



4º Congresso Aristotélico-Tomista de Psicologia * 18 a 31 de maio de 2026

The Hylomorphism of Aquinas and Contemporary Metaphysics

O hilemorfismo de Tomás de Aquino e a metafísica contemporânea

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Abstract

This paper proposes to provide a succinct account of Aquinas' hylomorphist natural philosophy and metaphysics, contrasted with the growing trend of "rediscovering" hylomorphism for contemporary metaphysics and philosophy of mind. The main claim of the paper is that as long as the contemporary accounts do not recognize the strict logical connection between Aquinas' notions of form and being, according to which being (*esse*) is the actuality of form, and, correspondingly, any form distinct from its being is a determination of its act of being (*actus essendi*), they will not properly be able to engage Aquinas' account, which is why their attempts to identify substantial form as 'structure' or 'configuration' of matter will, from a Thomistic point of view, be doomed to be abortive. The concluding remarks of the paper will also relate Aquinas' metaphysical conception of material substantial form as the primary act of prime matter to the newest ideas in contemporary mathematical physics concerning "fragments of energy".

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Resumo

Este artigo propõe uma descrição sucinta da filosofia natural e metafísica hilemorfista de Tomás de Aquino, contrastando-a com a crescente tendência de "redescobrir" o hilemorfismo para a metafísica e a filosofia da mente contemporâneas. A principal tese do artigo é que, enquanto as abordagens contemporâneas não reconhecerem a estrita conexão lógica entre as noções de forma e ser de Aquino, segundo a qual o ser (*esse*) é a atualidade da forma e, correspondentemente, qualquer forma distinta de seu ser é uma determinação de seu ato de ser (*actus essendi*), elas não serão capazes de dialogar adequadamente com a concepção de Aquino. É por isso que suas tentativas de identificar a forma substancial como "estrutura" ou "configuração" da matéria estarão, de um ponto de vista Tomista, fadadas ao fracasso. As considerações finais do artigo também relacionarão a concepção metafísica de Aquino da forma substancial material como o ato primário da matéria primordial às ideias mais recentes da física matemática contemporânea sobre "fragmentos de energia".

1. Hylomorphism's ups and downs

Saying that hylomorphism has had its ups and downs over the centuries of Western history of ideas would probably qualify as the understatement of the present century. After its somewhat rough start out of the Academy through the Lyceum as one of the metaphysical options in Antiquity, through a practically unchallenged reign in Scholasticism, followed by near complete repudiation and subsequent neglect in modern philosophy, to its rather surprising re-emergence in late twentieth century metaphysics (along with the equally unexpected resurrection of the very discipline in the same period), the idea has certainly had a bumpy ride until it has arrived in this century, especially in the contemporary philosophy of mind, as a promising metaphysical alternative between the apparent blind alleys of materialism and dualism.²

Although by and large true, nevertheless, this is an overly simplistic picture of the story. Hylomorphism comes in many varieties, as do its opponents.³ Going over all these theories and attempting to do justice to all their strengths and weaknesses would be an unmanageable task. So, instead, to keep the project manageable, in this paper I will just barge ahead with what I take to be the best interpretation of Aquinas's conception, without paying too much attention to the

² For a presentation of contemporary hylomorphism in the contemporary philosophy of mind along these lines, see Klima, G. (2016) "Mind vs. Body and Other False Dilemmas of Post-Cartesian Philosophy of Mind", in: Valdecasas, M. (et al., eds.), *Biology and Subjectivity*, Springer: Dordrecht, pp. 25-39.

³ For more on this issue, see Klima, G. (2017) "The Trivia of Materialism, Dualism and Hylomorphism: Some Pointers from John Buridan and Others", in: Klima, G. (ed.) (2017) *Questions on the Soul by John Buridan and Others: A Companion to John Buridan's Philosophy of Mind*, Springer: Cham, Switzerland, pp. 45-62.



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criticisms of its potential competitors (apart from the occasional jabs on the side), hoping to show that what I take to be Aquinas's genuine conception actually transcends not only the quibbles that can be raised by its potential competitors, but also the conceptual boundaries between scholastic metaphysics and contemporary science.

