

DOMAINS OF MATERIALISM, PAST AND PRESENT: BROADLY GENERALIZED OBSERVATIONS OF A HISTORY OF HUMAN THOUGHT

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In looking towards the East, economic issues take the foreground. It is important, however, to fully take into account the underlying assumptions about reality itself, which are implied and widely taken for granted, avoiding the promotion of capitalism as only a different aspect of materialism. I am also deeply concerned by some opinions expressed some time ago in *The New Philosophy* in an article that seemed to me in some parts to come close to an unrecognized materialistic bias,¹ where I fear dangerous consequences.

In the following discussion, the topic to be treated is *Philosophical Materialism*, which is defined in the *American Encyclopedia of Philosophy* as "doctrines concerning the nature of the world which give matter the primary position and accord to mind (or spirit) a secondary, dependent reality or even none at all. Extreme materialism asserts that the real world consists of material things, varying in their states and relations, and nothing else."² Among the opposites are vitalism³ (acknowledgment of nonma-

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¹ An otherwise very enlightening and well founded article by James L. Pendleton in *The New Philosophy* XCIV (July - December, 1991): 561 f, reflects presently held opinions by the majority of scientific psychiatry about physical causation. There are, however, also important minority views, quoted later, which take a different perspective.

A diametrically opposite view of materialism presenting an idealistic-holistic interpretation is presented in the writings of Emanuel Swedenborg, appearing in a new translation by Dr. George Dole in the volume *Emanuel Swedenborg* in the series *The Classics of Western Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), 227-256. The former title of this treatise was translated *The Intercourse between the Soul and the Body*. Here, Swedenborg asserts the absolute and exclusive causation of all physical and conscious processes by the soul alone, condemning the Aristotelian view of physical causation as well as Leibniz's theory of psychophysical parallelism.

² Paul Edwards, ed., *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. 5 (New York, London: Macmillan, 1972), p. 179. On p. 138, there is an almost 10 page article by Keith Campbell. Under the subparagraph "Contemporary Materialism" he states "the triumphant progress in the 20th century of a materialistic biology and biochemistry has almost completely eliminated vitalist notions and supranatural views of life."

³ *Ibid.*, vol. 8, p. 253 "...a metaphysical doctrine concerning the nature of living organisms...[accepting] The presence in living systems of a substantial entity that imparts to the system powers possessed by no inanimate body."

terial living energies), and idealism⁴ (acknowledgment of the primacy of spirit or consciousness) and other related orientations.

In the materialist's view, an understanding of matter as the ultimate reality means a specific and historically often dogmatic explanation of the world (ontology). As a philosophical orientation, this has its roots in Greek Philosophy, mainly in Leucippus and his pupil Democritus. It experienced a resurgence in England (Hobbes), France (La Mettrie, D'Holbach and others) and somewhat later in Germany (Feuerbach, Karl Marx and a branch of Neo-Hegelian followers, mainly supported and expanded by biologists like Haeckel and others). These laid a foundation, which became the undergirding of a complex of teachings that became later combined with Darwinism as well as essential parts of Communism and German National Socialism, generally restricting or even denying freedom.

Very wide areas of the world have become penetrated and are still swayed by this doctrine, although our age observes a number of important advocates of opposite positions.

Several prophetic voices have also forecast an overcoming of this trend, first Emanuel Swedenborg, and also in more recent times a renowned sociologist with a prophetic vision, Pitirim Sorokin,⁵ who predicted the decline of materialism already beginning in the late 1930s, speaking of the coming of a new "ideational age" of the future. Although he was a professor at Harvard and became the president of the World Association of Sociology, few followers listened to him and took him seriously in this respect.

Two very strong domains of materialism have recently collapsed:

1. German National Socialism contained a mystified materialistic basis as a foundation of its theory of human races. It is hardly remembered

⁴ Ibid., vol. 4, p. 110 "...the view that mind and spiritual values are fundamental in the world as a whole."

⁵ Pitirim A. Sorokin, (1889-1968), who was familiar with some of Swedenborg's books, has been called *The World's Greatest Sociologist* in a memorial by C. Zimmerman, (University of Saskatchewan: Saskatchewan, 1968). Sorokin represented with A. Toynbee and O. Spengler a set of theories of cultural cycles: *Social and Cultural Dynamics*, 4 vols. (New York: American Book Co., 1937). Of interest here are *The Crisis of our Age* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1946) and *The Reconstruction of Humanity* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1948).

today that Hitler's chief theoretician, Alfred Rosenberg, stated in the prologue to his main work⁶ "the Soul is the inward experience of Race," a flagrant denial of an independent spiritual reality. The implied view of the world, though rarely recognized to its full extent, came close to a conclusion that all that makes us human is in the genes, in the physical heredity of the race in which we are born, this determining the value of persons and societies. In philosophical terms, this means a materialistic ontology with a biological orientation. In this consisted the theoretical backbone of an ideology of races and specific degrees of their moral superiority or inferiority. (Such a classification of races was first originated by Gobineau.)⁷ This theory and its very concrete and horrible consequence of genocide held intellectual and political sway over a large part of Europe. It became irrelevant and suspect with the collapse of the "Third Reich" of Hitler's Germany.

