

**FROM ANAXAGORAS TO ALBERT THE GREAT:  
THE LATENCY OF FORMS AND THE ACTIVE POWER OF MATTER  
IN THE MIDDLE AGES**

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**Abstract:** This study explores the doctrine of the latency of forms in the Middle Ages, with a particular focus on Albert the Great's elaboration through his theory of *inchoatio formarum*. The doctrine, whose origins date back to Anaxagoras and was further developed in the Arabic philosophical tradition, posits that matter contains all the manifest qualities of substances, though in a latent form. Albert reworks this doctrine, correcting the immanentist and paradoxical implications attributed to Anaxagoras' error, and proposes an interpretation in which matter, while potentially active, receives the perfection of forms from an external causal principle. The study highlights how Albert's *inchoatio formarum* provides a response to the doctrine of the latency of forms and fits into the broader medieval debate on the relationship between matter and forms, both in philosophical and theological contexts. The discussion also examines the commentators of Peter Lombard's *Sentences* and the connection with Augustine's doctrine of *rationes seminales*. Lastly, Albert's contribution to the debate on Augustine's *rationes seminales* and his interaction with the Thomist tradition and other 15<sup>th</sup>-century authors are analyzed.

**Keywords:** latency of forms; *inchoatio formarum*; Albert the Great; *rationes seminales*; Anaxagoras, hylomorphism; active matter.

It is on the basis of evidence in the writings of John Versor, a French Dominican, rector at the University of Paris in 1458 and who died in 1485, that Rutten identifies, in a 2005 article published in *Vivarium* different conception of matter as one of the main points of the disagreement between Albertists and

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Thomists: the Albertists are said to support an understanding of matter as an active potency, the Thomists as a purely passive potency.<sup>1</sup> The results of Rutten's research confirm Albert's and Thomas's divergent understanding of matter, which Nardi in polemic with Father Busnelli had already emphasised in the late 1930s and which has been further highlighted by a rich tradition of studies to which Anna Rodolfi's more recent research belongs.<sup>2</sup> At the core of the debate on the different conception of matter, whether it is a somehow active power or a purely passive power, is the Albertian doctrine of *inchoatio formarum*, rejected by Thomas and the Thomists. It has, as we shall see, a relation to that of the latency of forms to which the present study is dedicated.

Ascribed to Anaxagoras and elaborated in the Arabic philosophical and theological tradition, from the 13<sup>th</sup> century onwards it is found in the philosophical and theological texts of the Latin Middle Ages, under the name of 'latentia formarum', 'latitatio formarum' or 'occultatio formarum'. According to this doctrine, which is generally criticised, the substratum of any transformation (matter, in fact) would possess in act, albeit hidden, all the qualities progressively shown by each substance. Whereas the term 'form' obviously belongs to the Aristotelian lexicon, the term 'latentia' (*latentia, latitatio, occultatio*) is absent from Aristotle's writings. Rather, it is a translation of the Arabic term 'al-kumun', first attested in a positive meaning in the works of Ibrahim al Nazzam (775–845) and later taken up by Avicenna and Averroes in their commentaries on Aristotle's works.<sup>3</sup>

Averroes's commentary on the *Physica* and *De caelo et mundo* and Avicenna's commentary on the book *De generatione et corruptione* are therefore

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1 RUTTEN 2005.

2 Cf. NARDI 1960; RODOLFI 2004.

3 Cf. VAN ESS 1986. I thank Giulio Navarra for the bibliographical reference.

some of the possible vehicles of transmission of the doctrine<sup>4</sup>. In the Latin Middle Ages, the doctrine, widely designated as the error of Anaxagoras, is documented in two main fields of discussion, which, as we shall see, are not disjointed: the philosophical field, on the one hand, and in particular the commentaries on the works of Aristotle, and the theological field, on the other, in particular the commentaries on the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard.

As Nardi had already pointed out, authors such as Robert Grosseteste, Bonaventure, Albert the Great, Thomas Aquinas, Giles of Rome had been involved in the discussion of the possible presence of hidden forms into matter. Such a discussions went on in the 15<sup>th</sup> century up to authors such as, for examples, as Rutten's study had shown, Eimeric of Campo, Johannes de Nova Domo and Joannes Versor.<sup>5</sup>

## 1. Origin of the Doctrine

To understand the significance of this doctrine for medieval authors, it is first appropriate to consider the Aristotelian questions within which it arose.

In the first book of the *Physica* Aristotle examines the question of the first principles of motion. He criticises the monism of Parmenides as well as, implicitly, that of Thales, Anaximenes, Anaximander and Heraclitus: more principles are required to explain the origin of motion.<sup>6</sup> Better therefore are the assumptions of the pluralist physicists, Anaxagoras, Empedocles, Democritus: on the one hand there is a substratum that supports change, on the other hand there is an active cause of change itself.<sup>7</sup>

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4 Cf. AVICENNA LATINUS 1987, 19,1-10; AVERROES 1562, I, comm. 32, 21va.

5 Cf. NARDI 1960.

6 Cf. ARISTOTELES, *Physica* I, 189a11-189b31.

7 Cf. ARISTOTELES, *Physica* I, 187a12-188a19.

Among the theories of the pluralists, of particular interest to Aristotle is Anaxagoras's explanation: nothing comes from nothing. The substratum that sustains change is a homogeneous, continuous, infinitely divisible matter; the active cause of change is the *nous*, an intellect capable of introducing order into matter, continuously aggregating and disaggregating its homeomeric tissue, which, in response, manifests different and even contrary qualities from within itself.<sup>8</sup>

'Qualities' or 'forms' that, as Avicenna emphasises in his commentary on *De generatione et corruptione* and Averroes stresses in his commentaries on the *Physica*, are therefore hidden in matter.<sup>9</sup> Anaxagoras is the theorist of the doctrine of the hiddenness of forms, which in Arabic terms, already attested in Mutzaelite theology, is the doctrine of *kumun*, and which is translated into Latin as *latentia*, *latitatio* or *occultatio formarum*.<sup>10</sup> This is an error, the error of Anaxagoras, established by the judgments of Aristotle, ratified by the criticism of the Arabic commentators and subsequently confirmed by the stigma of the Latin commentators.

