

PRIME MATTER AND BARRINGTON JONES

William Brenner

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Abstract:

In Philosophical Review, October 1974, Professor Jones argues that Aristotle's concept of matter is that of any individual item, such as a piece of bronze or a seed, with which a process of coming into existence begins, and which is prior (in a purely temporal sense) to the product which comes to exist. Aristotle does not try to prove the existence of some sort of "super-stuff" called "prime matter."

I argue that Jones' account does not do full justice to Aristotle's analysis of change, or to the traditional notion of prime matter based on it. I criticize Jones' arguments and draw attention to a passage in which Aristotle says that matter comes to be and ceases to be in one sense, while in another it does not. "Matter" in the first sense refers to the determinate individual, the first term of a change; in the second sense it is the "stuff" which remains after a substantial change, the "prime matter."

## Prime Matter and Barrington Jones

Professor Jones has argued recently<sup>1</sup> that Aristotle's concept of matter is that of any individual item, such as a piece of bronze or a seed, with which a process of coming into existence beings, and which is prior, in a purely temporal sense, to the product which comes to exist. Aristotle does not try to prove the existence of "some new ingredient of the world," of "some sort of super-stuff called prime matter."

I shall argue that Jones' account, interesting and scholarly though it is, does not do full justice to Aristotle's analysis of change, or to the traditional notion of prime matter based on it. Aristotle did not, indeed, try to prove the existence of prime matter if "prime matter" is taken to refer to a kind of sub-microscopic element--a simple species of substance more fundamental than the "elements" of Democritus or Empedocles. But there is good reason to think that Aristotle tried to show that there is prime matter in the sense of an intrinsic principle of material substance which, while not itself a kind of thing or substance, is the enduring subject in a substantial or unqualified change.

To begin my support of these points and of their basis in Aristotle I will quote and comment upon two passages, the first from the Metaphysics, the second from the Physics.<sup>2</sup>

By matter I mean that which in itself is neither a particular thing nor of<sup>3</sup> a certain quantity nor assigned to any other of the

<sup>1</sup>"Aristotle's Introduction of Matter," Philosophical Review, LXXXIII (1974), pp. 474-500.

<sup>2</sup>The Oxford translations edited by W.D. Ross are used unless otherwise noted. The translation of the Metaphysics is by Ross; of the Physics by R.P. Hardie and R.K. Gaye.

<sup>3</sup>The Greek text does not justify the inclusion of this "of" in the Hardie-Gaye translation.

categories by which being is determined. For there is something of which each of these is predicated, whose being is different from that of each of the predicates (for the predicates other than substance are predicated of substance, while substance is predicated of matter). Therefore the ultimate substratum is of ~~atseif~~ neither a particular thing nor of a particular quantity nor otherwise positively characterized; nor yet is it the negation of these, for negations also will belong to it only by accident. (1029 a 20-26)

This passage supports the point that, for Aristotle, "the ultimate substratum" is not a substance, a particular thing. The ultimate substratum or matter referred to in this passage is what Aristotelians have traditionally called prime matter. And I take it that this notion was first developed in Book One of the Physics.

In the Physics Aristotle investigates the principles of natural things subject to change. Near the end of Book One he says that, while agreeing with the Platonists that there is a divine, good, and desirable principle (form), he holds two other principles as well, "the one [privation] contrary to it, the other [matter] such as of its own nature to desire and yearn for it." He continues:

. . . the consequence of their view is that the contrary desires its own extinction. Yet the form cannot desire itself, for it is not defective; nor can the contrary desire it, for contraries are mutually destructive. The truth is that what desires the form is matter . . .

The matter comes to be and ceases to be in one sense, while in another it does not. As that which contains the privation, it ceases to be in its own nature, for what ceases to be--the privation--is contained within it. But as potentiality it does not cease to be in its own nature, but is necessarily outside the sphere of becoming and ceasing to be. For if it came to be, something must have existed as a primary substratum from which it should come and which should persist in it; but this is

its own special nature, so that it will be before coming to be. (For my definition of matter is just this--the primary substratum of each thing, from which it comes to be without qualification, and which persists in the result.) And if it ceases to be it will pass into that at the last, so it will have ceased to be before ceasing to be. (192 a 19-34)

This passage clearly supports the point that matter and form are complementary principles of things subject to change. And, at least in the translation quoted here, it clearly supports the point that matter ("in one sense") persists through change. However, Jones gives his own, significantly different translation of Aristotle's "definition of matter": "I mean by matter the first thing which underlies for each thing, from which something comes to be and which inheres not co-incidentally" (p. 497). Now I believe that both Jones' translation and the translation which I have quoted are admissible renderings of the Greek text.<sup>4</sup> Hence I will grant that the definition of matter contained in it does not by itself clearly support my point that matter persists in the result of a substantial change. Nevertheless I will have occasion to refer to the passage again shortly.

Let us now examine some specific points of Jones' argument.

On page 493 he says: "The product is not made from the matter, or made from a type of stuff; the product comes to be 'from' the matter solely in that the matter is something that existed before the product." In fact Aristotle speaks of matter in a ~~way~~ at odds with Jones' claim: "For the letters are the cause of syllables, and the material is the cause of manufactured things, and fire and earth and all such things are the causes of bodies, . . . in the sense that they are that out of which these respectively are made . . ." (Met. 1013 b 17-22, my emphases).

