

Philosophical Materialism

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Critical philosophical position which considers matter as beginning, origin and cause of whatever exists. The term was first used by Robert Boyle in *The Excellence and Grounds of the Mechanical Philosophy* (1674), and adopted by the *philosophes* of the Enlightenment in the 18th century (Condorcet, Condillac, Diderot, Helvetius, Voltaire, etc.) to designate their naturalistic position in physics and physiology, their radical critic against religion, their hedonist moral and their opposition to the educational and moral conventions of the Ancien Regime. The classical philosophical materialism suffers Kant's criticism and idealism effects during the 19th century, as it proves the so called "materialism dispute" (*Materialismusstreit*) in Germany, which led to the consolidation of different varieties of materialism: physicalist, moral, historical, dialectical, etc. The theoretical varieties of materialism have been multiplying throughout the 20th century as our scientific knowledge of matter and universe had been becoming more refined. Nevertheless, the original and underivable nature of matter was associated since classical times with the *cosmological atomism* (Democritus, Epicurus, Lucretius, etc.). Since atoms stop being "indivisible" and no longer appear as the ultimate components of reality, materialism takes a more *methodological* aspect and in all its varieties (Positivist or Marxist) underlines the ontological primacy of matter to spirit and the priority of the scientific knowledge (experimental and theoretical) to other types of knowledge: religious, mystic or extrasensitive.

Varieties of materialism. - The different conceptions of "matter" gave rise to a great variety of materialist systems. "Materialism" means different things depending on the context. We distinguish three big contexts, as we relate the Idea of Matter (M) with the World, with the Idea of God or with Knowledge.

A) In the most immediate context, the ontic one, which considers the relationships of the general Idea of Matter (M) with the different realities that filled the "world" just as they appeared to us, we underlined 4 big types of materialism.

1) The *cosmologic materialism* considers matter the origin of universe and postulates it as *substratum* or foundation of all reality. Its "mechanicist" variant adds to the material parts distribution in the universe (substances, atoms, masses, etc.), the existence of forces capable of moving and combining them, without the need of appealing to final causes or spiritual powers. In this way were presented the ancient materialism of Democritus and Epicurus, the 18th century's classical illuministic materialism and the 19th century's positivism. The energetistic tradition in physics, nevertheless, led G. Ostwald (1895) to proclaim the futility of the matter concept and the superseding of the scientific materialism. When the equivalence between mass and energy was recognised by Einstein's relativity theory in the 20th century, the cosmological idea of matter through the "force-field" idea seems to revive. But in 1932 it was detected, by the astronomer Jan Oort, a type of matter which applies gravitational force over visible substances, although it does not emit nor absorb light. Before 1980 people thought that this "dark matter" was ordinary matter in some undetectable form

such as gas, low mass stars and star corpses of the type white dwarfs or black holes. The astrophysics calculations, apart from establishing that the dark matter composes the 90% of the mass of the universe, suggest that it comprises *neutrinos* or some more exotic form of particles still undiscovered in the high energy laboratories. Although we do not know what is it composed of, the dark matter spread throughout the universe follows the trail of the ancient cosmological materialism.

2) The *anthropological materialism* centres in explaining the human nature from its physical and physiological components. By distinguishing categorically the “res cogitans” (or soul) from the “res extensa” (or body), Descartes contributed to the spreading of the anthropologic materialism in the modern age. The thesis of the materiality of the soul was clichéd in the clandestine literature of the Libertines and served as spearhead of the Enlightenment against the Christian tradition. The medical and physiological discoveries that show the spiritual functions dependence regarding their anatomic and organic conditions, allowed doctor De la Mettrie to devise a natural history of the soul and to formulate the famous thesis “man a machine” (1748) and David Hartley to defend the indivisibility of thought and sensation (1749). After them, Baron d'Holbach strengthen the natural character of human realities: “A man of genius produces a good work, in the same manner as a tree of a good species, placed in a prolific soil, cultivated with care, grafted with judgment, produces excellent fruit” (1770); made a critique of religion; and proposed an ethics of pleasure and a policy of the solidarity and the common interest. In the same line C.A. Helvetius developed an ethical program based on the self-esteem and the usefulness, and resorted to education to perform a synthesis of the state and private interest. In this ideological context the French Revolution took place, which for Kant’s “enlightened” generation meant a definitive progress for humankind. After the conservative reaction the reductionist and physiological materialism model strengthen in Germany with Kart Vogt, for whom “thought is regarding brain the same as bile regarding liver” (1854). It became consolidated thanks to Darwin’s theory of evolution (1859) and matured in Th. Henry Huxley’s (1863) and Ernst Haeckel’s works. The latter added to the scientific materialism a practical component of moral type, which sets life’s aim in the corporal welfare, pleasure and health: “the moral and ethical materialism, in the proper sense of the word, it is a practical direction of life which has no other purpose than the most refined sensitive pleasure” (1868). This materialism version was branded “vulgar” and “dogmatic”, but it played an important role in the refutation of the beliefs in spirits and abstract and transcendent realities. Albert Lange (1866) criticises it for its false aim of expanding the human knowledge beyond certain limits. By giving objective value to its imaginative constructs this anthropological materialism has turned into “metaphysics”. Against this criticism Paul Kurtz has reformulated in his *Eupraxophia* (1988) a more resistant anthropological materialism to “transcendental temptations” (1986), which reconcile humanism with 20th century’s scientific progress (1991).

