

## NOTE FOR BOOK ONE, READING FIFTEEN

This text of Thomas shows how difficult it is to separate matter from lack of form when our reason tries to understand matter by itself without form:

Mundus dicitur factus ex invisibilia materia, non quia informis materia tempore praecesserit, sed ordine naturae.

Et similiter privatio non fuit aliquo tempore in materia ante omnem formam, sed quia materia absque forma intellecta cum privatione etiam intelligitur.<sup>1</sup>

We see in the later Platonists the continuation of this identification of matter with the non-being of lack or privation. Consider this passage from Plotinus:

Investigation will show us that matter has not reality and is not capable of being affected. Matter must be bodiless - for body is a later production, a compound made by matter in conjunction with some other entity. Matter is no limit or bound, for it is mere indetermination; it is not a power, for what does it produce? It lives on the farther side of all these categories and so has no title to the name of being. It will be more plausibly called a non-being and this in the sense not of movement (away from being) or of station (in not being) but of veritable non-being.<sup>2</sup>

And another passage from Plotinus:

By this non-being, of course, we are not to understand something that simply does not exist, but only something of an utterly different order from authentic being...the non-being we are thinking of is rather an image of being or perhaps something still further from an image.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *De Potentia*, Q. 4, Art. 1, Ad 6 in second objections

<sup>2</sup> Plotinus, *Enneads*, III, Book 6, Chapter 7

<sup>3</sup> Plotinus, *Enneads*, I, Book. 8, Chapter 3

St. Augustine is puzzled as to how to speak of this strange reality that is matter:

For the mutability of mutable things is simply their capacity for all the forms into which mutable things can be changed. But what is this?..If it were allowable to say that it is a nothing which is in some way something, or that it is and yet is not, that is what I should say.<sup>4</sup>

And in this text, Augustine almost seems to identify matter with non-being:

However, what is not a body is either soul or something better than soul. For there is nothing lower than all bodies because, even if someone will suggest the matter from which a body is made, since it lacks all form, is rightly called nothing.<sup>5</sup>

At other times, Augustine speaks of matter as being in some way although close to nothing:

Yet this almost-nothing, since it was not absolutely nothing, must have been from Him from whom all is that in any way is.<sup>6</sup>

Aristotle in this Reading first shows how the Platonists arrived at their position identifying matter and lack, or matter and what is not. He then shows the difference of his own position which is that matter and lack are distinct. Lack is *through itself*, or as lack, non-being while matter *as such* is not although non-being can happen to it. And matter is almost a substance (for it is able to be a substance or is a substance in ability or potency) while lack is in no way a substance, either in act or in ability.

But when Aristotle wants to reason that his position is correct and Plato's is a mistake, he finds a thought common to himself and Plato. He is still following the advice of the central thinker, Heraclitus. They share a common thought

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<sup>4</sup> St. Augustine, *Confessions*, Book 12, Chapter 6

<sup>5</sup> St. Augustine, *De div. quaest. LXXXIII*, q. 54

<sup>6</sup> St. Augustine, *Confessions*, Book 12, Chapter 15

about form, a very profound understanding of form. Form is something godlike, good and desirable. Since God is pure act, every form, insofar as it is an act, is like God. And because act is the perfection of ability, and the perfection of a thing is its good and the good is desirable, form is also good and desirable. From this common understanding of form, Aristotle reasons that Plato should also distinguish between matter and lack of form. For if we compare matter and lack of form to form, one of them (lack of form) seems to be bad because it is opposed to form which is good. But the matter is not opposed to the form, but is perfected by it. Because of this order of matter to form as its perfection and good, we can say (carrying over the word *desire* and giving it a somewhat new meaning) that matter desires form. But in no way can we say that lack of form desires form as its good and perfection. For form eliminates lack of form. How can matter and lack of form be the same if the one is perfected by form and the other is destroyed by form.

