

## Comment on Hawkins

Thomas Jovanovski

Baldwin Wallace University

At least two interrelated questions would, I imagine, likely immediately occur to any well-informed student of Aristotle's corpus upon reading the title of Devon Hawkins' paper under consideration, "Aristotle's Prime Matter: An Analysis of Hugh R. King's Revisionist Approach": First, what could this, or any, essay possibly contribute to a debate that appears to have been effectively settled since about the early 1980s? And, second, what exactly is to be gained by continuing to undermine arguably the leading voice of the side that has implicitly acknowledged defeat? Reflecting a bit further, our conscientious Aristotelian student might pose a parallel, if larger scaled, question: Why revisit an idea that — more than "vague, at best" (p. 1), as Hawkins describes it — is not only a mare's nest of inconsistencies and sheer confusion, but also occupies a status of less than decisive significance in Aristotle's written thought?

My erotetic characterization of the debate to which I refer as *settled*, namely, the debate regarding Aristotle's elusive notion of prime matter, is grounded in a bald concession by William Charlton, himself one of the principal exponents who, along with Hugh R. King, have pronounced the traditional understanding that Aristotle posited and preserved the idea of prime matter, wrong. Specifically, in his "Prime Matter: a Rejoinder" (1983), Charlton refers to C.J.F. Williams' (1982) renewed criticism of Charlton's position as "flogging a dead horse" (p. 197). As concerns our imaginary student's likely parallel question, in the light of what I have gleaned from (primarily) the relevant sections in Aristotle's *Physics* and *De Generatione et Corruptione*, one would find it difficult to identify any conspicuous — indeed, any noticeable — distinctions between a universe with, and another without, prime matter. Speaking analogously, while, granted, prime matter could serve an indispensable function in Aristotle's intellectual workshop, its supervisor has assigned it to such an ill-defined task that neither he nor, as might be expected, any external observers have been able to reach a consensus on just *what* it is doing, or even *whether* it is doing anything at all.

Beyond the various thematic possibilities indicated by its main title, the paper before us consists of an abstract, a first part under the heading "King and the Tradition," a second part under the heading "Refining King Against [*sic*] the Tradition," and a conclusion. These divisions also partly point to the three objects Hawkins appears to have in mind, namely, (i) to delineate King's interpretation of Aristotle's passages on prime matter (pp. 3-13), (ii) to expose and rectify King's misapprehensions of the subject (pp. 13-20), and (iii) to "argue for an approach to prime matter that eschews a dichotomous understanding of form's place in the philosophies of Aristotle and Plato" (p. 1). Hawkins' descending success quotient in reaching each of her aims corresponds to the sequence of the parts; hence, while she succeeds in achieving her first aim, she succeeds less in achieving her second, and never seems to begin the third.

Insofar as our author has achieved her first aim, and insofar as I have failed to locate any discernible discussion concerning the third, let us here train our focus on the second part of her paper, wherein she promises to carry out an analysis of King's position. Actually, insofar as we are constrained by the character of our assignment — namely, to comment on a comment about a commentator who decades ago critiqued commentators who for over two millennia considered Aristotle through Platonic lens — within the succeeding paragraphs we would have to turn not to what Aristotle has written on prime matter, but to the question of whether our author has, stylistically as well as conceptually, made a compelling case against King.

Though of varying consequences, we might identify at least three elements deserving of attention in this part of Hawkins' essay and outside it: (a) For one, she repeatedly refers to "the tradition" (example, p. 16) and to the "traditional characterization of Aristotelian prime matter" (example, p. 1) — and this without even a single sentence of explanation as to precisely who should be included in that collection of writers. While it is possible that students of philosophy would have some inkling that these would be Aristotelian commentators of the Alexandrine and of the medieval periods, lay readers would likely remain largely mystified by these phrases. Nor, more perplexingly, does Hawkins see it as necessary to at least briefly explain what it was that this "tradition" explicitly said about prime matter.