3) *Historical materialism (Hismat)* is the name which F. Engels applied to the historical view of the social development expressed in Karl Marx’s Preface of 1859 to *Critique of Political Economy*. It is a perspective which is concerned not just to understand the world, but to change it. His analysis distinguish between the economic *base* of society (“means of production” and “relations of production”) and the *superstructure* (law, science, religion, art, philosophy...), which were seen as being determined for economics factor “in the last instance”. But there are antagonistic

relationship between the “forces” and the “relations” of production within each “mode of production” (slavery, feudalism, capitalism...), which eventually lead to the breakdown of the mode of production. Marx argued in *Capital* (1867, Vol. I) that the knowledge of natural sciences (superstructure ?) become the central productive force of industrial society. This contradiction, linked with the fact that man is treated as a commodity upon the labour market is leading to final crisis of capitalist system.

Marx and Engels provided the matter concept with a *real complexity* and an *objective plurality*, which separates it from subjectivism, at the same time as they underlined its dynamic and evolutionary nature. In this sense, for the *Hismat* conscience is not the determining principle of human history, but a result of this, which lacks any privilege. This “turn upside down” (*ümsstulpen*) of Hegel’s history of the philosophy definitely separates philosophical materialism from idealism. Nevertheless, within the this Marxist orthodoxy the *Hismat* was a *dialectical materialism*’s application (*Diamat*) polemically defined by Engels (1878/86) as a general science of the dialectical laws of movement (the law of the transformation of quantity into quality, the law of the interpenetration of opposites and the law of the negation of the negation). Over that evolutionary and monist materialism model, which tried to give an account of the 19th century’s natural sciences progress and which became established in the Soviet Union with Stalin (1938), Marxist materialism scientifically studied the genesis and functioning of the different historical societies in their own context. Works such as *The Class Struggle in France* (1850) and *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1851) illustrate the distance between that *contextual and historical scientific practice* and the economic determinism or the vulgar historicism which usually is attributed to him. The *historical materialism* is the more debated aspect of the Marxist thought in the 20th century, not only on the part of the Marxist authors which favour the materialistic view, such as Lukács, Korsch, Labriola, Gramsci, S. Hook (1936) or Althusser, but also within non-materialistic sociologists, anthropologists and historians (Weber, Mannheim, Merton, Gouldner, etc.). A North American version, which closely follows the historical materialism influence adding ecological elements, is the *cultural materialism* defended by L. White (1959) and Marvin Harris (1982).

4) Under the heading of *formalist materialism*, I embrace the heterodox position of those who have explained the abstract entities of “ideal” or “essential” nature from matter, without reducing them into subject. In the Aristotelian philosophy matter was intrinsic *active cause* already. It was also *operative power*, so “things which have in themselves the principle of their genesis would exist by themselves when anything external will prevent it.” (Met., IX, 7, 1049a). This matter’s autosufficiency to develop leads to an heterodox tradition in which the expression “intelligible matter” (Plotino) was coined and which going through Scotus Eriugena’s “divisions of Nature” and Avicbron’s “fountain of life”, comes to Nicholas of Cusa for whom matter is the “undetermined possibility” in which the earth, the sun and the rest of the universe are *contracted*. Against the concept of passive and inert matter, Copernicus’ and Galileo’s follower Giordano Bruno, *identifies matter with form*, as: “that matter... has all kind of figures and dimensions and since everything have none, because something which is so many different things, it is necessary that it would be nothing in particular” (*De la Causa*, IV, 1598). The meanders of this tradition tend to exceed the ontic context, by mixing with the ontological and gnoseological. Manifestation of this materialism in the 20th is the *Russian Formalism* of Bakhtin and V. Voloshinov (1929). For this, the understanding and the conscience can only be performed in some signical material,

which is a result of its *diamerical relationships*: “Consciousness itself can arise and become a viable fact only in the material embodiment of signs... Out of that material, remains a plain physiological fact”.

