

Keeping Hylomorphic Structure in Mind

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Abstract

Since the Scientific Revolution of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the dominant philosophical worldviews have taken the physical universe to be a vast undifferentiated sea of matter and energy that can be described exhaustively by our best physics. These worldviews have given rise to seemingly insoluble mind-body problems. What place can there be in the universe for thought, feeling, and perception if at a fundamental level the universe lacks any such characteristics? What the dominant worldviews have in common is their rejection of hylomorphic structure. Hylomorphic structure carves out distinctive individuals from the otherwise undifferentiated sea of matter and energy described by our best physics, and it confers on those individuals distinctive powers. If hylomorphic structure exists, the physical universe is punctuated with pockets of organized change and stability—composite physical objects (paradigmatically living things) whose structures confer on them powers that distinguish what they can do from what unstructured materials can do. Those powers include the powers to think, feel, and perceive. To reject hylomorphic structure is to reject a basic principle that distinguishes the parts of the physical universe that can think, feel, and perceive from those that can't, and without a principle of that sort, the existence of those powers in the natural world can start to look inexplicable and mysterious. If there is nothing built into the basic fabric of the universe that explains why some things have the powers to think, feel, and perceive, while others can't, then the options for understanding the existence of those powers in the natural world become constrained: either they must be identified with the powers of physical materials taken by themselves or in combination (as panpsychists and many physicalists claim), or their existence must be taken as an inexplicable matter of fact (as many emergentists and epiphenomenalists claim), or their existence in the natural world must be denied altogether (as substance dualists and eliminative physicalists claim). But for hylomorphists, the options are not constrained in this way. Powers like thought, feeling, and perception exist in the natural world simply because structure exists in the natural world. I outline a hylomorphic framework that dovetails with current work in metaphysics, philosophy of mind, and scientific disciplines such as biology and neuroscience, and explain how it enables us to situate mental phenomena within the natural world.