We might say in daily life that the sick desire to be healthy and the ugly want to be beautiful and the weak want to be strong. But is it the sick *as such* that want to be healthy or the ugly *as such* that want to be beautiful and the weak *as such* that want to be strong. For the good is what all want. But health is not the good of sickness. Rather it eliminates it. Likewise beauty takes away ugliness and strength, weakness. It is something else that *as such* wants to be healthy, beautiful and strong. It is the body that wants to be healthy and beautiful and strong for health and beauty and strength are perfections of the body and therefore the good of the body. Hence, we should distinguish between the body and its sickness or weakness or ugliness. To be a body and to be sick or to be ugly or to be weak are not the same thing. Aristotle reasons in like manner that matter and lack of form cannot be the same since matter is perfected by form which is therefore the good of matter while lack of form is eliminated by form. Matter in that sense is said to want or desire form. But it would make no sense to say that lack of form desires form for then it would want its own destruction. If form is the perfection of matter and the destruction or elimination of lack of form, it is clear that matter and lack of form are not the same and should be distinguished.

St. Augustine seems to have reasoned against the Manichean position that matter is something bad in the same way that Aristotle reasoned against Plato's identification of matter and lack of form. Since lack of form is opposed to form which is good, lack seems to be something bad. And if we do not distinguish then between matter and its lack of form, we will begin to think that

matter is something bad (as Plotinus said) Here are some of Augustine's words in his major work against the Manicheans:

Nor on this account ought this hyle which cannot be perceived through any sensible species but which can, with difficulty, be conceived through the privation of all form, be called evil. For it has a capacity for form, since if it were not able to receive form imposed by the maker, it would certainly not be called matter. But if form is something good, whence things are called well-formed which excel in it, just as things which excel in beauty are called beautiful, then, without doubt, even the capacity for form is something good.<sup>7</sup>

Since hyle (the Greek word for matter) is capable of form and form is good, matter is also good (although not as good as form). But lack of form as such is not capable of form and is rather opposed to it. Augustine does not seem to have read Aristotle's *Physics* and therefore he seems to have arrived at the same argument against the same error on his own. Great minds run in the same current.

Aristotle's way of reasoning can be shown by a likeness to the way we could show the distinction between the mind and ignorance. Suppose someone were to say that we can only teach the ignorant (and Socrates might add, those who know they are ignorant). Therefore you are teachable and can learn because you are ignorant. This position is confusing the mind which is the ability to learn and to know with the ignorance that happens to it before it learns something.

We might, imitating Aristotle, begin by saying that our position is that the mind and ignorance are not the same. For ignorance as such is not-knowing, but the mind as such is not not-knowing although it happens to the mind to not know. And the mind is almost knowing for it is the ability to know, but ignorance is neither actually knowing nor able to know.

But suppose our adversary agreed that God was all-knowing and good and therefore that knowledge is something godlike, good and desirable. We could then like Aristotle compare ignorance and mind to knowledge. And ignorance, being opposed to knowledge which is good and desirable, would seem to be

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<sup>7</sup> St. Augustine, *De Natura Boni Contra Manichaeos*, C. 18, P.L. 556-557)

something bad. But mind, being capable of knowing, is good or ordered to the good. The mind wants to know, we could say, because it is perfected by knowing. But ignorance cannot desire knowledge for knowledge eliminates ignorance. So if ignorance were to desire knowledge, it would desire its own destruction.

One could reason against the mistake of Sartre in *Being and Nothingness* in the same way. Sartre identifies the freedom of man with non-being. And someone might think this by the following consideration. When, for example, I go to the restaurant, if I am truly free to choose between say steak and chicken, then before I choose, my will is undetermined. This indetermination is what makes me free. If my will were already determined to choose steak, I would not be free.

Sartre is confusing my freedom or ability to choose with the indetermination in my will before I choose. But these can be seen to be not the same if we compare them with a third thing, the choice. The ability to choose is for the sake of choice and therefore choice is the good of the ability to choose. But the indetermination or lack of choice before I choose is opposed to choice and eliminated by my choice. My freedom is my ability to choose and the ability to choose could therefore be said to desire to choose. But the lack of choice could not be said to desire or want choice for that will destroy the lack of choice.

