



Τόμος Πρακτικών Φιλοσοφικού Forum «Ανάδρασις»
ISBN: 978-618-82935-0-2



ΔΙΕΘΝΗΣ ΕΠΙΣΤΗΜΟΝΙΚΗ ΕΤΑΙΡΙΑ
ΑΡΧΑΙΑΣ ΕΛΛΗΝΙΚΗΣ ΦΙΛΟΣΟΦΙΑΣ

**THE BASIC DIFFERENCES BETWEEN MATERIALISM AND
IDEALISM
AND THE DEGREDDATION OF INTELLECTUAL AND SPIRITUAL
LIFE
IN THE LATE CAPITALIST SOCIETY¹**

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I

In general lines we know that in the history of philosophy we distinguish two basic schools (at least in the field of ontology): *Idealism*² and *materialism*³ or *realism*. According to the former the ultimate reality is *the objective ideas or immaterial entities (objective idealism)*, which can be perceived only my mind in the world of “noumenon” (e.g. Plato’s “forms” according to its *objective ideocracy*) or God (not necessarily identified with

¹ Presented during the 5th Dialectical Symposium of the *World Philosophical Forum*, in Athens, 28/9-2/10/2014; submitted to the *Anadrasis* scientific committee afterwards, for publication in the abstracts of the *International Philosophical Forum*.

² See N.I. Louvaris, *Historia tis Filosofias (History of Philosophy)*, Athens, Elefteroudaki- Nika, 1st vol. p. 19; M.G.F. Martin, “Perception” in A.C. Grayling (ed.), *Philosophy*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1995, pp. 33, 54-55.

³ See N.I. Louvaris, *Istoria tis Filosofias (History of Philosophy)*, op.cit; A.C. Grayling, “Modern Philosophy II: The Empiricists”, in A.C. Grayling, op. cit. pp. 503-505, 514-515.



its religious version) or *the human mind itself*, [all the entities of the environment perceived by humans are constructed (*subjective idealism*)] or even more *immaterial entities which can be reached neither by senses nor by rational categories* (idealism connected with a kind of *agnosticism*). There are many versions of idealism (e.g. Plato's "forms",⁴ Berkeley's ideas,⁵ the view of the undetectable substance of God), but all of them have a common point: the essence of the ultimate reality is *not accessed by empirical way* (based on our senses). The ultimate reality (the *being qua being*) is something *immaterial*, something that is not reached by sensory experience. There exists in the world of "noumenon"⁶ or even more in an "invisible" and "unperceivable" world for which we cannot have any kind of positive conception based on our mind.

On the contrary, materialism accepts that the ultimate reality *is the matter with its properties (included motion)*. Thus, the ultimate reality is something reached by our senses empirically. The empirical experience is not a "wall" that hides the reality but a bridge which connects mind and reality. "What I have" in my mind has correspondence with the reality through my senses. The material reality surely has transformations but they are transformations of material entities with their properties (the motion is considered a property of theirs). The mutual transformation of matter and

⁴ See Christofer Janaway, "Ancient Greek Philosophy I: The Presocratics and Plato", in A.C. Grayling (ed.), *Philosophy*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1995, pp. 377, 380.

⁵ See A.C. Grayling, *op. cit.*, pp. 512-514.

⁶ R. Scruton, "Modern Philosophy I: The Rationalists and Kant", in A.C. Grayling, *op. cit.*, p. 477.



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energy ($E=MC^2$) is a natural process absolutely accessible to our senses.

According to materialism, being precedes the mind, and that being has material character, although humans can not know everything in the world of material universe. After the great progress of natural sciences in 19th and 20th centuries and the discovery of *equivalence of matter and energy* (according to Einstein's equation $E=MC^2$) some philosophers believed that the whole difference between materialism and idealism has been disappeared. They believed that what the idealism has conceived of as ultimate reality eventually *was identified with the "energy" of modern natural sciences*: the Being is only one, but has two different "versions", matter and energy (so a specific philosophical theory developed which underscored the predominance of energy).

However a more insightful philosophical consideration does not lead at the acceptance of the aforementioned identification. Surely energy is less "touchable" than matter, less "obvious" from the standpoint of senses, but finally is something accessible by the senses or by scientific instruments empirically. That is why a supporter of philosophical materialism may maintain that energy is a property of matter (like motion for example) or a transformation of its (look above at the known Einstein's equation) and not exactly an immaterial version of "being". Therefore for him/her the material "being" remains the same and "matter has not disappeared", according to the discoveries of modern natural sciences.

