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The Identity Conditions of Prime Matter
According to William of Ockham*

Magali Roques

This paper is dedicated to William of Ockham’s metaphysics of matter. Its aim is to examine how William of Ockham accounts for the identity conditions of prime matter.

Two main options concerning the ontological status of prime matter were available in the Aristotelian tradition at Ockham’s time. The first option was that prime matter is a kind of formless gunk, which is the position of Thomas Aquinas. According to Aquinas, prime matter is pure potency, pure potency being halfway between pure nothing and being in act. The second option was that prime matter is an entity in act, something like a giant stuff that can be divided into individual parts that are bits of matter. This is the position of Duns Scotus.

The problem we will examine is the following: if matter is in everything that can come to be and pass away, hence in you and me, how can I account for the fact that my matter is not yours? This problem is quite independent of the question of the ontological status of matter, one of the main focuses of recent studies on prime matter in later medieval Aristotelianism.

Indeed, this problem takes its roots in the claim that prime matter is said to be numerically one in every composite. This claim comes from Averroes’ commentary on the Physics. It can be found in Aquinas and others, like Walter Burley, who claim that matter is pure potency.

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1. Ockham’s hylomorphism has been studied by DONCOEUR 1921, WOLTER 1963 and GODDU 1984, 83-111.

2. The question was asked for the first time by MCCORD ADAMS 1987, 690-696. McCord Adams’s answer has been discussed by MASSOBRIO 1984.

3. For a presentation of the main positions on the ontological status of prime matter in Ockham’s time, see especially WEISHEIPL 1963 and MCCORD ADAMS 1987, 672-680.

4. AQUINAS, De principiis naturae, paragr. 2, 41.

5. BURLEUS, Expositio in libros octo de physico auditu, 30va: ‘Et eodem modo debet intelligi illud quod Commentator dicit hic scilicet, quod subjectum quod est in potentia est unum omnium generabilium et corruptibilium, non quia sit eadem materia numero
The medieval metaphysics of individuation has been the object of extensive studies.⁶ It is often highlighted that this metaphysics is centered on substances and accidents. For instance, Scotus’ well-known discussion of individuation is restricted to material substances.⁷ The interest of our study lies in the fact that it deals with another issue in the metaphysics of individuation: how can we account for the individuation of stuff in medieval metaphysics?

I will argue that Ockham switched from his well known view that individuality is intrinsic and irreducible to a version of the Leibnizian view that individuality is reducible to the uniqueness of properties, because Ockham’s standard theory of identity and distinction cannot account for the identity conditions of matter.

The paper will be divided into two parts. The first will deal with the nature of prime matter and the puzzle raised by its identity conditions. The second will explain the concepts of identity and distinction used by Ockham in his account of the identity conditions of prime matter.

1. The nature of prime matter

1.1. Matter as a substrate of change

Ockham’s notion of prime matter owes much to Duns Scotus, who contended that if matter were nothing it could not receive forms.⁸ Scotus claims that:

“Matter” means a certain being (entitatem) outside the mind and its causes, and it is through this being that it can receive substantial forms, which are purely and simply acts.⁹

Scotus opposes Aquinas, according to whom prime matter does not have its own being distinct from form: taken in itself it is not an essentialiter omnium generabilium et corruptibilium, sed quia materiae omnium generabilium non includunt formas quibus distinguuntur formaliter.’

⁷ See for example SCOTUS, Opera Omnia, II, d. 3, p. 1, q. 1, 391-392: ‘Primo quaedam est de distinctione individuali in substantiis materialibus […] utrum substantia materialis ex se sive ex natura sua sit individua vel singularis.’
⁸ SCOTUS, Opera Omnia, II, d. 12, q. 1, 666.
⁹ SCOTUS, Opera Omnia, II, d. 12, q. 1, 672.
actually existing being (*ens aliquid actu existens*) but a pure potentiality to receive form and to exist.\(^\text{10}\) Indeed, it is form that gives being to matter.\(^\text{11}\) For Scotus, on the contrary, matter has its own being and does not receive it from form. Following Scotus, Ockham defines prime matter as

> a certain thing which exists in act in the nature of things, which is in potency to every substantial form, while not necessarily having any of them, even if one always is in it.\(^\text{12}\)

