

Matter Without Form: The Ontological Status of Christ's Dead Body

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Abstract: In this paper, we provide an account of the ontological status of Christ's dead body, which remained in the tomb during the three days after his crucifixion. Our account holds that Christ's dead body – during the time between his death and resurrection – was prime matter without a substantial form. We defend this account by showing how it is metaphysically possible for prime matter to exist in actuality without substantial forms. Our argument turns on the truth of two theses: (i) God is able to produce all acts of secondary causes without those secondary causes, and (ii) Substantial forms are secondary causes of the actuality of prime matter. We argue that the metaphysical possibility of matter without form is perfectly consistent with holding both there is only one substantial form in a material substance and that prime matter is pure potentiality. Moreover, we argue that the metaphysical possibility of matter without form does little-to-no damage to our natural understanding of material substances.

Who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven. And was incarnate of the Holy Ghost and of the Virgin Mary and was made man; was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate, suffered *and was buried*...

1. Introduction

According to the creeds, the only begotten Son of God became incarnate, died, and was buried. Here's a worry. If Christ died (in his human nature), then his human nature must have been corrupted. When something is corrupted what results after the corruption is not what existed before the corruption. So, if Christ died, then how was it possible to bury him? At first glance, it seems that we can hold either that Christ died or that he was buried, but not both. We could hold – following St. Thomas

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Aquinas – that even though Christ’s human nature was corrupted, the Word remained united to both his soul and his matter. The Word was just as much in the tomb, *via* the body, during those three days after his death as he was in Hell *via* the soul. Christ’s body remained *his* body even after Christ died, in virtue of *it* continuing to be united to the second person of the trinity. The question we want to ask in this paper isn’t how Christ’s body can remain *his* body after he dies.¹ In fact, we will simply take this much for granted, even if it *could* be called into question. The question we are concerned with is what – ontologically – does “Christ’s body in the tomb” refer to (supposing Christ’s body does remain in the tomb)? In other words, what is the ontological status of Christ’s dead body? Stating this question in Thomistic terms, John Wippel writes,

...an interesting philosophical question can be raised about the ontological status of the matter of his [Christ’s] body during that period. If, as Thomas maintains, prime matter is pure potentiality and if, as he also holds, it cannot be kept in existence without some form even by divine power, how could the prime matter of Christ’s body continue to exist during the *sacrum triduum* without being informed by some substantial form?²

At one time, our metaphysical categories had it that it was metaphysically impossible – because contradictory – for an accident (a being whose essence is to exist in another) to exist but *not* in another. However, in light of the theological doctrine on the Eucharist, we (or at least those subscribing to the Catholic tradition) have come to hold that there are accidents that exist but not in another. This seems to entail embracing a contradiction, *unless* we acknowledge that our notion of an accident (as a being whose essence is to exist in another) was incorrect. A modification was needed. We have come to believe that accidents are beings that are *naturally* disposed to exist in another, or as Jeff Brower has put it, “*naturally dependent* on substances.”³ With this modification, the threat of contradiction unsurprisingly dissolves away rather easily. It’s not as though we *solved* a problem within our old – to borrow a phrase from Michael Gorman – “off-the-rack” metaphysical categories; rather, we needed something “tailor-made.” We had to modify the category of accident to dissolve the contradiction. It is worth noting – and this is greatly stressed by Thomists

¹ It ought to be noted upfront that there are strong theological and philosophical reasons to resist treating Christ’s human nature (and especially, for the purposes of this paper, the principles of human nature – matter and substantial form) as a subject of predication (i.e., *reifying* it as a *quasi*-substance). Michael Gorman (2017, 33-34) has recently argued that, “In Christology, one talks a lot about Christ’s human nature. In doing so, one is subject to the temptation to reify it, to treat it as a kind of thing. Doing so can lead to theological difficulties – to Nestorianism – but prior to that, independently of that, it is just a philosophical mistake.” Along similar lines, Aaron Riches (2016, 3-5) has argued against this quasi-Nestorianism: “the only tenable starting point for Christology lies in the absolute *unitas* of the human Jesus with the divine Son. This opposes any alternative starting point that would begin from a theoretical or ontological *separatio* of divinity and humanity in Christ...[this requires one] to begin with a paradox.”