2. Hylomorphism on “the intuitive approach” and its drawbacks

Hylomorphism, as it is popularly presented, is one of the simplest, most easily understandable of all metaphysical theories. It simply states that all material substances around us, indeed, including ourselves, are primarily composed of two basic ingredients: matter (hylé) and form (morphé). Just as a ball of wax is composed of wax and a spherical shape, so a human being is composed of human organic material (flesh and bones) and the form informing it, namely, a human soul.

Yet, upon a little reflection, this presentation is far from simple or obvious. For although it may seem clear enough that a piece of wax is something distinct from its spherical shape, nevertheless, one may just wonder what these “metaphysical ingredients” are in themselves, what their role is in the constitution of this particular material being, the ball of wax, and how all this is helpful in understanding the much less obvious case of a human person being constituted from an organic human body and a human soul.

So, let us start with what is supposed to be better understood, the wax ball, its wax, and its spherical shape. The wax and the spherical shape are items that we are supposed to understand pretty well from chemistry and geometry. Yet, they are clearly not components or ingredients of the wax ball in the same way as, say, the various carbohydrates making up the wax are, or as the left and right hemispheres of the spherical shape are. And even if we have a perfect geometrical understanding of spherical shape, one of its *accidental* forms determining *how* it is, this does not tell us how we should understand the *substantial* form the wax ball is supposed to have (namely, the form determining *what* kind of entity it is), unless we proceed intuitively, by some sort of analogy.

As this sort of explanation usually proceeds, we should think of the *substantial* form of the wax as having the same sort of relationship to the wax as the shape of the ball has to the ball. Just as it is on account of its spherical shape, or sphericity, that the ball is a ball, so it is on account of its wax-type-character, waxiness, if you will, that this piece of wax is wax. Or putting the same point in another way, just as the external shape is an arrangement or determination of the



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dimensions of the wax, so its waxiness, its “internal shape”, as it were, is an arrangement, determination, configuration (Stump)⁴ or structure (Jaworski, Koslicki)⁵ of its matter.

On the basis of this line of thought, then, it is still relatively easy to arrive at the idea that the substantial form of this piece of wax, which “makes” it wax (just as its shape “makes” it a ball) is just this: the configuration or structure of the matter of the wax. And indeed, this even seems to be borne out by what we are supposed to know about what “makes” a substance into wax from modern chemistry: it is just the arrangement of the atoms and molecules making it up.

Well, no matter how intuitive, relatively easy, and widespread this type of introduction of the notions of matter and form are, it has some serious problems, especially, as intended explanations or interpretations of Aquinas’ version of hylomorphist metaphysics.

First, and most obviously, if we identify substantial form in general with the structure of matter in general, then this identification *ab ovo* excludes the possibility of subsistent forms, i.e., forms that do not inform matter, such as are angels or separate intellective souls, according to Aquinas.

Second, if we are making this identification, it is not clear enough *at what level* of the organization of matter we are supposed to be making it: in the previous example we were talking about atoms and molecules, but even molecules are not mere congeries of their atoms (just think of how violently atomic hydrogen reacts with atomic oxygen and how oxygen peacefully coexists with hydrogen in water or the carbohydrates making up the wax), let alone a congeries of their subatomic particles, not to mention higher levels of organization, especially in the case of living beings, having their chemical structures organized into organelles, cells, living tissues and organs making up the entire living organism. Just which of these clearly distinguishable levels of organization would count as *the* structure which is *the* substantial form of the thing? Or are they all *several* substantial forms of the same thing? Perhaps, medieval “pluralists”, mostly Augustinians, would probably be happy with this answer, even if they would have distinguished the plurality of their substantial forms on different grounds, but Aquinas, the strict unitarian concerning substantial forms he is, would certainly not have it.⁶

⁴ Stump, E. (2003). *Aquinas*, Routledge, London, and New York.

⁵ Jaworski, W. (2011). *Philosophy of mind: A comprehensive introduction*. Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell.