Ockham’s definition is based on Scotus’ distinction between objective potency and subjective potency.\(^\text{13}\) For something to be in objective potency means that it is not but can be. In this sense, there is no being that is in potency, since a being actually exists and actuality and potency in this sense are mutually exclusive.\(^\text{14}\) Matter is in potency only in the subjective sense that it does not necessarily have every form it could have.\(^\text{15}\) Hence matter exists in itself in act and does not take its being from substantial form.\(^\text{16}\)

According to Ockham, the metaphysical possibility that matter exists without this or that form is sufficient for there to be a real distinction between matter and form.\(^\text{17}\) Moreover, each substantial form is such that it could exist without this or that matter. On this point, he is quite close to Scotus.\(^\text{18}\) However, Ockham’s position has some peculiarities which are quite important.

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\(^{10}\) Aquinas, *In Duodecim Libros Metaphysicorum Expositio*, 8.1, n.1687.

\(^{11}\) Aquinas, *De principiis naturae*, 43.

\(^{12}\) Ockham, *Opera philosophica et theologica*, *Summula*, I, 9, *Opera Philosophica* (from now on abbreviated as: OPh), VI, p. 179, l. 5-8. The reasons why Ockham stipulates a real distinction between matter and form have been studied by White 1984.

\(^{13}\) Scotus, *Opera Omnia*, II, d. 12, q. 1, 670.

\(^{14}\) Ockham, *Opera philosophica et theologica*, *Exp. Phys.* III, 2, § 1, OPh IV, p. 415, l.25.

\(^{15}\) Ockham, *Opera philosophica et theologica*, *Summula* I, 10, OPh VI, p. 182, l. 27-39.


\(^{17}\) Ockham, *Opera philosophica et theologica*, *Summula* I, 9, Oph VI, p. 179, l. 8-11.

\(^{18}\) Scotus, *Opera Omnia*, II, d. 12, q. 1, 671.
Magali Roques

Scotus argues that since matter and form are really distinct from each other and since matter is ontologically prior to substantial form, it is possible for God to make matter without any form.\textsuperscript{19} Ockham thinks that Scotus’ point relies on a fallacy. It is not acceptable to reason that since matter can be without this or that form, it can be without any form.\textsuperscript{20} This reasoning is not logically valid, because ‘form’ is taken in a divided sense in the antecedent, and in a collective sense in the consequent. However, it must not be denied that God is able, at least in some cases, to make matter without any form,\textsuperscript{21} but this theological possibility is not derived from the nature of matter.

This is why prime matter should not be thought of as a giant stuff which is divided into chunks of matter by substantial forms, which seems to be Scotus’ picture. Indeed, Ockham claims that prime matter is by definition that than which nothing is simpler. Otherwise, matter could be generated from a part of itself, which is, according to Ockham, absurd.\textsuperscript{22} In other words, prime matter is only a substrate, i.e. what is stipulated in order to account for substantial change, under the hypothesis that nothing comes from nothing.

This is confirmed by Ockham’s claim that there is not just one prime matter, but as many prime matters as there are composite substances.\textsuperscript{23} The terms ‘matter’ and ‘form’ are common nouns which do not refer to anything universal. The reason is that matter and form are particulars. As a consequence, there is no single matter that is numerically the same in every composite.\textsuperscript{24}

With this idea, Ockham differs significantly from Aquinas and Scotus who both agree that prime matter of itself is just as common

\textsuperscript{19} Scotus, Opera Omnia, II, d. 12, q. 2, 682.
\textsuperscript{20} Ockham, Opera philosophica et theologica, SL III-4, 12, OPh I, p. 829-830, l. 113-122.
\textsuperscript{21} Ockham, Opera philosophica et theologica, Ord., d. 9, q. 3, Opera Theologica (from now on abbreviated as: OTh), p. 309, l. 5-17. These texts were not taken into account by Adams in her analysis (see McCORD ADAMS 1987, 645-647). In my view, these texts do not support her reading of Ockham’s conception of prime matter as a giant stuff.
\textsuperscript{22} Ockham, Opera philosophica et theologica, Summula I, 11, OPh VI, p. 187, l. 18-23.
\textsuperscript{23} Ockham, Opera philosophica et theologica, Summula I, 8, OPh VI, p. 177, l. 29-33.
\textsuperscript{24} Ockham, Opera philosophica et theologica, Summula I, 12, OPh VI, p. 189, l. 32.
as any substantial form. Ockham says that my prime matter is not yours. We are not made of the same stuff. Let us examine now the philosophical implications of this nominalistic affirmation.

