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BOOK REVIEWS

Aquinas's Ontology of the Material World: Change, Hylomorphism, and Material Objects, by Jeffrey E. Brower. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. Pp. xxii + 327. \$74.00 (hardback).

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In this book, Jeffrey Brower investigates Aquinas's view of the ultimate content and structure of the material world. He aims to reconstruct the essential elements of this view, to locate them in the wider context of Aquinas's thought, and to engage this reconstruction in contemporary metaphysical debates. The book has five parts: Part I sketches Aquinas's complete ontology; Part II analyses Aquinas's theory of change in general and of the two types of change, namely substantial and accidental change; Part III deals with hylomorphism, which is presented as a type of substratum theory (Thomistic substratum theory), and defends it against rival theories; Part IV spells out the precise connection between Aquinas's hylomorphism and his account of material objects; Part V, entitled "Complications," deals with topics like transubstantiation, Aquinas's view of the nature of human beings, and some problems with Aquinas's account of the afterlife. Each discussion leads to refinements, extensions and modifications of Aquinas's theory. Thus the reader is led on an exciting path through an ontology of material objects that becomes increasingly differentiated and sophisticated. In this review I cannot do justice to the richness and subtlety of Brower's explorations. I can only touch roughly on a few main topics and formulate a few remarks.

Any presentation of Aquinas's ontology must be a reconstruction, for Aquinas did not write a cohesive ontology or metaphysics. Brower's reconstruction tries to be faithful to textual evidence, has in view the bigger picture of Aquinas's thought more generally, and accepts the challenge of figuring out a coherent account of seemingly inconsistent passages. The reconstruction centers on hylomorphism, the view that material objects are compounds of matter and form. The question it addresses is: How does Aquinas understand the terms "matter," "form," and "compound"? Brower approaches hylomorphism from the perspective of Aquinas's



theory of change, focusing mainly on the text *De principiis naturae* and the first book of the *Sententia super Physicam*. Change requires the existence of something that is changed. According to Brower, matter is that which endures in change, while form is that with respect to which the matter is changed. Thus, he initially proposes a functionalist understanding of the terms “matter,” “form,” “composition,” and “inherence.” The terms “potency” and “actuality” are initially also seen as functional concepts that “provide us with an alternative way of describing the functional roles that Aquinas associates with matter and form” (67). One might think that such a functional reading indicates an antirealist understanding of the relevant items. But it does not. Brower defends a realist understanding of matter, form, and compound. For beings “of all three types are required . . . to explain the occurrence of any given change” (62). Since there are two types of change, accidental and substantial, one of the thorny questions that arises is: What exactly is the matter that endures in cases of substantial change? Brower says that the endurer is prime matter, and he ascribes to Aquinas four assumptions concerning it: prime matter is a type of being that (i) can be re-identified over time, (ii) can be compounded and divided, (iii) is infinitely divisible, and (iv) is atomless. According to Brower, prime matter is non-individual gunky stuff, that is, a kind of stuff the parts of which are all such as to have proper parts. This interpretation is, of course, highly contentious, and Brower tries to show that Aquinas’s characterization of prime matter as pure potentiality is compatible with it. According to Brower, Aquinas does not claim that prime matter lacks actuality in some way (namely via inherence), but only that it lacks actuality *through itself* (123). Another contentious doctrine that Brower associates with Aristotle and Aquinas is the doctrine of numerical sameness without identity. He introduces the doctrine first in the context of accidental change: distinct hylomorphic compounds such as the accidental unities *white-Socrates* and *intellectually-educated-Socrates* are distinct, but share a common parent substance. Or, a particular lump of bronze and a statue are the same material object but are distinct hylomorphic compounds. Later on, Brower engages the notion of numerical sameness without identity in order to show its potential to solve the so-called problem of material constitution (as it arises in such puzzles known as the Debtor’s Paradox, the Ship of Theseus, the Body-Minus Argument, the Statue and the Lump) and in order to define material objects. Accordingly, “to be a material object is to be *numerically the same as* a hylomorphic compound possessing prime matter—that is a material substance or a material unity” (222). The last three chapters of the book deal mainly with Aquinas’s anthropology. According to Brower, human beings are a very special sort of compound: a compound of prime matter, on the one hand, and a *sui generis* type of particular, namely a human soul that is capable of existing without being enmattered, on the other. He calls this view “Thomistic dualism.” The two substances comprising this dualist partnership are (i) the compound, namely a particular human being, say, Socrates; and (ii) an immaterial substance, in this case

Socrates's soul. Brower further develops the relationship between these two dualist components by considering a problem concerning the sort of existence a person has after death but before bodily resurrection. Some interpreters, called "cessationists," ascribe to Aquinas the view that Socrates ceases to exist when he dies and comes to existence again when his body is resurrected. Others, called "survivalists," think that, according to Aquinas, Socrates must survive his death. Brower shows the problems of both interpretations and makes a new suggestion: "insofar as Socrates retains his soul as a proper part, he can be said to survive his death as an individual substance of a rational nature, and hence as a person. The important point, however, is that insofar as Socrates's soul ceases to be united with any matter, Socrates himself cannot be said to survive his death as a human being" (292). In this interim-state Socrates is a human person that is naturally disposed to be a human being. This disposition will be actualized when Socrates's soul is united with matter. Then he will be an actual human being again.