## **2. The Error of Anaxagoras: Homogeneity of Matter and Latency of Forms in Aristotelian Philosophy**

Anaxagoras's intuition, for Aristotle, is fundamentally correct: we have a material substratum that is continually disposed to accept the transformations introduced by an intellectual principle that orders it. At first sight, the doctrine is not dissimilar to Aristotle's: matter is subject to the ordering action of form. Yet Aristotle identifies a fundamental characteristic in the Anaxagorean conception of matter, which invalidates his theory as a whole. For Anaxagoras

8 Cf. ARISTOTELES, *Physica* I, 187a12–188a19.

9 Cf. above reference n. 4.

10 Cf. above reference n. 3.

matter is homogeneous: infinitely divisible, it represents everywhere the same qualities. Anaxagoras maintains that different forms are the result of quantitatively different aggregations of homogeneous qualities, but does not explain how and why quantitatively distinct aggregates result.<sup>11</sup> What Anaxagoras claims to explain is for Aristotle nothing more than a starting point, almost an axiom. Aristotle, in other words, works from the observation that only individual substances do exist in nature.<sup>12</sup> Substances move and it is the laws that explain their movement that the physicist has to describe. The matter of each substance exhibits forms proper to it. It is transformed by the intervention of an extrinsic efficient cause that alters it, giving it the only forms it can assume by virtue of its specific nature. Still within the limits of its specific nature, it is certainly capable of acquiring, one after another, the contrary *forms* that pertain to it. It does not, however, manifest them from within itself, because matter, understood preferably according to Empedocles' doctrine, has only a determined number of principles, that is, it does not have everything in itself, exactly because it is not at all homogeneous.<sup>13</sup>

In his commentary on the *Physica*, Averroes confronts the Anaxagorean doctrine of matter and re-proposes it, clarifying an aspect that lies beneath Aristotle's criticism of it: the notion of the homogeneity of matter, in which everything is in everything, implying the notion of *kumum*. Matter is homogeneous if, infinitely divisible, it manifests the same qualities everywhere, hidden but always in action within itself. Anaxagoras's error of homogeneous matter is translated then – in even more Aristotelian terms than those used by Aristotle himself – into the error of a bad hylomorphism: understanding matter as perfectly actualised by forms means conceiving the intellectual prin-

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11 Cf. ARISTOTELES, *Physica* I 187a12–188a19.

12 Cf. ARISTOTELES, *Metaphysica* VII 1028a21–1028b7; 1038b–1039a23.

13 Cf. ARISTOTELES, *Physica* I 188a13–188a19.

principle that structures and organises it as immanent, simply taking them from the state of latency to the state of manifestation.<sup>14</sup>

In the writings of Albert the Great, who discusses the doctrine within his commentaries on the *corpus Aristotelicum*, the error of Anaxagoras is the error of a tradition that is Socratic, Platonic, and is at the bottom of the deviation from Aristotelianism carried out by Theophrastus. It is accepted by the later Stoic philosophical tradition and finally finds its most recent representative in Avicbron, the author of the *Fons vitae*, who, in his commentary on the *Physica*, Albert explicitly designates as a ‘Stoic’ and who, again according to Albert, is responsible for spreading the worst errors and sophisms in contemporary culture.<sup>15</sup> Three passages from Albert’s commentaries on the *Analytica posteriora*, the *Physica* and Aristotle’s *De anima* confirm this hypothesis.

In his commentary on the *Analytica posteriora*, Albert explicitly ascribes the error of the latency of forms to Anaxagoras. According to his theory, forms are actually present in matter, albeit they are latent: this is a theory of physics that claims to explain motion as the passage of forms “de occulto ad apertum,”<sup>16</sup> evidently misunderstanding – as he explains more extensively in

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14 Cf. AVERROES 1562, I, comm. 32, 21va: “Sed dicunt quod contraria et universaliter omnia diversarum specierum et formarum sunt existentia in actu in illo uno principio secundum latentiam et generatio nihil aliud est quam exitus illarum rerum latentium ex illo uno: ut dixit Anaximander naturalis. Dicendum quomodo conveniunt quidam eorum, qui dicunt principia esse plura uno cum sistit in hac opinione, scilicet in hoc, quod generatio ex principiis est secundum dissolutionem et exitum et dixit. Et similiter illi, qui dicunt, etc. Talem opinionem de modis generationis opinantur illi, qui dicunt quod principium est unum, et qui dicunt principia esse plura, ut Anaxagoras et Empedocles. Isti enim attribuunt generationem rerum exitui earum a mixto.”

15 Cf. ALBERTUS MAGNUS 1987, III 3 11, 59,8–16: “Et nos quidem hic non habemus loqui de his, sed in scientia divina, nisi pro tanto, quod dicit omnium esse materiam unam. Huic enim non omnes concordaverunt Peripatetici, et ipse Avicbron magis videtur fuisse Stoicus, virtutes ponens incorporeas in nullo existentes corpore, quam Peripateticus. Et ideo volumus ponere sententiam Peripateticorum, quam putamus fuisse Aristotelis, et ostendere, in quo deviavit ab eis Avicbron,” on this passage see BRAY 2018.

16 Cf. ALBERTUS MAGNUS 1890, I 1 5, 15b–18; 18a: “Hic autem ut perfectior sit doctrina, interponenda est dubitatio Mennonis et solvenda, quamvis hoc ad metaphysicum pertine-

his commentary on the *Physica* – the processes of alteration and generation.<sup>17</sup> The error lies at the basis of the Platonic theory of reminiscence, explains Albert, explicitly quoting Plato's *Menon*, a book he does not know at first hand but about which he is aware because it is Aristotle himself who quotes it in the prologue to the *Analytica posteriora*:<sup>18</sup> according to this doctrine, knowledge consists in reminiscence which, again, is nothing other than a passage from latency to the manifestation of intellectual and moral truths, which are innate, that is, actually present in the human intellect. The theory of Platonic reminiscence is consistent with the conception of the intellect established by

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re magis videatur. Scias ergo quod dubitatio Mennonis super antiquissimam Anaxagorae opinionem de latentia formarum fundata est, qui dicebat omnes formas per motum accipiendas, iam intus esse in quolibet accipiente eas, sed latere et non apparere, et per motum non nisi depurari materiam ut appareat quod intus latebat.”