² Wippel (2011, 150).

³ Brower (2014, 248).

– that this modification of the category of accident does minimal damage to our natural understanding of the material world. Natural necessity is left unscathed. Natural necessity and metaphysical necessity – at least in this context – aren't coextensive. It is a maneuver that makes room, not for natural possibilities, but for metaphysical possibilities. It allows for the metaphysical possibility of a miracle, which can still be held to be a natural impossibility.⁴ Michael Gorman (2017) has recently argued that St. Thomas Aquinas realized that the “off-the-rack philosophical notion of nature is inadequate for Christological purposes. Something tailor-made – a modified notion of ‘nature’ – is required.”⁵ Gorman continues,

Certain possibilities become apparent only in light of revelation, and the theologian's task will, on occasion, involve adapting philosophical ideas to make them adequate to his larger context. Theology for Aquinas demands that we be willing to accept that the full truth is surprising and even somewhat subversive of our natural ways of thinking. It requires a willingness to allow theological reflection to suggest new ways of metaphysical thinking.⁶

Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger has made a similar – although more radical – comment in regards to the inadequacy of the off-the-rack philosophical notion of person for Christological and Trinitarian purposes. At the very least, what Ratzinger argues is that we need to remodel our metaphysical schema.

Something methodologically decisive for all human thinking becomes visible here [in considering the person of Christ]. The seeming exception is in reality very often the symptom that shows us the insufficiency of our previous schema of order, which helps us to break open the schema and to conquer a new realm of reality. The exception shows us that we have built our closets too small, as it were, and that we must break them open and go on in order to see the whole.⁷

We propose a response to the problem of the ontological status of Christ's dead body in the tomb that requires just such a remodeling. We will argue that the “off-the-rack” philosophical category of substantial form is too snug. We propose a slight modification of this notion which makes metaphysical room for God to work a miracle. In what follows, we will argue that one could reasonably hold that Christ's body, which lay in the tomb during the three days after his death, was prime matter without a substantial form. In fact, it was the numerically same prime matter that was a part of Christ's human nature; a part of that which hung on the cross, healed the

⁴ For example, given the nature of man and the nature of water, it is a natural necessity that man sinks if he tries to walk on water (at least in the Midwest between June and July). But, as we know from the Gospels, it is metaphysically possible for man to walk on water despite it being *naturally* impossible (i.e., impossible by his nature).

⁵ Gorman (2017, 9).

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Ratzinger (1990, 448).

blind, raised the dead, and ate the last supper. It also – as noted above – was that which remained united to the Son. We fully realize that on Aquinas’s account of the material world, this suggestion – prime matter without substantial form – is nothing short of an egregious sin – *viz.* a blatant contradiction. In fact, if this proposal is *not* initially repugnant, it is likely that the reader is metaphysically promiscuous or fails to understand Aquinas’s standard ontology of the material world.

Our proposal requires a ‘tailor-made’ notion of substantial form that allows for the metaphysical possibility of prime matter without substantial form. To limit scandal, we will argue that this solution does *little* damage to Aquinas’s ontology of the material world. In fact, we argue that it does no more damage to Aquinas’s material ontology than did his claim that it is metaphysically possible, but naturally necessary, for accidents to exist in another. Our account of the ontological status of Christ’s dead body (prime matter without substantial form) is entirely consistent with holding *all* of the following six theses:

- (i) Christ truly died.
- (ii) Christ’s body was truly buried.
- (iii) No new substantial form was introduced into Christ’s body after he died.
- (iv) There is only one substantial form – the rational soul – in Christ’s human nature (i.e., the unicity of substantial forms).
- (v) Prime matter is pure potentiality (prime matter does not have actuality through itself).
- (vi) It is *naturally* necessary for prime matter to exist with an inherent substantial form (i.e., as the prime matter of a hylomorphic compound).

