

Ancient perspectives on Aristotle's theory of the soul as a hylomorphic form -- from Aristotle to Plotinus: Epiphenomenalism, Emergentism and Dualism

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The present paper offers an outline of Aristotle's hylomorphism and its ancient developments, intended in this context as background to the modern philosophical developments of the theory. According to a recent version of the theory, hylomorphism claims that 'structure (or organization, form, arrangement, order, or configuration) is a basic ontological and explanatory principle. Some individuals, paradigmatically living things, consist of materials that are structures or organized in various ways' (W. Jaworski. *Structure and the Metaphysics of Mind*. Oxford 2016: 1). Aristotle's own account of the relation between body and soul broadly satisfies this description (with a number of qualifications, e.g. the status of active intellect). On the other hand, the historical approach to the theory as Aristotle and his immediate successors developed it allows us to draw attention to some interesting philosophical aspects and internal tensions of the theory,

Some of Aristotle's early students developed his view in a way that we could label in modern terms as reductionist or eliminativist. So they conceived of the soul/structure as being nothing else than the arrangement of the underlying body with no causal power. This is the *harmonia*-view, which is actually criticised by Aristotle, but is taken over and developed by Aristotelian philosophers such as Aristoxenus, Dicaearchus (4th century BC) and Boethus of Sidon (1st century BC). This is how Victor Caston describes Aristoxenus' view: 'Behavior issues not from the soul, but from the "nature and configuration of the entire body," as sounds do from an instrument. In both cases, the aggregate of material forces is entirely sufficient to cause the effects that follow. Nothing here requires distinct mental powers' (V. Caston. 'Epiphenomenalisms, Ancient and Modern'. *The Philosophical Review*. 106 (1997): 340). So according to this reading of Aristotle the form/structure is not an ontological and explanatory principle. Boethus of Sidon equates Aristotle's substantial form with a bundle of non-substantial

properties (presumably tropes, in modern terms) occurring in matter. This reading of Aristotle is interestingly criticised by Alexander of Aphrodisias (2nd AD), whose defence of the substantial and causal status of hylomorphic forms can be set in parallel with some recent neo-Aristotelian theories such as emergentism and causal powers. As noted by Victor Caston on Alexander's view, 'the forms of natural substances, and hence souls, are ultimately to be understood as causal powers or dispositions. Forms are the features of substances that enable them to do or undergo the activities characteristic of their kind – in Aristotelian terminology, a form just is the ability to perform one's specific function or *ergon*. Aristotelians in the last forty years have taken this approach to be pivotal and placed great emphasis on it. But the first person to make this central is Alexander. A striking feature of his treatise, as a quick glance at the Greek-English Index will show, is how prevalent the word *dunamis* or 'power' is – much more so, in fact, than *energeia* or 'activity', which one might otherwise have assumed would be more important, given the ontological and definitional priority Aristotle assigns it in the *Metaphysics*. But there is no substantive or doctrinal difference here, only one of emphasis. A power must inevitably be defined as the power to perform or undergo a certain activity, just as this activity can in turn be understood as its culmination and fulfilment' (V. Caston. *Alexander of Aphrodisias. On the Soul*. Part 1. Translated with an Introduction and Commentary. London 2012: 8). Alexander's critical engagement with the previous Peripatetic tradition is one of the most intriguing, and still widely neglected, philosophical debates in Antiquity (for details, see. M. Rashed. *Essentialisme. Alexandre d'Aphrodise entre logique, physique et cosmologie*. Berlin and New York: de Gruyter 2007).

After Alexander, Plotinus (3rd AD) levels an interesting criticism to hylomorphism. To cut a long story short, Plotinus argues that the distinction between structure and the underlying matter is insufficiently grounded. His position is somewhat similar to that which, in recent times, regards hylomorphism as a moderate form of materialism, and nothing more than this. So, according to Plotinus, Aristotle and Alexander are right in claiming that the soul is an ontological and explanatory principle, but the Peripatetic hylomorphic form cannot satisfy these requirements. Plotinus claims that only a self-subsistent and extra-physical substance, such as a Platonic soul, is able to solve the

internal tensions of hylomorphism. In particular, Plotinus rejects the view that life can be seen as some kind of structural or emergent property of the underlying matter.

This ancient philosophical debate runs in a direction that is contrary to recent discussions. Hylomorphism is currently regarded as an attractive theory, which is able to solve the difficulties caused by materialism on one side and by substance dualism on the other. In antiquity, hylomorphism was taken to be a materialist theory and the distinction between matter and structure was often seen as insufficiently grounded.