17 Cf. ALBERTUS MAGNUS 1987, I 2 12, 33,78–34,5: “Fuit autem positio Anaxagorae, quod similia in partibus, quae dicuntur homogenia, sint principia prima, quia ipse dicebat haec priora esse elementis, propter id quod videbat, quod materia secundum sui substantiam separata est a contrariis. Similia minus habent de contrarietate quam elementa, et ideo dicebat partes homogenias compositorum esse principia materialia elementorum. Et ponebat, quod omnia sunt in omnibus actu, sed latent, et ideo dixit, quod caro est in ligno et e converso. Latet autem, quod minorum est partium, in eo quod est partium maiorum, et ideo iste non dixit principia materialia esse quattuor sicut Empedocles, sed potius infinita per numerum, et quolibet principiorum esse in quolibet et quodlibet fieri ex quolibet, ex quo sequitur quodlibet esse principium ad alterum et principiatum ab illo et generationem dixit alterationem.”

18 Cf. ALBERTUS MAGNUS 1890, I 1 5, 16 a: “Mennon autem Mennonis media producta, ut Graeci pronuntiant, fuit quidam Platonis et Socratis discipulus, ad quem per modum epistolae scripsit responsionem factam ad quaestionem Mennonis, quae fuit, virtutes intellectuales sicut est sapientia, scientia, intellectus, prudentia, et ars: et virtutes morales, fortitudo, temperantia et iustitia: utrum essent bonum assuescibile, vel discibile, vel a diis datum per conversionem animae ad seipsam et ad ea quae habuit a saeculis aeternis, in quibus fuit (ut Socrates et Plato dixerunt) intra seipsam. Et consentiunt in hoc Plato et Socrates multique alii, Boetius, et Augustinus, et etiam ut videtur, Gregorius Nyssenus, quod virtus sit nec assuescibile bonum, nec discibile, sed a Deo vel diis datum per conversionem animae ad seipsam: quod vocant intellectum adeptum. Sic enim discere non esset nisi immemores recordari vel reminisci: et hoc quidem accidit si concedatur ante conceptam conclusionem eam praesciri simpliciter: quia quod scitur simpliciter, non semper actualiter consideratur: et tunc recordatur actu cum ex eo quod prius apud se habuit ad considerationem rei convertitur, et hoc esset scire quod est prioris quod apud se habuit recordari. Aut enim secundum hoc nihil discit aliquis: aut omnis qui discit, discet ea quae prius novit simpliciter.”

Theophrastus, Albert continues, who departed from the correct understanding of the peripatetic doctrine, denying the existence of a possible intellect *ante actum* and in fact, again, reintroducing the presuppositions of Platonic innatism.<sup>19</sup> It is this entire tradition, Albert again suggests, that underlies the Stoic idea of perfect reason, as the origin of all moral and intellectual forms.<sup>20</sup>

In the commentary on the *De anima*, the theoretical framework offered in the commentary on the *Analytica posteriora* is confirmed: Albert again refers to the doctrine of reminiscence exposed in the *Menon*, reaffirms the coherence between the Platonic and Stoic conceptions of the intellect, and again refers to the Anaxagorean doctrine of the latency of forms.<sup>21</sup> The errors ascribed to the aforementioned tradition are the same as those ascribed to Theophrastus,<sup>22</sup>

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19 Cf. ALBERTUS MAGNUS 1890, I 1 6, 18: "Similiter autem dixerunt esse in anima in acceptio-  
ne veritatis intellectualis et moralis: eo quod putabant ita se habere intellectum ad virtu-  
tem, sicut se habet materia ad formae susceptionem. In quo errore etiam fuit Theophra-  
stus, quamvis ab ipso magistro suo Aristotele correctus fuerit, ut dicit Commentator su-  
per tertio de Anima ; et ideo dixerunt intus esse scita simpliciter, sed latere, eo quod in-  
tellectus in hominibus non est possessus vel adeptus, sed potius passionibus et phanta-  
siis involutus et impeditus [...]."

20 Cf. ALBERTUS MAGNUS 1890, I 1 6, 19: "Quinta ratio est, quae in ipso libro Menonis con-  
tinetur, et est quasi per instantiam: quia si acceptio veritatis intellectualis vel moralis es-  
set per studium vel doctrinam: tunc ubicumque talia essent, ibi esset virtus: sed non est  
ita videmus enim aliquando pessimos ab optimis viris educatos et doctos, qui nec doc-  
trina neque educatione nec exemplo boni profecerunt: a doctrina igitur et consuetudine  
non est acceptio virtutis. Super has igitur tales rationes positiones suas Stoici fundave-  
runt."

21 Cf. ALBERTUS MAGNUS 1968, I 2 14, 55,65–81: "Per studium autem elevatur supra molem  
carnis et per speciem rei extra, vel per auditum excitatur ad videndum hoc quod in se  
habet, et per hoc venit in reminiscentiam eorum quae habet apud se. [...] Menon autem  
Pythagoricus et universaliter omnes Platonici, et multi Stoicorum istam opinionem sem-  
per defenderunt [...] Causam autem huius volentes assignare in diversas vias diverte-  
runt [...]. Et alii dixerunt, quod anima est materia prima in qua sunt omnes formae per  
aliquem modum latentes tamen, sed cum additur super potentiam animae lux intelli-  
gentiae agentis, tunc videt eas in se. Materia autem corporalis, eo quod non additur talis  
resplendentia lucis super eam, non potest eas in se videre. Et iste fuit Anaxagoras et  
quidem alii."

22 Cf. ALBERTUS MAGNUS 1968, III 2 3, 181,81–90: "Est autem adhuc dubium in his dictis,  
quia si separatus esse dicatur intellectus possibilis sicut potentia ab actu, sicut praepara-  
ta tabula a picturis, tunc non videtur habere relationem et proportionem ad intelligibilia  
nisi sicut materia ad formas. Quorum autem una est ratio et proportio potentiae passi-



but this time they also affect Avicbron:<sup>23</sup> neither the intellect nor prime matter, according to Albert's reconstruction of the doctrine of the *Fons vitae*, are purely potential dispositions to receive forms. Prime matter exists only because it uninterruptedly assumes the form of *intellectualitas*, which, in turn, could not exist even for a moment without giving itself to prime matter and without being able to manifest itself within it. The form of corporeity (*forma corporeitatis*) and the forms of the different physical bodies (*forma corporeitatis cum contrarietate*) are the successive determinations of these two principles. They contain in a contracted manner, one might say, all the forms of the superior.<sup>24</sup>

Precisely as prime matter, out of its uninterrupted conjunction with the form of *intellectualitas*, is full of forms, in the same way the material intellect of man, out of its uninterrupted conjunction with the form of intelligence, is never purely potential. The operation of the intellect consists, for all this tradition that Albert brings together, in returning to itself and its contents, continually bringing from latency to manifestation all the forms that both intellectual matter and man's intellect have ever actually possessed.

