

Review of the PhD thesis
The Primacy of Form in the Metaphysics of the Human Person.
A Contemporary Defense of Aristotelian-Thomistic Hylomorphism (242pp)
by Christopher Caruana, O.P.
under the supervision of rev. Dr hab. Tomasz Duma, prof. KUL
at the John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin

1. The aim of the dissertation

1.1. The main point of the thesis: a preliminary sketch

The background of the thesis is the following: humans perform various mental (including intellectual) and physical activities; there are two very influent traditions in the metaphysics of human persons offering rival accounts of the sources of these activities – substance dualism and reductive materialism; both are *philosophical* theories, and philosophy enjoys some kind of autonomy from natural science. Now against this background the main point of the thesis (clearly made at the very introduction and in many other places throughout the dissertation) is that Aristotelian-Thomistic hylomorphism offers a basically better metaphysical (and broadly philosophical) account of human persons than these two competing views.

1.2. The main claim of the thesis: some clarifications

To be more precise, the aim of the thesis is not just to defend or prove some particular claims of the Aristotelian-Thomistic hylomorphism, but rather something more general and fundamental: to defend the view that the Aristotelian-Thomistic hylomorphism offers a basically better conceptual philosophical framework (basically better conceptual tools, or even, as the author puts it on p. 214 – a „philosophical grammar”) for tackling various issues in the metaphysics of human persons than substance dualism and reductive materialism. The framework of hylomorphism is claimed to be better in particular in the following two respects: (i) it saves and may incorporate many (both philosophical and commonsense) fundamental intuitions concerning the unity, integrity, identity and specificity of human persons; (ii) it paves the way for the argument exchange with empirical sciences and even for „the correct philosophical understanding of certain new parts of information given by contemporary science” (p. 9), or, in other words, for a reliable philosophical understanding of current research in natural science (e.g. neuroscience).

To put it in other words: the main opponent of the standpoint developed in the thesis is not directly a dualist or a materialist, but rather someone who thinks that Aristotelian or Thomistic hylomorphism collapses in fact either into some form of dualism or into some form of materialism.

1.3. The point of the thesis in the context of contemporary research

The natural context of the claims made in the thesis is the contemporary revival of interest in Aristotelian hylomorphism in contemporary analytical metaphysics of mind, agency and persons; this sort of Neo-Aristotelian literature in the ontology of human persons is really vast. The author of the thesis is well aware of that, and claims (p. 9) that the contemporary Neo-Aristotelian or Thomistic literature has two basic shortcomings that the thesis is going to address: (i) the lack of „the detailed analysis of the classical texts they refer to”; and (ii) the lack of a critical look at the ways in which both scientists and philosophers (in their interpretation of the results of natural sciences) tend to slip „into physicalism and atomism” (p. 9). So the thesis is an attempt both to build bridges between classical debates in the history of hylomorphism and to offer some conceptual tools for a philosophically sound interpretation of results of empirical sciences.

1.4. The assessment of the aim of the thesis

I do think that the aim of the thesis is well designed and really fundamental; and, in particular, that the superabundance of contemporary literature on hylomorphism in the metaphysics of mind, agency and persons does not make the enterprise of the thesis superfluous.

My basic reason is the following: no doubt both substance dualism and reductive materialism pose many philosophical problems that make them untenable; and no doubt the hylomorphic introduction of the notion of *formal causality* is free from *these* problems. But the point is that, as Aristotle himself warned, the very notion of formal causality is most difficult. In order to show that in philosophy the notion of *formal causality* does really offer a viable option and a good way out of the paradoxes one has to settle a great number of very subtle issues concerning formal causes; and I do think that in spite of the superabundance of hylomorphic literature there is still much serious philosophical work to be done and many lessons to be learned from the classical authors on formal causality. In particular, besides some general traits common to all instances of formal causality there are crucial differences – in the very mode of formal causality – between artificial and natural forms, accidental and substantial forms, forms of inanimate beings and souls, irrational and rational souls; and much philosophical work needs still to be done in order to show these crucial differences. All those intricacies of formal causality are also intricacies of the *priority* that may be assigned to forms due to their causal roles.

