that matter cannot exist without corporeity as its form.³² Where there is matter, there is corporeity and corporeal being. In his more mature works, such as *Quaestiones disputatae de anima* (1265–1266), Aquinas still maintains that "matter can be found only in corporeal objects".³³ This position appears attractive to readers in the post-Cartesian age, for they tend to assume that being extended in space is an inherent property of matter, which can help to avoid the notion of characterless prime matter.

Aquinas's rejection of this convenient solution of the prime matter paradox, I believe, is deeply rooted in his controversial commitment to the unity

³¹ *DPN*, cap. 1: "Omnes enim formae artificiales sunt accidentales. Ars enim non operatur nisi supra id quod iam constitutum est in esse perfecto a natura." The translation has been modified.

³² *Scriptum super Sententiis* [*InSent.*] I, dist. 8, q. 5, a. 2, co. Zavalloni first cited this passage to argue that Aquinas briefly endorsed plurality of substantial forms. See Zavalloni, *Richard de Mediavilla*, 263.

³³ *QDA*, q. 6. Brower cites this passage to argue that prime matter is the source of corporeity. See id., *Aquinas's Ontology of the Material World*, 197.

of substantial form, which has been well studied in the recent literature.³⁴ Despite the counterexample mentioned above, most scholars believe that Aquinas never changed his mind about the doctrine that there is no more than one single form in any given substance to determine its substantial being.³⁵

Aquinas argues for the unity of substantial form in two independent ways. First of all, he appeals to the aforementioned distinction between substantial and accidental form. Form gives being to matter. However, as Avicenna had noticed, a substantial form gives to matter a complete being in the genus of substance (*esse completum in genere substantiae*) and therefore all the forms that come after this substantial form come to a thing which is already in actuality. It seems that these posterior forms can only be accidental ones.³⁶ Therefore, if corporeity actualized the complete being of the thing in question, i.e., as a corporeal being, then a seed and a tree would be nothing but accidental beings inhering in the corporeal being, which comes into obvious conflict with the natural categorization Aristotle's metaphysics relies on. Aquinas's opponents might argue that what corporeity gives is an incomplete being of the thing. However, according to Aquinas, it will follow that corporeity is not a substantial form, because it cannot determine the being of a substance as "a this (*hoc aliquid*)", or a particular individual of a given sort.³⁷

³⁴For classical studies on medieval debates on the plurality and unity of substantial form, see Zavalloni, *Richard de Mediavilla*, and Daniel A. Callus, "The Origins of the Problem of the Unity of Form", *Thomist: A Speculative Quarterly Review* 24, 2 (1961): 256–285. For recent research, see Spade, "Binarium Famosissimum"; Pasnau, *Metaphysical Themes*, 574–578. For recent work on Aquinas's own position, see Wippel, *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas*, 327–351, id., "Thomas Aquinas and the Unity of Substantial Form".

³⁵For a powerful refutation of Zavalloni's interpretation of Aquinas's early works mentioned in note 31, see Wippel, *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas*, 347–351. In later discussions, I will also show that Aquinas mentions the notion of corporeity and the relevant pluralist interpretation of substantial form in *De ente et essentia*, which was written almost in the same period. See the next section.

³⁶See, for instance, *InSent.* II, dist. 12, q. 1, a. 4.

³⁷This also explains why Aquinas insists on considering the soul as the substantial form rather than the form of the body, as most of his predecessors did. See Bernardo-Carlos Bazàn,

This brings us to the core of Aquinas's second argument for the unity of substantial form: the unity of a thing is determined by its manner of being (*esse*). Since a thing obtains its being from the form, its unity is ultimately determined by the form.³⁸ Taking the division of substantial and accidental form into consideration, it follows that the unity of a substance is defined by its substantial form. If there were more than one substantial form for the substance, then there would be many substances in one thing at the same time, which seems absurd to Aquinas. For without unity of substance it would be extremely hard, if not impossible, to account for the various properties and changes of a thing.

Moreover, Aquinas's emphasis on the close relation between unity and being also explains why the matter of a substantial form (i.e., prime matter) cannot have any sort of form in itself. Firstly, it cannot have a substantial form, otherwise there would be more than one substantial form at the same time. The matter merely underlies the one substantial form which gives being to it. Secondly, it cannot have an accidental form, because this would render an accidental form ontologically prior to the substantial form, which conflicts with the ontological priority emphasized again and again. It follows that the matter corresponding to the substantial form is nothing but prime matter without any form or actuality.

