Material Objects in Confucian and Aristotelian Metaphysics

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Material Objects in Confucian and Aristotelian Metaphysics

The Inevitability of Hylomorphism

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BLOOMSBURY ACADEMIC
LONDON • NEW YORK • OXFORD • NEW DELHI • SYDNEY

BLOOMSBURY ACADEMIC
Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
50 Bedford Square, London, WC1B 3DP, UK
1385 Broadway, New York, NY 10018, USA
29 Earlsfort Terrace, Dublin 2, Ireland

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First published in Great Britain 2022

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

ISBN: HB: 978-1-3502-7634-5
ePDF: 978-1-3502-7635-2
eBook: 978-1-3502-7636-9

Typeset by Integra Software Services Pvt. Ltd.
Printed and bound in Great Britain

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Acknowledgments

I would particularly like to thank Drs. Eleonore Stump, Bryan Van Norden, Jonathan Jacobs, and John Heil for their solicitude and care in helping bring this project to fruition.

In addition, William Dunaway and John McGinnis gave much-appreciated feedback on the individual chapters, as did those at Wuhan University—particularly Zheng Zemian, Li Yong, and Matthew Lutz. Further, I would also thank my colleagues Jonathan Nebel, Alexandra Romanyshyn, Matthew Shea, Audra Goodnight, James Kintz, and all the members of the dissertation group for their conversations and feedback that deeply influenced the outcome. Patrick Zoll and Jeremy Skrzypek were exceptionally helpful in shaping the final form of the book through helpful comments.

Lastly, I owe a debt of gratitude to Justin Tiwald, who very graciously shared materials, and to those who corrected and reviewed my translations: Nan Hu with classical Chinese and Adrian McCaffery, O.P., with Latin.

Soli Deo Gloria;
all faults being attributable to the author.

Introduction

A Chinese poet living in the Song dynasty wrote these lines:

> *A plum tree without snow does not shine forth;*
> *Snow, without poetry, is overly common;*
> *At sunset, a poem finished, heaven again brings snow;*
> *Together with the plum trees, spring is then fully complete.*[1]

Many people believe there are material objects: cats, quarks, protons, pieces of gold, human beings, chairs, and tables. Many might also count such things as plum trees and snow. But what is generally *not* taken for granted is that the poet's final line should be taken to mean that "spring" formed *one material object* composed of the poem, the plum, and the snow as its parts. If someone thought the poet was talking about a special sort of material thing, a "poem-plum-snow thing," such a person might be taken to have a very unnatural reading of the poem. There is something strange about thinking the plum is a part of the moon, because the plum is (of course) on earth and the moon quite far away. And even putting those two closely together, pulling the moon down right next to the plum tree, does not seem to many people to make those things *one* material thing.

Explaining what it is that sets apart the plum tree as a "genuine" material object, but not the plum-moon-spring-snow object, or saying what makes the plum tree's leaves or flowers its parts (but not the moon), nevertheless, is a complicated task. Peter van Inwagen, in his book *Material Beings*, famously called attention to the way in many of our puzzles about how material things can change parts over time, the best known of which is the puzzle of the Ship of Theseus, all centrally involve assumptions about what it is for one thing to be a part of another. He formulated what he called the "Special Composition Question" (SCQ) to get to the heart of the matter—"in what circumstances is a thing a (proper) part of something?"[2]—where the SCQ is a general question centered around when some things compose a material object rather than, for example, being a heap of things merely close together.

Depending on the answer one gives to the SCQ, what counts as a composite material object can be radically different. If we hold the view that there are *no* limits on how or when parts come to compose objects, for example, our world will be densely populated with lots of odd objects we ordinarily do not recognize as objects; anything could be quite literally a part of any other thing. There would then be a material object literally composed of the plum tree, snow, and moon. Or, conversely, on another extreme view, if there are no situations under which things compose anything (i.e., objects never have any parts at all), there will be *no* composite objects. And so, there would be no spring composed of plums and snow, but also no plums or snow or poems. Rather, on such a view, there would only be simple, part-less objects (maybe electrons or the like). Each would presumably require a significant shift in how we understand the world, assuming that the radical nature of the called-for revision does not incline us to reject these theories.

The aforementioned extreme views on the SCQ are generally not held by ordinary folk. Instead, many hold a "moderate" view that there are things like cats and plum trees, but that it is not the case that any old set of things compose a material object—there is no material object composed of three random pages of this book and your ear, for example. I will not be defending these "moderate" views of material composition but rather argue that, *if* they were true, all of these moderate answers to the SCQ would be variations on a very old account of how material objects are unified. This classical account is known as "hylomorphism."

"Hylomorphism" derives from the metaphysics of Aristotle (although it is not, as I will show, a uniquely Aristotelian view), where material objects are composed of matter (*hyle*) and form (*morphe*).[3] A survey of prominent names reveals not only that there are quite a few able defenders of the hylomorphism, but also that there are equally many different ways to understand and defend the theory.[4] I will be arguing that if you are among those who hold that there *are* such material objects as plums and snow, but not the other weird material objects of the extreme answers to the SCQ (including poem-snow-plum-moon objects), you are going to be committed to a fundamentally hylomorphic way of thinking about material objects. That is, you are going to hold that something playing the role of a *form* is what makes it the case that some set of material parts all compose one thing.