To put it in other words: as the very dissertation makes clear, Aristotelian hylomorphism has been diagnosed *both* as a hidden form of materialism *and* as a hidden form of dualism (see pp. 71-74); I do agree with the author that both diagnoses are false. But it takes a lot of philosophical effort to show in philosophy that Aristotelian or Thomistic hylomorphism is really a *third* viable option, making a real and not just a verbal difference.

As for the context of contemporary analytical metaphysics, some authors think that there is some sort of connection between aristotelian formal causality and contemporary notion of emergence which proves so amazingly popular especially amongs authors with naturalistic inclinations; but the point is that (i) it is not clear what exactly the connection is (and whether it is better to explain formal causality via emergence or rather emergence via formal causality); (ii) the very notion of emergence proves notoriously unclear, so that one may even suspect (as e.g. Christian Kanzian does) that it is in fact of very little utility in metaphysics.

For that very reason I think the author of the thesis is utterly right in the attempt to build more bridges between contemporary debates and classical authors so that more lessons could be learned from the latter; this kind of combination of the history of philosophy and systematic philosophy is admirable. I think, moreover, that the author is utterly right in paying close attention to physicalism or naturalism (which also is so crucial for the very notions of emergence).

1.5. A basic rule applied in the assessment of the thesis

Since these are my basic reasons for thinking that the aim of the thesis is determined in a really good way, my basic rule in the assessment of the dissertation as a whole is the following: the aim of the dissertation is realized as far as the author *manages to shed light on the relevant intricacies of formal causality* – both in the context of the exegesis of the classical texts and in the context of the debate with physicalism. This, to repeat, is the basic rule I apply in the rest of my review.

2. The structure of the thesis and the use of sources

2.1. The basic scheme of the dissertation

The structure of the thesis is clearly presented by the author at the outset and reminded in many places throughout the work, in particular at the beginning and at the end of each of the chapters.

The text (preceded by an informative introduction and followed by an informative general conclusion) is divided into five chapters. Four of them are devoted to some classical standpoints in the metaphysics of human persons, whereas the fifth and final one contains a detailed discussions of some issues concerning brain and sensation in the context of contemporary neuroscience and some of its philosophical interpretations; the final chapter presents a particular application of some general points concerning the metaphysics of human persons emerging from the previous four.

The first four chapters are devoted respectively (i) to dualist ontologies of human persons (Plato, Augustine, Swinburne), (ii) to the Aristotelian and Neo-Aristotelian metaphysics of life (including the methodology of four kinds of causal explanations); (iii) to the tensions in Albert the Great's hylomorphic metaphysics of human persons (inspired both by Aristotle and by some neoplatonic Avicennian ideas); (iv) to Aquinas's metaphysics of human persons.

2.2. The internal structure of the chapters and the choice of sources

Each of the five chapters opens with a introduction and ends with a summary or conclusion. Within each of the five chapters, a set of paradigmatic authors and texts is chosen for discussion. Latin texts are often quoted both in their original version (which is justified by scholarly requirements) and in translation (which is useful for building bridges between the tradition and contemporary research). As for the classical texts, the author of the dissertation offers a balanced combination of both source texts and contemporary exegetic commentaries on them.

2.3. The assessment of the structure of the dissertation

The structure of the thesis, both on the level of the whole, and on the level of the internal structure of the chapters, is quite well designed, proves functional and is clearly presented by the author. The choice of the authors, texts and problems for discussion is justified from the point of view of the aim of the whole; this should be stressed in particular in the case of the chapter devoted to Albert the Great who is not so well known in contemporary debates of hylomorphic metaphysics of human persons, but proves utterly relevant for many contemporary problems. The combination of classical sources and contemporary exegetic literature concerning them is well balanced, as I have already said. Finally, the presence of Latin quotations also is a basic advantage of the dissertation.