These two arguments clearly exhibit how deeply Aquinas's conception of prime matter as pure potentiality is rooted in his ontological commitments to unity, being, actuality and form. It seems impossible to revise the conception of prime matter without destroying the whole structure of his hylomorphic ontology. Nevertheless, this merely provides good reasons to engage in a more sympathetic and patient reading of his theory of prime matter, if his hylomorphic ontology is still of interest. Aquinas's defence of the ontological status of pure potential being (*esse*) cannot be complete

"The Human Soul: Form and Substance? Thomas Aquinas' Critique of Eclectic Aristotelianism", *Archives D'Histoire Doctrinale et Littéraire du Moyen Age* 64 (1997): 95–126, esp. 106–113; Sander W. de Boer, *The Science of the Soul: The Commentary Tradition on Aristotle's 'De anima', c. 1260–c. 1360* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2013), 36–43.

³⁸ *SCG* II, cap. 58. Cf. Wippel, *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas*, 338, note 166.

without a more positive clarification of its reality, as required by Aquinas's denial of the seventh premise in the paradox of prime matter, namely, what has no being in actuality is not real.³⁹

This requirement can be satisfied by a closer examination of Aquinas's distinction between nothing (*nihil*), privation (*privatio*) and prime matter, for all of these three terms carry the meaning of non-being, but only 'prime matter' can denote a real being though in a limited sense.

Privation (*στέρησις*) is a term Aristotle introduced to explain the process of generation as a change from non-being to being. Privation, form and matter are taken as the three principles of generation. For instance, the making of a bronze statue can be described as a process of a lump of bronze from being shapeless to being shaped. Its shapelessness or not-being-actually-shaped is called privation.⁴⁰ However, not all actuality that is not in a thing can be called a privation. As Aquinas rightly observes, it is meaningless to say that a rock is in privation of sight. "But a privation can be said only of a determinate subject, in which the opposite possession is naturally apt to occur, for example, only those things can be said to be blind that are naturally apt to see."⁴¹ However, prime matter has no form in itself at all. It remains unaffected when a privation is replaced by its corresponding form. For prime matter by definition is the thing that remains unchanged during the process of generation. Therefore, as mentioned earlier, it can be taken as the substratum of privation as well.⁴² Moreover, generation proceeds from privation and prime matter. Since privation refers to the non-being of a particular form, and nothing cannot come from nothing, it follows that prime matter as the substratum must be something real. However, this merely confirms the first horn of the prime matter paradox reconstructed

³⁹Some scholars have therefore proposed an anti-realist interpretation of prime matter, which has been rightly criticized by Pasnau and Brower for committing Aquinas to an implausible bundle theory, see Pasnau, *Thomas Aquinas on Human Nature*, 131, and Brower, *Aquinas's Ontology of the Material World*, 121.

⁴⁰*DPN*, cap. 1.

⁴¹*Ibid.*

⁴²See note 23.

earlier. To block the contradiction, I will show how Aquinas distinguishes prime matter from nothing or nothingness.

Concerning nothingness itself nothing can be said; it can merely be described as the absolute negation of being. If there is a real distinction between nothingness and prime matter, it will make it possible to say positively what the latter is. In his *On the Principles of Nature* Aquinas stresses that only things in actuality can be known or defined. However, actuality originates from form. It means that prime matter taken by itself (*per se*) is neither knowable nor definable and can only be illustrated by comparison.⁴³ The analogy Aquinas has in mind is once again the famous example of a bronze statue: prime matter can be compared with bronze. Nevertheless, Aquinas notes the inherent weakness of this analogy by stressing that one must imagine prime matter as a completely shapeless and formless thing. Then what on earth is this mystical prime matter? In his more mature works, Aquinas follows Aristotle to interpret prime matter as “the thing that is so related to (*se habere*) natural substances as bronze is related to a statue, and wood to a bed, and anything material and unformed to form.”⁴⁴ As mentioned above, Aquinas believes that prime matter cannot exist in itself (*per se*), but always needs a substantial form for actual being. This status of ‘being-related-to’ is simply another expression of its essential dependence, and of its indeterminacy: prime matter is essentially and indifferently related to all sorts of substantial forms. Aquinas stresses that it should not be confused with the Aristotelian category of relation, which by definition is an accidental being presupposing the existence of a substantial being and its substratum, i.e., prime matter.⁴⁵ Rather, it is a deeper ontological status, without which all properties of a material object would become ontologically unrelated. It can probably be called a transcendental relation, which makes the Aristotelian category of relation possible.

⁴³ *DPN*, cap. 1.

⁴⁴ See for instance, *Commentaria in Physicorum* I, lect. 13, n. 9, cited from the online version on *Corpus Thomisticum*, <http://www.corpusthomicum.org/cpyo12.html>.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* II, lect. 4, n. 9; cf. König-Pralong, *Avènement de l'aristotélisme*, 143.

