



The Concept of Matter (Classic Reprint)

Ernan McMullin

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Excerpt from The Concept of Matter

The notion of a matter that underlies can reasonably be said to be the Oldest conceptual tool in the Western speculative tradition. Scarcely a single major philosopher in the short but incredibly fertile period that separates Thales from Whitehead has omitted it from the handful of basic ideas with which he set out to make Nature more intelligible to man. In many instances, ancient and modern, an initial judgement about the role to be attributed to matter has been decisive in orienting a philosophic system as a whole. So that to trace the story of the concept of matter is almost to trace the story of philosophy itself. In addition, this concept played a central part in the complex story of the dissociation of what we today call natural science from its parent, natural philosophy. The new physics (like the old) was concerned with motion, but its practitioners were less interested in definitions of motion than in the charting of the motions of different bodies and their reduction to a few abstract quantitative formulae of great predictive power. The optimistic belief that such a reduction could be brought about depended on the existence of an intrinsic motion-factor peculiar to each body, one that could somehow be operationally defined just as volume and velocity could. In the long search for this factor - a search which, as we shall see, is not yet at an end - one older concept played an indispensable role. Mass (as the motion-factor came to be called) was first grasped as the quantity of matter. The subsequent history of this definition and of the gradual sundering of the concepts of matter and mass is enormously significant because of the light it can throw on the relationship between philosophic and scientific concepts generally.

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