Beyond the classical conceptions of idealistic and materialistic schools in the history of philosophy, some philosophers tried to conceive of the "being qua being" **with** a different way which cannot be identified **with** the



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classical conceptions. For example, Kant held that the “thing itself” is unknown and what we know is what is perceived by our senses always determined by *apriori intuitions* and rational *categories*.⁷ Another great philosopher of the 17th cent., B. Spinoza conceived of “being” as “only one thing”,⁸ but with many “*fashions*” (*Substantia sive deus sive natura*). Even Aristotle tried to conceive of “being” between Plato's *ideocracy and forms* and matter. That’s why he developed the concept of “*eidos*” (είδος)⁹ in which “*forms*” and *matter* are combined.

II

After the enlightenment, humanity opened new roads in the field of science and technology, based on reasoning and the methods of natural observation and experiment. Much more than before, humanity managed to control the natural forces, so that the *scientific* in combination with the *industrial revolution* (i.e. application of the new scientific knowledge in the field of production and productivity and the related technology) created the prerequisites for a more civilized, comfortable and safe life. But in parallel these revolutions (I mean all the stages of their development till now) made humans more dependent on the sensory experience, on the material applications of the scientific knowledge and on the material achievements

⁷ See R. Scruton, op. cit., p. 472.

⁸ See N.I. Louvaris, *Istoria tis Filosofias (History of Philosophy)*, op. cit., p. 19’ Roger Scruton, op. cit. p. 453-454.

⁹ See Hugh Lawson-Tancred, “Ancient Greek Philosophy II: Aristotle”, in A.C. Grayling, op. cit., pp. 429-432.



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for a more pleasant life. In general the humans have been made more dependent on having and enjoying material goods and pleasures.

Such a consequence found its climax in the consumption society of the capitalist system (mainly in its *finance stage*) in which “happiness” has been connected mainly with material goods, services and pleasures. *This “happiness” has anything in common with Aristotle’s «εὖ ζῆν» (good life)¹⁰ and the philosophical “eudemonia”.* So the so-called “vulgar materialism” started to develop a modern “blossom” always in connection with the new social context with high technology and even increasing artificial needs.

That new sociocultural condition is against *the intellectual life and spirituality*. Both of them have an obvious degradation. The intellectuality and spirituality themselves do not have the same “prestige” like before. They are covered and subjugated by the *instrumental knowledge*¹¹ and the criteria of “usefulness” (much more now with the pressure of the fundamentalists of market economy: the accepted intelligence and knowledge are those ones that correspond to the market criteria, otherwise are rejected).

I maintain that this sociocultural condition is a result not only of the late state of capitalism but also of other deeper intellectual and cultural changes or parameters of enlightenment, modern or even post-modern

¹⁰ See Michael J. Sandel, *Democracy’s Discontent, America in Search of a Public Philosophy* Cambridge MA, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998, pp. 7-8.

¹¹ Instrumental knowledge is this kind of specific knowledge which belongs to particular branches of applied science and is useful for one’s profession, especially as he/she works in a market economy society. Instrumental knowledge is something as a “tool” that is useful for coverage of material needs. It is not a deep knowledge connected with the so-called *vita contemplativa*.



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society. There is a kind of a larger “anthropological turning point”. After that “turning point” intellectuality and spirituality decreased and on the contrary dependence of human being on contemporary material parameters increased. I maintain also that *philosophical materialism* (*mechanical or dialectical*), *positivism* (to be based only on empirical scientific data and facts without any attempt to figure out what there exists behind them as “true ultimacy”) and the ever growing rationalization of the human activities, contribute to the aforementioned degradation and to the development of new versions of vulgar materialism, independently if the initial purposes of those scientific and philosophical movements were different.

In modern times we experience what, according to Max Weber, can be called “disenchantment of the World”.¹² Even the tendency to analyze social and intellectual phenomena in terms of something “material” (in the broad sense of the term, eg. *marxism and the economic base, freudism and libido*) contributed to the aforementioned “disenchantment”, although the exponents of those scientific trends did not have such intentions (thus, we had a kind of “cultural back fire”: we had unexpected results different from the initial intentions of the scientists).