1.2. A puzzle about individuation

Ockham defends the idea that every prime matter is of the same reason in every composite substance, while every prime matter is numerically distinct from any other prime matter. When Ockham says that chunks of matter are of the same reason, he means that no chunk of matter is determined to receive one form rather than another.25

Ockham justifies his claim by means of an argument based on a structural property of substantial change, namely that change can be transitive or, in Ockham’s terms, ‘immediate’. The conservation of matter through change implies that matter is at least specifically identical in every composite.26

Someone could argue that since matter can be numerically the same through change, matter can be numerically the same in every composite. Ockham cannot accept this idea because he thinks that there are as many matters as there are composites. He argues that this is a consequence of the fact that some forms are incompatible with each other.27 Ockham’s point is quite interesting. However, this argument presupposes what is to be proven, since it presupposes that incompatible forms are received in numerically distinct matters.

Ockham therefore gives another argument, which is based on the nature of prime matter. The argument has been called by M. McCord Adams ‘the Argument From Distinct Places’.28 It runs as follows:

‘This prime matter is not numerically one in everything that can be generated and corrupted. For my matter is not the same as your matter. Nor is anything imaginable numerically the same in a man and a donkey, since (1) nothing extended could exist simultaneously

27. Ockham, Opera philosophica et theologica, Summula I, 12, OPh VI, p. 189, l. 32-36.
in many places. Therefore, since (2) prime matter is truly extended, (3) it will not be able to be numerically the same in those things that are distinct in subject and place [...]. Therefore (4) there are different matters of different things.29

The reason why matter is not numerically the same in every composite would be that extension or quantity is incompatible with multilocation. Quantity is a feature of some things (material substances and qualities) which accounts for the fact that they have ‘partes extra partes’.30 To have ‘partes extra partes’ means first to be extended and divisible into parts that have a position,31 second to be impenetrable32 and third to be in a place circumscriptively, i.e. whole in the whole and part in part.33

Ockham’s argument seems to imply that spatio-temporal location belongs to the identity conditions of chunks of matter. Let us examine in a second part whether this is really the case.

2. The identity conditions of prime matter

2.1. The debate over individuation

Ockham’s claim is dependent on his position in the debate, at the end of the 13th century and at the beginning of the 14th century, over the individuation of substances and accidents. Ockham rejects the positions of Aquinas and Scotus as incoherent.

29. OCKHAM, Opera philosophica et theologica, Exp. Phys. I, 18, OPh IV, p. 207. Ockham gives another formulation of this very same argument in another place (OCKHAM, Opera philosophica et theologica, Summula I, 12, OPh VI, p. 190.

30. OCKHAM, Opera philosophica et theologica, SL I, 44, OPh I, p. 137, l. 156-157; Rep. IV, q. 6, OTh VIII, p. 71, l. 7-p. 72, l. 2; Rep. IV, q. 6, OTh VIII, p. 88, l. 22-24; Exp. Praed. 10, OPh II, p. 210, l. 133-135.


32. OCKHAM, Opera philosophica et theologica, TCC 41, OTh X, p. 223, l. 50-54. ‘Distare localiter’ is equivalent to ‘not to be in the same place’, which is the definitional property of impenetrability. See for example OCKHAM, Opera philosophica et theologica, Exp. Praed. 10, p. 215, l. 279-283.