We will begin with the main argument for why we think it is metaphysically possible for prime matter to exist without substantial form (section II), followed by a defense of its premises (section III). We will conclude by showing how our account of the ontological status of Christ dead body - as matter without form – is perfectly consistent with holding (i)-(vi) above (section IV).

2. The Main Argument

Consider the following argument

- (1) God is able to produce all acts of secondary causes without those secondary causes. (premise)
- (2) Substantial forms are secondary causes of the actuality of prime matter. (premise)
- (3) Therefore, God is able to cause the actuality of prime matter without substantial forms. (from 1 and 2)

- (4) If God is able to cause the actuality of prime matter without substantial forms, then it is metaphysically possible for prime matter to exist in actuality without substantial forms. (premise)
- (5) Therefore, it is metaphysically possible for prime matter to exist in actuality without substantial forms. (from 3 and 4)

The logical structure of this argument is straightforward enough. In section III, we take up a discussion of premises (1), (2), and (4). In section IV, we will fill in some details to show how the conclusion of this argument allows one to provide a solution to the problem of the ontological status of Christ's dead body.

3. The Premises

Premise (1)

Aquinas utilizes the principle in premise (1) in his discussions of the metaphysics underlying various miracles. The principle is rooted in God's omnipotence. Let us call this principle, "The Omnipotent Principle," which can be stated more formally as:

The Omnipotent Principle (OP): If God is the cause of a secondary cause, C, causing effect, E, then it is *possible* for God to cause E without causing C to cause E.

Before we get too far ahead of ourselves, it will be worthwhile to make a few general comments on what we – following Aquinas – hold *causation* to be. Caleb Cohoe (2013) has argued that causation, according to Aquinas, is nothing but an ontological dependency relation – effects ontologically depend on their causes. This can be seen from a quick, albeit it suggestive, textual survey. In his *Commentary on Aristotle's Physics*, Aquinas puts the point rather succinctly, "Those things are called causes upon which other things *depend for their being or their coming to be*."⁸ And again, "every effect depends on its cause, insofar as it is its cause"⁹ In his *De Principiis Naturae*, Aquinas claims, "A beginning is only called a cause, however, if it gives existence to what follows, for a cause, we say, is that from which the existence another follows."¹⁰ Lastly, Cohoe notes that,

Perhaps the clearest statement of the connection between ontological dependence and causation comes from Aquinas's discussion of God's preservation of creatures in *De Potentia* where he claims that: 'it is necessary that an effect depend on its cause. For this belongs to the notion (ratio) of effect and cause' (Aquinas, *Quaestiones disputatae de*

⁸ Aquinas, *In Phys.* 10.240; cited in Cohoe (2013, 841).

⁹ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, 104, a. 1.

¹⁰ Aquinas, *De Principiis Naturae*, trans. Timothy McDermott, in *Aquinas: Selected Philosophical Writings* (1993, 73).

potentia 5.1 Respondeo). Aquinas claims that dependence is part of the very notion (ratio) of effect and cause: any effect, insofar as it is an effect, ontologically depends on its cause.¹¹

So much for the general notion of cause and effect as being one of ontological dependence. Let us return to *OP*, which now can be restated – in light of what was just said about causation – in terms of ontological dependence.

The Omnipotent Principle (OP*)*: If effect E's dependence on secondary cause C itself depends on God, then it is *possible* for effect E to depend on God without E depending on C.¹²

Take the following example. If Big Carl is the cause of my black eye, then it follows that the first cause caused Big Carl to be a cause of my black eye. If *OP* (and *ipso facto OP**) is true, then it is possible for God to have caused me to have a black eye without Big Carl (or any other created efficient cause) causing it. In short, it is possible for my black eye to depend on God and not Big Carl.

One might feel the pull of this principle, and yet limit its scope to efficient causation. Even though the *prima facie* examples given in favor of *OP* are cases of efficient causation, it would be a mistake to limit its scope in this way. Once we see causation as ontological dependence, it is obvious that *OP* extends to other types of causes.¹³ In fact, Aquinas uses the *OP* principle in justifying why he thinks it is possible for accidents in the Eucharist to exist but not in a subject.