B) *Materialism and Atheism*.- It was traditionally considered that “materialism” entails the negation of God or atheism, e.g. in the Soviet Communism or in the Nazism. However, there are two ways of getting around the incompatibility between theism and materialism. The former entails making Gods corporeal entities, as Epicurus and Hobbes did, who did not deny the existence of God, but were *practical atheists*. The latter, more subtle, besides making equivalent “matter” and “body”, involves adding a rational divine principle which causally operates in the world, either *inside* (stoic pantheism), or *from outside* by creating atoms (as Tertulianus or Gassendi), or arranging it (enlightened deism), or transmitting to it force and movement in the style of R. Cudworth and the Cambridge Platonists, for whom matter was of *plastic nature*, a living force which directly derives from God (1678). Newton and his disciples took advantage of the science progress to support their religious beliefs.

Their atheist rivals, rationalists too, do the same. B. Spinoza (1677) accepted the equivalence between God, Substance and Nature in the *general ontology* level, to turn atheism into an impregnable position. By identifying God with *everything which exists*, denies meaning to the traditional distinctions between *matter* and *spirit* as different realities. For him there is only one substance, which, however, it is not one, but multiple, *infinite*, composed of infinitely attributes, of which we know only two: *thinking* and *extension*. Spinoza refuses the ghost in the machine myth (Descartes), and also the Leibniz’s monads *psychophysic parallelism*, because neither body, nor soul are independent substances. On the contrary, “*the order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things*”. Actually, “*I’m my body*” and “*by body I mean a mode which expresses in a certain determinate manner the essence of God, in so far as he is considered as an extended thing*”. Atheism was never so subtle and daring. Spinoza’s *Ethics* is the Bible for every unbelieves.

In this line G. Bueno formulates an *ontological materialism* (1972), which also distinguishes between a *general level* (*Natura naturans*) and another *special level* (*Natura naturata*). Now materialism is the philosophical reason’s exercise when decodes the *symploké* or puzzle of ideas which make our present up. *Philosophical reason* is different to the scientific, political and technological ones ... because it’s practiced upon ideas. And it’s not idealistic because ideas are *functions*, which values are determined in each historic moment, according the objects in which they become incarnated. The *general-ontological materialism* is opposed to the metaphysical idea of “universe” as *omnitude realitatis* (“everything real is rational”, Hegel), which culminates in *monism* or in *harmonic holism*; but doesn’t accept the a limitless multiplicity. In *regressus* from what’s given (the objects of world) the idea of radical plurality or *general-ontological matter* (M) is reached as a limit. Nevertheless, materialism is alternative to *nihilism* which dissolves reality, so far not get stranded on a abstract and indeterminate M, but progresses into worldly realities. In this *progressus* worldly beings are organized in three *special-ontological genres* of materiality (M₁ or whole of physical objects, “bulges” or extensive bodies; M₂ or collection of subjective realities –headaches, experiences, etc.- living through “deep down” (and also historic

institutions); M₃ or set of “essences” – numbers, theories, etc. -, whose existence, not exactly subjective, no physical, but materially objective). The “reductionism” of any genre of materials into other is criticized, because the three are “incommensurate”; anybody who doing it make a some type of “formalism”.

The ontological materialism support a *militant atheism* against the new wave of fundamentalism. For this is not enough the Enlightenment theory about the priestly deception, nor the Marxist idea about the “people’s opium”. According to G. Bueno (1985) throughout his evolution man was accompanied by religion, not for having a divine gene or one sacred faculty inside, but for having been he come in contact with the Pleistocene big predatory animals, which he could hunt, but which he could become a prey. *Gods* are not anthropomorphic projections of consciousness (Xenophanes, Feuerbach...), but material *Numens* shaped by man in wild beasts own image. *Ethology* is the new *Theology*. It is essential to atheist materialism claim that many cultural facts usually related with the spiritualism and idealism (zodiacal signs, sacrifice) are materialistic events. Is the Spinoza’s strategy.

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