Once again, I must concede that it is beyond the scope of this essay to give a full account of this profound insight into being-related-to as the basic principle of ontology. For the present purpose, it is necessary to presuppose its reality with respect to the intuition that some properties or actualities are related and therefore can be ascribed to a unified underlying principle. It is necessitated by our experience of unity and continuity in the process of change.

Nevertheless, prime matter is not a purely conceptual reality, because it serves as a principle of generation. Prime matter as pure potentiality is essentially indeterminate. It is open to all sorts of forms, both substantial and accidental, and therefore open to all possibilities. Therefore, it is real by its unspecified relation to all possible actualities. Its reality is knowable merely in indirect ways, because only things with determinate characteristics can be cognized by humans. In other words, its reality is conceded precisely because it defines the limits of human knowledge. This reality is not a consequence of having some sort of actuality, such as corporeity, because this fundamental relational being is uncategorized.⁴⁶ It does not have any determinate characteristics of its own. Nevertheless, it can be conceptually distinguished from both privation and nothingness by its essential indeterminate openness or pure potentiality to be any form, which is unique among the concepts of non-actuality.⁴⁷

In sum, for Aquinas, prime matter is not real in that it does not admit of any being in actuality or any determinate property. This is a necessary consequence of his doctrine of substantial form based upon the ontological priority of the substantial to the accidental. On the other hand, prime matter is real in that it is a necessary ontological condition of our understanding of the world in terms of unity and continuity. Therefore, although it has no

⁴⁶This also helps to reply to Graham's criticism of Aristotle's identification of prime matter with pure potentiality for failing to notice that all potentiality presupposes some 'actual constitutive properties'. Cf. Graham, "The Paradox of Prime Matter", 483.

⁴⁷Brower also insists that prime matter has a distinctive character, even though it is not characterized by any form. See Brower, *Aquinas's Ontology of the Material World*, esp. 113–129 for a different realist conception of prime matter as non-individual stuff.

independent features and therefore no independent existence in reality, it is still real in that its indeterminate existence is independent of our mind.

3. THE BODY AS PRIME MATTER

After such a detour about Aquinas's conception of prime matter, the picture of the fundamental principles of his hylomorphic ontology is now clearer. At the same time, it is also evident how the body in a living being can be established as its prime matter. It has been established that what corresponds to a substantial form is nothing but prime matter. If it can be demonstrated that the soul is the substantial form of the body, then the conclusion follows.⁴⁸

Since the beginning of his career, Aquinas maintained that the soul is combined with the body not in an accidental manner (*accidentaliter*), but by endowing the body with substantial being (*esse*) and defining the specific characteristic of the whole compound as a living being. In short, the soul has an essential relation (*essentialis habitudo*) to the body. It is absurd to believe that the soul is created before the body, or that the same soul can pass over from one body to another, as Plato and Pythagoras had wrongly claimed.⁴⁹ Therefore, when Aristotle defines the soul as a substance serving as a species or a form (*substantia sicut species vel forma*) in the second book of *De anima*, Aquinas claims that the Philosopher had explicitly denied that the soul is an accidental form of the body.⁵⁰

There is no need to cite further textual evidence, for it is already clear from the ontological principles presented above that the soul is the substantial form of a living being. Like Aristotle, Aquinas has no doubt about the existence of a particular living being (*hoc aliquid*) and takes its unity for granted, because it is natural for us to talk about a living creature, such

⁴⁸ It is worth noting that this move from the general metaphysical framework to a specific claim in Aquinas's philosophical psychology is taken as Aquinas's radical innovation in the medieval controversy over the unity and plurality of the souls. See Boer, *The Science of the Soul*, 40.

⁴⁹ *InSent.* II, dist. 17, q. 2, a. 2, co.

⁵⁰ For Aristotle's definition, see *DA* II, cap. 1, 412a 20–22, Moerboke's Latin translation runs as follows "Necesse est ergo animam substantiam esse, sicut speciem corporis phisici potencia uitam habentis". For Aquinas's commentary see *InDA* II, cap. 1 (ed. Leonina XXLV, 1: 70).

as Socrates. On the other hand, it is also natural for us to think that a human being is composed of a soul (or a mind) and a body. What has puzzled philosophers is not this fact, but the precise definition of the soul, the body, and their relationship. For Aquinas, no matter how they are related, this cannot shake the basic fact that a particular human being is an internally united substance.⁵¹

As I have shown above, the unity of a thing is determined by its being. However, to be is to be in actuality. It follows that if two different beings in actuality exist simultaneously, then they cannot form an absolute unity. Therefore, if an absolute unity is believed to be composed of two items, then one will be in actuality, while the other is in potentiality.⁵² Applying this principle to soul and body, the soul is certainly preferred to the body as the determining element that distinguishes human beings from other living creatures. Therefore, a soul is the form of a human being, while a body is its matter. Moreover, a particular human being is conceived of as a substance ontologically prior to other actual beings inhering in it. It follows that the soul of this particular being is its substantial form, while the body is its matter.