I have two *minor* doubts concerning the structure of the work. (i) A disadvantage of the structure of the work is that some crucial philosophical concepts – in particular „substance” (in the context of „substance dualism”), „mind” and „soul” – are first used to make some substantial claims, and discussed or defined in some highly relevant detail only later. So, for example, one might wonder what is the difference between dualism and *substance* dualism, before one gets a crucially relevant discussion of the concept of substance (in fact I do think that not every form of dualism in a broad sense is *substance* dualism); one might wonder what is substance „in the strict Aristotelian sense” that the author is referring to on p. 54; and one might wonder whether the concepts of mind and soul are to be used interchangeably before the author rightly denies this. A similar worry might concern the concepts of materialism, reductive materialism and eliminative materialism used in the dissertation. I do *not* think that every philosophically crucial concept should be explicated before it is seriously used; we do have, for example, primitive concepts even in formal systems. And I do *not* think there is any serious flaw in the structure of the dissertation; I am just wondering whether some concepts should be discussed in some detail at an earlier stage, perhaps in the introduction.

(ii) Substance dualism is granted a privileged position in the structure of the work: it has a whole chapter, and indeed the first one, devoted to it (by contrast, atomistic materialism is introduced first in the context of Aristotelian analyses in chapter 2). I wonder what is the reason of such a privilege, although I do *not* claim that this structure is somehow faulty. Offering, it may seem, a kind of justification, the author claims on p. 14 that dualism is „probably the oldest account of human nature”; as a point in the history of philosophy, it seems unconvincing to me; at any rate, the issue deserves a far more detailed discussion. In the very next line, the author states that dualism is „the commonest view of what constitutes us humans”, which seems to me even more controversial. At the bottom of p. 14 and on p. 18, by contrast, the author refers to „long-lasting impact” of Platonism, which seems to me a far better strategy (although, after all, atomism cannot be denied a long-lasting impact in modern philosophy and science).

3. The assessment of particular chapters of the dissertation

Here I confine myself to pointing at some most striking advantages (and in some cases disadvantages) of particular chapters of the dissertation.

3.1. The chapter *Dualist ontologies of the human person*

The chapter confronts three dualistic proposals put forward by Plato, Augustine and Swinburne; they are chosen to show the possibility of utterly different varieties of dualism. The

chapter ends with some general assessments of the viability of dualistic standpoints in philosophy.

The choice of the former two authors seems evident; the choice of the third is well justified (although there are other dualistic standpoints in analytical metaphysics, for example „non-Cartesian substance dualism” by Lowe); the choice of Swinburne gives a valuable opportunity to present some basic tenets of contemporary modal metaphysics (including some form of essentialism, ideas of rigid designation etc. combined with some tenets concerning first person perspective and privileged access).

Besides those basic advantages I think there are two minor disadvantages of the chapter. (i) Unlike the parts devoted to Augustine and Swinburne, the presentation of Platonic standpoint seems to me too sketchy; the arguments proposed in *Phaedo* seem quite loose, and although they are loose indeed, they are not as rough as it may seem according to their presentation in the dissertation. The author does not discuss the arguments for the existence of Platonic forms, although they are closely related to the arguments for the immateriality of the soul. In general, the Platonic standpoint may seem so sketchy that its long-lasting influence seems very hard to explain.

(ii) *Some* (surely not all) of the arguments put forward by the author in the final rejection of dualism (pp. 49-50) seem to me unsatisfactory (although I do agree that substance dualism is not a viable option). In particular: (a) when the author states that „substance-dualism does not do justice to our experience as unitary beings”, I am not sure what should count as the relevant *experience*, and whether relevant circumstances are a matter of *experience* at all; (b) when the author says that „substance dualism does not offer a guarantee for this unity [of the subject of mental and physical events]”, it seems natural to answer that substance dualism just *consists* in the rejection of this unity, and such an objection against dualism is just question begging.