(b) Next, we might point to Hawkins' somewhat ungainly usage of a couple of centrally situated words. The essay's title characterizes King's position as *revisionist*, a depiction that, had he been amongst us at the moment, King would have rejected; for if the root term, *revise*, means to alter or modify, then Hawkins' title should have to be interpreted as implying that the traditional understanding of Aristotle's prime matter was in need of, essentially, some conceptual tweaking, and not supersession, as King thought. In the title of her essay's second part, Hawkins uses the term *refining* in an equally awkward sense. If by refining we mean to separate from impurities or other extraneous substances, then Hawkins' subtitle must necessarily be implying that in what follows she will attempt to cleanse King's position from the traditional view on the subject, as though traces of the latter could be found therein. This should suffice the point, as Hawkins is surely using each of these and similar terms in its colloquial, and not in its denotative sense.

(c) Finally, in her essay's second part, Hawkins proposes several critical claims against King. In the opening lines there, she nonplusses us by referring to King's "re-reading of prime matter in Aristotle" as "groundbreaking," while, in the same breath, accusing him of "suffer[ing] from the confirmation bias of which he accuses his predecessors" (p. 13). In the sentence following these remarks, Hawkins adds that King "routinely looks past Aristotle's references to form in [*sic*] his supporting citations about matter" (*ibid.*). We might here pause to reflect on how, or whether, it is possible for anyone to present a *groundbreaking* commentary on Aristotle, and be simultaneously guilty of confirmation bias and of routinely looking past references in his corpus, a practice which could not but wholly neutralize that commentary's revolutionary message.

Chances, I believe, are good that Hawkins would have done better had she focused her efforts on examining another topic in philosophy — that is, not only a more current, or, as William James would have said, a more *lively* topic, but moreover one whose critics and reviewers she might well have engaged in a dialogue. As it is, or to the extent that a decreasing cohort of writers appears to be willing to reflect on Aristotle's prime matter, and an even smaller number willing to concentrate on King's position, she is, basically, presenting a critique of rather *passé* (not to say superfluous) importance. Hawkins might nevertheless have boosted her discussion's interest and impact factors had she attempted to reinforce sections of King's argument while maintaining an overall critical disposition toward it. Nor, I must hasten to add, should that have in any meaningful sense subverted her position, as academic honesty demands that any critic demonstrate understanding of the antecedent elements that brought his or her opponent's position into being, and also acknowledge characteristics therein that are strong or could be rendered stronger.

Such alterations ought to be made to at least partly improve the existing paper, insofar as it appears to fall short of the usual academic mark for other reasons as well. Not the least of these reasons is that Hawkins' analysis consists of a mere seven-page, double-spaced text, which includes block quotations and footnotes. On the other hand, even if the scant number of observations she makes on King had each turned out to be of seminal import, the final product would still have had to be declared insufficient; for when one promises to submit an *analysis* of another author's view of the sort of vexing subject we have here, we tend to expect a much longer and a more detailed treatment of the essay in question. To paraphrase Aristotle's oft-quoted analogy in *The Nicomachean Ethics* (1098a), one swallow does not a spring make — but, indeed, neither do only several swallows.

Ultimately, however, it is the secondary literature on Aristotle's concept of prime matter, or, specifically, the literature preceding Hawkins' paper, which might be said to have at once eclipsed and precluded the need for any additional works on the subject. It is in the light of this fact, and secure in the knowledge I am not committing the *ad veracundiam* fallacy, that I inquire: Exactly what, if anything, could pass for unaddressed territory in King's essay which would necessitate another look at his position? What is there in the latter that has not been already examined in, for example, Friedrich Solmsen's "Aristotle and Prime Matter: A Reply to Hugh R. King" (1958), or, much more recently, in David Bostock's *Space, Time, Matter, and Form: Essays on Aristotle's Physics* (2006)? In a word, Solmsen, who, together with his teacher and colleague Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, stands as one of twentieth century's renowned commentators on classical philosophy, appears to have begun and, essentially, to have completed the response to King's challenge in behalf of, as Charlton puts it, the "friends of prime matter" (p. 197). Curiously, insofar as she does not so much as even mention either of these titles, here we must ask further: Did Hawkins think it unnecessary to acknowledge these writers, or was she simply unaware of their indispensable contribution to the debate? My impression is that she is familiar with these writers, though, whatever the case, her essay will remain incomplete so long as she perpetuates this lacuna by not addressing where she agrees or disagrees with them.