4. THE HOMONYMY OF *CORPUS* AND A PROBLEM FOR HYLOMORPHISM

The body is the prime matter of a human being. No matter how successfully one argues for this proposition with theoretical and textual evidence,⁵³ it is difficult to reconcile it with our common-sense intuitions about the body, for prime matter is indifferent everywhere, due to its complete lack of actuality. However, it is evidently possible to talk about the essential difference between a human body and an animal body. Aquinas also insists

⁵¹As John Wippel succinctly summarizes: "He is convinced on the strength of experience and introspection that a human being is essentially one, and therefore he rejects all forms of dualism which would in some way view a human being as consisting of two distinct entities or substances." See Wippel, "Thomas Aquinas and the Unity of Substantial Form".

⁵²See for instance, *QDSC*, a. 3.

⁵³See for instance, *InDA* II, cap. 1.

that a body for an intellective soul should have a more equable complexion than the bodies of other animals, otherwise it would be unsuitable for the functions specific to human beings.⁵⁴

Moreover, the Latin word for 'body', *corpus*, has many meanings. It can signify a human body, as well as a natural being in general. Aquinas offers a detailed analysis of its various uses in his early work *On Being and Essence*:

- (1) *Corpus* can be taken as a genus of substance which has determinate length, width, and height. (*corpus*₁)
- (2) However, these three spatial dimensions as such can also be called 'corpus', which belongs to the genus of quantity, rather than substance. (*corpus*₂)
- (3) Finally, a spatially-extended being always has other determinate features or perfections. For instance, a human being has a sensitive and an intellectual nature. 'Corpus' can signify exclusively the entity that merely has the perfection of spatial dimensions with all its other perfections being taken away (*cum praecisione*). (*corpus*₃)⁵⁵

It is obvious that corporeity is the exclusive perfection or actuality in *corpus*₃, a concept Aquinas has good reasons to reject in his doctrine of prime matter. Unfortunately, Aquinas claims further in this work that when saying that an animal consists of a soul and a body as two constituent parts, the term 'body' or '*corpus*' is used in this final sense, for all other perfections beyond being spatially extended seem to be from the soul.⁵⁶ This means that endorsing the distinction between corporeity and prime matter deeply rooted in Aquinas's hylomorphic ontology will render not only three meanings of

⁵⁴ See for instance, *STh* I, q. 76, a. 5. For a detailed study of the human body from this perspective, see Bazàn, "A Body for the Human Soul".

⁵⁵ *De ente et essentia* [DEE], cap. 2. Gyula Klima therefore claimed that the human body cannot be prime matter but some tempo-spatial entity, See id., "Man = Soul + Body: Aquinas's Arithmetic of Human Nature", in *Thomas Aquinas: Contemporary Philosophical Perspectives*, ed. Brian Davies (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 261.

⁵⁶ DEE, cap. 2.

corpus all different from 'prime matter', but also a claim directly conflicting with the conclusion reached above.

Furthermore, as Sander W. de Boer has recently observed, conceiving of the body as of prime matter comes into conflict with one of the Aristotelian definitions of the soul as "the first actuality of a physical body having organs".⁵⁷ For it is immediately obvious that a physical body having organs as the subject of the soul cannot be prime matter. As Boer rightly points out, prime matter *per se* is indescribable and therefore cannot constitute a part of the definition of the soul as its correlate.⁵⁸

Even worse, considering the close relation between the uses of a word in everyday language and its conceptual content in Aristotelian-Thomistic semantics, the confusing uses of the word '*corpus*' might seem to imply an ambiguity of the body's ontological status in Aquinas's hylomorphism. As I have observed, this ambiguity is precisely one of the crucial points in Bernard Williams's fierce attacks on hylomorphism.⁵⁹

In his seminal paper "Hylomorphism", Williams first points out that Aristotelian hylomorphism courts attention in the philosophy of mind, because it is taken as a way to resist both materialism and dualism. However, according to Williams, neither the soul nor the body has been well defined in hylomorphic ontology. With regard to the conception of the body, Aristotle himself already mentions the homonymy of body in the *De anima*: when a human being is dead, the dead body would no longer be a body, except in a homonymous manner.⁶⁰ It means that, properly speaking, only a body possessing a soul is really a body. The body in its strict sense in Williams's interpretation turns out to be a specific instance of Aquinas's *corpus*₁, i.e., a living body that has three spatial dimensions. This living body obviously

⁵⁷ *DA* II, cap. 1, 412b 5–6. See Boer, *The Science of the Soul*, 130–141, esp. 136.