III

Thus, philosophical materialism has meant and means that men have to search for the truth of the world within the field of the senses. So, the

¹² See Pantazis Terlexis, “Max Weber, *To Xemagema tou Kosmou (The Disenchantment of the World)*, First Vol., Athina (Athens), Papazissis, 1999, pp. 293-301.



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naive perception of the ordinary people is accepted as true, while the importance of the material entities and processes (in the broad sense of terms) is increased and highlighted.

On the contrary idealism has meant and means that ultimate reality should be found beyond the sensory experience and simple perception of the ordinary people. On this philosophical standpoint the so-called “immaterial” entities have been highlighted and recognized as true ultimateness.

The point is that the aforementioned philosophical distinctions, differences and consequences have an impact on the state of mind, culture and social behavior of people. The philosophical materialism, according to the criteria of ordinary people [of “many” («τῶν πολλῶν»), in Socrates’ terminology] unfortunately may be degenerated to a kind of “vulgar materialism”. And “vulgar materialism” means that in the human life the complete gratification of the “body appetites” and the possession of material wealth shall have priority beyond intellectual and ethical restraints and considerations.

Historically we know that Left (especially marxism) has been connected with materialism.¹³ According to its ideology idealism is a philosophical theory of predominant classes and is rejected as “reactionary”. Even more Left holds that the distinction of the two philosophical schools has correspondence with the division of labor and specifically with the *division between intellectual and manual labor* (the

¹³ See Georges Politzer, *Stihiodis Arhes tis Filosofias (Elementary Principles of Philosophy)*, Athina (Athens), Publ. House “Gnosis”, 15th ed. pp 11-12.



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first “class separation” in the history according to K. Marx)¹⁴. The idealism is related with the supposed superiority of the former (intellectual labor) and can be considered as “ideological mechanism” against the emancipation and liberation of the working classes.

IV

Taking into consideration the aforementioned distinctions of the two philosophical schools (and their relations with the differences and the conflict of social forces and classes) I maintain that is maybe naive to identify the progressive and radical social processes only with philosophical materialism. I maintain the same position even if we conceive of materialism at the *dialectical* sense of marxist tradition. Additionally is naive to reject philosophers and philosophical theories as “reactionary” or as intellectual expressions of “bourgeois ideology”, if they do not belong exactly to the school of materialism.

The conflict between *conservative* and *radical progressive* social and political forces (more generally between forces of *justice and forces of injustice*) is relatively independent from the philosophical questioning about the “true ultimateness” and especially from the acceptance of materialism as “the only true philosophical theory”. On the contrary, the aforementioned acceptance may lead gradually (intependently of the fact that there is not probably any intention for that) to a decrease of the importance of the world of ethical and intellectual values (at least from the point of view of “many” ordinary people). In the last case all the human

¹⁴ See K. Marx, Fr. Engels, Germaniki Ideologia (The German Ideology), First vol., 4th ed. Athina (Athens), Gutenberg, p. 77.



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affairs and “human destiny” there are in a danger to “land” eventually on a field of only “vulgar material values” (e.g. economic ones or much more values of a society in which everything is commercialized and is measured only by money).

V

If we leave “an open window” in the whole discussion about the “being qua being” and we do not reduce it merely to an external material world which we perceive as based on our senses and we can absolutely understand it based on our reasoning, probably we are more right. *Substance is one* (as ultimate reality) but it’s particular kinds are probably more: it is *matter, energy* but probably it is also *something else*. Probably, there exist other dimensions of “being”, which we cannot perceive through our senses or understand them through rational categories, through mind. Maybe the “true ultimacy” of certain idealists is related with this “something else”.

According to up-to-date theories of physics (e.g. string theory, theories of an endless universe vs Big Bang theory) we accept more dimensions than three or four (the other dimensions being not visible because they are very tiny). Maybe the “dimensions” of the “being qua being” (I speak metaphorically) are more than those we perceive based on our senses and our mind.

If we are inspired (I speak metaphorically again) by the spirit of the altar of ancient Greeks dedicated «Τῷ Ἀγνώστῳ Θεῷ» (*to the Unknown God*), perhaps we may enrich our whole intellectual adventure for



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understanding the essence of “being qua being”. Maybe such a way of thinking is an effective counter balance against “vulgar materialism” and the arrogance of “instrumentalism” of our days, while it is in favor of the uplift of intellectuality and spirituality.