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HYLEMORPHISM AND THE CHALLENGE OF EMBODIED COGNITION

Embodied cognition is a relatively new research program within the cognitive sciences that holds both challenges and opportunities for Thomistic hylemorphism. The challenge is to show that hylemorphic theory can cohere with recent insights, and the opportunity is to use these insights to add to Thomistic thought. Embodied cognition poses a general challenge to dualistic mind/body conceptions because its focus on the importance of the body in cognitive processes lends itself to both reductive monism and emergence theory. Many of the difficulties that embodied cognition poses to Platonic/Cartesian types of dualism is avoided in hylemorphism. However, it yet holds a specific challenge to hylemorphic thought in its goal to replace theories of representational cognition with embodied cognition. This essay will make two arguments regarding the relation of embodied cognition and hylemorphism. First, that the basic embodied paradigm found in embodied cognition is consistent with Thomistic accounts of hylemorphic body/soul unity. Second, the challenge to representational cognition does not overcome the representational paradigm present in Thomism. The sort of cognition through phantasms that Thomas expounds cannot be adequately explained solely through non-representational embodied cognitive processes. The extension of cognition to the body can be accommodated within Thomistic thought as part of habitual action, since habits lie primarily in the soul and secondarily in the body as the body assists with the operation of the soul. Thomistic hylemorphism can thus successfully cohere with insights from embodied cognition and learn from it for a deeper understanding of habits.