3.2. The chapter *The metaphysics of life: Aristotle's analysis*

The chapter contrasts Aristotle's rich methodology of fourfold causal explanations (both in *Physics* and *On the soul*) with ancient atomism which serves as a source and a model of eliminativist materialism. I think that basic advantages of the chapter are (i) focusing on the topic of fourfold causal explanations in *Physics* and *On the soul* (since the topic of formal causality in metaphysics presupposes in some way the treatment of kinds of causality in *philosophia naturalis*); (ii) focusing on atomism as paradigmatic for eliminative materialism in general (although it may be worth noting that there are some unusually strong forms of reductionism that are basically anti-atomistic – both in the ancient tradition (e.g. Empedocles or stoicism) and in contemporary analytical metaphysics (J. Heil)).

There is also one case of weakness in the argument of the chapter 2. On pages 71-74 the author considers various claims that Aristotelian hylomorphism is either a form of dualism (perhaps some sort of 'emergent dualism') or a form of materialism. Now arguing against both kinds of interpretation of hylomorphism the author makes four claims that seem to me problematic; below I show in some detail why I find them problematic, since I believe the topic is really crucial for the whole work.

(i) Arguing against the idea that Aristotle is a kind of (possibly emergent) dualist the author claims that Aristotle „rejects the view that the soul is a thing ontologically distinct from the body” (p. 72). Now taking 'thing' in a broadest sense of '*res*' or 'something' and taking 'ontologically distinct' in a reasonably broad sense it seems to me evident that the soul, being

the formal cause of a body, is something „ontologically distinct’ from the body it is the formal cause it is; this follows evidently from the fact that causality is irreflexive – so the soul that is a *cause* of the body cannot be identical to the body. Another topic that might deserve attention in the context of the claim that Aristotle represents ‘emergent dualism’ is whether ‘emergent dualism’ should count as a ‘substance dualism’, that is, whether an emergent entity (given some possible senses of ‘emergent’ may be a *substance*.

(ii) On the other hand, the author seems to agree with the claim that „the soul is a *dunamis* that supervenes (*epigignetai*) on the body when the organization of matter has reached a certain level” (p. 73) (the claim is a part of the argument for taking Aristotle to be a dualist of some sort). Now it seems to me that the claim the author accepts is quite false: for it is clearly one of the basic tasks of the formal cause of an organism to govern the development of the body in the first phases of its existence – that is, before the moment when „the organization of matter reaches a certain level”. I am dwelling on this point here just because it shows how complicated are the relationships between Aristotelian formal causality and modern concepts of emergence and supervenience, downward and upward causation etc.

(iii) Arguing against ‘identity theory’ in contemporary analytical metaphysics (the form of materialism put forward e.g. by David Armstrong) the author appeals to the Aristotelian analogy with formal and material aspects of a house and to the fact that „material compounds of a house will both predate and survive the house itself” (p. 74). The point is that it is just here that the analogy between artificial or accidental and substantial forms breaks: parts of the organism like neurons or parts of the brain do *not* survive the organism, and this circumstance is crucial for *organic* unity specific to organisms as opposed to *artificial* unity specific to artifacts; so it seems that one cannot argue against the identity theory in *this* way (although I *do* think the identity theory is profoundly false) – and, to repeat the point I have already made, more should be said about the difference between artificial and substantial forms.

(iv) The author claims that Aristotle „offers a breakthrough that avoids the dichotomy between dualists and materialists by regarding the organism as one whole, a complete substantial unity, composed of matter and form” (p. 75). Now the basic problem with this claim is the following: as it is well known from general mereological considerations, it is very difficult to treat the form – the unifier of a whole – as a *part* of that whole; there is a risk of infinite regress of unifiers here. Of course the author is going to discuss various related problems on the subsequent pages of his work. But my point is that it is very problematic to claim that Aristotle offers a breakthrough from the vexed dichotomy of dualism and materialism just by treating organisms as wholes enjoying some sort of unity and *composed* of matter and form.