Therefore, to that which is objected to the contrary, it must be said, that an accident according to its being depends upon a subject as upon a cause sustaining it. And since God is able to produce all acts of secondary causes without those secondary causes, He can preserve in being an accident without a subject.¹⁴

An accident ontologically depends on a subject (viz. a substance). Since all beings ultimately ontologically depend on God as their first cause, it is possible for those accidents to cease to depend on substances and continue in their existence dependent on God. The details of how or why this is shouldn't concern us now. What matters is that this is an instance of the *OP* being utilized by St. Thomas in a non-efficient causal way.

¹¹ Coho (2013, 841).

¹² For the sake of simplicity, in this principle and in what follows, I will leave the "ontological" qualifier implicit. It should be obvious that the type of dependence involved in the *OP* is ontological.

¹³ We don't see a metaphysical difference between *OP* and *OP**, and so in what follows we will use 'OP' as a generic name for both of those principle without discrimination.

¹⁴ "Ad illud ergo quod in contrarium obiicitur, dicendum, quod accidens secundum suum esse dependet a subiecto sicut a causa sustentante ipsum. Et quia Deus potest producere omnes actus secundarum causarum absque ipsis causis secundis, potest conservare in esse accidens sine subiecto" (*Quodlibet* III, Q.1, a.1, ad. 1).

This Eucharistic application of the *OP* appears to be grounded in the fact that the accidental forms naturally *depend* on a subject. More fundamentally, one could say that matter is a cause of form. Actually, that is exactly what Thomas does say,

Also, we say that matter is the cause of the form, in so far as the form exists only in matter. Likewise, the form is the cause of the matter, in so far as matter has existence in act only through the form because matter and form are spoken of in relation to each other, as is said in the second book of the *Physics*.¹⁵

As we have just seen, not only is matter the cause of form, but form is also the cause of matter. We will return to this passage shortly in our discussion of premise (2), but what is important to note at present is that matter is a cause of form and form a cause of matter. This surely raises a whole host of questions – not least of which is why this isn't an instance of circular causation – but we need not wade into those waters here.

Premise (2)

The next premise states – “Substantial forms are secondary causes of the actuality of prime matter.” As we noted above, according to Aquinas, the substantial form is that through which matter has existence in act. One thing that the substantial form does is cause the actual existence of the matter. Prime matter, *through itself*, lacks actuality. It doesn't have its act of existence in and of itself, but rather from the form. To put it another way, we can say that since matter depends on form for its actual existence, form is the cause of the actual existence of matter.¹⁶ In characterizing prime matter, Brower has described it as “the only type of being that exists in pure potentiality.”¹⁷ This fact about prime matter – its pure potentiality – carries with it two further characteristics, as Brower explains,

The first is the radical dependency of prime matter...All creatures, as we have seen, are characterized by a sort of radical dependency on God, in that they are essentially dependent on him both for their initial and for their continued existence. Aquinas thinks that prime matter is characterized by the same sort of dependency on creatures because it is essentially dependent on certain forms and compounds (namely, substantial forms and material substances), both for its initial and for its continued existence. The reason has to do with the way prime matter possesses actuality.¹⁸

¹⁵ Aquinas, *De Principiis Naturae*, par. 30.

¹⁶ When we speak of 'form' we intend *substantial* form unless otherwise noted.

¹⁷ Brower (2014) is an interpretive work, and the views we attribute to Brower should be taken as Brower's interpretation of Aquinas, not his own views.

¹⁸ Brower (2014, 19).

What is interesting to note about Brower's discussion of prime matter as pure potentiality and its dependence on form is that he immediately transitions to a discussion as to why prime matter cannot exist without form. He writes,

Insofar as prime matter is a being in pure potentiality, it has no form or actuality through itself, but only via inherence...this just entails that prime matter *cannot* exist without some form inhering in it. Indeed, for prime matter to exist, he says, just is for it to have actuality in this way...¹⁹

We certainly do not dispute that this is in fact Thomas's view of the matter (no pun intended), but we think one could reasonably question the type of modality in play in the conclusion. In short, we are happy to grant the *natural necessity* of prime matter's dependence on form for its initial and continued existence (and hence as a constituent of a hylomorphic compound), but what we wish to call into question is whether this dependency is, albeit naturally necessary, metaphysically contingent.