⁵⁸ Boer, *The Science of the Soul*, 137.

⁵⁹ Williams, "Hylomorphism". Similar criticisms also came from Anthony Kenny and William Hasker, see Barnes, "The Paradoxes of Hylomorphism".

⁶⁰ *DA* II, cap. 1, 412b 13–15. See Williams, "Hylomorphism", 220–221. For a detailed account of the homonymy of body in Aristotle and a different way of defending Aristotelian hylomorphism, see Christopher Shields, *Order in Multiplicity: Homonymy in the Philosophy of Aristotle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 131–155.

cannot be the matter of a human being, for it cannot survive his death.⁶¹ Williams then proposes another term 'Body' for that which can have life and then lose it. However, it follows that being alive would merely be an accidental property of the Body, which is obviously unacceptable for Aristotle. To avoid this, Williams introduces his careful distinction between 'body' and 'Body'. A body, or more precisely, a living body has the perfection of life as an essential property. It can never lose life without its existence being destroyed. Therefore, as Aristotle insists, a dead body is not a body at all. However, a Body is neither alive nor entirely lifeless, but something that constitutes the living body in question. There is something other than the property of life determining the ontological status of the Body to enable this constitution. Williams appeals to the Cartesian analogy of a human being to a going clock. When the Body works as a clock, it will constitute the living body or have the property of life as something extra. When it ceases to work, the living body will cease to exist, while the Body will remain a corpse. In Williams's own words, a Body serves as the matter "not just of a human being, but of a human body".⁶² In short, being alive is essential for the body, but accidental for the Body. Then what is the essential property of the Body *per se*? Williams merely adopts a contemporary conception of life and its matter to stress that the Body is a structured physical thing.⁶³ It is nonetheless not difficult to identify the close similarity between his conception of the Body and Aquinas's *corpus*. For both are defined exclusively by a determinate form or structure that remains after all other properties, such as life or mental activities, have been taken away. This is particularly true if one recalls the Cartesian conception of the body or Body as an entity occupying a certain amount of three dimensional space.

⁶¹As Ackrill argues, Aristotelian definitions of the soul and the homonymy of the body apparently commits him to the implausible position that the body as the matter of a living being simultaneously have and lack the form of life, see id., "Aristotle's Definitions of *Psuche*", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 73 (1972-3): 119-33.

⁶²Williams, "Hylomorphism", 221-222.

⁶³Williams, "Hylomorphism", 222.

This distinction between body and Body, Williams argues, will bring serious theoretical difficulties and destroy the original attractions of the hylomorphism view. First, a human being such as Socrates is certainly not to be identified with his Body or *corpus*₃. However, it is difficult to say that he is not the working Body that possesses life, or *corpus*₁. Without any doubt, Socrates is a particular substance that has three dimensions and the essential property of life. Secondly, every truth concerning Socrates, including his mental activities, is not just about his being as a living body or *corpus*₁, but also about the underlying Body or *corpus*₃, and in many cases, Williams believes, they seem much the same. For it is just as possible to say that a human being is thinking, as that a three-dimensional entity is thinking, even though the latter is not a natural way of expression. This conception of thinking seems foreign to Aristotelian psychology. However, it is not difficult to be understood with Aquinas's threefold distinction of *corpus* cited earlier, because a *corpus*₁ is nothing but a *corpus*₃ endowed with more advanced forms. The problem is that a *corpus*₃, or Body as a spatially extended entity or a structured physical thing, is the subject matter of physical inquiry, which renders the original hylomorphic view into a sort of materialism, at most a non-reductive one. On the other hand, if one appeals to the soul, the other constituent part of a living being, and casts it in a more active and independent role in life activities, which determines the irreducible feature of human mental activities, while maintaining the presence of the Body as a physical being, one actually returns to a weakened version of dualism.⁶⁴

Williams's criticism seems particularly true of Aquinas, for Aquinas assumes that the intellectual activities of a human soul have no need for the participation of the body and function as the basis of the immortality of the intellective soul. Nevertheless, in his arguments against Averroes's theory of the intellect, he insists that a particular person such as Socrates, not his soul, is the subject of intellectual activities. This seems to commit Aquinas to a sort of dualism between *corpus*₁ and *corpus*₃.