Jaworski, W. (2016). *Structure and the Metaphysics of Mind: How Hylomorphism Solves the Mind-Body Problem* (Oxford University Press, 2016); Koslicki, K. (2008). *The Structure of Objects*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2nd edition.

⁶ For an excellent, succinct historical presentation of the medieval debates concerning the issue, see Callus, D. (1967–1979). “Forms, unicity and plurality of”. In Staff at the Catholic University of America (Ed.), *New Catholic encyclopedia* (Vol. 6, pp. 1024–1027). New York: McGraw-Hill.



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On the other hand, in the *third* place, if a contemporary metaphysician were to bite the bullet and say that there is only one substantial form in a given material substance, and that it should be not just any arbitrary organizational level of matter, but “the most basic one”, then the problem is that we just don’t know what that is (unless we pretend quantum mechanics or even string theory as we know it is already “The Theory of Everything”, which sane physicists would deny), whereas, in order to be able to identify what we are talking about, we certainly *ought to* know it.

But, in the *fourth* place, no matter what sort of “structure” or “configuration” of matter we were to identify as *the* (sole) substantial form of a material substance, it should be clear enough that as long as it is identified as just *any* sort of spatio-temporal structure, it could not really count as a substantial form as far as Aquinas is concerned. For any such spatio-temporal structure must be some sort of arrangement of the thing’s dimensive quantity, an accident that can only exist with the *presupposition* of the thing’s substantial form.⁷

Indeed, finally, and in the *fifth* place, if the thing’s substantial form were to be identified as the configuration or structure of its matter, then the order of determination would be just the reverse of what it should be in a genuine hylomorphic composition: for then what determines what kind of thing we are talking about is precisely its material structure, determining, as it were, the thing’s kind “from the bottom up” (structure determining kind), whereas one of the big advantages of hylomorphic composition in the order of explanation would be that it is “top down”, explaining structure from kind: *if* we have a thing of such and such substantial kind, *then* it has to have such and such structural features (rather than conversely, *if* we have such and such material structure, *then* it is a thing of such and such kind). So, for instance: this thing is a human being *not* because it is put together from quarks, leptons, bosons, and whatnot in such and such a way (not leaving any room, by the way, for a possibly immaterial intellective soul), but the other way around: since this is a human being, it has to have such and such organic, material structure down to the most elementary level (leaving open the possibility that this material structure is not all there is to the constitution of this being).

Now, obviously, none of these arguments are supposed to be knock-down refutations of the idea of identifying the substantial form of material substances with their material structure. They serve here rather as some “dialectical motivations” for the introduction of an alternative approach to the idea of substantial form, which I would say avoids all these problems from the get-

⁷ Cf. e.g.: 4SN d. 10, q. 1, a. 3, qc. 3 co. “*tota forma substantialis ligni est in qualibet parte ejus, quia totalitas formae substantialis non recipit quantitatis totalitatem, sicut est de totalitate formarum accidentalium quae fundantur in quantitate, et praesupponunt ipsam.*” That is to say, just as accidental forms founded in quantity (as for example color is founded on surface) *presuppose* quantity, so quantity *presupposes* substantial form, without which it would not exist naturally (though it could, miraculously, in the Eucharist). But this means that (*pace* Descartes) its dimensive quantity cannot be the substantial form of a material substance. See also *De veritate*, q. 28 a. 8 co. “... *forma substantialis est prior, in quantum perficit et materiam, et accidentia materialia*”.



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go, and which I think addresses Aquinas's notion at a more fundamental level, namely, at the level of how he thinks our words conveying our thoughts grasp the reality of the things we are talking about, which is what I would call, for want of a better phrase, "the semantic approach" to the idea of substantial form, and in the case of material substances, the prime matter it immediately enforms.⁸

