

William of Ware
Teaching Philosophy and Theology in the 13th Century
between Thomas Aquinas and Duns Scotus.

Guglielmo di Ware
Insegnare filosofia e teologia nel XIII secolo
tra Tommaso d'Aquino e Duns Scoto.

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William of Ware and Duns Scotus on Prime Matter as a Positive Being

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William of Ware is an author to keep in high regard for the sake of the reconstruction of the historical-philosophical framework about the contemporaneity of Duns Scotus. Although we cannot yet be able to establish a precise temporal relationship between the two Franciscans, it is in fact highly reasonable to affirm that William of Ware can be considered among the personalities chronologically closest to Scotus.

Over the years, researches about Ware have been slowed down by the fog shrouding his manuscript tradition. [S] As it has been shown by many scholars, Ware's Commentary on the *Sentences* survives in an undefined number of versions, or redactions. With regard to the book 2, I have compared among them a certain number of manuscripts, identifying two different redactions, conventionally named here *Quaestiones* and *In Sententias*.

The differences between these two versions go further than just few textual variations, sporadic and attributable to the material transmission of the manuscripts; rather, they are genuine structural reworkings and textual readaptations, extended to the entire text of book II. The result of the comparison between the two versions of the Commentary is that they cannot be collated with each other, but each must be analyzed individually. Unfortunately, I don't have the time to show everything in detail here, but I can say that the 'Quaestiones' version is the one that seems to be way closer to the oral source of the text, given the high number of oral features it contains. The heavy usage of verbs that recall orality (*dicendum*, *loquendo*, etc.) and the frequent use of the first person suggest that this redaction is probably either some preparatory material for the lesson, written by Ware himself, or something very close to an original reportatio.

Let us now move on to more philosophical issues. My purpose today is twofold [S]: **first**, I will provide an analysis of William's treatment of prime matter as a positive and actual entity. In order to do this, I will take into consideration both redactions of d. 12, q. 4 entitled «whether prime matter in its own consideration is said to be some positive nature, namely some act». I am

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preparing an edition of this question for the proceedings of the conference, but in the process I've faced one of the most classical problems: which version is to be edited? Maybe it could be interesting to discuss this today too. Anyway, as for the so-called **In *Sententias*** version, my study is based on the manuscript Venezia, Marciana Lat. III 66 (2450), as I think it gives the best quality text. As for the **Quaestiones** version, the manuscript that proved to be the best one is Bologna, Archiginnasio A 913. As for the **second** and final point of today, I will propose a comparative analysis of some extracts of Ware's and Duns Scotus' textual productions, in order to show a very strong closeness between them. The purpose of this section is to show that regarding the topic of prime matter, there was internally to the Franciscan order – at least, until the arrival of Peter Aureol – a strong univocal Franciscan account, shared by many masters.

So, let's move on to the first point. **[S]** The core of Ware's position lies in an endorsement of the doctrine of Henry of Ghent. The concepts of actuality and positivity of matter, which we will shortly see, are conceived by Ware as an application to prime matter of Henry's doctrine of the 'esse essentie': «arguitur et ostenditur quod materia sit alia natura positiva in se, et quod sit actus accipiendo actum pro esse essentie, vel pro essentia positiva». What are therefore the characteristics of this *actus* meant as *esse essentie*? What is the actuality of prime matter understood in terms of positivity?

[S] Analyzing the concepts of act and potency, Ware points out a double internal division on the basis of three criteria: their perfection, their being manifest and their reality. Thus, there are two types of acts and two types of potencies with mutually opposing features. Let's consider now the two types of act. The first act (a1) is perfect and manifest, while the second (a2) is imperfect and unmanifest.

What is the first act then? Since perfection is provided to a compound by the form, as Ware himself says (I'm quoting from Quaestiones) «ipsa forma secundum se est perfectiva materie», only the form is said to be an act in this first way. The second act, on the contrary, is more inclusive, and covers also acts even not formally concluded, such as matter. As it lacks any form, this second act will be imperfect, «inquantum possibilis est ad ulteriorem perfectionem» and not manifest, since – as the right column says – matter is not «principium alicuius operationis directe».

