

AN ANALYSIS INTO THE CONCEPT OF MATERIALISM IN WESTERN PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVES

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"Man is composed of four elements. When man dies, the earthly elements return and elapse into the earth; the watery element returns to the water, the fiery element returns to the fire, the airy element returns to the air; the senses pass into the space"¹ says Dr. Radhakrishnan. Since everything in the cosmos is the combination of matter according to the popular understanding of materialist philosophers, the analysis of the concept of materialism becomes necessary to understand the development of western philosophical thinking. Materialism is understood differently by different western philosophical thinkers namely Descartes, Hobbes, Spinoza, Locke, Hume, Kant, Hegel and others which are the subject matter of this paper.

Materialism can be defined as 'a form of philosophical monism which holds that matter fundamental substance in nature, and that all things, including mental aspects and consciousness, are results of material interactions'.² Materialism, at its simpler level, involves the focus on material things as opposed to that which is spiritual or intellectual in nature. We live in a world surrounded by and composed of matter. It is natural; therefore, that we may become distracted from spiritual or intellectual pursuits by material possessions, but this is frequently where problems occur. We can become obsessed by a desire to obtain them, or simply

frustrated by the need to maintain them. C.S. Lewis once said, "God likes matter. He invented it."³ Consider, instead, how what you choose to believe affects how you live, for as Lewis also said, different beliefs about the universe lead to different behavior. What we believe must either be true or false. Before settling on the position you choose, you owe it to yourself to keep seeking the truth about life, death and the universe.

Greek and Roman materialism

Thales of Miletus (c. 580 BCE) and some of the other pre-Socratic philosophers have some claims to being regarded as materialists. "Thales is traditionally regarded as the first philosopher, and, in a way, is put forward as the prototype of the wise man"⁴.

The materialist tradition in Western philosophy said to begin with Leucippus and Democritus, Greek philosophers who were born in the 5th century BCE. According to Democritus, the world consists of atoms in empty space. These atoms can be micro/ nano in size, and they interact either by impact or by hanging together, depending on their shapes. The greatness of atomism was its capacity to explain the changes that took place in things as due to changes in the configurations of unchanging atoms. This atomist view of Democritus is contrasted with that of the earlier philosopher Anaxagoras, who thought that when, for

¹ S. Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, Vol-1, Second edition, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2008, pp.228-229

² <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Materialism>. Retrieved on 15.12.2015

³ <https://www.allaboutphilosophy.org/materialism.htm>. retrieved on 18.12.2015

⁴ Ignatius Yarza, *History of Ancient Philosophy*, Sinag-tala publishers, Spain, 1994, p-12

example, the bread that a person eats transforms into human flesh, this happens because bread itself already contains hidden within itself the characteristics of flesh. Democritus thought that the soul is the combination of smooth, round atoms and those perceptions consist of motions caused in the soul atoms by the atoms in the perceived thing. "The atomist school represents another effort to reconcile the unity of being with the multiplicity of the physical world".⁵

Epicurus philosophy was expounded by Lucretius, a Roman philosopher of the 1st century BCE, Epicurus (died 270 BCE) was the most influential Greek materialist. He differed from Democritus in that he postulated an absolute up-down direction in space, so that all atoms fall in roughly parallel paths. To explain the impacts of atoms with one another, he then held that the atoms are subject to chance swerves a doctrine that was also used to explain free will. He also stated that "good and truth are equal in all men"⁶ Epicurus' materialism therefore differed from that of Democritus in being an indeterministic one. Epicurus' philosophy contained an important ethical part, which was a sort of enlightened egoistic hedonism. His ethics, however, was not materialistic in the pejorative sense of the word.

Galileo's Mechanical Laws and Materialism

In the new philosophical realm, experience and reason became the only standards of truth. Italian physicist and astronomer Galileo's work was of even greater importance in the development of a new worldview. Galileo brought attention to the importance of applying mathematics and numbers to the formulation of scientific laws. He accomplished this formulation by creating the science of mechanics, which applied the

principles of geometry to the motions of bodies. The success of mechanics in discovering reliable and useful laws of nature suggested to scientists that all nature is designed in accordance with mechanical laws. These great influences of the 15th and 16th centuries brought about two intellectual crises that profoundly affected Western civilization. Primarily the decline of Aristotelian science called into questions the methods and foundations of the sciences. This decline came about for a number of reasons including the inability of Aristotelian principles to explain new observations in astronomy. Second, new attitudes toward religion undermined religious authority and gave agnostic and atheistic ideas a chance to be heard.

