

On Cheese and Hylomorphism

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PHIL 205

September 24, 2022

G. K. Chesterton once observed that throughout history authors “have been mysteriously silent on the subject of cheese.”¹ In recognition of this unfortunate silence, and to assist in filling said topical void, this essay will offer a brief excursus on Aristotle’s hylomorphic view of reality by analyzing the matter, form, actuality, and potentiality of cheese.

Aristotle’s philosophy of nature is founded on hylomorphism, a “view according to which every natural body consists of two intrinsic principles, one potential, namely, primary *matter*, and one actual, namely, substantial *form*”² (emphasis added). The word “hylomorphism” is thus composed of the Greek words *hylē*, “matter,” and *morphē*, “form.” On this view, matter is that out of which a thing is made, while form is precisely *what a thing is* as differentiated from any other thing, particularly regarding functionality. Matter is also intimately tied to a thing’s potentiality; that is, its capacity to become or change—while form is tied to actuality; that is, the mode or state in which a thing presently exists. Matter is fundamentally desirous of form, as it is inherently capable of change. One could say that matter is that aspect of reality with the ability to change, to *trans-form*; that is, to go from one form to another.

To better understand these concepts, consider the example of cheese. On the material level, cheese is composed of coagulated milk, which can be seasoned and colored to preference, and which then takes the form of a nutritious and delicious dairy product capable of functioning as a savory ingredient in a variety of recipes. This means that the form of cheese is itself a result of the actualization of milk’s material potential for change. Milk has the potential to coagulate, which can be activated by the introduction of a coagulant, such as rennet, which causes the liquid component of milk (whey) to separate from its solid component (curd). Once milk’s potential to

¹ G. K. Chesterton, “Cheese,” in *Alarms and Discursions* (USA: Start Publishing, 2013), 21, Hoopla eBooks.

² *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*, s. v. “hylomorphism,” accessed September 24, 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/hylomorphism>.

coagulate has been actualized, the resulting solid curd can then be formed into cheese. This cheese, having changed from liquid milk into a savory solid, thereby gains new potency in service of its newfound functionality. For example, cheese, unlike liquid milk has the wonderful potential to melt. This potential can be activated when a slice of cheese is placed atop a burger patty while it cooks on the grill. The heat of the grill actualizes the cheese's potential to melt, and in so doing aids the cheese in fulfilling its function as an ingredient.

However, one must recall that not every cheese takes exactly the same form. Depending on variations in its material components and the different routes one might take in the cheesemaking and aging process, one form of cheese (say, cheddar) may differ slightly—or significantly—from another form (say, blue cheese). In fact, take blue cheese for example. This particular form of cheese has a unique potential to crumble. This potential, when activated by the force of machinery or that of human hands, enables it to serve most excellently as an ingredient in a delightfully chunky dip, especially those dips most suitably served alongside celery sticks and chicken wings.

This tangent on blue cheese once again calls to mind the close relationship between form and functionality, and functionality is itself intimately tied to what is called an object's *final cause*. In simple terms, an object's final cause speaks to the purpose for which it was made, a purpose which can be inferred from its matter and form. For example, when one considers the matter and form of cheese and how these allow it to so fittingly serve as a savory ingredient in a variety of different dishes, one can conclude that the final cause of cheese is to be delicious. In other words, the purpose of cheese is to please the senses; and, not just any senses, but particularly those of human taste buds (since, after all, humans, as the only known manufacturers of cheese, are the most likely to enjoy its savory characteristics).

Thus, the final cause of cheese is the unitive element which makes sense of the relationships between its matter, form, and their respective potency and actuality. Yet one could ask a further question still. Sure, the purpose of cheese is to delight human senses, but what is the point in such delight? Perhaps the answer can be found in an oft-misattributed quotation of Benjamin Franklin: “[Cheese] is a constant proof that God loves us and wants us to be happy.”³

³ Misattributed because the quotation is often said to be speaking of beer, while the original context of Franklin’s circa-1779 letter to Abbé Morellet concerned God’s gift of wine.

Bibliography

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