Contemporary Hylomorphic Theories and the Problems of Philosophy

By William Jaworski

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 philosophical problems. What place can there be in the universe for mind, freedom, and value 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, perceive, and act as morally responsible agents.

To reject hylomorphic structure is to reject a basic principle that distinguishes the parts of the physical universe that have these powers from those that lack them, 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 these powers while others can't, then the options for understanding the existence of those powers in the natural world become constrained in unfavourable ways. I argue that one variety of contemporary hylomorphic theory has resources for solving the kinds of conceptual problems that have baffled philosophers since the Revolution and that continue to beleaguer competing philosophies.