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Untangling Robert Grosseteste's hylomorphism: matter, form, and bodiness

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ABSTRACT

During the thirteenth century, Aristotelian hylomorphism became the cornerstone of scholastic natural philosophy. However, this theory was fragmented into a plurality of interpretations and reformulations, sparking a rich philosophical debate. This article focuses on Robert Grosseteste (d. 1253), one of the earliest Latin philosophers to directly engage with Aristotle's natural philosophy. Specifically, it delves into Grosseteste's perspective on hylomorphism, emphasizing two controversial doctrines that characterized British scholasticism in the late thirteenth century: universal hylomorphism and formal pluralism. The former claims that all substances, whether bodily or spiritual, are hylomorphic compounds, that is, they are made of matter and form. Formal pluralism, in turn, maintains that hylomorphic substances possess more than one substantial form simultaneously. After a brief introduction, the paper proceeds, first, to examine the type of hylomorphism endorsed by Grosseteste, shedding light on an obscure passage that seems to suggest universal hylomorphism. Second, the examination expands on Grosseteste's theory of bodily form and emphasizes the apparent contradiction of this theory with universal hylomorphism. The discussion then turns to Grosseteste's endorsement of formal pluralism and the functionality he envisioned being expressed by the bodily form. Finally, the paper draws conclusions about Grosseteste's revised hylomorphic account.

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1. Introduction

Robert Grosseteste (d. 1253) is among the most original thinkers of the thirteenth century. His reflections would impact profoundly later English philosophers like Roger Bacon, Walter Burley, and John Wyclif. The reconstruction of Grosseteste's philosophy, however, is hindered by some contextual factors related to his texts and working methods. One of the best examples of this attitude is Grosseteste's hylomorphism. While he clearly adheres to this Aristotelian theory, his works hint at the formulation of a revised hylomorphic

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account, which has not yet been adequately clarified due to three main difficulties. First, Grosseteste's revised account is seldom accompanied by precise justifications and explanations of his new enunciation in relation to other claims he makes elsewhere. Second, the authoritative framework on which Grosseteste's account is based merges Aristotelian and Platonic inputs. Third, Grosseteste authored a series of very short works that often exhibit a fragmentary nature and some strong contextualist flavour, concentrating on one issue at a time without any apparent willingness to embrace a more systematic approach.

In this paper, I want to address two fundamental questions about Grosseteste's theory of matter and form. First, does Grosseteste adhere to universal hylomorphism? Second, does he accept formal pluralism? Unfortunately, Grosseteste does not engage directly with either of these questions. Yet he leaves some clues scattered throughout his philosophical and theological works. First, I will examine the question of whether Grosseteste endorses universal hylomorphism, as many later Oxford philosophers would do. Second, I will discuss his theory of bodily form in relation to both universal and bodily hylomorphism. Third, I will examine Grosseteste's commitment to the persistence of bodily form in individual compounds and assess his adherence to the theory of the plurality of substantial forms. Finally, I draw my conclusion about Grosseteste's revised hylomorphic account and emphasize the possible influence of Avicbron.

2. A first bodily matter?

According to medieval hylomorphism, prime matter is one of the two metaphysical components of all bodily substances, the other being the substantial form. This prime matter is often characterized by a series of privative features: it is formless, extensionless, and in potency to all substantial forms.¹ The compound made of prime matter and the substantial form is a unitary, individual substance.

The thirteenth-century debate, however, proposes two different interpretations of the items that should be included in the set of the hylomorphic compounds. The most common and successful interpretation limits the set of these compounds to the physical substances, that is, those substances that satisfy two main criteria: (1) they are bodily, that is, they are extended into the three dimensions and (2) they undergo generation and corruption. With some hesitations about the case of the celestial spheres (which are extended yet do not undergo substantial change), this interpretation assumes that only these substances are enmattered. We may call this

¹For an overall discussion of the scholastic debate on prime matter, see Pasnau, *Metaphysical Themes*, 17–95.