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[S] Moving on to discuss potency, Ware makes use of a distinction which is rather important from a historiographical point of view, namely that between objective and subjective potency. These concepts, borrowed from Henry of Ghent, are also – as we shall see later – widely used by Duns Scotus in his treatment of prime matter in both his *Lectura* and *Reportationes Parisienses*. Adopting the same distinction of the previous passage on acts, also potency in a first sense (p1) is perfect, manifest and «realis», while in a second sense (p2) is imperfect, unmanifest and «rationalis magis». If we therefore assume potency meant in its first sense, matter is a *subjective* potency, in that it is inclined to the reception of the perfect and manifest act. Moving on to *objective* potency, Ware uses the concept of possibility to show how matter cannot be in potency in this second way, since it has already been created by God. In fact, if we speak of potency as (I quote) «potency of reason and not real», continues Ware, «so matter is not said to be in such a potency». So what can be considered a potency in this second sense, namely a mere entity of reason and not real? This is the case of the possible, namely what is *possibile creari*, which, insofar as is a mere thought, does not yet possess (I quote) «some positive entity external to the mind». The example given by Ware, which can only be found in the Quaestiones version, which we find in the right column, is that of the Antichrist. Such a being, as it is a creatable, is in potency to be created, and possesses the ontological degree of a 'possible', namely that of an entity (I quote) «of reason and not real».

It might be interesting to note - though we don't have enough time to do so adequately here - the relationship between the two versions of the text. While the text of the Quaestiones is long, explanatory, and full of examples that would be fitting for a teaching activity, the text on the right condenses the entire explanation of what each of the two potencies is in just two words: *obiectiva* and *subiectiva*.

[S]

In the light of what has been said, let's take a look to this sketch of the elements so far arranged by Ware:

By representing graphically all the shades of acts and potencies introduced by Ware we obtain the scale that we see, which goes from what is more actual (on the left) to what is more potential (on the right). Between what is properly in act (form) and what is properly in potency (the possible

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entities) there is some kind of grey zone designating something that from a certain perspective – that of the objective potency – is said to be in act, while from another perspective – that of the formal act – is said to be in potency: it is precisely in this ontological grey zone that we find prime matter according to Ware. In order to go deeper into what he means exactly by calling matter sometimes act and sometimes potency, let us finally see what does Ware himself say about the combinations among these acts and potencies.

At this point, [S] Ware cannot avoid asking: is matter in act or in potency? Although there are no significative differences in their content, the Quaestiones version is once again longer and more discursive (I quote) «If one asks whether matter is act or potency» begins Ware «referring to the terminating act, namely the formal act, and to the manifest and perfect potency, I say that matter is not such act, but is in potency to such act». The reasoning is well argued: «Because, since matter moves towards the formal act, then in itself it has no formal act, since nothing moves towards what it already has. And moreover, since it moves towards that act, it is in potency to that act, and it can receive it, since the motion, that is the change, is the act of the entities in potency». And so, concludes Ware, «it follows that matter is not such a terminative and manifest act, but that it is such manifest and perfect potency».

[S] Let us now reverse perspective: (I quote) «If, on the other hand, one asks about the indeterminate act and about potency of reason and not real», so, Ware continues, «I say that matter is such an act in itself». Once again, the Quaestiones version helps to clarify why it is excluded that matter is such a potency 'of reason' and 'not real'. Since, as we have seen, matter is a created («producta») entity, it has *already* ended the action of the creative agent, and is not something that *could* end it. The example is again that of the Antichrist, which, as a creatable (namely a possible with respect to creation) has *not yet* terminate a creative action, but *could* terminate it. And in this sense, it is a possible entity.