Cartesian Dualism of Mind and body

During the 17th century French mathematician, physicist, and philosopher René Descartes attempted to resolve both crises. He followed Bacon and Galileo in criticizing existing methods and beliefs, but whereas Bacon had argued for an inductive method based on observed facts, "Bacon insists that the mind clear itself of all false opinions, prejudices, or idols"⁷. Descartes made mathematics the model for all science. Descartes championed the truth contained in the clear and distinct ideas of reason itself. The advance toward knowledge was from one such truth to another, as in mathematical reasoning. Descartes believed that by following his rationalist method, one could establish first principles for all knowledge about man, the world, and even God.

For Descartes "the end of study should be to direct the mind towards the enunciation of sound and correct judgments on all matters that come before it"⁸. Descartes

⁵ Ibid. p-52.

⁶ Dario Composta, *History of Ancient Philosophy*, Theological publications, Bangalore, 2005, p-90

⁷ Frank Thilly, *A History of Philosophy*, Central book depot, Allahabad, 1973, p-286

⁸ Enrique Chaves-Arviso (ed.), *Descartes Key Philosophical Writings*, (trns: Elizabeth S. Haldane), Wordsworth Publishers, Great Britain, 1997, p-3.

reconstruct all human knowledge on an absolutely certain foundation by denying to accept any belief, even the belief in his own existence, until he could prove it to be necessarily true. In his so-called dream argument, he argued that our inability to prove with certainty when we are awake and when we are dreaming makes most of our knowledge uncertain. Ultimately he concluded that the first thing of whose existence one can be certain is oneself as a thinking being. This conclusion forms the basis of his well-known argument, '*Cogito, ergo sum*' (I think, therefore I am). He also argued that, in pure thought, one has a clear conception of God and can demonstrate that God exists. Descartes argued that secure knowledge of the reality of God allowed him to have his earlier doubts about knowledge and science." Descartes placed the whole edifice of knowledge upon the foundation and deduction."⁹

Descartes agreed with the traditional religious doctrine of the immortality of the soul and maintained that mind and body are two different substances, thus exempting mind from the mechanistic laws of nature and providing for freedom of the will. His fundamental separation of mind and body, known as dualism, raised the problem of explaining how two such different substances as mind and body can affect each other, a problem he was unable to solve that has remained a concern of philosophy ever since, Descartes's thought launched an era of speculation in metaphysics as philosophers made a determined effort to overcome dualism, the belief in the irreconcilable difference between mind and matter and obtain unity. The separation of mind and matter is also known as Cartesian dualism after Descartes.

Hobbesian reduction of mind to material substance

Thomas Hobbes, in his effort to attain unity, asserted that matter is the only real substance. "Motion is the key concept of Hobbes thought"¹⁰. He formed a comprehensive system of metaphysics that provided a solution to the mind-body problem by reducing mind to the internal motions of the body. He also argued that there is no contradiction between human freedom and causal determinism - the view that every act is determined by a prior cause.

In his ethical theory Hobbes derived the rules of human behavior from the law of self-preservation and justified egoistic action as the natural human tendency. In his political theory he maintained that government and social justice are artificial creations based on social contract (voluntary agreement between people and their government) and maintained by force. In his most famous work, *Leviathan* (1651), Hobbes justified political authority on the basis that self-interested people who existed in a terrifying "state of nature"¹¹-that is, without a ruler; would seek to protect themselves by forming a political commonwealth that had rules and regulations. He concluded that absolute monarchy is the most effective means of preserving peace.

Spinoza's reduction of matter to spiritual substance

Hobbes tried to oppose Cartesian dualism by reducing mind to matter. Baruch Spinoza attempted to reduce matter to divine spiritual substance. He constructed a rigorous system of philosophy that offered new solutions to the mind-body problem and to the conflict between religion and science. Like Descartes, Spinoza maintained the thought that "we can achieve exact knowledge of reality by following the method of

⁹ Samuel Enoch Stumpf, *Philosophy: History and Problems*, second edition, McGraw-Hill Book Company, United States of America, 1977, p-247.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p-235.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p-238.

geometry¹², on the model of Euclidean geometry. However, Spinoza believed that Descartes' theory of two substances created an insoluble problem of the way in which mind and body interact. He concluded that the ultimate substance is God and that God, substance, and nature are identical. Thus he supported the pantheistic view that all things are aspects or modes of God. Spinoza's solution to the mind-body problem explained the apparent interaction of mind and body by regarding them as two forms of the same substance, which exactly parallel each other, thus seeming to affect each other but not really doing so. Spinoza's ethics, like the ethics of Hobbes, was based on a materialistic psychology according to which individuals are motivated only by self-interest. But in contrast to Hobbes, Spinoza concluded that rational self-interest coincides with the interest of others.

