Wax, Minds, and Aristotelian Bodies

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# Abstract

In this article, I would like to address two themes of contemporary Aristotle scholarship, one larger, one smaller. My hope is that juxtaposing the smaller theme with the larger will shed considerably more light on the issues involved in the larger one than has been done up to now.

The larger theme, drawn from the work of Burnyeat, is that modern functionalist appropriations of hylomorphism fail to realize just how different Aristotle’s conception of matter is from our own. A corollary of this is that it is a mistake to view Aristotle as the father of modern functionalism, since this understanding simply grafts a notion of function onto a distinctly *modern* conception of matter: one that Aristotle could not possibly have accepted, *nor could we accept his*. “Aristotle’s psychology is designed to be the crowning achievement of his physics, and his physics is irretrievably dead and gone”.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The smaller theme, shared by Shields and Corcilius,[[2]](#footnote-2) is that against this backdrop, the examples that Aristotle draws on to illuminate the case of the soul-body relation turn out not to be very illuminating at all.

Focusing on Aristotle’s employment of wax analogies, what I aim to show here is that the second theme in fact serves to reinforce the first, and can be traced back to the same source: the example of the relation of the wax to its shape is unilluminating for us because that very example was appropriated by Descartes in Meditation II.

The whole work divides into two parts. The first part, which primarily serves as a critique of Burnyeat, begins with a brief description of his critique of Aristotle’s hylomorphic account of perception. From here,I move to Descartes’ appropriation of the wax example in the latter half of the second Meditation, focusing on *what* it is that the appropriation is supposed to convince us of. This allows us to determine in precisely what respect Burnyeat’s critique is wedded to a Cartesian conception of matter.

In the second part, I turn to Aristotle’s uses of wax examples directly: first, as they bear on the *metaphysical* thesis of Aristotelian hylomorphism; second, as they apply to the Aristotelian account of *perception*. Focusing on the common use of this example thus allows us to see the commonality between the two accounts, and, ultimately opens up a *via media,* one already broached by Thomas Aquinas and John Philoponus, between spiritualist and literalist interpretations of Aristotle’s account of perception.

KEYWORDS: Aristotle; Descartes; Wax; hylomorphism; mind-body problem; perception, ancient theories of; scope distinction.

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1. Burnyeat (2002), 78. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Cf. Shields (1993), 162-63; Corcilius (2014), 35, fn. 49. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)