33. OCKHAM, Opera philosophica et theologica, Rep. IV, q. 6, OTh VIII, p. 80. For Ockham’s conception of the ontological status of quantity and its function in the metaphysical structure of composite substances, see especially MAIER 1955, 141-223 and MCCORD ADAMS 1987, 169-214.
In Ockham’s view, Aquinas is interested in a general principle that explains the possibility of numerical diversity within a species.\textsuperscript{34} Matter, as pure formless potency, lacks any distinctive character by which it could diversify a received form into the many singular members of a species. Thus, in order for a form to be multiplied and individuated as a concrete material substance, it must be ‘received in this particular matter, determined to this place and this time’.\textsuperscript{35} In short, ‘a form is individuated by being in matter subject to quantity’.\textsuperscript{36} Such matter, marked by quantity, is called ‘signate’ matter. The dimensions demarcating an individual material substance from all other formally identical individuals are definite at any instant in time, but are variable over time. It is these ‘indeterminate’ dimensions that define signate matter.\textsuperscript{37}

Ockham contests Aquinas’ assertion that signate matter is the cause of distinction among forms of the same species.\textsuperscript{38} He argues that this assertion is circular because it implies that forms are individuated by matter and matter by form.\textsuperscript{39} Even if this were granted, it would still rely on the false hypothesis that a form’s nature determines which amount of matter it needs. Indeed, by God’s power, any form can be in any chunk of matter. If this is not the case, it is because of some intrinsic limitation of the natural efficient cause that puts this form into this chunk of matter.\textsuperscript{40} Aquinas should then accept that the principle of individuation is the efficient agent which puts this form into this matter. Obviously he cannot accept this, since he does not accept

\textsuperscript{34} For an extensive study of Aquinas’ theory of individuation and its evolution, see Roland-Gosselin 1926, 104-117.
\textsuperscript{35} Aquinas, \textit{Super Boethium De Trinitate}, q. 4, a. 2, p. 97.
\textsuperscript{36} Aquinas, \textit{Summa Theologicae}, I, q. 115, a.1, ad 3. Against the standard objection that mere accidents cannot fulfill the task of pluralizing and individualizing a physical substance, see Aquinas, \textit{Super Boethium De Trinitate}, q. 4, a. 2, ad. 2, p. 99.
\textsuperscript{37} Aquinas, \textit{Super Boethium De Trinitate}, q. 4, a.2, c. p. 97-98.
\textsuperscript{39} Ockham, \textit{Opera philosophica et theologica}, Ord. d. 7, q. 3, OTh III, p. 149, l. 21-p. 150.
\textsuperscript{40} Ockham, \textit{Opera philosophica et theologica}, Ord. d. 7, q. 3, OTh III, p. 151, l. 21-p. 152, l. 8.
that the cause of individuation is extrinsic to what is individuated.\textsuperscript{41} Aquinas’ theory is therefore simply inconsistent.

Let us come to Scotus, who seeks an account of what makes some member of a species the very individual that it is. Scotus is looking for an intrinsic individuator.\textsuperscript{42} Scotus’s strategy is to revise the very notions of identity and difference, by accepting a new kind of distinction that lies between rational distinction and real distinction. An individual substance is a composite of two parts that are really identical with each other, one of which is a common nature, the other is an individuating principle called ‘haecceity’ or ‘thisness’.\textsuperscript{43} These parts are formally distinct from each other.

Ockham’s well-known attack on Scotus consists in showing that the notion of ‘formal distinction’ is ill-grounded, at least for creatures.\textsuperscript{44} Ockham’s main weapon rests on the Principle of the Indiscernability of Identicals: if a is identical with b, then whatever is true of a is true of b.\textsuperscript{45} Since the individual difference is not formally distinct from itself, it follows that ‘the nature is not formally distinct from the individual difference\textsuperscript{46}, which contradicts Scotus’s own thesis.

In answer to Scotus, Ockham holds that no principle or cause accounts for the individuality of the individual, and thus there is no metaphysical problem of individuation at all.\textsuperscript{47} Rather, individuality is primitive and needs no explanation. In light of this conclusion,

\textsuperscript{41} Ockham, \textit{Opera philosophica et theologica}, Ord. d. 7, q. 3, OTh III, p. 151, l. 15-20.


\textsuperscript{43} As R. Adams suggests, ‘A thisness is the property of being identical with a certain particular individual, not the property that we all share, of being identical with some individual or other, but my property of being identical with me, your property of being identical with you, etc.’ Adams 1979, 6.

\textsuperscript{44} Ockham, \textit{Opera philosophica et theologica}, SL II, 2, OPh I, p. 254, l. 139-143. On Ockham’s attack on the formal distinction, see especially McCord Adams 1987, 13-70.