3. Hylomorphism on "the semantic approach", and its advantages

One immediate advantage of what I call here "the semantic approach" is that on this approach we really do not need to know much; rather, we need to understand the meanings of the words we are using and how they are related to the things we are talking about. In fact, this is exactly how Aquinas introduces the primary notions of being and essence in his *De Ente et Essentia*, starting with the significations of their names. On this approach, therefore, we can simply describe a form signified by a common categorematic term in a thing as whatever it is in the thing the actual presence of which verifies the term of the thing. For instance, going back to our wax ball, what verifies of it the term 'ball' is the actuality of its round, spherical shape, because this is precisely what is signified by the term in any single thing that actually has such a shape. As can be seen, on this approach we would not even need to know what the definition or the essence of roundness or spherical shape is. All we need to know is that when we say of a thing that it is a ball, then what we signify in it by the term 'ball' is also signified by the term 'round' and 'sphere'. It is only after considering what sort of a thing a round thing as such is that we would say that it is a three-dimensional object whose outermost points are (more or less)⁹ equidistant from a given point. Supposing, then, that this is a good definition of a ball or a sphere as such, we can say that now we know what the form signified in it by the term 'ball' is: it is its shape, which is such that (ideally)¹⁰ all its outermost points are equidistant from a given point. What is important here from

⁸ Note here that the verb 'enform' here is not the result of a spelling error: I use it to contrast *enformation*, the formation of a subject in real being to *be* what it is and how it is, with *information*, the formation of a cognitive subject to *cognize* the objects of its cognitive faculties in intentional being. For more on this issue, see Klima, G. (2021) "Form, Intention, Information: from Scholastic Logic to Artificial Intelligence", in Ludger Jansen & Petter Sandstad (eds.) *Neo-Aristotelian Perspectives on Formal Causation*, Routledge, 2020. ISBN: 9780367341206; <https://www.routledge.com/Neo-Aristotelian-Perspectives-on-Formal-Causation/Jansen-Sandstad/p/book/9780367341206>

⁹ Obviously, when we are talking about a physical ball, then it does not have an ideal spherical shape. But that issue is now beside the point.

¹⁰ Again, the issue of the difference between a geometrically perfect spherical shape (the concept of which abstracts from physical inequalities) and a physical round shape is now beside the point. I deal with this issue in some detail in Klima, G. (2000) "The Medieval Problem of Universals", in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2000 Edition), E. N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/universals-medieval/>



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our point of view, however, is that on this approach, we did not need to know this from the get-go in order to be able to identify the form we were talking about.

This also means, then, that we need not know anything about the substantial form of the wax or of any other substance, for that matter, in order to safely identify it and refer to it in our discussions in finding out about its nature, properties, and relations to other things. In fact, and this is the next important point, on this approach we can also precisely identify what the actuality, or being (*esse, actus essendi*) of such a form and of the thing it informs is, without having to know anything about precisely what it is: for we can simply say that the *act of being* of such a form is nothing but what verifies of it the predicate 'is' as long as it is actual.

As I have done in several earlier, more technical papers in more detail,¹¹ we can actually formulate these ideas in a mathematically exact form, using the well-known techniques of formal semantics in the following way. Let P be any concrete common predicate of our language, and x a variable referring to any individual in our universe of discourse of which P is predicable. Now let $SGT(P)$ be a semantic function from such individuals to their individualized forms signified by P in them. So, if u is such an individual element of our universe of discourse U , then $SGT(P)(u)$ is going to be such a form, the actuality of which will verify the predicate of the individual in question. Accordingly, in our semantics we need to distinguish at least actual and non-actual elements; so, let us call the set of the actual elements A , which is then a subset of the entire universe of discourse, U .

Using this machinery, we can state the criterion of truth of a simple predication 'x is P', in accordance with what is usually referred to in the literature as "the inherence theory of predication" as follows:

(ITP) 'x is P' is true, just in case $SGT(P)(f(x))$ is an element of A , where $f(x)$, the semantic value of the variable x , is an element of U .

So, for instance, 'This is wax' is true, just in case the individual referred to by 'this' has the form signified in it by 'wax' in actuality, whatever that form is.

And now, if we take 'is' as a distinguished predicate, the semantic function of which is precisely to signify this actuality, then we can have the following analogue of the above principle:

(ITPE) 'x is' is true, just in case $SGT('is')(f(x))$ is an element of A , where $SGT('is')(u)$ is an element of A , just in case u is an element of A .