So far I have briefly presented some of the book's main topics. Here are some critical remarks:

1. With respect to textual evidence, some texts that are used as evidence for some theses might not support them as clearly as Brower seems to intend. Two examples: First, Aquinas writes in *De ente et essentia*: "But the definition of natural substances contains not only form, but matter as well." Brower comments: "As Aquinas insists here, and reiterates elsewhere, the nature or essence of material substances must be said to include both matter (in the sense of prime matter) and form (in the sense of substantial form)" (201). However, in my view, Aquinas is speaking here not of prime matter. For according to Aquinas the definition of a human being would have to include flesh and bones—and if there were a definition of Socrates it would have to include *these* bones and *this* flesh. Second, Brower uses a passage of the *Commentary on the Metaphysics* as direct evidence for the doctrine of numerical sameness without identity: "those things are one in number whose matter is one. . . . Indeed, it is on account of matter that a singular thing (*singulare*) is both one in number and divided from other things" (In *Meta.* 5.8.876). Brower reads matter-sharing here as prime matter-sharing. However, the sentence which Brower leaves out of the quotation makes clear that Aquinas is not speaking about prime matter but about matter under determinate dimensions. He says: "For matter insofar as it is under determinate dimensions [*dimensionibus signatis*] is the principle of individuation of the form."

2. With respect to matter and form as metaphysical parts, Aquinas speaks sometimes of matter and form as metaphysical parts that constitute a compound. However, one can also find passages where he is reluctant in using such terminology. Aristotle thinks that such terms as "synthesis" or "composite of matter and form" can be misleading, claiming that "the proximate matter and the form are one and the same thing, the one actually, and the other potentially." Aquinas comments on this that "the

proximate matter, that is the one that is appropriated to the form, and the form itself are the same. For the one of the two is it as potency, the other as act" (In *Meta.* 8.5.1767). And in his *Sententia libri De anima* (2.1.234) he writes: "that matter is united to form is the same as matter is actualized." These passages suggest that Aquinas does not in fact consider matter and form to be real metaphysical parts.

3. With respect to prime matter as stuff that can be re-identified, there certainly are contexts that suggest that Aquinas is committed to such a view, especially contexts elucidating his account of formal substantial change, and also his view of the resurrection of bodies that are numerically identical with bodies that lived once and decayed. Such an identity would seem to presuppose that there are portions of prime matter that can be re-identified. On the other hand, in *De Principiis Naturae* he writes that prime matter "dicitur una numero in omnibus . . . Dicitur etiam aliquid unum numero, quia est sine dispositionibus quae faciunt differre secundum numerum"; i.e., that prime matter is numerically one in all means here that it "is without dispositions which make it differ in number." In my view, this passage excludes the thesis that there are portions of prime matter that can be re-identified over time. Aquinas is not saying that there are "distinct portions of prime matter" which have a kind of "intrinsic unity" (114), but rather that prime matter as a whole has this unity.

4. Brower illustrates ordinary substantial change with the example of the generation of a human being. Such change involves several compounds: one compound that is generated (a human being, such as Socrates), and other compounds that are corrupted (the sperm and the ovum). (For present purposes we may presuppose the correctness of this description.) The compounds sperm and ovum and the compound Socrates overlap with respect to their matter, which is, according to Brower, prime matter. But might Aquinas not be using "matter" in the sense of proximate matter, that is, formed matter that has the potential to take on a new substantial form? Surely, in this case there would be no endurer. But as Brower makes clear in his discussion of transubstantiation, substantial change does not necessarily involve an endurer that survives the actualization of a potentiality. "In order for the relevant sort of potentiality to get actualized, it is sufficient for there to be a substratum that *becomes* something else" (240). This conception of substantial change would be free of the contentious assumption of the existence of prime matter as re-identifiable stuff.

These critical remarks are not intended to give a devaluing impression. Brower's book is clearly and precisely written with well-articulated theses and definitions. Many helpful figures illustrate the text. A glossary of technical terms at the end is very handy for keeping track of the various senses in which Aquinas uses these terms. Brower has delivered a philosophical masterpiece of thoroughness and successful creative engagement with a classical author. It gives both Aquinas scholars and contemporary metaphysicians much "gunkless stuff" to think about for many hours.