⁶⁴Williams, "Hylomorphism", 222–225.

I do not pretend to be able to reply to all the difficulties involved here in textual exegesis as well as in theoretical defence. Concerning the apparent textual conflict between Aquinas's *corpus*₃ and prime matter, I want to draw attention to the context of his distinction of the various meanings of *corpus* in the *On Being and Essence*. Aquinas is primarily concerned with the relationship between the essence of a species and that of its genus. On the one hand, Aquinas cites Averroes's comment with approval "Socrates is nothing other than animality and rationality, which are his quiddity", which seems to imply that animality is a part of Socrates's quiddity, namely, humanity.⁶⁵ On the other hand, he is explicit that given a particular being, the essence of its genus is not an integral part of the essence of its species. In the case of Socrates, being an animal is not a part of being a man, for otherwise a man would not be said to be an animal, due to a general rule of predication that no integral part is predicated of its whole.⁶⁶ Aquinas argues that whatever is in the essence of a species already is in the essence of its genus, although in an indeterminate manner. In the case of Socrates, humanity adds nothing new to animality, but rather specifies what is contained implicitly in animality. Then how can humanity be equated with animality plus rationality, as Averroes had suggested?

To account for this apparent conflict, Aquinas introduces the distinction of the various meanings of *corpus*. According to the definition of *corpus*₁, it is evident that every material being can be called a *corpus*, because all have three spatial dimensions. However, Aquinas immediately stresses that when a thing, either a living being or a piece of stone, is said to be a *corpus*₁, this is not on account of an additional form such as corporeity, but rather of its own form, either a soul or something like stone-ness. In this context, Aquinas focuses on the meaning of *corpus* as a genus and draws the conclusion that the form of a living being (i.e., the soul) is implicitly contained in the form of *corpus*₁.⁶⁷ However, on the same basis, it is also possible to say that the soul is merely a corporeal form of a special sort, on account of which a living being

⁶⁵ Averroes, *In Metaph.*, 7, cap. 5, com. 20, quoted in *DEE*, cap. 2.

⁶⁶ *DEE*, cap. 2.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

can have determinate spatial dimensions. Although Aquinas does not make it clear, it is not difficult to infer that the form of corporeity, or the form of *corpus*₃, is contained in the form of a living being as well, certainly not in an implicit manner as mentioned above, but rather in a virtual manner (*in uirtute*), as Aquinas explains in his later works: it is in the power of the soul to endow the body with an inferior form of corporeity.⁶⁸ Returning to Aquinas's puzzling claim that a human being is constituted of the soul and the *corpus*₃, or Socrates = the soul + *corpus*₃, I have shown that he rightly noticed the change of the meaning of *corpus* in this context. Nevertheless, he failed to explicate that the soul in the equation also received a meaning significantly distinct from the one discussed so far. This is so because the integral parts of a thing should be mutually exclusive. If *corpus*₃ signifies an entity informed merely by corporeity with the exclusion of all other perfections, it follows that the soul as the other integral part contains all other perfections except corporeity. However, it is evident that the soul as the substantial form of the body, or prime matter, is the source of its intellectual activities, as well as of its corporeity. Therefore, in the equation Socrates = the soul + *corpus*₃, the soul is taken to be something other than his substantial form. But it is not difficult to reconcile this equation with Aquinas's doctrine of the unity of substantial form. One can argue that here the minimal actuality of corporeity contained in *corpus*₃ ultimately comes from the soul as the substantial form. The presence of *corpus*₃ already presupposes the soul as its substantial form.⁶⁹ *Corpus*₃ should first be actualized by this substantial form before constituting an individual *corpus*₁. As Carlos Bazán rightly observes, corporeity is nothing more than a perspective, separated by one's thought, from the substantial form, which constitutes the composite.⁷⁰

As I have shown in the first part of this essay, Aquinas is more explicit in his later works that it is the unique substantial form, the soul in the case of Socrates, that renders a human being a substance, a corporeal being

⁶⁸ See for instance, *STh* I, q. 76, a. 3.

⁶⁹ Even in this text, Aquinas is quite clear that the soul is the form through which three dimensions can be designated in a thing. See *DEE*, cap. 2.

⁷⁰ Bazán, "La corporalité selon saint Thomas", 401.

(*corpūs*₁), a living being as well as an intellectual being.⁷¹ And the body that corresponds to this substantial form is prime matter, although this meaning is absent in Aquinas's early analysis of *corpūs*.