2. Another domain of materialism with a more sophisticated undergirding, with far-reaching intellectual and political aspects of involvement, came to power in Russia with the Russian Revolution in 1917. The social and philosophical doctrines of Karl Marx and F. Engels were uncritically accepted by Lenin, who adapted them as his theoretical basis for political realization. They were again similarly used by Stalin and made serviceable to his own purposes of power politics, leading to the elimination of millions. Within this ideology or doctrine, dialectical materialism is clearly based upon an acknowledgment of an exclusive material reality, seeing especially in the entire history of mankind only material causes. This became an official dogma of the Bolshevik Party as an unassailable teaching of the state, involving strict censure of anything claiming or even mentioning the opposite. A tenet of the official dogma asserted that quality

⁶ Alfred Rosenberg (1893-1946), *Der Mythos des 20. Jahrhunderts*. (München: Hoheneichen Verlag, 1935), 2. "Soul means race as inwardly seen. Seen in the other direction, race is the outside of a soul" (transl. by the author). Oddly, he rejects materialism, p. 324, and tries to establish a mythical concept of race, declaring it integrated in material inheritance, though no clear ontological or epistemological position is presented. Rosenberg was hanged as a war criminal in Munich in 1946.

⁷ Comte Joseph Arthur de Gobineau (1816-1882), *Essai sur l'inegalite des races humaines* (Paris: 1853-1855), English translation *The Inequality of Human Races* (London: 1915), rejecting the idea of progress. The main German race theorists expanded this only slightly, declaring the Jews as the most inferior race below the Africans that appeared at the bottom of Gobineau's list.

develops from quantity and is basically an aspect of matter. Consequently, some limited power of ideas was maintained, yet these could supposedly only accelerate what must happen by necessity. Freedom was often defined in this framework as *insight into necessity*, and a stifling denial of freedom in theory (determinism) and practice prevailed. Unfortunately much of socialism in the world accepted these premises, partially because traditional religious organizations defended an unjust status quo and refused necessary changes.

Much of Eastern Europe was forced under this yoke after World War II, politically as well as intellectually. The entire educational system, including the universities and all schools, became forcibly oriented in this direction. Nearly all literature, laws and art were pushed step by step into this mold—yet its threadbare poverty and sterility became increasingly evident in thousands of ways. When the overthrow of the Communist party occurred in 1991, in many quarters the fetters were thrown off with relief, and a deep resentment surfaced against everything that had been connected with it, although strong countercurrents are still in existence. It is unavoidable that in the popular view and in the media, political and economic features now stand in the foreground, while the deeper ideological foundations have found only little attention up to now. Great efforts are presently being made in Eastern Europe to overcome the dogmatic limitations of the past decades, to rethink most aspects of a previously all-pervading ideology, and this process will demand much acuity and time. It is a task that mainly involves the areas formerly dominated by Bolshevism, but in certain respects these attitudes extend to the Western world as well. Many pockets of indoctrination from all institutes of learning proclaim some glorification of a materialistic view of the world, of human nature and history, which have to be revised and examined in a critical light.

3. It is not easy to recognize the present status of open and hidden materialism in the Anglo-Saxon countries, especially in the United States. Few are aware that in the Academic realm of thought one discovers strong and widespread domains of materialism, although some creative minorities work towards radical change. As an observer with a European intellectual background, one is sometimes appalled by the onesidedness of a

larger part of American science. In the leading popular publication, representing most of present-day science, *Scientific American*, one will never find mention of parapsychology, meditation, vitalism, homeopathy or psychosomatics, not to mention a serious discussion of these topics. There is a powerful implied taboo as to what has to be kept out as unscientific, (which is not entirely without justification, because there are undoubtedly many strange popular superstitions). What is accepted and financed in the great Universities very seldom goes outside of certain self-imposed boundaries. Examples of these boundaries can be seen in the orientations of endowed chairs, their publications and accepted doctoral dissertations. Materialistic trends are very often dominant in the science of medicine, but also in philosophy, psychology and economics.

In medicine, and in official psychiatry, it is widely held that physical heredity, biochemical processes, and the impact of the environment are of primary importance and they are studied and emphasized. Any "mentalism" is considered to be almost heresy, hardly anyone daring to mention the soul or spiritual energies as serious hypotheses. What is officially advocated and prescribed involves physical and chemical treatment of patients, including electroshocks and many psychologically active and often permanently harmful drugs. An impersonal treatment of patients without attempting to understand them is the consequence, although this is sharply and competently attacked by a minority.⁸ Psychosomatics⁹ is neglected, because it is not so easily demonstrated scientifically, although there are valid and far-reaching epidemiological observations. Many of the problems with the present overrun of medical costs are the consequence of an implied powerful and uncritical materialism—we pay for it in every hospital or doctor bill. The fact that with the same germs around, some patients become ill and others, even in the same family, do not, can seldom be further explained except as chance factors involving the immune system or sometimes mysterious factors of stress.