Locke's reduction of ideas to empirical experience

John Locke responded to Cartesian dualism by supporting a commonsense view that the corporeal bodily or material and the spiritual are simply two parts of nature that remain always present in human experience. He made no attempt to define these parts of nature or to construct a detailed system of metaphysics that attempted to explain them; Locke believed that such philosophical aims were impossible to carry out and thus pointless. Against the rationalism of Descartes and Spinoza, who believed in the ability to achieve knowledge by reasoning and logical deduction, Locke continued the empiricist tradition begun by Bacon and embraced by Hobbes. The empiricists believed that knowledge came from observation and sense perceptions rather than from reason alone. In his theory of the mind Locke attempted to reduce all ideas to simple elements of experience, but he distinguished sensation

and reflection as sources of experience, sensation providing the material for knowledge of the external world, and reflection the material for knowledge of the mind. Locke greatly influenced the skepticism of later British thinkers, such as George Berkeley and David Hume, by recognizing the vagueness of the concepts of metaphysics and by pointing out that inferences about the world outside the mind cannot be proved with certainty. His ethical and political writings had an equally great influence on subsequent thought.

Hume's knowledge through senses and impressions

David Hume opposed the Judeo-Christian doctrine of Creation, and also belief in miracles. Locke claims that all human knowledge comes from our senses. They are, he maintains, **impressions** meaning sensations and current emotions which are the stuff from which all our ideas are composed but for Hume, "morality is a subject that interests us above all others,"¹³ morality is the matter of taste and sentiment rather than an object of understanding. He defines *virtue* as 'Whatever mental action or quality gives to a spectator the pleasing sentiment of approbation'. He held to the doctrine of the Epicureans, that pleasure is of the highest good and claimed that it is our emotions that move us, and reason is powerless. He therefore claimed that reason should be the slave of our passions and can never pretend to any other office than to serve or obey them. Hume is usually cast as an empiricist in the Locke mould, but he was even more Cartesian than Locke in relation to things that one can be immediately aware of and so for Hume, it was still appearances in our own minds rather than objects in the external world, we can be aware of.

Idealism as Antithetical to Materialism

Idealism refers to a group of philosophies that have a common view that what we would call 'the external

¹² Ibid., p-256.

¹³ Ibid., p-296.

world' is somehow created by the mind. While they do not disagree with the ordinary man's view that material things exist, they disagree with the view of many other philosophers that the material world is independent of the mind. There are three principal types of *Idealism* which were proposed respectively by Berkeley, Kant and Hegel. Berkeley, an Anglican bishop, always tried to put faith above reason and so his philosophy will not be dealt with here. Instead, in addition to the philosophies of Kant and Hegel, consideration will be dealt.

Kantian Transcendental *Idealism*

Immanuel Kant was against Hume's account of causality that gave him a completely different direction in the field of speculative philosophy. He had to consciously consider two different groups of philosophies (i) Descartes' group of *Cogito* and *rationalist* group of Spinoza, Leibnitz, and Berkeley (ii) the *empiricist* group of Locke, Hume and the French Empiricists. Kant's solution to the problem raised by the differences of opinions expressed in these philosophies was embodied in his philosophy which he called *Transcendental Idealism*. This has been described as the term he used for his theory of the external world. It refers to his view that the objects of our experience, in the sense of things existing in space and enduring through time, are nothing but appearances and have no independent existence outside our own thoughts. The adjective 'transcendental' indicates Kant's reason for this view: namely, that only by accepting it can we account for our *a priori* knowledge of objects. "To Kant, 'pure' reason meant '*a priori*' reason: that is, something that can be known apart from anything derived from experience. Therefore, he was not prepared to accept the view of the *Empiricists* that all knowledge comes from experience"¹⁴.

¹⁴ <https://www.allaboutphilosophy.org/materialism.htm>.
retrieved on 10.12.2015

He concluded that there were two sources of human knowledge namely sensibility and understanding. Through the former objects are given to us, through the latter they are thought. "Kant claimed, there were concepts (twelve in all) that were not learnt from experience and enable us to make sense of our experience but have no other use. However, he claimed what he called *noumena* (*that which doesn't go through space and time*) which are the sources of our external experiences, cannot be known in themselves"¹⁵. This locked us in a mental world which excluded from metaphysics knowledge of the existence of God (Natural Theology), free will, etc., and the support that could be found in Natural Theology for the Genesis doctrine of Creation. Kant believed in the existence of God and the future life, but he recognized that they could not be logically proven by his philosophy. His experience with the moral law made it certain for him that they are true. Kant quite clearly looked to science and not revelation for the truth about origins and to this end he was the first to advance the theory that the solar system, including the earth, came from a swirl of matter.

