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Primary Matter

In I, 44, 2, St. Thomas addresses the question of whether primary matter is created by God. Aquinas shares with Aristotle the idea that material beings are a composite of matter and form. From this view comes the concept of primary matter, which is matter without form. Some pre-Christian philosophers saw the act of creation as the application of form to preexistent primary matter, and this is the view that Thomas is addressing.

Thomas begins his argument with the statement, “The ancient philosophers gradually, and as it were step by step, advanced to the knowledge of truth,” which states beautifully why Thomas can draw wisdom from pre-Christian thought without embracing everything these thinkers said. He goes on to show how the concept of primary matter began with thinkers who could only conceive of material beings, and they saw all change as the alteration of accidental qualities, supposing that all physical substance had always existed. They looked to various sources for the cause of these changes, but none of these sources were responsible for the existence of things. Out of this background arose the Aristotelian concept of form and matter that appears in the thought of Thomas. Aristotle still assumed that matter always existed, so when he looked for causality, he was only looking for the cause of movement or change.

In Thomas’ thought, God is not responsible only for movement, but for being. The being of a physical thing is not only its form, but also its matter. Therefore, the work of creation is responsible for both the form and the matter of things, so there is no need for preexistent primary matter.

Objection two is interesting because it argues for a symmetry in the order of being. Since God is pure act, or “the first active principle,” and then we have various things that are part act, and part potential, then there is a need for something that is pure potential, or “the first passive principle,” which is primary matter. Primary matter is pure potential because it can only receive form, and without form nothing is actualized, and it cannot act. Such a sentiment was expressed in my Philosophy of Being class last semester by a student that appeared to be coming from the point of view of Eastern dualism. Although people don’t talk about primary matter today, many do see the need of a principle of chaos which is the duality of God. Thomas’ arguments here can be applied to such dualistic views.

Thomas’ response (ad 2) is helpful because he shows that there can be no symmetry in this regard. Passion is an effect of action. Nothing receives an action unless something else initiates an action, so the first principle of action accounts for passion. Passion is not on the same level as action, and similarly potency is not on the same level as act, or evil on the same level as good. In these cases, the contrary is only an effect or privation of the positive quality, and does not require an originating principle of its own.