⁸ A very comprehensive and critical analysis of these prevailing materialistic trends is presented by a psychiatrist, Peter Breggin, *Toxic Psychiatry. Why Therapy, Empathy and Love must replace the drugs, electroshock, and biochemical theories of the 'New Psychiatry'* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991).

⁹ For example: Kenneth Pelletier, *Mind as Healer, Mind as Slayer* (1977; reprint New York: Dell, 1977).

An elevation of random chance as the great creative power is also often used by materialistic biologists as the only or main explanation for the evolution of life on earth, even for the origin of humanity.

In philosophy there are presently very few representatives of idealism, of transcendentalism or followers of Royce, while linguistics (often with a strict materialistic orientation rejecting metaphysics, like Wittgenstein) is a widely popular topic. Epistemology, often connected with logical positivism is widely characteristic of the field and the majority of research. In a few cases, even strict followers of Karl Marx still advocate their views widely. Only a few philosophers dare to go ahead in new directions against prevailing trends of the majority,¹⁰ as far as I have been able to observe.

In religion, a number of Christian denominations deny, question or de-emphasize topics like life after death, angels or any spiritual or transcendent reality, for instance in "demythologization."¹¹ The main scientifically unobjectionable area remains history, especially literary history, which often at present overshadows living interpretations in theology, occupying a major part of theological and philosophical study.

The followers of Swedenborg are a rare exception in the religious field, and not everybody realizes that here is offered a philosophical set of teachings about reality, advocated by a scientist who radically opposes materialism and presents a consistent and logical holistic framework. A graduated ontology involving degrees of reality from the spiritual to the material realms is proposed.

4. With great interest, one notes now a number of new popular and academic trends that counteract prevailing materialistic tendencies. Holistic views appear that include a spiritual dimension and energies. There are many interesting orientations,¹² (but also many that are questionable).

¹⁰ An exception is the philosopher Renee Weber who dared to publish *Dialogues with Scientists and Sages: The Search for Unity* (London, New York: Routledge and Kegan, 1986).

¹¹ This became the main theme of a widely influential interpretation started by Rudolf Bultmann of Marburg University, Germany, a trend to expurgate Scripture according to materialistic concepts, many publications by followers.

¹² Marilyn Ferguson has published a number of observations in a similar line in *The Aquarian Conspiracy, Personal and Social Transformation in the 1980s* (Los Angeles: J. P. Tarcher, 1980).

Among various examples and observations, one can mention a list of publications pointing in a new direction in the area of humanistic psychology.¹³ An M.D. has published a book *Recovering the Soul*,¹⁴ and in the field of biology Rupert Sheldrake is proposing a controversial theory of bio-energetic fields.¹⁵ There is an Academy of Transpersonal Psychology. The near-death experiences point in the direction of a spiritual reality, and there is recent research in this area.¹⁶ There is a widespread interest in New Age Spirituality which often transforms Eastern traditions of spiritual experience, and involves a great deal of searching and thinking in new directions.¹⁷ New terminologies appear as in the Institute of Noetic Sciences led by the astronaut Edgar Mitchell, which offers many publications and has a center and nationwide following. While the traditional universities are slow to find a new orientation, the J. F. Kennedy University in Orinda, California is at least opening some avenues with programs in consciousness and parapsychology. Many other movements could be listed.

One is eagerly anticipating more indications that the domain of materialism will shrink and the predictions of Sorokin, and the much greater religious perspective of Swedenborg may be confirmed.

An age where spiritual approaches and values will again take the lead to elevate all genuine human capacities appears at the horizon, but is still remote. To an increasing number of insightful individuals, a growing recognition dawns in many forms: The Supreme Reality cannot be only material, but must be spiritual. Energy and Order, or more sublimely, Love and Wisdom stand in reality behind all appearances, especially in the phenomena of life, as this has been seen by some of the greatest thinkers in past and present.

In all the history of mankind, it is creative minorities that have laid the foundations of great changes. There are presently many directions and

¹³ One of the leaders is Victor Frankl, originally of Vienna, in his book *The Doctor and the Soul*, 2nd. ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965).

¹⁴ Larry Dossey, the book has the subtitle *A Scientific and Spiritual Search* (New York, Toronto, London: Bantam Books, 1989).

¹⁵ *The Rebirth of Nature: The Greening of Science and God* (New York: Bantam Books, 1990).

¹⁶ Charles P. Flynn, *After the Beyond; Human Transformation and the Near-Death Experience* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1986).

¹⁷ Willis Harman, *Global Mind Change, also A Re-examination of the Metaphysical Foundations of Modern Science*. Report of the Institute of Noetic Sciences, (Sausalito, Calif., 1993).

areas of reaction against materialism, but they represent still only a minority force, and it is difficult at this time to determine the impact these trends will have on our culture. It is a challenge to all those who have some perception of the foundations of our culture and thinking to join in the struggle against the blinders and constrictions imposed by shortsighted observations, misused by cliques striving for power.

We can hope that the time may not be too far away when new truths will come to light universally, so that the dominance by dogmatic materialism may be recognized as dark and cruel spots in human history. □