Hegel's Dialectical Process of Spirit and Body

Friedrich Hegel proposed that truth could be reached by use of the *dialectic*, which involved a process of triads, each consisting of thesis, antithesis and synthesis. In the first essay Hegel is critical of the fact that the pre-Christian Hebrew religion tied its adherents down to the acceptance of 'positive' religious beliefs and practices and he therefore claimed that the Hebrew religion was inferior to that of the ancient Greeks who were not restricted but were all individually free to speculate concerning their beliefs. He is also critical of the 'positivity' he claims has developed in the Christian religion. Hegel's second essay dealing with what he

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

argues is the *Spirit of Christianity*. Hegel concerning the moral teachings of Jesus, which no doubt reflects the fact that before he decided to become a philosopher Hegel was a seminary student and a prospective Lutheran minister. However, despite the fact that throughout his public life Jesus attested to the truth of the Hebrew Scriptures, nowhere in his essay does Hegel restore his own acceptance of this truth, which he had previously downgraded with his criticism of the Jewish religion as a whole. Hegel wrote that, 'to consider the resurrection of Jesus as an event is to adopt the outlook of a historian and this has nothing to do with religion'.

"Hegel claimed that an infinite cause (God) cannot have a finite effect and that: 'miracles therefore are a manifestation of the undivine because they are the most unnatural of phenomena. They contain the harshest opposition between spirit and body, two downright opposites here conjoined without any mitigation of their prodigiously harsh contradiction'¹⁶. Divine action is the restoration and manifestation of oneness; miracle is the supreme disseverance. Before dealing with these attacks from inside of the Church, it is appropriate to consider the contemporaneous attacks that were being made from outside of the Church under the aegis of *Positivism*.

Logical Positivism of David Hume and Auguste Comte

The philosophy of *Positivism* claims that only science can tell us of our historical origins and those of the world and universe in general. It was inherent in the philosophy of Hume and the other empiricist philosophers. It was first explicated by Auguste Comte (1798–1857) in his work, *Cours de Philosophie Positive* (Lessons from Positive Philosophy) (1830–1842). In his book, Comte claimed that there were three stages of man's thought (i) **First** was the religious

or theological stage where man invented gods and devils to explain his origins (ii) **Second** was the metaphysical stage where man (unsuccessfully) tried to discover his origins by philosophical abstractions;(iii) **Third and final** was the scientific stage where men, by scientific observation and experimentation, will reach the positive truth. This was never anything but a fallacy because; (1) the past cannot be observed and, (2) since the events of past history are unrepeatable; any theory that postulates such history as science can never be experimentally tested. Comte endeavored to found a 'positive' religion, which he called 'the religion of humanity', with himself as high priest. Although some Positivist Societies which worshipped humanity instead of God were formed, the movement was ultimately a failure. However, his philosophy enjoyed success among atheist philosophers and scientists, although some rejected Comte's excesses.

In the 20th Century the 'Logical Positivists', a group of Austrian philosophers and scientists known as 'the Vienna Circle', attempted to restate 'positivism' in a more intellectual way. Pursuant to this, they introduced the 'principle' of 'verifiability', "the principle was that the meaning of a proposition consists in its method of verification"¹⁷and claimed that any non-tautological proposition which is, in principle, unverifiable by observation, is devoid of meaning Logical Positivism attacked theology and metaphysics. Their characteristic claims concerning the nature of the world and reality were unverifiable, so it was claimed, and therefore had no meaning and the status of the principle itself was suspect. To conclude, the following essentials derivations could be made in this paper (i)pre-Socratic philosophers claim that the five primeval elements of earth, water, air, fire and ether are the source of reality for the evolution of

¹⁶ *Ibid*

¹⁷ A.J.Ayer, *The Central Questions of Philosophy*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, pp.23-24

the living and non-living realities of the world (ii) Atomists portray that everything is made up of atoms (iii) Galileo's Philosophy iterates that everything is made out of movement (iv) Descartes reconstruct all human knowledge on an absolutely certain foundation by denying to accept any belief, even the belief in his own existence, until he could prove it to be necessarily true (v) Hobbes reduces mind to material substance (vi) Hume's emphasizes the attainment of knowledge through the impressions in our own minds from the appearances of the objects in the external world (vii) Immanuel Kant accepts the two sources of human knowledge namely sensibility and understanding through his *synthetic a priori* judgments (viii) Hegel claimed that an infinite cause (God) cannot have a finite effect (ix) Logical positivists highlight about the verifiability principle of truth which is skeptically viewed.

"Logical positivists positions are materialists, in the sense they all lack belief in any spiritual reality"¹⁸. There are logical positivists who believe Christians. Despite the erroneous nature of 'positivism', the Western World today, including many Christian Churches, still accepts the false philosophy that only science can tell us the truth about our origins and those of the heavens and the earth. In fact, it would be true to say that most of the Western World is saturated with this positivistic misconception of the reality.

¹⁸ Frederick Copleston, *A history of: philosophy logical positivism and existentialism*, continuum publications, London, 2003, p.31.