I would like to briefly sum up here the conclusions of this first part of my paper. The Anaxagorean doctrine of the latency of forms, as we have seen, is thus the common error underlying a tradition that Albert designates as Stoic and that, due to the relations he established and which have just been

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vae et receptivae, ipsa sunt eadem. Et sic igitur videtur non esse differentia aliqua inter primam materiam et intellectum possibilem; et haec est obiectio Theophrasti contra Aristotelis positionem."

23 Cf. ALBERTUS MAGNUS 1968, III 2 9, 189,5–13: "Cum intellectus possibilis sit, quo est omnia fieri, et materia prima, qua similiter est omnia fieri, consensit [Avicbron], quod materia prima et intellectus possibilis sint eiusdem naturae. Dicit enim, quod et verum est, quod materia prima est potentia habens omnes formas et rerum incorporearum et corporearum et per quamlibet formam susceptam clauditur communitas potentiae eius et coartatur."

24 Cf. ALBERTUS MAGNUS 1968, I 2 14, 189,1–75.

highlighted, includes the misleading doctrines of Socrates, Plato, Theophrastus and Avicbron. What is at stake around the discussion of Anaxagoras's error is no longer, as it was for Aristotle who first identified the limits of the Anaxagorean doctrine, the explanation of motion. It extends in fact to psychological questions, especially those concerning the relationship between possible intellect and agent intellect, and to metaphysical questions concerning the correct way to understand Aristotelian hylomorphism. In both cases, as we shall see in the second part of my study, the error of the Anaxagorean doctrine of the latency of forms and the philosophical issues surrounding it are involved in the discussion on relevant theological questions.

### **3. The Doctrine of the Latency of Forms and the Error of Anaxagoras in Peter Lombard's Comments on the Second Book of the *Sentences***

As it emerges from the evidence within Albert's texts, the Stoic theory of perfect reason, which in the commentary on the *Analytica posteriora* has been traced back to the Anaxagorean doctrine of the latency of forms, from a theological point of view, had already been stigmatised by Albert in the commentary on distinction 36 "Utrum virtutes morales sint connexae" discussed in the third book of Peter Lombard's *Sentences*.<sup>25</sup> But there is more. A doxo-

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<sup>25</sup> ALBERTUS MAGNUS 1894(2), d. 36, a. 1, 666, *An virtutes politicae sunt connexae*: "Et haec fuit opinio Stoicorum: et accipiebant rationem virtutis secundum quod est ultimum de re vel de potentia [...] Eum autem qui non est sapiens, sed exercetur in opere alicujus virtutum, dicebant esse in dispositione, et nullam virtutem habere: eo quod operatio non generat virtutem, sed datur ab intelligentiis quae sunt substantiae separatae. Et hoc accipitur ex verbis Augustini supra inductis, ubi dixit, quod Stoici proficientem nolebant omnino virtutem habere, sed perfectam tantum. Quia vero Augustinus hanc sententiam non approbat ideo aliter dicendum est secundum Aristotelem in *Ethicis*, scilicet quod politicae virtutes generationem habent ab operibus, si sunt consuetudinales: vel ab experimento et tempore, si sunt intellectuales: et quia generantia connexa non sunt, ideo virtutes connexionem non habent."

graphical and lexicographical investigation carried out not only on Albert's works, but also on those of his contemporary and later medieval authors, shows that explicit references to Anaxagoras's error are attested in the commentaries on the second book of the *Sentences* and, in particular, on questions concerning creation. A quick review of the occurrences I have found can only serve here as an example, as it is certainly not exhaustive. As it will appear, Anaxagoras's doctrine of the latency of forms (1) is listed by Albert among the arguments that render indefensible the hypothesis that God created all corporeal realities simultaneously:

Utrum omnia simul facta sint, sicut dicit Augustinus, aut per senarium dierum numerum digesta? [...] Ad hoc quod obiicitur per Philosophos, dicendum quod illi plane errabant: quia ponentes mixtum, ut Empedocles, non ponebant in mixto esse nisi vocata elementa: et dicebant hoc multoties fieri in quolibet generato, et amicitiam et litem movere ad exitum rerum in esse per generationem, sicut supra est notatum. Et de illa opinione videtur fuisse Ovidius. Alii sequentes Anaxagoram et Anaximandrum, dicebant illud mixtum esse ex infinitis similibus partibus, ibi sub formis propriis remanentibus, ut carnem, et os, et nervum, et sanguinem, et huiusmodi: et illi ponebant infinita esse elementa, et omnia esse in omnibus, et latentiam formarum: quae omnia erronea sunt, et supra exposita. Et ideo sancti Patres non ponebant huiusmodi mixtionem, sed potius confusam materiam quatuor elementorum, solo Deo faciente distinctionem in ea. Et ita intelligitur auctoritas Boetii. Et secundum Augustinum, praecedit illud mixtum natura tantum, et non tempore: sicut etiam mixtio humorum in homine causa est complexionis, et tempore non praecedit: et sol lucens radium emissum, et tamen tempore non praecedit.<sup>26</sup>

(2) It is associated by Bonaventure, by Thomas Aquinas and later also by Dionysius the Carthusian with the Augustinian doctrine of the *rationes seminales* of which, according to all these authors, it constitutes a misinterpretation once again because, as already pointed out by Albert, it leads to the absurdity of having to admit the co-presence of contrary forms that would be simultaneously acting in matter:

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26 ALBERTUS MAGNUS 1894(1), d. 12, a. 1, 233 b–234 a.

Utrum omnes formae inducuntur a Creatore, vel ab agente creato.