The mistake of identifying matter and the lack of form, and the mistake of identifying the mind and its ignorance, and the mistake of identifying the will or the ability to choose with the indetermination or lack of choice before choosing seem all to be a mistake from the accidental or what happens. The mistake of the accidental deceives even the wise, says Aristotle in the book *About Sophistical Refutations*. And it seems to us that we are especially deceived by what happens when it necessarily happens. It necessarily happens to matter before it is formed to lack that form. And it necessarily happens to the mind before it learns to be ignorant. And it necessarily happens to the will to be undetermined before it chooses. And what necessarily comes before seems to be a cause of what comes to be. But it need not be a cause as such of what comes to be. Hegel's famous phrase "the portentous power of the negative" seems to make universal the mistake in all of the above.

In this text, Thomas, following Averroes, shows that the desire of matter for form is not some action or doing of matter, but rather its order and relation to form as its perfection and good:

appetitus formae non est aliqua actio materiae, sed quaedam habitudo materiae ad formam, secundum quod est in potentia ad ipsam, sicut Commentator exponit in primo *Physicorum*.<sup>8</sup>

In this text, Thomas explains two senses in which something is said to be for the sake of another, one of which is true of matter:

Est enim aliquid propter alterum dupliciter.

Uno modo propter eius operationem, sive conservationem vel quicquid huiusmodi est quod consequitur ad esse: et huiusmodi sunt posteriora eo propter quod sunt; sicut vestimenta sunt propter hominem, et instrumenta propter artificem.

Alio modo est aliquid propter alterum, idest, propter esse eius: et sic quod est propter alterum, est prius tempore et natura posterius. Hoc autem modo corpus est propter animam: sicut et omnis materia propter formam.<sup>9</sup>

We are also given the clue to understanding the bad in this Reading. The word *bad* is equivocal by reason, but in the order of its meanings, the first is always some lack. In this text, Thomas unfolds the truth that the bad is a privation or lack in the strict sense and points out the distinction between being bad *simpliciter* and in some way:

Malum quidem in substantia aliqua est ex eo quod deficit ei aliquid quod natum est et debet habere: si enim homo non habet alas, non est ei malum, quia non est natus eas habere; si etiam homo capillos flavos non habet, non est malum, quia etsi natus sit habere, non tamen est debitum ut habeat; est tamen malum si non habeat manus, quas natus est et debet habere, si sit perfectus, quod tamen non est malum avi. Omnis autem privatio, si proprie et

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<sup>8</sup> *De Potentia*, Q. 4, Art. 1, Ad 2 in second objections

<sup>9</sup> *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Liber II, Capitulum LXXXIX

stricte accipiat, est eius quod quis natus est habere et debet habere. In privatione igitur sic accepta semper est ratio mali.

Materia autem, cum sit potentia ad omnes formas, omnes quidem nata est habere, nulla tamen est ei debita: cum sine quavis una earum possit esse perfecta in actu. Quaelibet tamen earum est debita alicui eorum quae ex materia constituuntur: nam non potest esse aqua nisi habeat formam aquae, nec potest esse ignis nisi habeat formam ignis. Privatio igitur formae huiusmodi, comparata ad materiam, non est malum materiae: sed comparata ad id cuius est forma, est malum eius, sicut privatio formae ignis est malum ignis.

Et quia tam privationes quam habitus et formae non dicuntur esse nisi secundum quod sunt in subiecto, si quidem privatio sit malum per comparisonem ad subiectum in quo est, erit malum simpliciter: sin autem, erit malum alicuius, et non simpliciter. Hominem igitur privari manu, est malum simpliciter: materia autem privari forma aeris, non est malum simpliciter, sed est malum aeris.<sup>10</sup>

The second sense of bad is what lacks something. And the third sense of bad is what causes a lack. Thus because blindness is bad, it is bad to be blind or to be a blind man. And because that is bad, we can also say that to blind someone is bad.

Toward the end of this Reading, Aristotle points out that, in some way, the first matter always remains under change although it is under different forms successively. The first matter is in some way incorruptible. In another way, the first mover will be shown in Eighth Book to be incorruptible. The changing ultimately depends upon something unchanging. Even the modern physicists base everything on the conservation laws.

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<sup>10</sup> *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Liber II, Capitulum V & VI