Brower, following St. Thomas, says that the form is *identical* to the actuality of the matter. This is precisely why they think it is contradictory to hold that matter can exist without form. It is only by holding that the form is *identical* to the actuality of the matter that it would be a syntactic contradiction to hold that matter exists in actuality without form (actuality). However, we aren't convinced that one *need* hold that form is *identical* to the actuality of the matter. In fact, St. Thomas seems to make what seems a hasty assumption – since the form causes existence in act, therefore it is (identical to) the act. Consider the following passage from *De Principiis Naturae*,

But, just as everything which is in potency can be called matter, so also everything from which something has existence whether that existence be substantial or accidental, can be called form...*Also, because form causes existence in act, we say that the form is the act.* However, that which causes substantial existence in act is called substantial form and that which causes accidental existence in act is called accidental form.²⁰

As Aquinas notes, since form causes existence in act we can *call* it the act, but it is incredibly significant to emphasize that there is a causal relationship between the form and the act. We think that the inherence of a form in matter is a natural necessity for the matter's having actual existence, but this does not imply that the form is identical to the act. After all, the form is a *cause* of the actual existence of the matter. Thomas seems to be making a sleight of hand in his transition from a natural necessary causal relationship (form is the *cause* of actuality) to a far more metaphysically intimate relationship – identity (form *is* the actuality). This transition is unjustified. Premise (2) is therefore reasonable, even in light of Thomistic material ontology; for as we have seen, Thomas himself holds (2).

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Aquinas, *De Principiis Naturae*, par. 5.

Proposition (3)

The third proposition of our Main Argument is a straightforward inference from premises (1) and (2). As much as the proposition in (3) appears metaphysically dubious, it is worth emphasizing the obvious – (3) is entailed by (1) and (2) which we have seen are themselves well founded. So much for (3).

Premise (4)

Our last premise is a fairly uncontroversial conditional. We expect that any problems one might have with the Main Argument will turn on premises (1) and (2). However, in our explanation of premise (4), we hope to clarify something we have deliberately left implicit in our discussion of premises (1) and (2). But first, the premise.

Premise (4) states that if God is able to cause the actuality of prime matter without substantial forms, then it is metaphysically possible for prime matter to exist in actuality without an inherent substantial form. This premise asserts that if God is able to cause the existence of x without y , then y isn't a metaphysically necessary condition for the existence of x . Moreover, if y isn't a metaphysically necessary condition for the existence of x , then it is metaphysically possible for x to exist without y . Combining these two conditionals gives us: if God is able to cause the existence of x without y , it is metaphysically possible for x to exist without y . Taking this uncontroversial conditional and applying it to our situation about God being able to cause the actuality of prime matter without substantial forms – i.e., (3) – renders the conditional that we have in (4): if God is able to cause the actuality of prime matter without substantial forms, then it is metaphysically possible for prime matter to exist in actuality without substantial forms.

Before moving on, we need to make a clarification about something we passed over uncritically in our discussion of (1) and (2). A distinction can be made between (a) whether God could cause prime matter *to come into actual existence* without a substantial form, and (b) whether God could cause already existing prime matter (prime matter which is already a part of a hylomorphic compound) *to continue to exist* without a substantial form. This distinction is one Aquinas himself is careful to address in the context of his discussion of whether God could cause accidents to exist without a subject. His answer is that God could cause accidents to *continue to exist* without a subject, but He cannot cause them to *come into* existence apart from a subject. The reason has to do with the individuation of accidents requiring a subject. To have individual accidents in the first place requires them to be individual, and hence to be accidents of something. But once they are accidents of something, Aquinas argues, God could preserve their existence without that subject.²¹ In what follows, we are concerned with the simpler possibility of God causing already existing prime matter (prime matter which is already a part of a hylomorphic compound) *to continue to exist* as actual without a form. Whether God could cause prime matter to *come into*

²¹ See: *ST I*, 77, a. 1.

existence apart from form is something we will not say much about here, but a brief comment might be helpful.