These little technicalities simply help us to initially identify and to keep track of what we are talking about as we are trying to determine the identities and distinctions of the items thus

¹¹ For example, Klima, G. (1996) "The Semantic Principles Underlying Saint Thomas Aquinas's Metaphysics of Being", *Medieval Philosophy and Theology*, 5(1996), pp. 87-141; Klima, G. (2002) "Aquinas' Theory of the Copula and the Analogy of Being", *Logical Analysis and History of Philosophy*, 5(2002), pp. 159-176.



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picked out as the semantic values of the phrases we use to talk about them. So, for instance, using this approach, and saying that the substantial forms of things are picked out by their substantial predicates, where the substantial predicates of the thing are just those that signify in it a form the act of being of which is the same as the act of being of the thing itself, we can provide a very precise reconstruction of Aquinas' main argument for the unicity of substantial forms, again, without knowing much about what these items are in their own nature.

For let us say we have a thing that has two substantial predicates, S (species) and G (genus). Aquinas' main argument is to show that if these two predicates signified two distinct forms in the same thing, then one of them would have to be accidental, contrary to our assumption.¹² For if SGT(S)(u) is a substantial form, then SGT('is')(SGT(S)(u)) = SGT('is')(u). However, if SGT(G)(u) is a form distinct from SGT(S)(u), a distinct entity, then SGT('is')(SGT(S)(u)) cannot be the same as SGT('is')(SGT(G)(u)), for distinct forms, as distinct entities, cannot have the same act of being in the same way (after all, *unum et ens convertuntur*, as Aquinas repeatedly claims).¹³ But then, SGT('is')(SGT(G)(u)) must be distinct from SGT('is')(u), which means it cannot be a substantial form of u, and hence G cannot be a substantial predicate of u, contrary to our assumption. So, for instance, if the wax ball is already informed by the substantial form signified in it by the predicate 'wax', which means the *esse* of the wax is the same as the *esse* of that form, then if it were to acquire another form, signified by another predicate, while it stays in existence (and so, stays wax all along), then the newly acquired form will have to have an *esse* distinct from that of the wax; so, it must be an accidental form, just as Aquinas says.

To be sure, the point of this brief reconstruction of Aquinas' argument was not to present it as a knock-down demonstration of the unicity of substantial forms (although based on some further metaphysical considerations concerning the relationships between various sort of things and their acts of being, which would definitively exclude the possibility that two distinct forms

¹² See for example *Q. d. de anima*, a. 9 co. "*Si qua ergo forma est quae non det materiae esse simpliciter, sed adveniat materiae iam existenti in actu per aliquam formam, non erit forma substantialis. Ex quo patet quod inter formam substantialem et materiam non potest cadere aliqua forma substantialis media, sicut quidam voluerunt, ponentes quod secundum ordinem generum, quorum unum sub altero ordinatur, est ordo diversarum formarum in materia; utpote si dicamus, quod materia secundum unam formam habet quod sit substantia in actu, et secundum aliam quod sit corpus, et iterum secundum aliam quod sit animatum corpus, et sic deinceps. Sed hac positione facta, sola prima forma, quae faceret esse substantiam actu, esset substantialis, aliae vero omnes accidentales; quia forma substantialis est quae facit hoc aliquid, ut iam dictum est.*"

¹³ Perhaps, I should note here, though, that Aquinas does allow that distinct items can share the same act of being (after all, a material substantial form, the matter it informs, and the resulting composite substance do share the same act of being to constitute *one* entity), but then they cannot *all* have it *in the same way* as inherent forms would. For more on this issue, see Klima, G. (2020) "Aquinas on the Union of Body and Soul", *Quaestiones Disputatae*, Volume 10, Number 2, Spring 2020, HYLOMORPHISM: Ancient, Medieval, and Contemporary Approaches, Issue Edited by Jeremy W. Skrzypek, pp. 31-52. ISSN 2374-555X; Print ISSN 2150-5756. <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/774085>



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can share the same act of being, I would argue it *can* be turned into a strict demonstration),¹⁴ but rather to illustrate how this conceptual machinery on this semantic approach can be used to arrive at definite metaphysical conclusions without knowing (or just assuming) too much about the nature of the things we are talking about. But this is exactly how Aquinas can safely proceed with his metaphysical considerations, despite his famous complaint about no philosopher ever to have found out about the nature of a single fly (*In Symbolum Apostolorum, pr*).¹⁵

4. What is a form, then, on “the semantic approach”?

Still, despite the fact that on this approach we are assuming so little about the nature of the forms we are talking about, based on how we identify them, we can provide a general characterization of what they are: a form is a determination of an act of being (*esse*), given that an act of being is nothing but the actuality of a form (*esse est actualitas omnis formae vel naturae*, ST I. 3.4 co.).