Conclusio: Agens creatum particulare potest educere formas substantiales, saltem corporales, quae sunt in potentia materiae, non solum in qua et a qua aliquo modo, sed etiam ex qua, quatenus in materia sunt secundum rationes seminales. Respondeo: Dicendum ad hoc, quod de educatione formae in esse quadruplex fuit positio. Quidam enim posuerunt *latitationem formarum* sicut imponitur Anaxagorae. Et illud potest dupliciter intelligi: aut quod ipse poneret formas actualiter *existere* in materia, sed non apparere extrinsecus, sicut pictura aperta panno; et iste modus impossibilis est omnino, quia tunc contraria simul poneretur in eodem. Alio modo potest intelligi, ut essentiae formarum sint in materia in potentia non solum *latentes*, sed *entes in potentia*, ut materia habeat in se seminales omnium formarum rationes, sibi a primaria conditiones inditas – et illud concordat et philosophiae et sacrae Scripturae – et per actionem agentis educerentur in actum. Sed hic intellectus non fuit huius positionis, sed primus, secundum quod expositores dicunt. Haec enim positio fuit, quod agens particulare nihil agat sed tantum detegat.<sup>27</sup>

Utrum Deus convenienter indiderit materiae rationes seminales.

3. Praeterea, quod est in aliquo, non producitur ab eo nisi per modum exitus. Si ergo omnium rerum semina Deus in natura prius posuit, videtur quod generatio rerum sit per exitum unius rei ab alia, et sic redibit error Anaxagorae, qui posuit quodlibet esse in quolibet, et nihil pure esse hoc vel illud, ut os vel caro; sed unumquodque nominari ex predominante: quod in I *Phys.*, a text. 33 ad 40, improbatur.<sup>28</sup>

Utrum Deus convenienter indiderit materiae rationes seminales.

Secundo quaeritur, An omnium rerum quae fiunt aut generantur sint ponendae in materia rationes seminales.

Videtur quod rationes seminales non sint in materia statuendae. Ratio enim dicit quid spirituale, materia vero corporeitatis est fundamentum [...] Quarto, omne ens est substantia vel accidens. Quaeritur ergo realiter quid sit ratio seminalis. Non enim videtur esse substantia. Aut enim esset ipsa materia: quod nullus admittit; aut forma: quod non apparet, cum forma substantialis non recipiat magis et minus. Nec in materia sunt plures formae substantiales, nec formarum latitatio Anaxagorica est ponenda, ut Aristoteles probat.<sup>29</sup>

The juxtaposition between the Anaxagorean doctrine of the latency of forms in matter, to which, as we have seen, Albert himself had traced the doctrinal

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27 BONAVENTURA 1885, d. VII, p. II, a. II, q. I, 196–200, in particular 197–198.

28 THOMAS AQUINAS 1929, d. XVIII, q. I, a. II, 450–454, in particular 450.

29 DIONYSIUS CARTUSIANUS 1903, d. XVIII, q. II, 166–182, in particular 166.

errors of Stoic philosophy, and the doctrine of seminal reasons, which Augustine, with the necessary limitations, takes from the Stoic and Neo-Platonic tradition, is particularly interesting. As already observed by Bruno Nardi in a famous essay, first appearing in 1936, republished in 1960 and dedicated to Albert's doctrine of *inchoatio formae*, addressing the issue of creation in six days, in *De Genesi ad litteram*, Augustine describes it as a progressive manifestation of *rationes seminales* that are concealed in primordial matter.<sup>30</sup> In primordial matter God introduced them not one after the other but all together, thus simultaneously beginning and sketching the entire creation. It is this interpretation of creation that, again according to Augustine, gives reason for the verse in *Sirach* (*Sir.* 18,1) where it is said that "Deus omnia simul creavit." The success of Augustine's solution and the different reactions of the Church Fathers to his doctrine are documented in several distinctions in the second book of Peter Lombard's, especially in distinctions VII, XII and XVIII, around which the authors of the late Middle Ages questioned themselves.<sup>31</sup> The problems at stake are different. On the one hand, it is a question of explaining the apparent inconsistency of two distinct places in Holy Scripture: as mentioned

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30 NARDI 1960, 75-76; cf. AUGUSTINUS HIPIONIENSIS 1894, 183,23-184,23: "Nunc autem quia iam consummata quodammodo, et quodammodo *inchoata* sunt ea ipsa quae consequentibus evolvenda temporibus primitus Deus *omnia simul creavit* (*Sir.* 18, 1), cum faceret mundum: consummata quidem quia nihil habent illa in naturis propriis, quibus suorum temporum cursus agunt, quod non in istis causaliter factum sit: *inchoata vero, quoniam erant quasi semina futurorum, per saeculi tractum ex occulto in manifestum locis congruis exerenda*: ipsius etiam Scripturae verba satis ad hoc admonendum insigniter vigent, si quis in eis evigilet [...] rursusque nisi *inchoata* essent, non ita sequeretur, quia in illa die requievit ab omnibus operibus suis quae *inchoavit* Deus facere [...] *inchoasse* autem, ut quod hic praefixerat causis, post impleret effectis."

31 PETRUS LOMBARDUS 1971, II, d. VII, 8 (40) *Quod non sunt creatores, licet per eos magi ranae et alia fecerint; sicut nec boni, etsi per eorum ministerium fiant creaturae*; d. XII, 58 (1) *De distinctione operum sex dierum*; 59 (2) *Quod alii senserunt omnia simul facta sunt in materia et forma, alii per intervalla temporum*; 60 (3) *quomodo per intervalla temporis res corporales conditae sint*; 61 (4) *Quo sensu tenebrae dicantur esse aliquid, et quo dicantur non esse aliquid*; 62 (5) *Quare illa materia confusa sit dicta informis et ubi ad esse prodiit, et quantumcumque in altum procederit*; 63 (6) *De quattuor modis divinae operationis*; d. XVIII, 108 (6), *De causis quae in Deo sunt simul et in creaturis et de his quae in Deo tantum.*

above, according to *Genesis* God's creation takes six days, according to *Sirach*, on the other hand, God creates *omnia simul*. Making sense of this dichotomy is a question of understanding whether and how God enacts creation through secondary causes, whether secondary causes have always been present in primordial matter and in what way, if any, they are. The solutions proposed by the authors commenting on the distinctions in the second book of Lombard's *Sentences* are various. They converge, however, on one conclusion: granted that in primordial matter there is everything simultaneously, nothing in it is perfectly realised. In order for the forms of the different created species to be given, the confused matter needs to be ordered, and it is this order that matter progressively receives in six distinct and successive days of creation.<sup>32</sup> The seminal reasons, which have always and simultaneously acted in matter, progressively transforming it, are by no means the expression of a law immanent to matter itself, which would be capable of self-regulating itself as a result of a sort of total delegation received from the original and divine causative principle. Rather, they continue to maintain a relationship with their origin, which is the guarantor of the law and underlies the orderly succession of their successive transformations, while remaining transcendent of matter itself.<sup>33</sup>

