



Materialistic Atheism

Cogs in a machine?

A third alternative to theism is materialism. This had its earliest traceable roots among Greek philosophers such as Thales and Democritus (sometimes called 'the father of materialism') who tried to explain the universe and its working without any reference to the great gaggle of gods who were all the rage at the time. As we saw in chapter 1, Democritus taught that all reality consisted of nothing but a vast number of atoms whirling around in space and energized by their own innate powers. Over 2,000 years later, Feuerbach agreed: 'There is nothing beyond nature and man... Any solution that seeks to go beyond the boundaries of nature and man is worthless.' Some 200 years after Feuerbach, the modern materialist takes the same line; all reality is either matter itself or is dependent on matter for its existence.

Put in a nutshell, the modern materialist says that the origin and nature of the universe, and the existence and characteristics of man, are all due to physical agencies, because nothing else exists. The universe began with a spontaneous gathering of atoms and will end with a stupendous scattering of atoms, neither event having any meaning or purpose. In this scenario, 'nature' is everything and there is therefore no point in debating the existence or relevance of non-material concepts such as God, the supernatural, the human soul, religion, morality, ethics, eternity or the afterlife; what we see is what we get.

Over the centuries, many thinkers have attempted to fine-tune this general idea and to apply it specifically to the form and functions of human beings. The nineteenth-century Irish physicist John Tyndall thought that all of life was 'once latent in a fiery cloud'. The French historian and philosopher Hyppolite Taine stated,

'Man is a spiritual automaton... Vice and virtue are produced like sugar and vitriol,' while his fellow-countryman Emile Littré defined the human soul as 'anatomically the sum of functions of the neck and the spinal column, physiologically the sum of functions of the power of perception in the brain'. The nineteenth-century German biologist Ernst Haeckel took a somewhat different line and said, 'We now know that the soul [is] a sum of plasma-movements in the ganglion cells.' On the other hand Feuerbach wrote, 'There is no thought without phosphorous and... bluntly speaking, thoughts are in the same relationship to the brain as bile to the liver and urine to the kidneys.' Before we are tempted to dismiss these as nothing more than crude conclusions reached long before the huge scientific advances made during the twentieth century, we need to read these words by the contemporary atheist Peter Atkins, a lecturer in physical chemistry at Oxford University: 'Free will is merely the ability to decide, and the ability to decide is nothing other than the organized interplay of shifts of atoms.'

Atkins touches on an issue which is something of a materialist's mantra, and we shall come back to it in a moment, but before we do so we should spell out the bottom line of materialism's assessment of man, which sees him as nothing more than what 'nature' made him to be, a complex chemical machine. Man does not have a mind, self or soul which is different or distinct from his body. Essentially, he is on the same level as rocks and rats, a collection of atoms and sub-atomic particles which have accidentally come together and, as far as human beings are concerned, experience a variety of sensations and emotions when their physical ingredients are shuffled around. Materialism says that man's personality, hope, aspirations and ideals are merely biological functions and therefore have no meaning. All our human experiences such as knowing, imagining, feeling, tasting, loving and enjoying, are nothing more than chemical reactions, the meaningless by-products of random rustlings inside our craniums.

This cues us in to one major area in which materialism cuts across all human intuition and experience – the identifying of the mind with the brain. Even in the most extreme situations, human beings have an intrinsic awareness that they are more than the sum of all their physical parts, an awareness that ties in with the most recent evidence in the field of brain research. As physicist Michael Cosgrove writes in *The Essence of Man*, 'A simple materialistic explanation for all that man is and does will not fit with human experience or with what we know about the human brain.'

Two other modern scholars have collected a mass of evidence to refute the materialists' identification of the mind with the brain, including the following example. While under a local anaesthetic, an epileptic's scalp was lifted away, and the cranium opened to allow the surgeon direct access to the brain tissue. Using an electrical probe, he touched that part of the brain which made the right hand move or twitch. As the hand moved, he said to the patient, 'You just moved your hand.' The patient replied, 'I didn't move it, you did.' Evidently the man's self-awareness was not

directly related to his brain. The surgeon then directed the patient to will in his mind not to let his right hand move. The patient agreed to resist moving it in his mind and, as the hand began to twitch due to the application of the electric probe, the patient's left hand reached over and stopped the right hand from moving. The physician could control the brain and make it move the right hand, but the mind of the patient, which transcended the brain, moved the left hand to stop it. If the patient's mind and brain were identical, then the surgeon would have been able to control the patient's mind as well as his brain. In reality, the patient's mind was free from the physician's manipulation of the brain.