\textsuperscript{45} Ockham, \textit{Opera philosophica et theologica}, Ord., d. 2, q. 1, OTh II, p. 16, l. 15-19.

\textsuperscript{46} Ockham, \textit{Opera philosophica et theologica}, SL I, 16, OPh I, p. 56.

\textsuperscript{47} Ockham, \textit{Opera philosophica et theologica}, Ord., d. 2, q. 6, OTh II, p. 196, l. 1-6; SL I, 16, OPh I, p. 55, l. 30-31. For a more detailed account of Ockham’s position on the problem of individuation, see Maurer 1994, 373-397.
how should we understand Ockham’s idea that chunks of matter are numerically distinct because their extensions are numerically distinct?

2.2. Ockham on identity and distinction

The basic notion at stake is numerical identity. Numerical identity holds between things, not names. It can hold only between a thing and itself. Numerical identity characterizes only individuals. Its opposite is plurality, because everything which is numerically one is not many nor is it in many. To put it roughly, individuality consists in the possession of determinate self-identity and numerical distinctness from other things. Identity and distinction are modal relational properties.

Ockham makes the indiscernibility of identicals the primary criterion of distinction among real things. In other words, things which do not have the same properties are distinct. This is not a new idea in Ockham’s time. Indeed, Aquinas says that ‘Things that are identical are related to each other such that whatever is predicated of the one is also predicated of the other.’ He appeals to the contrapositive of the indiscernibility of identicals to establish distinctions.

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48. In this last case, one speaks of a relation of co-designation.
52. Ockham, Opera philosophica et theologica, Ord., d. 26, q. un., OTh IV, p. 537, l. 5-7.
53. See especially McCord Adams 1976, for a first attempt to relate Ockham’s criterion for real distinction to the principle of identity of indiscernibles. In this article, McCord Adams does not distinguish between the identity of indiscernibles and the indiscernibility of identicals.
55. For the following remarks on Aquinas and Scotus, see especially Cross, forthcoming.
56. Aquinas, Summa Theologicae, I, q. 40, a. 1, obj. 3.
57. Aquinas, Summa Theologicae, I, d. 39, a. 1, obj. 2.
different predications.\textsuperscript{58} Like Aquinas, he thinks that a strong version of the principle of non-contradiction can be used to solve questions of identity and distinction: ‘the distinction between things can be immediately inferred from the first principle’.\textsuperscript{59}

Ockham likewise appeals to the principle of non-contradiction to argue from identity to indiscernibility:

But among creatures the same thing cannot be truly affirmed and truly denied of the same thing. Therefore they are not the same.\textsuperscript{60}

Indeed, according to Ockham, ‘contradiction is the most powerful way of proving a real distinction of things from one another’.\textsuperscript{61} Identity is not relative, since discernibility is without qualification a property of any distinction.\textsuperscript{62} Ockham regards identity as primitive and non-reducible.

In this sense, Ockham’s position on identity is opposed to positions that claim that numerical identity can be analyzed in terms of some other concept. The most prominent among such reductionist views is the Leibnizian view according to which the individuality of an entity supervenes on the entity’s properties.

This approach to individuality is associated with the principle of the identity of indiscernibles, which expresses a relation between objects and their properties. Stated crudely, it says that objects that are indiscernible are identical. The principle is also associated with a certain theory of substance held by Leibniz, Hume and Russell, known as the bundle theory. According to this theory, substances are identical to their properties. Two substances cannot differ solely in number.\textsuperscript{63}

Ockham’s Argument From Distinct Places is meant to answer this question: is the nonidentity of numerically distinct matters grounded? The answer is clearly affirmative, on the ground that if something is extended, it is not multi-located. This supposes that there are no two