3.3. The chapter *A medieval experiment: St. Albert the Great*

The main advantage of this chapter is the introduction of the discussions by Albert the Great that are less known in contemporary debates on hylomorphism, yet prove really fundamental. The topic I find most fundamental is the distinction, clearly inspired by some neoplatonic sources, between the causal role of the soul and its inner nature. The point is that these two issues are not just distinct, because the causal role played by a substantial formal cause poses a number of constraints on the inner nature of something that can play that very role. So (the example is mine) it seems clear that water (or my arm) cannot be a formal cause of anything (although it may well be a material, an efficient or a final cause of something else); but it takes serious philosophical effort to say precisely *why* water cannot be a formal cause of anything else. A question of history of philosophy whether Albert’s standpoint is self-consistent

or rather an incoherent eclectic combination depends heavily on settling those systematic questions.

A closely related topic is the relationship between formal and efficient causality – in particular the question whether a formal cause of something may be at the same time an efficient cause of it.

I have some minor doubts concerning one of the claims the author makes in the conclusion of this chapter. He says that in Albert (unlike in Aristotle, if I take it correctly) form and matter „no longer serve as purely explanatory factors but they acquire a ‘new’ dynamic and causal relationship” (p. 126). This strongly suggest that in Aristotle they *did* serve as „purely explanatory factors”; or that – to put it in terms of contemporary analytical metaphysics – souls do not enjoy any sort of *downward* causality; such a view, however, seems to me quite unacceptable given a realist idea of explanation that is to be found in Aristotle.

3.4. The chapter *Aquinas on the ontology of souls and bodies*

The main advantage of the chapter is that it carefully selects, collects and discusses all these points that are, from a systematic point of view, crucially relevant for the metaphysics of human persons. They include, in particular, the unicity of form in a single substance (and henceforth the unicity of the soul in a single living substance) or the role of formal cause in operations of substances, the specificity of intellectual cognition and the mode of its dependence on sensual cognition in the case of *human* intellectual cognition; the role of formal causes in cognition and intentionality in general, and the differences between human (rational) souls and all the other kinds of souls (the crucial point here is that human souls are, unlike others, *subsisting* substantial forms).

Here, however, we arrive at some problems fundamental for Thomistic hylomorphism both in its classical and contemporary versions: it is the issue of the relationship between the soul as the form of the body and its various powers (or more generally: the powers that the form is a *source*). There are at least three ways in which the relationship is characterised in the dissertation: (i) the powers are said to *flow* from the very substantial form (p. 166) and it seems clear that this ‘flowing’ must be a very special sort of causal relationship (marked by a peculiar *closeness* of cause and its effects); (ii) *some* (but not all) of these powers are said to *inhere* in the substantial form (p. 166); (iii) on pp. 167-168 the author states at least 4 times that substantial forms have *parts* corresponding to their various powers, but it is clear from the classical general mereology that substantial forms do not have *parts* in the sense in which, for example, bodies are said to have *parts*. It is just here, I think, that much serious philosophical work is to be done in order to have a fully-fledged way out of the dualism-materialism alternative.

3.5. The final chapter *Brains, sensation and the hylomorphic unity of human persons*

The final chapter offers some very interesting discussion applying the principles elaborated in the previous four chapters to contemporary debates relating to some neuroscience projects. The author shows thereby a wider prospect of applying the conceptual tools of hylomorphism to many domains of contemporary debates in neuroscience. He also – rightly, I think – accuses some popular philosophical projects of conceptual confusions or categorial mistakes („the mereological fallacy”). Some of them consist in thinking about the relationships between mind and body in instrumental terms or in terms of property rights (p. 194).

The author also argues against some contemporary interpretations of Aquinas's standpoints concerning those matters (pp. 196-208); in my opinion the author's standpoint here is sound and well argued.

