

# The Metaphysical Assumptions of Materialism

Discussions regarding materialism have been, for the most part, confined to the physiological and psychological aspects of it. Its supporters and opponents have been content to adduce arguments pro or con, as the facts of physical and mental life bear upon the case in hand. It is the object of the present paper to discuss its metaphysical phases.

Hume suggested that possibly one might escape from the nihilistic consequences of his philosophy by means of "the sceptical solution of sceptical doubts." In a somewhat analogous manner we would attempt to render explicit the metaphysical assumptions (i.e., assumptions regarding the real nature of things) latent in all materialism, and, by showing the relation of these fundamental assumptions to materialism itself, show the self-destructive character of every scheme of this kind—whether actual or possible.

What is materialism? It is that theory which declares that matter and its forces adequately account for all phenomena—those of the material world, commonly so called, and those of life, mind, and society. It declares that not only the content of mind, but that which we call mind itself, is determined by matter. We notice first, then, that it is absolutely monistic. But one substance exists—matter. All phenomena of mind are really phenomena of matter. The intellect is a function of the brain and its subordinate nervous organs. The laws of matter are therefore the laws of mind. Mental phenomena are expressible in terms of material. And since all material phenomena are expressible in terms of the

atom and molecule (or whatever names be given to the ultimate forms of matter), therefore all mental are similarly expressible. The ultimate form of matter contains, then, implicitly, all phenomena of mind and society. In short, the coarsest form of matter with which you can begin, as well as the highest organism with which you end, must contain all emotion, volition, and knowledge, the knowing subject and its relations. Beginning, then, with a strictly monistic theory, and keeping directly in the line of materialistic reasoning, we have ended with the conclusion that the ultimate form of matter has dualistic "mind" and "matter" properties. Nor is there any escape from this conclusion on a materialistic basis. Therefore on its physical or constructive side we find such a theory suicidal.

To be sure, a materialist might reply that ultimately the "matter"-molecular-property accounted for and caused the "mind"-molecular-property, but proof, or suggestion of proof, or suggestion as to method of finding proof, all are equally absent. If a materialist were to say that this double-sided substance is what he means by matter, we could only reply that he is playing with words—that it is just as much mind as it is matter.

We have now to consider the strictly metaphysical assumptions of materialism.

First, it assumes the possibility of ontological knowledge, by which we mean knowledge of being or substance apart from a mere succession of phenomena. The substance which is so known is matter. Now, since it is this statement that a belief in the possibility of ontological knowledge is an inherent necessity in all materialistic reasoning, which is the basis of our criticism, the statement must be examined more fully. Suppose for the moment that it is not such an inherent necessity—that it is possible to found materialism on something besides an ontological basis. If there be no knowledge of substance as such, there is either only knowledge of phenomena produced by the activity of the Ego (pure subjective idealism), or of phenomena entirely unrelated to any substance whatever (Humian scepticism), or of those related only to objective spirit (Berkeleian idealism), or of those related to an unknown and unknowable substance (H.

Spencer), or of those brought into unity by the forms of knowledge which the mind necessarily imposes on all phenomena given in consciousness (as Kant). Now, since none of these can afford a sufficient basis for a theory, which posits matter as the universal underlying unity, we must admit that materialism exists on the basis of a belief in the possibility of ontological knowledge of such objective reality. If a materialist, who still believes that we have no knowledge of substance as such, replies that while we have knowledge of phenomena only, yet we know them as the effects of matter, the answer is obvious. Either we know this substance, matter, which is the cause of them, or we do not. If we do, it is ontological knowledge. If we do not, then it is as much assumption to claim that it is matter as it would be to name it mind. We must conclude, therefore, that a knowledge transcending phenomena is the sole thinkable basis for materialism.

Starting from this, we have to consider the relation of such knowledge to materialism. What is involved in knowledge of matter as substance?

To know, requires something which knows. To know material phenomena, are required mental phenomena. A thing is for the mind non-existent until it is an idea or phenomenon of the mind. To know substance, matter, is required substance, mind. If materialism merely posited knowledge of material phenomena, there would be required to give it validity only mental phenomena, which do, on every theory, exist. A theory, however, which posits knowledge of a substance besides, must also posit something more than phenomena in order to know this substance. If there be no substance, mind, then there are only series of mental states or successions of mental phenomena. But it is a mere truism to say that phenomena cannot go beyond phenomena. Successions of consciousnesses unrelated, or related only in time, can but give knowledge of phenomena similarly related. Undoubtedly the former may be but subjective, while the latter are objective, but that does not constitute knowledge of substance. To have real knowledge of real being, there must be something which abides through the successive states, and which perceives their relations to that being

