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Conceiving Prime Matter in the Middle Ages: Perception, Abstraction and Analogy

<https://doi.org/10.1515/agph-2020-0147>

Abstract: In its formlessness and potentiality, prime matter is a problematic entity of medieval metaphysics and its ontological limitations drastically affect human possibility of conceiving it. In this article, I analyse three influential strategies elaborated to justify an epistemic access to prime matter. They are incidental perception, negative abstraction, and analogy. Through a systematic and historical analysis of these procedures, the article shows the richness of interpretations and theoretical stakes implied by the conundrum of how prime matter can be known by human beings. In particular, the reasons behind the later medieval acceptance of analogy as the main way to unveil prime matter become clearer by pointing out the correlation between the ontological and epistemological levels of the medieval examination of prime matter.

學而不思則罔，思而不學則殆。

*To study and not think is a waste,
To think and not study is dangerous.*
Confucius, *Analects* 2:15

1 Introduction: Conceiving an Elusive Substrate

In their study of reality, science and philosophy often postulate entities that challenge our everyday ontological inventory. On some occasions, we do not know how to classify their existence. More often, we are unable to think, visualise, and properly conceive these entities. How could we visualise or think a quantum field, a black hole, or the space I was occupying on my chair yesterday? Although they did not have any concepts of quantum mechanics and astrophysics, and had a rather different notion of space, medieval thinkers, too, often had to face questions related to how postulated entities can be included in our ontological inven-

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tory and be epistemically accessed. Among these entities, the most curious and pervasive one was prime matter.

In medieval hylomorphism, prime matter is a metaphysical entity which lacks any forms and therefore expresses the potentiality that different sets of beings (usually, either corporeal or corporeal and spiritual) have in order to exist. Prime matter is not to be confused with ‘matter’ since medieval thinkers often indulged with the position of a diverse set of ‘matters’ – prime, proximate, specific, secondary, and so on. In this taxonomy of matter, prime matter is the basic, original status of matter without a form. And precisely in reason of this primacy, prime matter is a fringe entity that challenged the ontological and epistemic inventory of medieval philosophers. If existence is primarily actuality – *pace* Meinong – and actuality corresponds to the presence of a form, how can prime matter, in its formlessness, even exist? Attempts at addressing this problem originated different notions of prime matter in the Middle Ages. Some authors, and particularly Thomas Aquinas, deny that prime matter has any actuality.¹ Others, like Ockham, identify prime matter and quantity, implying a sort of ontological concreteness proper to matter.² Many others, often following Duns Scotus, claim that prime matter is characterised by some actuality.³

The ontological problem about prime matter, however, also implies a second order of questions. If knowing something, both sensorially and intellectually, is an activity primarily related to the forms, either accidental or substantial, how can we conceive an entity which has no form, no qualification, and only a minimal, obscure existence? Echoing what Nicole Oresme (d. 1382) observes in his *Questions on Aristotle's Physics*, if prime matter is to be considered a principle of the natural world, it must be knowable in some way.⁴ If we were to assume that prime matter is utterly inconceivable, this would entail either that the science of nature is based on an epistemic void because prime matter exists but is unknowable or that prime matter does not exist at all and is just a useless conceptual abstraction.

In this article, I want to discuss the ways in which medieval philosophers engaged with the problem of how prime matter can be conceived. As we shall see, this epistemological aspect of hylomorphism is directly related to the authors’ ontological commitment to prime matter. Instead of focusing on individual char-

¹ See Brower 2014 (especially 109–84) for a thorough account of Aquinas’s theory of prime matter in the context of his hylomorphism.

² On William of Ockham’s hylomorphism, see Adams 1987, 633–95.

³ Petagine 2019 has recently examined Scotus’s theory of prime matter and its early reception among Scotists. See also Friedman 2021 for a thorough account of the debate on matter as potency in the 14th century.

⁴ See Oresme, *Quaestiones super Physicam* I.14, 104.