This reinterpretation of the passage in *On Being and Essence* already provides a clue as to how to reply to Williams's criticisms. In Aquinas's eyes, the genuine matter of the soul is not Williams's Body or *corpūs*₃, but prime matter without any actuality or determination. What is known about this matter is merely that it is open to every substantial form in this material world. In this sense, hylomorphism will not emerge as "a polite form of materialism", as Williams argues, because prime matter *per se* is a principle of being that resists direct knowledge. It only makes sense in terms of its relation to substantial forms, within a metaphysical framework that accepts strict substantial unity and ontological priority. In short, prime matter cannot be the subject of physical inquiry.

Concerning the danger of dualism, a more comprehensive response certainly calls for a complete re-examination of the ontological status of the intellectual soul in Aquinas's hylomorphism, which requires another independent study. However, it is at least evident that the alleged dualism cannot be a substance dualism, when the body in question is taken as prime matter, not as an independent substance. Certainly, whether the various properties deriving from the soul—such as corporeity and intellectual thinking—constitute a sort of property dualism, is still an unresolved problem, which requires a detailed analysis of intellectual activities in Aquinas's philosophy.

Besides these big issues in Aquinas's philosophy of the soul, there is still a difficulty left unanswered: given that the body in Aquinas's hylomorphism primarily denotes prime matter, how can a clear distinction be made between the animal and human body from an ontological perspective? In his later work, *Disputed Questions on the Soul* (1266–1267), Aquinas offers a clue to its solution.⁷² There he stresses again that only the first form that enables the actual being of a substance is its substantial form. If the soul is the

⁷¹ See for instance, *QDA*, q. 9.

⁷² *QDA*, q. 9.

substantial form of a human being, there cannot be any medium between it and prime matter. However, unlike the arguments in his other works,⁷³ Aquinas goes further to elucidate how the body changes from prime matter into a sort of *corpus*₁, such as a human being. This happens through a gradation of actualization. First of all, prime matter can only exist in a corporeal being. However, so far as it is a constitutive part of a corporeal being, it becomes matter with respect to the higher perfection of life. Applying Aquinas's distinction of *corpus* here, one can say that when it is actualized by a soul in a human being, prime matter has changed into *corpus*₃, or Williams's Body, which serves as matter for life activities.⁷⁴ Similarly, the *corpus*₃ being endowed with life activities will be matter for the sensitive nature, while the sensitive nature will be matter for the intellectual nature. However, as Aquinas immediately stresses, it is the same substantial form of the soul that elevates prime matter from an inferior form to superior forms. The soul itself functions as the medium between prime matter and its different operations.⁷⁵

Aquinas's metaphysical gradation of matter also helps to explain everyday human experience of the body-soul interaction. It is natural to believe that the soul can change the status of the living body, although not the body in the sense of prime matter. For instance, when the soul makes a free decision to do something, this will normally be followed by bodily movements. At this moment, the body is under the control of the soul, precisely because the soul has actualized prime matter into a corporeal being, into a living being. In the whole process, the body moved by the soul is not given as a heterogeneous entity, but something informed by the soul itself. Therefore, even though in this context the soul is described as a mover and the body as something being moved, this does not lead to dualism, at

⁷³For the difference, see Kevin White, "Aquinas on the Immediacy of the Union of the Soul and Body", in *Studies in Thomistic Theology*, ed. P. Lockey (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996), 209–280. However, White's article is more about the difference of expression than the evolution of Aquinas's argumentation for the same doctrine.

⁷⁴*QDA*, q. 9.

⁷⁵*Ibid.*

least not to substance dualism, because without the mediating function of the soul, which is ontologically prior, the body cannot be a moveable thing at all. In Aquinas's own words, "as a form the soul is united to the body without an intermediary, but as a mover it is united to the body through an intermediary."⁷⁶ Thanks to the existence of these intermediaries, the matter in a human being can be further divided into a hierarchical order in accordance with his various operations, from those shared with other corporeal beings up to those unique to the intellective soul.

It is obvious that the soul in the above passage also has different meanings, in accordance with the homonymy of the body as I argued earlier. It is the unique substantial form conferring being (*esse*) on prime matter as well as on the different movers in the different activities of the living being. It plays a different role in moving the body. When it actually launches a concrete operation by moving the body, the soul is exercising its specific faculties (*potentiae*), such as sensation, desire, or understanding. To understand the different roles of the soul, one should be aware that for Aquinas these faculties are not the essence of the soul or its substantial forms, but rather some accidental forms specific to the soul.⁷⁷ Since matter is for the sake of form, the difference of forms defines the difference of the corresponding matter. In the earlier discussions, I highlighted that the matter corresponding to a substantial form is nothing but prime matter, which is the same for every sort of substance.⁷⁸ However, accidental forms require other sorts of substratum, for according to ontological priority they presuppose the presence of substances, ranging from inanimate to spiritual beings. Therefore, Aquinas emphasizes more than once that the rational soul and its specific operations determine the dispositions and proportions of the human body.⁷⁹ Certainly,

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ See *STh* I, q. 77, a. 1, ad 5. For a recent study on Aquinas's real distinction between the essence and the powers of the soul, see Dominik Perler, *The Faculties: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 97–139.