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32 Cf. PETRUS LOMBARDUS 1971, II d. XII, c. 5, 387–388, in particular 387,21–24: “Facta est ergo illa materia in forma confusionis ante formam dispositionis. In forma confusionis prius omnia corporalia materialiter simul et semel sunt creata; postmodum in forma dispositionis sex diebus sunt ordinata”; cf. ALEXANDER HALENSIS 1952., d. XII, 116–125, in particular 120–121.122; ALBERTUS MAGNUS 1894(1), 229–240; a. 1, 230–235, in particular 233; BONAVENTURA (1885), d. XII, q. II, 295–298, in particular 296); THOMAS AQUINAS 1929, d. XII, aa. 1–5, 296–320.

33 Cf. PETRUS LOMBARDUS 1971, II d. XVIII, c. VI, 419–420, in particular 419,18–27: (1) “Distinctio causarum rerum perutilis, scilicet quod quaedam in Deo et in creaturis, quaedam in Deo tantum. Omnium igitur rerum causae in Deo sunt; sed quarundam causae et in Deo sunt et in creaturis, quarundam vero causae in Deo tantum sunt. Et illarum rerum causae dicuntur absconditae in Deo, quia ita in divina dispositione ut hoc vel illud fiat; quod non est in seminali creaturae ratione. (2) Quare dicuntur naturaliter fieri vel non. Et illa quidem quae secundum causam seminalem fiunt, dicuntur naturaliter fieri, quia ita cursus naturae hominibus innotuit; alia vero praeter naturam, quorum

On the basis of an unanimously shared theoretical condition, which is aimed at rescuing the distinction between creature and creator, Augustine's doctrine of the *rationes seminales*, for the authors who accept it, is admitted only insofar the correct interpretation excludes its immanentist implications or, which is the same, insofar it excludes its original Stoic premises. Consistent with such theoretical assumptions, the *rationes seminales* must be first of all understood as incipient forms, i.e. in Bonaventura's formulation, *inchoatae*, according to the adjective used by Augustine himself in his *De Genesi ad litteram*,<sup>34</sup> or, that is once more the same, incomplete forms, according to the terminology used by Peter of Tarantasia in the solution to the same distinction.<sup>35</sup>

The more and more detailed confrontation with the *corpus Aristotelicum*, recently translated into Latin, from the 13<sup>th</sup> century onwards enabled the authors to rethink the questions concerning the relationship between God, matter and second causes, discussed in Lombard's aforementioned distinctions, in the light of the theoretical coordinates of Aristotelian hylomorphism. As we can read once again in Bonaventura's text, the *rationes seminales*, incomplete forms, are latent in matter.<sup>36</sup> Bonaventura refers explicitly to the Anaxagorean doctrine of the latency of forms, but claims it must be correctly understood in

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causae tantum sunt in Deo"; cf. ALEXANDER HALENSIS 1952, d. XVIII, 157-165, in particular 161-163; ALBERTUS MAGNUS 1894(2), d. XVIII, 309-325; a. 7, 322-323; BONAVENTURA 1885, d. XVIII, q. II, 434-438; q. III, 439-444; THOMAS AQUINAS 1929, d. XVIII, 441-473; q. 1, a. 2, 450-454.

34 Cf. BONAVENTURA 1885, d. XVIII, a. 1, q. II, 434-438; in particular 436: "Ratio seminalis respicit inchoationem et intrinsecam virtutem, quae movet et operatur ad effectus productionem."

35 Cf. PETRUS DE TARANTASIA 1652, d. XVIII, 151-153, in particular 152b: "Dicunt ergo quod ratio seminalis est forma incompleta, est enim quasi initium quoddam seu seminarium formae completae in materia adeo, quod per actionem agentis naturalis de potentia ad actum educitur, fluit autem seu transit de uno esse ad aliud usque quod perveniat ad esse formae ultimae completis."

36 Cf. BONAVENTURA 1885, d. VII, p. II, a. 2, q. 1, 196-197: "Utrum omnes formae inducuntur a Creatore, vel ab agente creato [...] Respondeo: Dicendum ad hoc, quod de educatione formae in esse quadruplex fuit positio. Quidam enim posuerunt *latitationem formarum*, sicut imponitur Anaxagorae."

order to be consistent with the correct meaning of the Augustinian doctrine of *rationes seminales*. Contrary to what Anaxagorean's conception of homogeneous matter seems to imply, the forms which are hidden in matter are not actually present in it. According to Bonaventura, then, matter possesses only incomplete forms in a latent way.<sup>37</sup> The same is true also for Albert the Great. Matter possesses an *inchoationem formae*, a beginning of form and, as we can read in his commentary to Aristotle's *Physica*, such beginning of form is present in which Albert called *mixtura privationis*.<sup>38</sup> Because it is deprived, the matter of the individual substances manifests that it does not possess the formal principle towards which it tends. Nevertheless, it tends towards such formal principle only because, something of it is hidden but present in it.<sup>39</sup> Matter possesses in fact potentially its incipient forms: it is these incomplete forms, Albert explains, that determine matter's appetite for form.<sup>40</sup>

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37 Cf. BONAVENTURA 1885, d. VII, p. II, a. 2, q. 2, 201: "5. Item, formae secundum seminales rationes latent in materia, ut habetur in littera et praedeterminatum est supra; et ad hoc, quod fiant in actu, non indigent nisi extrinseco adiutorio [...] 5. Ad illud obiicitur, quod formae sunt in materia seminaliter; dicendum, quod illa *ratio seminalis* valde remota est ab actu completo nec potest ad actum reduci, nisi multa adminiculantia habeat, ex quorum influenza, sibi et naturae suae conveniente, proficiat, quousque in actum perveniat"; cf. ALBERTUS MAGNUS 1894(2), d. XVIII, 309–325; a. 7, 322–323; THOMAS AQUINAS 1929, d. XVIII, 441–473; q. 1, a. 2, 450–454.