So, what does this all mean, and what do we gain from this understanding of the notion of form and the correlated notion of matter? In the first place, let me try to elucidate the notion of form we can gain on this “semantic approach”, and then let me try to show its worth by presenting how it avoids the difficulties I listed against “the intuitive approach” earlier.

When I say that “a form is a determination of an act of being”, all I mean is that the form of a being whose act of being it determines is precisely what determines *what* the thing in question is and *how* it is, out of a range of all sorts of possibilities. The substantial form of wax determines *what* it is: that it is wax, as opposed to some metal or plastic, an amoeba, a human being or an angel, anything whatsoever. By contrast, its round shape determines *how* it is, namely that it is spherical, as opposed to cubical, pyramidal, or amorphous, not having any “regular” shape whatsoever, while other accidental forms determine *how* it is with respect to its other features, such as its taste, smell, weight, etc. Now how does this understanding of form avoid the objections raised to the notion gained by the “intuitive approach” listed above?

As far as the *first* objection is concerned, the answer is really easy. Not defining form as the structure of matter clearly does not tie the notion of form to material substance: an immaterial substance can clearly have (or rather be) some form or forms determining *what* it is and *how* it is without having to inform any sort of matter whatsoever.

¹⁴ See again my paper referred to in the previous note.

¹⁵ “... *nullus philosophus potuit unquam perfecte investigare naturam unius muscae*”.



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As for the *second* objection, since we are not identifying the substantial form of a thing with the organization of its matter (if it does have any) on *any* level from the get-go, the question is moot as to *which* level of organization of matter we should identify it with.

Furthermore, as for the *third* objection, given this epistemic situation on this approach, we should really not worry about *what the basic level* of organization of matter is, even if we may actually have some better clues as to what it *must* be, as we shall see in the closing section of this discussion.

As for the *fourth* objection, therefore, whatever we may eventually happen to identify as *the most basic form* of the organization of matter based on our best microphysics, we can always say that that organization is the *result* of the determination of the being of the material substance in question, which *presupposes* this primary determination by the substantial form of the thing in question in a given spatio-temporal region (whatever *that* is, being itself also determined by its substantial form to being what it is and how it is).

And so, finally, whenever we can carve out an individual material substance in space-time as a determinate individual, it will always have its being primarily determined by its substantial form, which in turn determines not only what it is, but also what sort of material structure it requires to realize this mode of being in this particular spatio-temporal location (which in its turn determines the individuality of *this* form, serving as its principle of individuation).¹⁶

5. So, how can we exploit these advantages in contemporary metaphysics?

Now assuming (perhaps against what several readers may think) that these answers provide sufficient motivation to pursue this “semantic approach”, one may still wonder how we might cash in on it if we do. So, let me try to provide a few, hopefully sufficiently enticing illustrations. In general, what I take to be the greatest advantage of this approach is its ontologically and epistemically non-committal character: we need not assume much in our ontology and we need not assume much about what we are supposed to know about it.

To be sure, one may immediately counter the claim about ontological non-commitment by pointing out the enormous amount of semantic values this semantics commits us to: all significates of all predicates in all individuals whether actual or merely potential (or perhaps even impossible!). However, as I have pointed out in several of my earlier writings, the multiplication of semantic values does not have to amount to a multiplication of items in our ontology: the semantic values

¹⁶ For more detail on how I would interpret, along with Thomas Sutton, O.P, Aquinas’ doctrine of individuation, see Klima, G. (2011) “Thomas Sutton on Individuation”, in Klima, G. and Hall, A. (eds.), *Universal Representation, and the Ontology of Individuation*, Proceedings of the Society for Medieval Logic and Metaphysics, Vol. 5, Cambridge Scholars Publishing: Newcastle upon Tyne. pp. 91-102.