Here again I should repeat my worry that more philosophical work is still to be done to show that what Aristotle or Aquinas offer is a viable and fully-fledged third option. For example, the author says that one of the differences between Aristotle and dualists is that when the former refers to the soul „he intends it (as we have amply seen) not as a distinct or separate entity or part but *form of the body*” (p. 194). To repeat: (i) if the soul is taken to be a formal *cause* of the body, it must be, in some sense or way, a „distinct or separate entity”, just because causality is irreflexive; (ii) the soul is not a part of the body, but it is sometimes (perhaps in some loose way) said to be a part of the composite of body and soul. So we should still ask: what is the sense in which the formal cause of a body is „not a distinct or separate entity”? what is the sense in which the formal cause of a body is or is not a part of a greater whole or compound?

4. The assessment of the editorial aspects of the thesis

In general, the dissertation is very well prepared in terms of editorial rules concerning citations, quotations, bibliographical data, pages layout and so on. There are *incidental* inconsequencies, spelling mistakes and mistakes stemming, it may seem, from a rush in writing. For example, the author says on p. 34 (as far as the possible worlds essentialism is concerned): „A logically possible proposition like „Carbon Dioxide is ABC” where ABC is different from H₂O [...] does not hold in a metaphysically possible world.”. And talking about Aquinas he says on p. 137 „there is no doubt that Aristotle is pursuing an Aristotelian project”.

5. The overall assessment of the thesis

There is one big and philosophically serious task that the author undoubtedly manages to realize – in a really admirable way – in his dissertation. He skillfully selects, collects and presents all these intricacies of the classical hylomorphic standpoints (of Aristotle, Albert the Great and Aquinas) that prove relevant for contemporary debates in the metaphysics of human persons; he also skilfully and insightfully applies them to some selected contemporary debates related to neuroscience and its philosophical interpretations. In these respects, the dissertation is well designed, well argued, and insightful. All this is clearly enough to convincingly show that the classical hylomorphism offers unusually and surprisingly rich and nuanced conceptual framework for tackling problems that have proven fatal to many versions of both substance dualism and materialism. In other words, it is enough to show that at least *prima facie* the classical hylomorphism is a promising third way beyond the dichotomy of dualism and materialism. It is also clearly enough for a scholarly illuminating „contemporary defense of Aristotelian-Thomistic hylomorphism”. This is why I think that the reviewed dissertation meets all the criteria of PhD theses and is a substantial contribution to the scholarly debate on the topic.

Another problem is that there are some philosophers who claim that some forms of Aristotelian hylomorphism do in fact collapse into materialism or substance dualism (perhaps a substance dualism involving some notion of emergence) – that, in other words, the talk of the fundamental relationship of being a *form of* or being a *formal cause of* makes a difference which proves to be only verbal. I don't agree with them; but I just wonder whether the reviewed dissertation has an immediate potential for convincing such philosophers. For the reasons I have

presented in 3.2, 3.4 and 3.5, I am afraid they might remain unconvinced: there is much serious philosophical work that still should be done. But the basic point is that such philosophers are generally very hard to convince; so even if they remain unconvinced, I do not think that Father Christopher Caruana is to be blamed for that failure.

Let me add one final remark: it is my impression that the most serious philosophical attack on the project developed in the reviewed dissertation may come from the *Leibnitian* metaphysics of formal causality and human persons. This sort of metaphysics of formal causality clearly opts for the primacy of forms; but the ways in which it solves various issues pointed in 3.3 and 3.4 are utterly different from the Thomistic ones, and the result is that on Leibnitian metaphysics of forms there is no significant difference between humans and angels assuming bodies. I think a fully-fledged defense of Aristotelian-Thomistic hylomorphism should be prepared to show why the details of Leibnitian metaphysics of formal causality should be rejected.

To sum up, my conclusion is that **the PhD thesis *The Primacy of Form in the Metaphysics of the Human Person. A Contemporary Defense of Aristotelian-Thomistic Hylomorphism* by Christopher Caruana meets all the requirements imposed on PhD dissertations in philosophy and I am applying for admission of Christopher Caruana to the next stages of the PhD procedure.**

Michael Gorman