38 ALBERTUS MAGNUS 1987, I 3 16, 72,92–73,6: "Et ideo verissime dicendum est, quod nihil appetit aliud nisi per similitudinem incompletam quam habet ad ipsum: et ideo appetit compleri per transmutationem ad ipsum quod appetit [...]. Et ideo talis appetitus <qui> est materiae *per mixturam privationis cum ipsa formae habet inchoationem*, ad quam transmutari desiderat."

39 Cf. ALBERTUS MAGNUS 1987, II 2 6, 106,63–64: "Nisi aliquid formae esset intra materiam, non appeteret materia formam et finem"; cf. I 1 16, 74,1 and following.

40 Cf. ALBERTUS MAGNUS 1964, XI 1 5, 464,48–60. 465,27–33. cf. 33–50: "Et hoc quidem omnes Antiqui de physicis loquentes dicere intendebant, sed exprimere non sciverunt: hoc enim quod sic dicimus unum ens in potentia ex quo fit omne quod fit. Et est illud unum quod Anaxagoras intendit, quando dicit omnia esse unum mixtum ex omnibus, et ex illo fieri omne quod fit: non enim omne quod fit, ex illo fieret, nisi in ipso esset aliquo modo inchoatio formarum omnium cum privatione actus: et hoc non vocavit ipse privationem, sed latentiam. Sed multo dignius est quod dicamus omnia sic simul esse in prima materia secundum potentiam et privationem, quam quod dicamus omnia simul esse secundum actum et latere [...] Secundum ergo hunc modum non sufficit dicere quod simul sunt res omnes, sed latent, sicut dixit Anaxagoras: oportet ergo quod prae-



The change that leads *inchoatae* forms to their perfection, i.e. their passage from being potential to being actual, therefore, occurs when the *inchoata* form manifests a contrary form to which it is inclined and which is not actually present within itself at all. Instead, it acquires it at the moment when, altered by a further agent cause, it is placed in the condition of being able to receive it from an extrinsic formal cause, fully actuated, the formal principle of the entire causative process.

As it appears and as the text from Albert's commentary to Aristotle's *Metaphysica*, in formulating his doctrine of the *inchoatio formarum*, Albert works by proposing a correction of the Anaxagorean doctrine of the latency of form, freeing it from the immanentist implications and further paradoxes in which the Anaxagorean formulation seemed to confine it. Albert's doctrine of the *inchoatio formarum* provides in other words a correct alternative to the Anaxagorean doctrine of the latency of forms.<sup>41</sup> Albert's alternative of the Anaxagorean doctrine of the latency of forms, within his conception of active matter, full of incomplete forms (*inchoatae*) and always related to an extrinsic causal principle capable of perfecting them, made it possible to rethink Augustine's doctrine of the *rationes seminales*, freed from its Stoic and

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dictae res differant secundum materiam: quia cuiuslibet rei est materia propria, eo quod nos iam diximus quod materia supponitur cum formae inchoatione: et sicut inchoationes illae sunt diversae, ita et materiae."

41 ALBERTUS MAGNUS 1964, XI 1 5, 464,48–60. 465,27–33. Cf. 33–50: "Et hoc quidem omnes Antiqui de physicis loquentes dicere intendebant, sed exprimere non sciverunt: hoc enim quod sic dicimus unum ens in potentia ex quo fit omne quod fit. Et est illud unum quod Anaxagoras intendit, quando dicit omnia esse unum mixtum ex omnibus, et ex illo fieri omne quod fit: non enim omne quod fit, ex illo fieret, nisi in ipso esset aliquo modo inchoatio formarum omnium cum privatione actus: et hoc non vocavit ipse privationem, sed latentiam. Sed multo dignius est quod dicamus omnia sic simul esse in prima materia secundum potentiam et privationem, quam quod dicamus omnia simul esse secundum actum et latere [...]. Secundum ergo hunc modum non sufficit dicere quod simul sunt res omnes, sed latent, sicut dixit Anaxagoras: oportet ergo quod praedictae res differant secundum materiam: quia cuiuslibet rei est materia propria, eo quod nos iam diximus quod materia supponitur cum formae inchoatione: et sicut inchoationes illae sunt diversae, ita et materiae."

Anaxagorean premises. As already underlined by Bruno Nardi, in the commentaries on distinction XVIII of the second book of Peter Lombard's *Sentences*, dedicated to the question of the *rationes seminales*, the expression *inchoatio formae* actually came into use in scholasticism to signify Augustinian doctrine.<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, the necessary disambiguation with respect to two possible interpretations of the doctrine of the latency of forms, one consistent with the more correct Peripatetic understanding, the other with the error of Anaxagoras came into discussion in the comments to the distinctions of the *Sentences*, as the cases of the solutions provided by Bonaventure and by Albert the Great show, and in contexts of discussion concerning the question of creation, for examples, by Thomas of York.<sup>43</sup> There are, on the other hand, also alternatives and reactions to Albert's doctrine of *inchoatio formarum*, as it can be documented in the writings of Thomas Aquinas as well as, later, in those of Giles of Rome.<sup>44</sup> And here there's once more something very interesting, because, once again, paradoxically, such reactions to Albert's doctrine stem from the discussion of the error of Anaxagoras. According to Thomas, not even Albert, in spite of his own intentions, had managed to free his doctrine from the erroneous theoretical consequences of the error of the latency of form.<sup>45</sup> The error of Anaxagoras, Thomas suggests, can only be considered

42 Cf. NARDI 1960, 75–76.

43 Cf. THOMAS EBORACENSIS, *Sapientiale* II, 5, Città del Vaticano, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Ms. Vat. Lat. 4301, f. 43ra; cf. BRAY 2021.

