CHAPTER FOUR

THE CARTESIAN DESTINY
OF FORM AND MATTER AND
ITS CRITICS

What happens to the traditional form-matter pair in the Cartesian program? The answer at first sight appears simple. Scholastics saw everything—with the possible exception of the human rational soul between death and the last trump, and of course God—hylomorphically. That is to say, they saw it as matter, itself mere potentiality, informed, or actualized, in such and such ways to produce the nice, tidy variety of things, animate and inanimate, found around us. Within each specific form, matter is the principle of individuation, but always in subordination to a form. Descartes changed all that by making matter independent, and replacing form, here and there only, by separate mind. So most of the erstwhile hylomorphic cosmos becomes just spread-out stuff, with minds dotted here and there as God decrees. This, it seems, is the Cartesian revolution.

When we look a little closer, however, we find a more complicated situation. Take the years 1637–1641, between Descartes’ first publication and the first edition of the Meditations, as roughly our terminus a quo: by then, the “standard,” if you will Thomistic, view of form and matter has been significantly modified, so that strict hylomorphism no longer prevails. As Scipion Dupleix wrote in 1603: “There is so much great noise among the Scholastics concerning the establishment of matter, that if I wanted to appease all sides, I would waste too much time.”1 And there are also some strident anti-scholastic voices to be heard, some, but not all, of these proposing corpuscularian themes. So we need first to look at the status of form and matter in the immediately pre-Cartesian literature. Second, we want to examine in Descartes’ own writings such passages as shed light on his solution to the form-matter problem, and finally, we will consider the use of the concepts form and matter in the works of some adherents and critics of Cartesianism: given that the gulf between

---

1 Dupleix 1990, p. 129.
the scholastics and the *novatores* was not so great, we find here also a
variety of compromises as well as some more radically anti-scholastic
views.²

**Before Descartes**

Aristotle’s doctrine, in *Physics* book I, is that there are three principles
of natural things, matter, form and privation. Though the principles are
three, privation quickly drops out, being only incidental—“there is a
sense in which the principles are two and a sense in which they are three,”
says Aristotle,³ and Aquinas echoes: “There are two *per se* principles of
the being and becoming of natural things, namely form and matter, and
one *per accidens* principle, namely privation.”⁴ Questions usually arise
about the relationship between the two *per se* principles of matter and
form and their respective properties. Traditionally, matter and form are
inseparable. All substances are informed matter. Form is associated with
actuality and matter with potentiality: to be in actuality is to participate in
a form and to have potentiality is to have a “power” of acting or undergo-
ing something;⁵ in this conception of substance, matter has the potential
for receiving forms, whether substantial or accidental. Forms are kinds,
or universals, and matter provides the individual substance with its par-
ticularity. Thus, matter is the principle of individuation, always subordi-
nate to form, which makes it a this-such, a recognizable entity of such
and such a kind. Substantial change, or mutation, that is, generation and
corruption, is a change in the very nature of a thing, its acquisition or
loss of a substantial form. Substantial forms are said to be indivisible, not
capable of more or less, and not possessing contraries, and thus they can-
not be acquired successively and piecemeal. Short of substantial change,

² The thesis, then, is not that the seventeenth century brand of scholasticism directly
influenced Descartes’ formulation of his philosophy, but that, at least, it prepared the way
for the acceptance of Cartesianism (and for the eventual attempt at reconciliation). The
thesis could be taken as a more general version of the one Vincent Carraud proposes with
respect to Ockhamism and the reception of Cartesianism by Arnauld, in “Arnauld: From

³ Aristotle, *Physics* I, 190b28–30. In fact, privation is needed only for substantial
change, and so drops out of consideration for most of the *Physics*. It is commonly dropped
by Cartesian, even those who still pay obeisance of a sort to form-matter explanation;
see e.g. Rohault.

⁴ Aquinas 1953, I, lectio 13.

⁵ Toletus 1589, III, chap. 1, text. 3.