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of several of our phrases may be identified as just one and the same item in our ontology merely conceived, and hence signified differently, and even several of the items we can conceive or signify may not add any genuinely real items to our ontology.¹⁷

In fact, many of the great metaphysical questions of pre-Ockhamist scholastic philosophy, framed pretty much in the same semantic framework, were actually designed to find out which semantic values of which of our phrases were the same or distinct, or perhaps the same or distinct “merely formally” or “modally” or to “some degree”, and to which real categories of entities they belonged, if at all, or whether they would have to be deemed mere *entia rationis* or objects in mere *esse intentionale*. For example, the issue of the unicity or plurality of substantial forms, as we could see earlier, is really just the issue of the sameness or distinctness or the significata of the substantial predicates of material substances. The real distinction of the essence and existence of creatures and the identity thereof in God is again the question of the distinctness or identity of substantial predicates and the predicate ‘is’. But we can list here also the questions about the identity or distinctness of relations and their foundations, not to mention the theological questions about the identity of the distinct divine persons with the same indivisible divine essence or the identity or distinctness of the being of the Son of God with the earthly life of Jesus Christ.

I would certainly not even attempt to go into any of these issues in this paper. I merely broach them to illustrate the usefulness of this approach in our attempts even to try to understand the questions and the relevant arguments. Instead, in another attempt to get “back to earth” with this discussion, I will finally try to illustrate how this approach may have the best chance to keep up with the ever-changing visions of contemporary physics about what I alluded to as “the basic level” of the organization of matter.

6. Hylomorphism on “the semantic approach” and (the ever-changing) contemporary physics

If we further reflect on the general description of a real form (as opposed to a mere intention or being of reason) provided above, namely, that it is a determination of an act of (real) being, then we can perhaps draw out some implications of this idea that can bring the metaphysical idea of hylomorphic composition a little closer to the more concrete considerations of natural science. For the general characterization, also allowing (as was desired) the existence of subsistent forms, when specified for the forms of material substances, and combined with Aquinas’ thesis of the unicity of substantial forms and his idea that the principle of individuation is designated matter, would yield the following characterization of a *material* substantial form: a material substantial form is the determination of the primary act of being of the matter that individualizes it here and now. On this description, the substantial form of a material substance, whether macroscopic or microscopic,

¹⁷ See again the paper referred to in n. 8.



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will turn out to be the determination of that primary act of being (*actus* L., *energeia*, Gr., *energy*, Eng.) which qualifies it as a real entity, one with causal efficacy, that can be “at work”.¹⁸ So, the form is what, as it were, “envelopes” or “carves out” this “fragment of energy”, a new major player in contemporary mathematical physics.¹⁹ Whether or not this identification is justified, at least it certainly seems more basic than “configuration” and “structure”, which *presuppose* this primary act.

In any case, I would say that the final upshot of the foregoing considerations is that with a proper understanding of Aquinas’ basic *metaphysical* ideas as interpreted in terms of his own *semantic* ideas (rather than our own vague intuitions), we can safely hold on to his metaphysical principles even against the ever-changing landscape of our actual physics, just as generations of scholars have been able to do even after the break-down of much of Aristotelian physics.

¹⁸ For more detailed elaborations of Aquinas’ idea of *esse* as act, as *energy*, as opposed to the anemic post-Scottic notion of “just being there”, see Clarke, N. (2001), *The One and the Many: A Contemporary Thomistic Metaphysics*, Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.

¹⁹ Cf. Childers, T. (2020) “New Theory Casually Upends Space and Time: Forget what you thought you knew about the universe”. *Popular Mechanics*, December 10, 2020. <https://www.popularmechanics.com/space/deep-space/a34934990/new-universe-theory-fragments-energy/#:~:text=Fragments%20of%20energy%20may%20be,two%20problems%20solved%20by%20Einstein>.