

A Biologically Informed Hylomorphism

By Christopher J. Austin (University of Oxford)

Although contemporary metaphysics has recently undergone a neo-Aristotelian revival wherein dispositions, or capacities are now commonplace in empirically grounded ontologies, being routinely utilised in theories of causality and modality, a central Aristotelian concept has yet to be given serious attention – the doctrine of hylomorphism. The reason for this is clear: while the Aristotelian ontological distinction between actuality and potentiality has proven to be a fruitful conceptual framework with which to model the operation of the natural world, the distinction between form and matter has yet to similarly earn its keep. In this talk, I offer a first step toward showing that the hylomorphic framework is up to that task. To do so, I return to the birthplace of that doctrine - the biological realm. Utilising recent advances in developmental biology, I argue that the hylomorphic framework is an empirically adequate and conceptually rich explanatory schema with which to model the nature of organisms.