Perhaps a case could be made for holding that the initial existence of matter (matter *coming into* existence) requires that it be designated. God can't cause prime matter to be actual without causing it to be *this* matter. But, perhaps – like in the case of accidents – the only way for it to be initially designated is for it to be the matter of some hylomorphic compound. Therefore, this would make it impossible for God to cause prime matter to come into existence (and hence be designated) without it being the matter *of* a compound. Therefore, matter cannot come *into* existence without a substantial form. But, despite all of that, it nevertheless might be possible for God to cause already designated matter to continue to exist without a form. He could preserve the actual existence of *that* matter without it being the matter of a compound. Perhaps this is what allows one to say that Christ's body in the tomb remained *that same body of Christ* despite not having Christ's soul inherent in it – God preserved that designated matter. It was initially designated by being part of a compound, but it continues to exist as the matter *of that compound* despite not being a part of that compound for three days. In short, we want Christ's body to remain the body *of* Christ even after his corruption. One way to do that is to hold that God is able to cause the matter of a hylomorphic compound to continue to exist as *that matter* (the matter *of that compound*) without it being a part of that compound.²² This is precisely what we say about disembodied souls. Even when not actually part of a complete hylomorphic compound, souls are nevertheless still forms *of* a particular hylomorphic compound. St. Paul's soul is still the soul *of St. Paul*. It is the soul of *that* hylomorphic compound. An analogous thing can be said about Christ's body in the tomb. Even though Christ's body in the tomb is not a part of an actual hylomorphic compound (Christ's human nature) because that compound was corrupted, it is nevertheless still (*via* a miracle) the body of *that* particular hylomorphic compound (Christ's human nature) and *not* some other hylomorphic compound, say carbon or oxygen. One major difference between Christ's disembodied soul and Christ's disensouled body is not that the former subsists while the latter does not, but simply that the former does so *naturally* while the latter only does so *miraculously*.

Conclusion (5)

We are only one modus ponens away from the conclusion that it is metaphysically possible for prime matter to exist in actuality without substantial forms. As odious as the conclusion of this argument might sound (although we hope by now its plausibility has begun to take hold of the reader), it is worth emphasizing the elementary – (5) is entailed by (3) and (4). It is also important to emphasize the modal scope of the conclusion. We are claiming that it is *metaphysically possible* for matter to exist without substantial form, which is entirely consistent with what Aquinas

²² Be that as it may, what we say here is still consistent with holding what we said earlier (which is also what St. Thomas himself held), *viz.* Christ's body in the tomb was still hypostatically united to the second person of the Trinity. In other words, the Word himself was in the tomb during the three days.

thinks is certainly true – i.e., it is *naturally necessary* that matter exists in act only through an inherent form. No matter how hard we try to bring about matter without form, we can't do it. It could only be done miraculously – something we think could have happened upon Christ's death and burial.

IV. Reconciling the Main Argument with (i)-(vi)

At the beginning of this paper, we claimed that we would provide an account of the ontological status of Christ's dead body as *matter without form*. We believe that we have provided a strong case for the matter without form account. The bulk of that work consisted in arguing that it is metaphysically possible for prime matter to exist in actuality without a substantial form. In this concluding section, we will show how our account is perfectly consistent with the truth of the following six theses which we take to be independently motivated and well worth retaining. So, if our account of the ontological status of Christ's dead body conflicts with any of these theses, we take that as evidence against the account. It is important to note that we are not trying to argue for these theses here. Although we do think each is true and that strong cases can be made in their favor, we will not be concerned with that here. In other words, the remainder of this paper will show that the matter without form account of the ontology of Christ's dead body isn't as metaphysically radical as many have initially thought. Here, once again, are the six theses.

