Chapter 4

SUBSTANCE AND ARTIFACT IN AQUINAS’S METAPHYSICS

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The concept of a substance is fundamental to ancient and medieval metaphysics, but it is not so easy to understand what this notion comes to. It is sometimes taken to be the concept of a thing which can exist on its own, apart from other things. But that this interpretation of the concept cannot be right can readily be seen by reflecting on the fact that substances are typically distinguished from artifacts. It certainly seems as if an artifact such as an ax can exist on its own apart from other things, at least as much as a flower; and yet a flower is a substance, and an ax is not. In this paper, I explore Aquinas’s account of the nature of a substance by looking at it in the context of his general metaphysics and by focusing on the way in which he attempts to distinguish substances from artifacts. I begin by exploring his fundamental understanding of the nature of a material thing, and I conclude by considering what Aquinas’s account of substance commits him to as regards the relation of a composite to its components.1

1. MATTER AND FORM

Aquinas thinks that any macro-level material thing is matter organized or configured in some way, where the organization or configuration is dynamic rather than static. That is, the organization of the matter includes causal relations among the material components of the thing as well as such static features as shape and spatial location. This dynamic configuration or

T. M. Crisp, M. Davidson and D. Vander Laan (eds.), Knowledge and Reality, 63-79.
organization is what Aquinas calls ‘form’. A thing has the properties it has, including its causal powers, in virtue of having the configuration it does; the proper operations and functions of a thing derive from its form.

Like many contemporary philosophers, Aquinas also recognizes levels of organization. What counts as matter for a macro-level object may itself be organized or configured in a certain way; that is, it may be possible to decompose the matter of a thing into material and formal components. For Aquinas, the lowest-level material component which counts as matter organized in a certain way is an element. An element is composed of matter and form; but if we conceptually strip away the form or configuration of an element, the matter that remains is not itself a matter-form composite. All that remains when an element is conceptually stripped of its form is prime matter, that is, matter which cannot itself be decomposed further into matter and form.

Prime matter is thus matter without any organization at all, “materiality” (as it were) apart from configuration. When it is a component in a matter-form composite, prime matter is the component of the configured composite which makes it the case that the configured thing can be extended in three dimensions and can occupy a particular place at a particular time. But by itself, apart from form, prime matter exists just potentially; it exists in actuality only as an ingredient in something configured. So we can remove form from prime matter only in thought; everything which exists in reality is configured in some way. For this reason, Aquinas sometimes says that form is the actuality of anything. Configuration or organization is necessary for the existence of anything at all; without form, nothing is actual. Consequently, although matter is not necessary for the existence of a thing, on Aquinas’s view, form is. For Aquinas, to be is to be configured.

2. **SUBSTANTIAL AND ACCIDENTAL FORMS**

Aquinas takes it that the forms of material objects can be divided into two sorts, substantial forms (that is, the substantial forms of the things that are primary substances) and accidental forms. For present purposes we can understand his distinction between these two sorts of forms roughly in this way. The difference between the substantial and the accidental forms of material objects is a function of three things: (1) what the form organizes or configures; (2) what the configuration effects; and (3) what kind of change is produced by the advent of the configuration.

(1) A substantial form of a material thing configures prime matter. An accidental form, on the other hand, configures something which is an actually existing complete thing, a matter-form composite. Or to put the