On page 488 he states that "matter is precisely what does not remain." But, in the passage from the Physics quoted earlier, Aristotle says that, although matter in one sense ceases to be, in another sense it does not cease to be but remains. Aristotle, I think, is referring here to

<sup>4</sup> λέγω γὰρ ὕλην τὸ πρῶτον ὑποκείμενον ἐκάστῳ, ἐξ οὗ γίνεται τὸ ἐνυπαρχούτου μὴ κατὰ συμβεβηκός

change in general, accidental as well as substantial. But Jones wants to deny that matter remains in the case of a complete or substantial change. He is lead to this position by his analysis of Aristotle's example of the piece of bronze which becomes a brazen sphere, an example which he seems to take as an instance of complete or substantial change. The matter, he argues, is a hunk of bronze; but clearly this does not remain after the change, since it has been transformed. The stuff bronze remains. But "matter" cannot, for Aristotle, refer to bronze, or to any other kind of stuff. For Aristotle explicitly says that matter is "enumerably one thing," which implies that it is discriminable into individual instances. But "matter cannot be any kind of stuff, since stuffs as such are not discriminable into individual instances" (p. 493). Now Jones puts much weight on the passages where Aristotle speaks of matter as arithmō hen ("enumerably one" or "numerically one"). But I want to draw attention to the passage from Physics A, referred to earlier, where Aristotle points out that matter comes to be and ceases to be in one sense, while in another it does not. I want to say that matter in the first sense refers to the discriminable individual which is the first term of the change, such as a certain piece of brass, and that matter in the second sense is the "stuff" which remains, such as brass. The unworked brass loses its privation, its unshapeliness, but brass remains--as something in potency to many different shapes. In a change of natural substance (as contrasted with an artificial change), something lacking a certain substantial form loses that privation, thereby changing into a different kind of substance. Matter in the sense of that which actually contained the privation ceased to exist in its own nature. But, as a potentiality of receiving forms, matter did not cease to exist. The being of a substance is not identical to its present actuality or form; it has another principle, matter, which is a potentiality to an indefinite number of substantial forms. This primary matter was present in the original substance and persists in the one generated out of it.

On page 499 of his article Jones claims that Aristotle explicitly denies that the matter can remain in a "complete" or substantial change. He cites the following passage from De Generatione (his translation): ". . . there is alteration when, while the underlying thing remains, being perceptible, there is a change in affections. . . . But when the whole thing changes, without there remaining any perceptible thing as the same underlying thing . . . such is coming to be" (319 b 6-18).

Jones comments, correctly, that "a perceptible thing" is probably equivalent to "a substantial individual" in this passage. But, granted that no substantial individual remains, it does not follow that matter does not remain--unless one adds the premise that matter is always a substantial individual. But, as I have argued, prime matter is not a substantial individual. In any case, the passage which Jones puts forward certainly does not unambiguously support the claim that, for Aristotle, matter does not remain after a complete change.

It seems that something must persist in every change, even in a complete or substantial change. Were there no factor in the acorn that remained after its change into an oak, Aristotle (at least) would not want to say that the oak was (in part) made out of the acorn, and not merely substituted for it. But how is such a "factor" to be described? This, I take it, is one of the problems Aristotle struggles with in Book One of the Physics. And his solution to it, I maintain, involves the introduction of prime matter: Prime matter is the ultimate substratum that provides an enduring subject in a substantial change. The acorn does not just cease to be of a certain quality, or in a certain relation; it ceases to be "without qualification." And yet it remains in a sense; it remains not qua acorn but qua material--as a subject formable in many ways, in potency to many substantial forms. Before the change the substantial form of acorn was predicated of that material or subject; after the change the substantial form of oak was predicated of that subject. That enduring subject is matter. "For the predicates other than substance are predicated of substance, while substance is predicated matter" (1029 a 23). For example, "warm" or "cold" is predicated of acorn or oak but "acorn" or "oak" is predicated of that matter. Because the matter in question is the ultimate or first subject of a material substance, it has been called prime matter.

The notion of prime matter is admittedly difficult to grasp. (Jones thinks that it is not merely difficult but unintelligible.) If one is to know about this "subject of unqualified change" it must be through a comparison or analogy with the subjects of qualified changes. A helpful account of this knowledge by analogy is given by Ralph M. McInerny:

The flower comes to be on condition that the seed ceases to be and yet it is to seed that the change is attributed in "The seed becomes a plant." This suggests what has already been

said about the qualified change, "Man becomes musical." St. Thomas says, accordingly, that it is by a comparison or analogy with other changes that we come to know the subject of absolute or unqualified becoming. For just as shape is other than the wood and musical is other than man, so it would seem that when one substantial unit is said to come from another, there is a subject which is other than that determination whereby we denominate the substantial units seed and plant. Now the wood can be known through its natural properties without appeal to the shapes imposed upon it by man; Socrates can be known as to what he is, and his definition will not include musical. But if the subject of absolute becoming is something other than substantial determinations, it cannot be known in itself. It must be known, if it is to be known, by means of something other than itself, by an analogy or comparison with something else.<sup>5</sup>

As McInerny points out, we do attribute the change to the seed when we say that the seed becomes a plant, even though the seed is not a permanent subject and is there only beforehand. Does this case prove Jones' thesis that, in a complete or substantial change, the matter is not permanent? No, for we may deny (in harmony with Metaphysics 1029 a 20-26) that the seed is the ultimate subject or primary matter of the change. "The seed becomes a plant" resembles grammatically "The man becomes musical"; so we tend to think that, as the man is the subject of the second change, so the seed is subject of the first. But, since the seed does not persist through the change, we infer that there must be a more basic subject of the change. And we are led to believe that a permanent subject is involved in the change from seed to plant by comparison or analogy with other changes, changes in which the subjects are sensibly perceptible and thus "better known to us."<sup>6</sup>

William Brenner  
Department of Philosophy  
Old Dominion University  
Norfolk, Virginia 23508

<sup>5</sup>The Logic of Analogy (The Hague, 1961), pp. 143-144.

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