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{60} Ockham, \textit{Opera philosophica et theologica}, \textit{Ord.}, d. 2, q. 6, OTh II, p. 173-174. See also Ockham, \textit{Opera philosophica et theologica}, SL I, 16, OPh I, p. 56, l. 71-73.
\textsuperscript{61} Ockham, \textit{Opera philosophica et theologica}, \textit{Ord.}, d. 2, q. 6, OTh II, p. 174, l. 2-3.
\textsuperscript{62} Ockham, \textit{Opera philosophica et theologica}, \textit{Ord.}, d. 2, q. 1, OTh II, p. 14, l. 10-12.
\textsuperscript{63} The principle, with no restrictions on what to count as a property, is trivially true. On this subject, see especially Adams 1979 and Black 1952.
\end{flushleft}
The Identity Conditions of Prime Matter According to William of Ockham

(quantified) things that are in the same place at the same time. This implies in turn that Ockham admits the principle of the identity of indiscernibles, which is, in one of Leibniz’ formulations:

There are never in nature two beings which are perfectly alike and in which it would not be possible to find a difference that is internal or founded upon an intrinsic denomination.\(^64\)

Put another way, Ockham’s argument implies a denial of differences *solo numero* in at least one case. We must find a qualitative fact that explains why my matter is not yours, even if they are the same specifically. Ockham seems to think that this qualitative fact is related to spatial position. The basic idea is that spatial position is nonrepeatable, i.e. it cannot characterize more than one thing.

Ockham’s argument is baffling because it seems to suppose that, in at least one case, he accepts that something explains why something is nonrepeatable. How can this exception be justified?

### 2.3. Ockham’s use of the Identity of Indiscernibles

Let us begin by recalling that Leibniz committed himself to a strong version of the principle of the identity of indiscernibles, one takes into account only monadic intrinsic properties. However, a weaker form of the principle of the identity of indiscernibles is possible. This weaker principle allows for things that are otherwise qualitatively identical to be numerically distinct by the mere fact that they exist in different places. This would explain the first premise of the Argument From Distinct Places, which seems to imply that if there are two chunks of matter, then they are in different places.

The argument appeals to multiple location rather than to impenetrability. The principle of impenetrability states that no two individuals can exist at the same spatial location at the same time. This is an assumption of Russell’s use of the identity of indiscernibles.\(^65\) It is by means of positional qualities that different things are individuated.

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\(^64\) Leibniz, *Philosophical Essays, Monadology*, p. 42. For Leibniz’s position, see among others Cover and O’Leary-Hawthorne 1990; Rodriguez-Pereyra, forthcoming.

\(^65\) For the relation between impenetrability, ‘determinate’ or ‘indeterminate’ dimensions and quantity, see especially Donati 1998.
Positional qualities ground individuation for one such quality cannot be ‘in’ two discrete things at the same time by the synthetic a priori laws of space.\textsuperscript{66}

Nevertheless, Ockham’s Argument From Distinct Places presupposes the principle of impenetrability. Indeed, when trying to confirm his argument, he affirms that matter can be divided into parts that are extended, which implies in turn that these parts impenetrable to each other:

‘Further, matter is extended, and therefore it has part distant from part. But it is certain that matter can be divided, at least inasmuch as the whole can be divided. Therefore when the whole has been divided into parts, one part of the matter will be in one part and the other part of the matter in the other part. Therefore there are distinct matters there, and consequently it is not the same matter that exists in all distinct things existing at the same time.’\textsuperscript{67}

Moreover, Ockham does not defend an absolutist conception of space. Distance relations defined in dynamic terms do all the work.\textsuperscript{68} Particular places and times are intrinsically featureless and so lack any internal basis for differentiation among themselves. In this sense, they are structurally similar to Scotus’ haecceities inasmuch as one can speak of the distance relation as an intrinsic individuator. Ockham’s position suffers from an important weakness related to the thesis that numerically distinct chunks of matter are specifically the same. If matter is of the same reason in every composite, there is no reason why all chunks of matter cannot be considered integral parts of a single, big prime matter. Indeed, if matters are specifically the same in every composite, then everything which is predicated of any term referring to a prime matter is predicated of any other term referring

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{66} Russell 1948, 310-320. See also Russell 1946, 24: ‘For my part, I hold that a “thing” is nothing but a bundle of qualities and that, therefore, two different things cannot be exactly alike. But I hold this only because I regard position in space as defined by means of certain qualities not usually recognized as such.’
\item \textsuperscript{67} Ockham, Opera philosophica et theologica, Summula I, 12, OPh VI, p. 190.
\item \textsuperscript{68} Ockham, Opera philosophica et theologica, Exp. Praed. 16, OPh II, p. 300, l. 66-67: ‘positio non dicit nisi partes diversimode distantes inter se.’
\end{itemize}
to another prime matter except ‘to be there’. This is the definitional property of an integral part.69