⁷⁸ Certainly the identity of prime matter is said by analogy or comparison, because real identity can be found only in individual beings in actuality. See note 37.

⁷⁹ An example may be *STh* I, q. 91, a. 3. For more references and relevant discussions, see Bazán, "A Body for the Human Soul".

the human body here is no longer the body as a constituent part of the human being, i.e., the body as prime matter, but a body that has been actualized by the rational soul for the sake of performing its operations. Similarly, the body of a beast is determined by its sensual soul and therefore distinct from a human body. To conclude, the faculties and operations of substances define the ontological hierarchy of bodies, from inanimate to human ones.

According to the analysis above, all these entities are called 'body' not because they have a univocally real definition, but because they share the same sort of inclination, the potentiality toward a particular activity—sensation in an animal and understanding in a human being. They are distinguished by the activities they incline to. However, so far as the inclinations themselves are concerned, they are not different from prime matter, because they are all defined by the status of being-related-to, prime matter being indifferently related to every substantial form, while living bodies are related to certain life activities. In other words, all sorts of matter or substratum, in substantial or accidental change, can be called *corpus*. It is undoubted that this *corpus* is homonymous and has richer meanings than the ones shown in Aquinas's early analysis. Nevertheless, 'corpus' is not therefore an ambiguous term, because the basic connotation remains the same in all occasions: the presence of a *corpus* indicates the possibility of change and therefore an inherent limitation of any actuality in this world. When talking about the body, one touches upon the various forms of potentialities and limitations in this world.⁸⁰

⁸⁰This essay originated from a response to the series of lectures "The Metaphysics of Soul in the Aristotelian Tradition" delivered by Christopher Shields at Peking University in October 2012. I learnt a lot from the discussions with Professor Shields. I am also grateful to Mingyu Ma, Luo Wang, and Yin Liu for helping me find some relevant literature. I also want to thank Nicholas Lombardo for improving my English. This research is generously funded by the National Social Science Foundation of China (中国国家自然科学基金, 项目编号, Project No. 11CZX042).

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SUMMARIUM

De corporis statu ontologico secundum D. Thomae de materia et forma doctrinam

Doctrina de materia et forma, quae “hylomorphismus” nuncupatur, principalem partem habet in Thomistarum de natura hominis doctrina. Attamen ab auctoribus non satis explicatum est de corpore, quemnam statum ontologicum iuxta hanc doctrinam habeat. Haec tractatio ostendere conatur, in D. Thomae ontologia hylomorfica corpus non esse nisi materiam primam prout puram potentiam. Impugnationes quasdam notionis materiae primae a recentioribus factas notans, auctor philosophica huiusce controversi conceptus fundamenta examinat doctrinamque D. Thomae de corpore ut materia prima explicando vindicat. Auctor etiam difficultates quasdam prae oculis ponit, quas corporis cum materia prima identificatio prae se fert, ipsarum tamen solutionem adumbrans. His exactis patet possibilitas bonam D. Thomae de corpore doctrinae cohaerentiam defendendi recentesque impetus in hylomorphismum, quos philosophiae mentis, ut aiunt, cultores (ut B. Williams) facere solent, reprimendi: ostendendo nempe, quomodo hylomorphismus cohaerenti se praebet explicationi, in qua tam Scylla materialismi vitatur quam dualismi Charybdis.

ABSTRACT

The Ontological Status of the Body in Aquinas's Hylomorphism

Hylomorphism is central to Thomistic philosophical anthropology. However, little attention has been paid to the ontological status of the body in this theoretical framework. This essay aims to show that in Aquinas's hylomorphic ontology, the body as a constituent part of the compound is above all prime matter as pure potentiality. In view of the contemporary criticisms of prime matter, it examines the fundamental theoretical presuppositions of this controversial concept and offers a defensive reading of Aquinas's conception of the body as prime matter. It also displays possible difficulties in identifying the body with prime matter and gives a clue indicating the way out. This effort will make it possible to defend the consistency of Aquinas's conception of the body and to react to the severe criticism of hylomorphism in the philosophy of mind by contemporary philosophers such as Bernard Williams, namely by showing how hylomorphism can be formally consistent without slipping into the materialism or dualism it bitterly opposes.

KEYWORDS: hylomorphism; body; prime matter