[S] So let's get back to our question: is matter actual or potential? All the answers that Ware has given us so far, could be condensed into the following sketch: the answer to our question depends on the point of view we choose. If we compare the formal act with the potency that Ware calls 'receptive', then matter is not actuality, but potential. If instead by act we mean 'actuality' in a broad sense and by potency the status of a possible entity, then matter is certainly in act. [S]

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In his conclusion Ware is crystal clear (I quote) «do not rise a controversy about the names!» he says, in fact «if we call act everything that is a *positive entity*, external to the mind, thus matter is act». If instead «we call act only the formal and terminating act, then matter is not act, but potency». All that being said, «I believe (*credo*)», concludes Ware «it is better if you simply call prime matter act rather than potency».

Let's do a little recap before moving on to the next point [S] Ware' account of prime matter's ontology revolves around the following key points: given I) two senses to mean 'being in potency' for something, and as many to say 'being actual', then II) prime matter is said to be both in act and in potency in two distinct and qualified ways. Eventually, the core concept of Ware's theory is III) that matter is a positive entity, namely something actual in the broadest and most inclusive sense of such notion.

Now, as is well known and unanimously recognized by the scholarly literature, Scotus' account of prime matter's ontology, mainly contained in *Lectura II.12*, revolves around these same three key points. Let's take a quick look at some tables comparing the texts of the two authors: [S]

I) *duplex potentia*: In the present table we can see how both Franciscans develop in their Commentaries, a genuine restoration of Aristotle's 'classical' concept of potency, covering entities existing in a not fully determined way. As we have just seen, matter is said to be in potency in a qualified way, *subjective*, as both Scotus and Ware say: subjective potency - they both add - is proper to something that is inclined to receive the act of a substantial form. [S] On the contrary, they add, matter is not potential to be created *tout-court*, as would be an entity that does not yet exist, such as the Antichrist. As we have seen, this is the case of the possibles, entities that *could* exist in the future, and are therefore in objective potency. [S]

II) So, is matter actual or potential? According to both Franciscans, one should not rise a dispute about these names. If, on the one hand we consider in act everything that is created (*extra causam suam*) and, on the other hand, in potency something that has not yet ended a creative action, then matter is an actual being. In this regard, it is interesting to note how the two texts are very similar right down to the details: in fact, both Franciscans adopt the example of the Antichrist

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to indicate a possible entity that has not yet been created. Furthermore, for both Scotus and Ware, as we see, «the simple positivity of being» is a concept included between the actuality of being the term of the divine creative action and the potentiality of being receptive of further acts. Matter could therefore be considered as both actual and potential: actual inasmuch as it is established externally to its cause, and potential inasmuch as it is not a formally complete act. [S]

III) As said, both Franciscans make extensive use of the attribute 'positivum'. This table collects all the occurrences in their respective questions. Unfortunately, we do not have room here to see each occurrence in detail, but the use that both authors make of this definition is the same: it is employed to indicate the actuality of something that simply 'exists outside of its cause'. A created entity that is said to be in act insofar as it exists, even though 'nothing less can be made'.

In conclusion and briefly: as mentioned, only an analytical comparative study between Ware and Scotus could reveal clues regarding the precedence - and thus the influence - of one of the two authors over the other. Despite this, it is interesting to record once again how the late medieval period - and in particular the Franciscan order in the years between the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries - was an age of strong doctrinal influences. The authors active during these decades certainly cannot be regarded as single and circumscribed chapters of the great book of the history of philosophy. As we have observed, the case of the relationship between William of Ware and Duns Scotus does not represent an exception: regardless of which of the two authors is chronologically precedent, their doctrines are close enough to make the idea of a philosophical 'Franciscan school' – in which even Scotus is obviously included – that should probably be studied in a panoramic and enlarged perspective. [S] To this purpose, in order to unearth authors, doctrines and texts, it is therefore desirable today more than ever the proliferation of editions and critical studies to be made available to research.