



Hylomorphism into Pieces? Introductory Remarks

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1 RESHAPING THE NARRATIVE

For centuries, hylomorphism ruled over Western philosophy and science. From the emergence of the first universities in Europe to the early modern era, the notion that natural bodies are composed of matter and form represented the prevailing theory of nature in the later Middle Ages. However, hylomorphism faced its share of challenges, which gradually surfaced during the later Middle Ages.

A common narrative in the history of both philosophy and science asserts that the seventeenth century witnessed the abrupt decline of hylomorphism, coinciding with the decline of Aristotelianism. Atomist and corpuscular theories of matter (if we choose to designate ‘corpuscular’ as a theory that explains the structure of bodies and natural processes

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through interactions among minute material constituents without necessarily assuming the existence of a void) came to supplant the long-dominant hylomorphic perspective. Philosophers and scientists such as Descartes, Galileo, and Gassendi, to name just a few, believed that ‘true’ philosophy should dispense with the venerable Aristotelian doctrine of matter and form. This narrative possesses a degree of vagueness and excessive generality, and its validity extends only up to a certain point. In addition, it remains incomplete, misleading, and significantly inaccurate to a large extent.

The rejection of hylomorphism as an explanatory framework for the constitution of natural bodies can be attributed to the influence of alternative explanations regarding the internal structure of such bodies. However, it is a misconception to assume that the rejection of hylomorphism in the seventeenth century resulted from a sudden and complete replacement.

The resurgence of Lucretius’s *De rerum natura* in the early fifteenth century, followed by increased access to other Greek Antiquity materials in the sixteenth century, sparked new ideas concerning the structure of bodies and the nature of explanations needed for natural processes. During approximately two centuries, spanning from 1400 to 1600, many philosophers did not necessarily believe that atomist and corpuscularian theories were inherently incompatible with hylomorphism. Instead, they formulated original philosophical doctrines that integrated these two frameworks.

When viewed through the lens of the history of both philosophy and science, this fact is somewhat unsurprising. Much like other significant conceptual shifts in the history of philosophy, the departure from the Aristotelian framework largely represented the culmination of a gradual evolution in the conception and application of matter and form as speculative tools. However, opting for a gradualist perspective rather than the abrupt replacement narrative commonly associated with figures like Gassendi, Galileo, and Descartes would still be a simplified explanation.

Even in the late sixteenth century, many proponents of hylomorphism continued to believe that the Aristotelian principles of matter and form could be reconciled with the emerging insights of modern physics, not to mention the enduring presence of a robust scholastic tradition firmly rooted in this doctrine well into the seventeenth century. The various inventive ways in which corpuscular theories and hylomorphism coexisted during the transitional period between the late Middle Ages and the early