The identification of the mind with the brain is a case in which materialism can be seen to be flawed when applied to one specific issue, but other major weaknesses show up when we take a broader view of what it claims. In *Blind Alley Beliefs*, David Cook exposes one of these by showing that even if one accepts that the notion may be theoretically true, there is no way in which it can be expressed as true, or believed in, without falling into a contradiction. To illustrate this, he pictures all the national newspapers coming out with the same front-page headline – 'Materialism is True' – and then running articles which show the theory to be totally proven. He then goes on, 'The ordinary man would ask, "What differences would that make at lunchtime or in the evening?" If it is correct that materialism is true, and that everything is simply matter, if there is no reality of the mental life, and if feelings are all simply reducible to pieces of matter, would we believe, think, feel or relate in any way differently at all? In other words, the ordinary man would deny that it would in fact make any difference. After the shock and novelty wore off, life would be the same. We would all continue to think, feel, say and believe that these things were real. We would continue to relate to each other on the basis of these, and to use normal societal structures even if materialism were true. The common-sense argument here suggests that there is something extremely odd about a view which is true and correct, but does not make any difference at all. What kind of view is it that is true, but does not in fact affect anything that we do? It seems a strangely remote kind of truth.'

Yet this 'strangely remote kind of truth' is one of today's dominant philosophies, and one with which we are swamped from childhood onwards. As the British author John Benton comments, 'We are taught from an early age that the only things that matter, the only things which exist, are the things you can taste, touch, smell, hear and see. Death is the end, and therefore we must adopt the philosophy of "Eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die"'. So we are brainwashed into believing that success in life means business success, academic success, sporting success. The question as to whether a person is loving, patient, kind and loyal is viewed as largely irrelevant. "How much does he earn?" "What grades did he get?" These are the questions our society operates on, and that sort of attitude is producing a lonely and cut-throat world.'

Materialism, which has rightly been called ‘the natural accompaniment of atheism’, seeps into every part of modern society and has a massive influence on ethics, standards, lifestyle and relationships, yet as soon as we begin to examine what it says a whole raft of uncomfortable questions beg to be answered:

- If there is no absolute beyond the existence of matter, how can there be any source of eternal truth upon which an objective system of law and order can be based?
- If matter is everything and everything is matter, what do we say about theories, meanings, concepts, propositions, the laws of logic – and truth itself? Can we seriously deny that these things exist or say that they have no ‘reality’?
- Again, what does the materialist do with universals (entities which can be in more than one place at the same time)? What about properties such as softness or blackness; or the relation of one object to another – what we mean when we speak of something being larger than something else, or of objects being closer or further apart? Are these things not true because they are not comprised of matter?
- Materialism is obviously locked into empiricism, which says that all knowledge is limited to what can be tested with the senses; but how can that claim itself be valid when it cannot be subjected to empirical testing?
- If materialism is true, why is there no evidence that rocks feel, think or make decisions (as humans do) or that animals have moral emotions (as humans do)?
- If man is nothing more than one item in a universal mass of matter, how can any human being have individual value or personal worth?
- If matter is all there is, what possible meaning can we give to concepts such as good, evil, morality, reason, love, beauty, desire, intention or hope?
- How does the materialist explain creativity in the worlds of science, music, drama or art?
- How do things such as imagination, belief and memory fit into a materialistic concept of man?
- If man is just a mass of matter, how does he remember the past, evaluate the present and anticipate the future?

For all its dominance, materialism simply fails to deliver, as the modern American scholar Robert Morey explains: ‘As a world view, materialism is neither philosophically nor logically valid because it carries within itself the seeds of its own destruction. It does not correspond to what the world is. It does not describe man as he is or does. It is unliveable on a personal level and unbearable on a political level. Materialism is thus a rotted pillar which cannot give any support to modern atheism. It has failed the tests of reason and experience.’

Extract from 'Does God Believe in Atheists' by John Blanchard