The upshot of this argument is that one cannot affirm like Ockham that every chunk of matter is countable,70 because ‘matter’ is a mass noun. M. McCord Adams is right to say that Ockham fails to distinguish mass nouns and count nouns and that this failure has important consequences for the identity conditions of prime matter.71

Even if it is granted that ‘matter’ behaves like a count noun, Ockham cannot affirm that matters are countable as he does. Indeed, according to him, for things to be countable, it does not matter whether things are in distinct places or not.72

Nevertheless, one could think that Ockham’s position holds if one says that matter is individuated by its location only insofar as it is a constituent of a natural substance. In the argument proposed to confirm the Argument From Distinct Places, Ockham says that ‘matter can be divided, at least inasmuch as the whole can be divided’. Either matter is here part of a giant matter or it is part of the substantial composite. That matter must be understood here as part of the composite is confirmed by Ockham’s claim that impenetrability only stands for composite substances and not for prime matter alone.73 In this sense, Ockham’s Argument From Distinct Places would mean that it is hard to see how two composite entities could share literally part of their constituents and still be two, while being in distinct places.

However, this implies that the identity conditions of the parts of a substance depend on the identity conditions of the substance,

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71. McCord Adams 1987, 686: ‘Actually, Ockham’s way of talking obliterates any distinction between count-nouns and mass-nouns: he counts, not parcels or quantities of stuffs or prime matter, but stuffs and prime matters. For instance, he speaks of “two waters”, rather than two glasses of water or volumes of water, coming to make numerically one water. Having thus assimilated stuffs to things as alike countable, Ockham not surprisingly advances the following principle: each generated composite has its own prime matter that is numerically distinct from the prime matter of any other simultaneously existing generated composite.’
73. Ockham, Opera philosophica et theologica, TCC 41, OTh X, p. 222, l. 9-20.
which means that there is some metaphysical priority of the whole over the parts. This runs counter to Ockham’s reductionist conception of material substance according to which a composite substance is nothing more than its parts disposed in a certain way.\textsuperscript{74}

**Conclusion**

To conclude, in his reflections on the identity conditions of prime matter, Ockham seems to change his conception of identity, moving from a view of individuality as based on mere numerical difference and countability, to a view of identity as discernibility grounded in spatio-temporal location. This move does not come from the fact that Ockham claims that prime matter is an entity in act with a nature of its own, independently of any form. It comes instead from the fact that Ockham is dissatisfied with the common idea of numerically the same matter existing in every composite. Since he claims nevertheless that matter is specifically the same in every composite, he is obliged to find a qualitative ground for the numerical distinction between chunks of prime matter. Ockham claims that differences of spatio-temporal location explain why chunks of matter are numerically distinct. In this sense, I disagree with M. McCord Adams, according to whom Ockham sees prime matter as a giant stuff that gets divided into numerically distinct matters by substantial forms.\textsuperscript{75}

All in all, Ockham should not have given up his absolute concept of identity in order to defend the idea that there are as many prime matters as composite substances. He nevertheless has the merit of having tackled a problem that had gone unnoticed by his predecessors.

\textsuperscript{74} Ockham, *Opera philosophica et theologica*, Summula I, 19, OPh VI, p. 207, l. 64-68.

\textsuperscript{75} McCord Adams 1987, 687: ‘Thus, despite wide disagreements about the ontological status of prime matter, Aquinas and Ockham seem to share the picture of matter as extended into a giant cookie dough that gets divided into numerically distinct matters with determinate boundaries by substantial forms that function as cookie cutters!’ Massobrio follows McCord Adams in part, when she says Massobrio 1984, 199: ‘If I am right, it will turn out that Ockham does not really need something to individuate matter over and above matter itself, in some sense at least. I think he will be able to rely on the location of matter and on the inherence of forms in matter for its individuation.’
The Identity Conditions of Prime Matter According to William of Ockham

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