V. Conclusion

Contrary to Bayle’s assumption, neither Grew or Cudworth admit any autonomy of matter, nor something similar to the “substantial forms” of the Aristotelian tradition. It is precisely because they both want to refute materialist theses presumably involved by this conception, that they promote two different conceptions of the notion of life, a generic one (life as something mental), and a specific one (life as vegetation), whose agreement is sometimes difficult to grasp. Indeed, despite the huge differences between the two authors, they both defend this double conception of life for apologetic reasons. On the one hand, the ‘mental’ features of life understood as its higher capacities, sensation and intellection, are the best proof of the incorporeal nature of life, and this way, the best proof of the divine causation testified by vital phenomena. On the other hand, the ‘vegetative’ sense of life, regarded as the lowest common denominator of the group of things or properties that are called ‘vital’, is the best way to demonstrate both the presence of God everywhere throughout the whole universe and the unity of the creation. It is notably the adoption of these two ideas of life that paradoxically does not allow for a clear distinction between animate and inanimate bodies.

This ambiguity demonstrates the fecundity of the notion of life as a polemical tool. Nevertheless, in these conditions it is necessary to take into account the different dimensions of life: if it is a notion that can be determined by the phenomena described in the life sciences of that time, it keeps a strong theological dimension, which can partly modify its meaning.