44 On the references to the Anaxagorean doctrine of *latentia formarum* by Giles of Rome, cf. AEGIDIUS ROMANUS 2003, *Reportatio* 2.51, *Excerpta Godefridi* 2.5, 294–302, 516–519; AEGIDIUS ROMANUS 1502, 28ra–28rb; AEGIDIUS ROMANUS 1581, *Ordinatio*, 2.18.2.2, 2:79b–92; on this subject see DONATI, TRIFOGLI 2016; on the discussion of the Anaxagorean doctrine of *latentia formarum* by Thomas Aquinas, see, for example, THOMAS AQUINAS 1933, d. 33, 1, 2 sol. 1 c; THOMAS AQUINAS 1891, q. 63, 1 c; THOMAS AQUINAS 1965, 8 c.; NISSING 2006, 678.

45 THOMAS AQUINAS 1971, VII 1 8, 352–352: “(n. 9) Et si obiiciatur contra eos, quod tunc ea, quae generantur naturaliter, non indigent extrinseco generante, si eorum generatio est a principio intrinseco: respondent quod sicut principium intrinsecum non est forma completa, sed quaedam inchoatio formae; ita etiam non est perfectum principium activum, ut per se possit agere ad generationem; sed habet aliquid de virtute activa ut cooperetur exteriori agenti. Nisi enim aliquid conferret mobile exteriori agenti, esset motus violen-

freed from it insofar as one accepts thinking of matter as a purely potential substratum, and is instead continually implied, in his opinion, in the premises of those who, like Albert, in various ways, are instead inclined to admit that matter is power in some way active.

## Conclusions

Resuming from Thomas's remark to Albert, I turn to the conclusion. Thomas's remark to Albert, who is responsible for reintroducing the error of the latency of forms into his doctrine of *inchoatio formarum*, suggests that, despite the criticism levelled by Aristotle and Arabic culture, far from being definitively refuted and expunged from the history of philosophical thought, the error of Anaxagoras is in some ways a phantasm with which any theorist of hylomorphism needs to be measured.

The discussion around this error animates the debates that took place in the Latin Middle Ages, even after Thomas. Evidence of the discussion regarding the error of Anaxagoras can still be found in the 15<sup>th</sup> century in the commentary to the second book of the *Sentences* of Dionysius the Carthusian, in the writings of Heimeric de Campo,<sup>46</sup> John de Nova Domo and John Versor,

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tus: violentum enim est, cuius principium est extra, nil conferente vim passo, ut in primo Ethicorum dicitur. (n. 10) Haec autem opinio videtur propinqua ponentibus latitationem formarum. Cum enim nihil agat nisi secundum quod est in actu: si partes vel inchoationes formarum quae sunt in materia, habent aliquam virtutem activam, sequitur quod sint aliquo modo actu, quod est ponere latitationem formarum. Et praeterea, cum esse sit ante agere, non potest intelligi forma prius habere agere, quam sit in actu"; cf. AEGIDIUS ROMANUS 2003, d. I, p. I, q. 2, a. 4; d. 18, q. 2, a. 2.

<sup>46</sup> HEYMERICUS DE CAMPO 1496, probl. 7, 21r-v: "Dicebat enim Plato, quod materia est coaeterna datori formarum, Deo scilicet glorioso, cui ille dator sola sua bonitate stimulatus imprimit ymagines conformes suis ydealibus rationibus, sicut artifex in praeiacentem materiam imprimit formas artificiales, ita, quod materia secundum istum est velud matercula de se sterilis et ager omnino incultus, quae per illapsum talium formarum impraegnatur et sic ad partum | (f. 21v) per motum et transmutationem promovetur. E contra autem dicunt Epicurei, quorum caput fuit Anaxagoras, quod materia est universorum primum et perfectissimum principium, quod in se praehabet omnium formas,

critics of the Albertian doctrine of *inchoatio formarum* and supporters, in agreement with Thomas, of a purely potential conception of matter. I would add, traces of such discussion should still be sought more generally, even beyond the Middle Ages, in the writings of authors who, as Thomas's objection to Albert suggests, in various ways theorised a conception of matter as a power endowed with incipient activity.

A reconnaissance of the discussions around the alleged error of Anaxagoras could make it possible to distinguish, (1) favorable or contrary positions around the doctrine of the latency of forms in matter, a question on which, as has been said, divides Albertists and Thomists; (2) different conceptions of hylomorphism, if it is true that Albert elaborates an hylomorphic conception that, unlike what Thomas is willing to recognize, claims to be different from that derived from the Anaxagorean premises. (3) Above all, it would be interesting to understand, if concepts like, for example, those of the infinite divisibility of matter, of the co-existence of opposites and of the total immanence of the formal principle in prime matter, which have been indicated as paradoxical consequences of Anaxagoras's erroneous doctrine of latency of form, have been eventually rehabilitated into the history of philosophy and, finally, if such rehabilitation has involved a discussion and even a rehabilitation of the Anaxagorean doctrine, and if so, through which arguments and through which sources.

To be taken into consideration for the proposed investigation would be in general the theories of authors favorable to a conception of matter as an

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quas subiective sustentat, sed velamento accidentium ipsam vestientium occultantur, ne alicui appareant praeter eam, quae dat materiae in hoc vel in illo nomen. Et dicit huiusmodi latentias illucescere per agentia naturalia remouentia ab ipsa materia talia accidentia occultantia et obumbrantia lucem talium formarum, ita, quod generatio non est aliud, quam revelatio formae substantialis intus sepultae in caligine materiae, et alteratio est revelatio alicuius formae accidentaliter similiter latitantis."

active power and, in particular, the hylomorphic conceptions. Authors such as David of Dinant, who was criticized by Albert the Great for his pantheistic conception,<sup>47</sup> or those who, like Cusano, also accused of pantheism, made of the principle of the coincidence of opposites, that is, of what was one of the main objections to the Anaxagorean doctrine of the latency of forms in place in homogeneous matter, one of the cornerstones of his philosophy. Another fruitful investigation could be into those who, like Giordano Bruno, influenced by the Albertine doctrine, even before the writings of Plotinus, as Nardi suggests, denies that matter is a “prope nihil,” an almost nothing, a pure and naked potency, since all forms are contained in it, produced by it, and brought forth by virtue of the efficient cause.<sup>48</sup>

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47 Cf. RODOLFI 2002.

48 BRUNO 1998, 9.

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