- (i) Christ truly died.
- (ii) Christ's body was truly buried.
- (iii) No new substantial form was introduced into Christ's body after he died.
- (iv) There is only one substantial form – the rational soul – in Christ's human nature (i.e., the unicity of substantial forms).
- (v) Prime matter is pure potentiality (prime matter does not have actuality through itself).
- (vi) It is *naturally necessary* for prime matter to exist with an inherent substantial form (i.e., as the prime matter of a hylomorphic compound).

In light of our account, we can say that Christ truly died because his human nature was truly corrupted – the soul was separated from the matter. Hence, nothing prevents us from also affirming (i). Moreover, in light of what was argued earlier in this paper, we believe that Christ's body – that same extended matter that hung on the cross – was placed in the tomb. That prime matter of Christ's human nature can be said to be *Christ's* because – as Aquinas argues – the Word never 'gave up' what he once assumed; he was still hypostatically united to it. Moreover, as we saw in our discussion of premise (4), one could also hold that it was Christ's body that was buried because what was buried is the designated matter of Christ, thanks to God's preserving it in actual existence. So, our proposal is also consistent with (ii).

It should be obvious how our proposal is consistent with theses (iii) and (iv) – no new form is introduced into Christ’s matter upon his death and Christ’s human nature (and all substantial natures for that matter) has only one substantial form. In fact, the main motivators pushing us towards the matter without form solution to the problem of the ontological status of Christ’s dead body are precisely the desire to affirm (iii) and (iv). The matter without form account was conceived as an ontological story that would be consistent with affirming (iii) and (iv). We aren’t going to argue why one should hold these two theses (or any of the six for that matter), but we think there is reason to find (iii) and (iv) desirable.²³ One point, however, should be emphasized regarding (iii).

It is worth noting, that if the prime matter of Christ took on new substantial forms upon his death – say the forms of carbon, oxygen, and hydrogen – then perhaps it becomes more difficult to hold that what was in the tomb was still *that same body* that hung on the cross. Also, as Wippel (2011, 152-153) notes, given the communication of idioms, one would have to say (following Giles of Rome), something rather difficult: “God is earth, carbon, water, etc.” Wippel (2011, 152-53) summarizes Giles’s hesitation towards embracing the new form solution as his own.

Giles concludes by remarking again that while this solution [the new form solution] is probable, he is not “determining” it, that is, he is not proposing it as his definitive position. He points out that according to this explanation, just as it is necessary to say that before his death Christ was a man, in like fashion during his time in the tomb, when he was under some other created form, such as earth, a consequence follows which is difficult to accept (*quod grave est dicere*). Because of the *communicatio idiomatum*, just as one could say of Christ before his time in the tomb that “God is man”, so during that period of time one could have said “God is earth” or something of that kind. [cf. Giles of Rome, *Reportatio Lecturae super Libros I-IV Sententiarum*, q. 34 (dist. 21), p. 437 (ll. 54-59)]

So much for our discussion of (iii) and (iv). We are also very concerned about ensuring that our proposal is consistent with thesis (v) in its strictest form. We are inclined to think that giving up (v) would result in great damage to our hylomorphic material ontology and a great many natural necessities. If matter ceased to be pure potentiality – i.e., if it wasn’t a being that lacks all actuality in itself – then it would be very difficult to understand how there was a unity in material substance.²⁴ One can baldly claim that prime matter is pure potentiality and yet Christ’s dead body in the tomb was prime matter existing in act without a substantial form. It should be obvious why that is. On our view, the prime matter existing in act in the tomb is not existing in act *through itself*. It is *entirely* dependent on something else for its act. It has no

²³ For a discussion of way it might be desirable to hold (iii) and (iv), see: Wippel (2011).

²⁴ See: Wippel (2000, 295-375) for a comprehensive discussion of prime matter as pure potentiality; also, see: Jaeger (2014) for a contemporary discussion of some of the metaphysical difficulties that arise as a result of denying that prime matter is pure potentiality.

principle of actuality in itself. While in the tomb, it entirely depends (in an unmediated fashion) on an omnipotent being for its actual existence. Prime matter, then, is certainly still pure potentiality on our account of the ontological status of Christ dead body.