To set the stage, however, I will begin by dealing directly with only one broad camp among hylomorphists, which has been called "structural hylomorphism."[5] These views may broadly be described as a variant of hylomorphic theory that conceptualizes "form" as a kind of "structure." As we will see, there are various accounts of the nature of structure and its role in constituting material objects.

And all are going to agree that the thing playing the role of form—structure—is what makes something *one* material object. Yet exploring these theories can help us understand possible ways in which hylomorphism generally can resolve some of the puzzles of material composition and parthood, because not all of these authors I will survey agree on *the way in which* structure resolves these puzzles.

Thus, in the recent rise of interest in Aristotelian or neo-Aristotelian metaphysics, this kind of structural hylomorphism has been a prominent neo-Aristotelian view. Nevertheless, the various kinds of structural hylomorphism on offer span an array of metaphysical commitments. In particular, I will discuss three proponents of hylomorphism, Kit Fine, Kathrin Koslicki, and William Jaworski, who understand "structure" to function in significantly different metaphysical roles. In addition, while each claims that hylomorphism can help resolve problems in specific areas of philosophy (e.g., Jaworski utilizes hylomorphism to resolve issues in metaphysics of mind), all of these three thinkers explicitly propose hylomorphism as a satisfactory answer to van Inwagen's aforementioned "Special Composition Question." This makes their brands of hylomorphism particularly interesting avenues through which to consider the way in which hylomorphism interacts with contemporary mereology.

In what follows, I also show that there is a problem that affects each of these views. Despite the way in which Fine, Koslicki, and Jaworski differ in many particulars, all three accept a common principle that the parts of a substance can include things that are substances in their own right while they are part of the whole substance (i.e., a substance can have "substance-parts"). This principle characterizes, I propose, a uniquely "structural" aspect of structural hylomorphism, because it treats "form" as a kind of structuring of preexisting material objects.

In the second chapter, I argue that if "structure" answers the questions we had about what it is for some things to compose *one* substance, then it is not clear how there can be many such structures in one substance. Either structure makes something *one* a material object or it doesn't. If some things can continue to exist as substances while they compose other substances as parts, and each such substance retains its "structure" even while composing another as a part, then it seems as if structure really doesn't make something *one* material object. Rather, structure makes something *one* according to some other measure of oneness. I will show that, on these neo-Aristotelian versions of hylomorphism, there are too many cooks in the kitchen. If we go this way, hylomorphism is either incoherent or contradicts the assumption that a "moderate" view of composition is true.

By contrast, in other classical hylomorphic theories, what accounts for the unity of a material object does not function in this way. Instead, a material part will undergo a substantial change when it becomes a part of a substance; this is because the way that a form accounts for the unity of an object, on these views, is by being something like the *particular nature* of that substance and its parts. For this reason, there cannot be multiple substances composing one whole substance as parts—one cannot be an individual material composite "many times over." My third chapter motivates the classical view. Yet a chief reason people are hesitant to accept such classical hylomorphic theories is that they appear committed to absurd analyses of change either of objects or their parts. I respond to those worries by appeal to one such version of classical hylomorphism that strikes me as plausible and coherent: Thomas Aquinas' version of hylomorphism. In addition, Aquinas' account brings us to be able to characterize "hylomorphism" in a general way, and to present a functional account of what Aquinas calls "substantial forms."

The characterization of form I derive from Aquinas allows me to begin, positively, to press toward my main conclusion. In the fourth chapter, I begin to apply that characterization of form to argue that a medieval Chinese Confucian philosopher, Zhu Xi, embraces an independent non-Aristotelian metaphysics that parallels in important ways the Aristotelian hylomorphic tradition. In particular, Zhu Xi's metaphysics of material objects requires (and posits) substantial forms and therefore is a version of hylomorphism – one remarkably close to that of Thomas Aquinas. While it is true that Zhu Xi's account of material objects demonstrates a cross-cultural recognition that restricted theories of material composition need to be hylomorphic, the point is not primarily historical. Zhu Xi's account of material objects is dialectically well-placed for demonstrating that if composition were as the "moderate" views require it to be (i.e., the material composites are not such that any two or more things compose them necessarily), and there are no such things as substance-parts, then all these "moderate" views of composition entail the existence of substantial forms.

Finally, in the fifth chapter, I conclude by showing why it is the case that many theories of material composition are committed to substantial forms. To this end, I begin by showing that any theory of material objects that holds that there are facts about the composition of material objects, such that these facts are objective or mind-independent, is plausibly committed to entities in virtue of which a set of material parts all compose one object. Then, utilizing Zhu Xi's position against his Buddhist contemporaries as an illustration, I propose a generalized argument that all the moderate theories of material composition

(even those that might hold nonstandard views about the relationship between identity and composition) are committed to entities like substantial forms.[6] If my argument is correct, any theory of material objects that accepts certain assumptions about the nature of composition should be committed to the hylomorphic metaphysical principles I outline or that theory risks incoherence. Not only then is hylomorphism a plausible theory that offers to resolve problems of material composition, but hylomorphism is the necessary framework for constructing *any* consistent, restrictive theory of material composition.