and to itself. To say that the mind, if itself a mere phenomenon or group of phenomena, can transcend phenomena and obtain a knowledge of that reality which accounts both for other phenomena and for itself, is absurd. But there is no need to multiply words to show what is, after all, self-evident—that phenomenal knowledge is phenomenal, and that to transcend phenomena there must be something besides a phenomenon. We find materialism, then, in this position. To prove that mind is a phenomenon of matter, it is obliged to assume the possibility of ontological knowledge—i.e., real knowledge of real being; but in that real knowledge is necessarily involved a subject which knows. To prove that mind is a phenomenon, it is obliged to implicitly assume that it is a substance. Could there be anything more self-destructive?

Secondly, it assumes the reality of the causal nexus, and the possibility of knowledge of real causation. In declaring that matter causes mind, it declares that the relation is one of efficiency and dependency, and not one of succession—antecedent and consequent. For, if it be the latter, then there are only succession and conjunction of material and mental phenomena, unrelated or related only in time, in which case it would be absurd to say that matter caused mind.

We have therefore to consider what is involved in real causation, and the knowledge of it as such, and what relation the involved facts bear to the theory of materialism.

How, on a materialistic hypothesis, can the knowledge of a real causal nexus be obtained? It cannot be a primary, necessary intuition of the human mind, nor yet a universal mode of viewing things, for both of these imply the reality of substantial mind. Nor can it be a concept obtained from experience, and generalized by unconscious habit. For, in the first place, such a concept is necessarily subjective, and belongs only to the mind which framed it. It may or may not obtain as an objective relation among objective things. There is no ground for positing objective validity of any mental conception, except by *a priori* mind necessity, which a materialistic theory must reject. But, secondly, and chiefly, such a theory as to the origin of a knowledge of the

causal nexus contains a *petitio principii*—i.e., it presupposes real causation to account for our knowledge of real causation. For this generalized belief, being a result of experience, is itself an effect of the phenomena given in experience. To ensure, therefore, that it is a true concept—i.e., one holding good objectively—we must assume that it was produced by a true causal nexus, which in turn is the thing to be accounted for. It certainly is begging the question to say that our knowledge that causation is real is a result of experience, when to prove that experience can produce a correct result we have to assume that very reality of causation which is to be proved. Nothing can be more illogical than to deduce knowledge of real causation from that which has for its own basis that same reality. After accounting for the one, the other still remains to be accounted for, which can be done only by reasoning in a circle. There is yet available one resource to materialism—to claim that, although our knowledge of true causation is not generalized from a series of experiences, it is obtained directly from the knowledge of phenomena—that in any two or more phenomena there is also given the causal nexus and the knowledge of it. Now, we might object to this, that it approached the position of the strictest intuitionist, and that, as *mere* phenomena, there is in them nothing but the relation of co-existence and succession. Objective phenomena are not labelled “this is the cause of that”; and, therefore, if the mind thinks it finds in them such a relation, that relation must be brought to the phenomena by the mind itself. Or we might also say that, if a series of experiences is incompetent (as we have seen it is) to give a knowledge of causation, on a materialistic hypothesis, *a fortiori*, a single experience is. But waiving these, we have to see what is contained in this theory, granting the truth of materialism. According to it, the knowledge of these objects, and that of the causal nexus between them, is the result of matter, and therefore is a dependent “effect”—the first effect in the perfect blank, which is to change that blank into what we call mind and its content. (The *first*, because by the theory the knowledge of causation, not being derived from experiences, must be contained in the first two phenomena given in consciousness.) But as an effect it is, of

course, a phenomenon, and for a phenomenon to transcend phenomena, and attain the reality behind them, is, as before shown, impossible. Ontological knowledge is not possible to the mind when the mind is considered as a phenomenal effect. Knowledge of causation cannot be reached, then, on a materialistic theory, either through experiences or a single experience without intuitional or ontological knowledge. Only one way remains—that it should be reached through the activity of the Ego itself. The mind is a true cause, and gives knowledge of true causation. So, to prove mind and effect, materialism would have to postulate it as a cause. It is again suicidal.

To sum up: To prove a strict monism, materialism has to assume an original irresolvable dualism. To prove the mind a phenomenon of matter, it is obliged to assume a substance to give knowledge of that matter. To prove that it is an effect of matter, it is obliged to assume either an intuitional power of mind, or that mind is itself a cause, both equally destructive of materialism.

We conclude, therefore, that as a philosophical theory materialism has proved itself a complete *felo-de-se*. To afford itself a thinkable basis, it assumes things which thoroughly destroy the theory.