Finally, and this has been stressed throughout this paper, our ontological account of Christ's dead body does little damage to our material ontology. In fact, it does *no* damage at all to the natural necessities in the natural world. The existence of prime matter in act still has as a natural necessary condition the inherence of substance form. It is naturally impossible for matter to exist without form. No matter how hard we might try (metaphorically speaking, of course!) to pull the substantial form out of a substance and leave the matter in existence while blocking off other substantial forms from taking its place, we are bound to be unsuccessful. The 'damage' done by our remodeling is minimal. The damage is as minimal as the damage done by permitting the metaphysically possibility of non-inherent accidents.²⁵

It should be perfectly obvious that Aquinas did not endorse the matter without form account of Christ's dead body. Thomists, therefore, have given anything that resembles this solution little time of day. However, in light of the above discussion, we are inclined to think that *perhaps* (but we do not wish to bet the farm on this) one could show that the matter without form solution *could* be adopted by a Thomist (or perhaps by St. Thomas himself, albeit with slight modification) without too much damage. In fact, if the reader is inclined to agree with Wippel's (2011) humble confession, then perhaps one has reason to consider whether the solution proposed in this paper bears fruit that will last.

Unfortunately, I must also acknowledge that as of this writing I have not yet found an explicit explanation in Thomas' text indicating how he *would account for the continuing presence of prime matter* (and quantity) in Christ's body during the *sacrum triduum* without appealing to the introduction of some other substantial form. This issue I must leave for future research. But I have found no indication in his texts that

²⁵ In fact, the doctrine of the Eucharist might even appear *more* metaphysically radical than our matter without form view on the grounds that the doctrine of the Eucharist requires the conversion of the whole bread into the whole body of Christ. In short, it seems to require a modification of the standard hylomorphic account of change. In the Eucharist, there is a change, but it is hard to identify the (functional) matter of the change, since the whole bread – matter and form – ceases to be; all that remains are its accidents, but they aren't inherent in the body of Christ. Brower (2014, 240) describes this difficult metaphysical situation as follows,

Indeed, I think it would be best to say that not all change requires the generation or corruption of compounds, for Aquinas, and hence needn't satisfy his 'general' account at all. Change as such requires only that a potentiality associated with some matter or substratum gets actualized. And this, in turn, requires the existence of distinct compounds, which are such that they exist at distinct times and are wholly distinct with respect to their form. But it does not require that the compounds in question overlap with respect to their matter. On the contrary, it requires only that their matter is, by the end of the change, one in number. If such matter does, in fact, overlap, then we will have formal change; if not, we will have transubstantiation.

See: Brower (2014, 235-241) for a thorough discussion of the metaphysical difficulties surrounding Aquinas's account of transubstantiation.

he ever abandoned his doctrine of the unicity of substantial form in human beings, or his denial that prime matter could exist without some form even by divine power.²⁶

We agree with Wippel in that we are baffled regarding how Thomas – himself – “*would* account for the continuing presence of prime matter (and quantity) in Christ’s body during the *sacrum triduum*” without giving up thesis (iii) above. However, we think that further attention ought to be given to whether Thomas *could have* said (after slight modification of form as the *cause* of, but not identical to, the actuality of prime matter) that God could preserve prime matter in existence without form. However, for our purposes in this paper, we can ignore what St. Thomas would have, could have, or even did say about the “continuing presence of prime matter (and quantity) in Christ’s body during the *sacrum triduum*.”²⁷ Although motivated by Thomistic metaphysics, we do not pretend to be engaged in those interpretive questions. All we are concerned with is whether it is possible for Christ’s body in the tomb to have been matter without form. We think we have made a strong case that it is, indeed, possible.²⁸

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²⁶ Wippel (2011, 154).

²⁷ We hope that this paper will inspire Thomists more interested (and competent) in that difficult interpretive question – which we think ought to be explored in far greater detail – to take it up.

²⁸ Thanks to Jeffrey Brower, Alex Pruss, Michael Gorman, Aaron Riches, Tim Pawl, and an anonymous referee for helpful discussions on this topic. Also, thanks to Thomas DePauw for his translations of *Quodlibet* III, Q.1, a.1.

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