

On Materialism*

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TEACHER Si Fu, name the basic questions of philosophy.

SI FU Are things external to us, self-sufficient, independent of us, or are things in us, dependent on us, non-existent without us?

TEACHER What opinion is the correct one?

SI FU There has been no decision about it....

TEACHER Why has the question remained unresolved?

SI FU The Congress which was to have made the decision took place two hundred years ago at Mi Sant monastery, which lies on the bank of the Yellow River. The question was: Is the Yellow River real or does it exist only in people's heads? But during the congress the snow thawed in the mountains and swept away the Mi Sang monastery with all the participants in the congress. So the proof that things exist externally to us, self-sufficiently, independently of us was not furnished.

- Brecht [1]

Abandoning the study of John Stuart Mill only for that of Lachelier, the less Mme de Cambremer believed in the reality of the external world, the more desperately she sought to establish herself, before she died, in a good position in it.

- Proust [2]

1 Introduction

Marx called himself a 'materialist' and Engels dubbed the account of society and history which he regarded as sharing with Marx, 'historical materialism' (or 'the materialist conception of history'). What does this commitment to 'materialism' come to? The aim of this paper is to outline an answer to that question.

2 A first answer

Marx says what he means by his general materialism in *Capital*:

For Hegel, the process of thinking ... is the creator of the real world, which is only its external appearance. With me the reverse is

true, the world of ideas being nothing but the material world transposed (*umgesetzte*) and translated into the human head. [3]

This statement of materialism involves two theses: firstly, that the material world pre-exists ideas, thinking, and secondly, that the latter is or can be the vehicle of accurate knowledge of the former. I shall call these the Independence and Knowability Theses respectively (for short, henceforth, 'IT' and 'KT'). Engels' work on Feuerbach contains a substantially similar formulation [4]. A necessary and sufficient condition for idealism is a denial of IT.

3 Some problems with this answer

There are difficulties with this answer, at least if it is set up as an exhaustive one. I shall mention two of them.

(a) What of historical materialism?

How, if at all, does this characterization apply to historical materialism? The query arises if only from the fact that social-historical affairs would seem to be at least partly *constituted* by such things as intentions, implying some forms of awareness, and hence that such states of affairs are not causally independent of such forms.

(b) The answer is dogmatic

How are IT and KT to be defended? Consider IT and indeed prescind from the problem just noted. How can anyone possibly know whether the material world existed before any form of consciousness did, and indeed if it would exist if human beings (and any other conscious inhabitants of the cosmos) were to disappear? And, with regard to KT, how could anyone know if this were true? For, if there were some nook or cranny of nature which human beings could not know about, then we could not know that we could not know, otherwise we would know something about it, contrary to hypothesis.

Now all this is likely to be dismissed by the robust-minded as a typical philosopher's paradox, which fortunately, in this case at least, can be easily rejected. For, it will surely be said, we need only appeal to the best science, which tells us that the earth existed long before humans - reference to the fossil records suffices. And, as for the captious subtlety about knowledge, surely the triumphant progress of science over the last few

* This paper is essentially a summary report on a more extensive inquiry which originated with and has been centred upon a study of Lenin's *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*. It presents, as far as possible, some account of those parts of the larger piece that do not bear directly on that book. For the sake of brevity I have omitted the bulk of references to relevant literature, retaining for the most part only a few pointers to the works of Marx, Engels and Lenin. Other references, in particular exchanges with other current writers on the subject, would have illuminated my own positions, which are set out perhaps too compendiously, but these will appear in the more complete

piece which I hope to publish in the near future. As regards the literature, I am uniquely indebted to Althusser, particularly *Philosophie et philosophie spontanée des savants*, 'Lenin and Philosophy', and *Essays in Self-Criticism* and Lecourt, *Une Crise et son enjeu*. In more personal terms I am deeply indebted to John Burnheim for conversations about the themes of the paper and remarks upon drafts of various pieces, and to Roy Edgley for written comments at various stages. Both have helped me in ways too numerous to acknowledge in detail.

centuries is sufficient warrant for its further successes.

However, that 'inductive', scientific arguments of this sort are in no way decisive, or, indeed, in some cases even relevant, should be evident to anyone who is at all familiar with the ways in which traditional philosophers have tried to take account precisely of facts like those just mentioned (Berkeley for instance), or, for example, the ways in which Christians tried to cope with the evidence of the fossil record in the early days of Darwinian evolutionary theory. There is no scientific result which idealism cannot cope with by some further elaboration of the doctrine. Such devices may appear to the *materialist* to be the merest fabrications, patently designed only to save a position and having no other theoretical justification. But this is so only from a *materialist* standpoint, which involves a commitment to the best results of the sciences, un glossed by idealism. That is, *after* this standpoint has been adopted, *then* science can afford (massive) evidence in favour of materialism. So we seem to be on the merry-go-round of a circular argument if we seek to defend materialism (as so far formulated anyway) by appeals to science.

4 Another start

The preceding may suffice at least to arouse some degree of uneasiness about the initial characterization of materialism (and idealism), and so stimulate an attempt to find a fresh place to start.

I think that this is in fact to be found, to begin with, in Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach*. In the first he writes that 'the chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism ... is that objectivity, reality, the sensible world' is not conceived as '*sensible human activity, practice, ... as activity which belongs to the objective world*'. And the second thesis runs:

The question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but a *practical* question. In practice must man prove the truth, i.e. the reality and power ... of his thinking. [5]

Forty years or so later Engels spelled out the same line of thought in the work to which Marx's *Theses* were first published as an appendix. Engels is discussing the views of philosophers such as Hume and Kant 'who question the possibility of any knowledge, or at least of an exhaustive knowledge, of the world'. He writes: [6]

The most telling refutation of this as of all other philosophical crotchets is practice, namely, experiment and industry. If we are able to prove the correctness of our conception of a natural process by making it ourselves, bringing it into being out of its conditions and making it serve our own purposes into the bargain, then there is an end to the Kantian ungraspable 'thing-in-itself'. The chemical substances produced in the bodies of plants and animals remained just such 'things-in-themselves' until organic chemistry began to produce them one after another, whereupon the 'thing-in-itself' became a 'thing-for-us', as, for instance, alizarin, the colouring matter of the madder, which we no longer trouble to grow in the madder roots in the field, but produce much more cheaply and simply from coal tar.

Engels attests, then, to put it very briefly, that (1) as a result of practical interventions in the world, we can (2) know things that we did not know before.

Lenin's commentary on the second point is full of

instruction [7]. He starts thus:

Engels clearly and explicitly states that he is contesting both Hume and Kant.... What is the kernel of Engels' objection? Yesterday we did not know that coal tar contains alizarin. Today we have learned that it does. The question is, did coal tar contain alizarin yesterday? Of course it did. To doubt it would be to make a mockery of modern science.

He continues:

And if that is so, three important epistemological conclusions follow:

(1) Things exist independently of our consciousness, independently of our sensations, outside of us, for it is beyond doubt that alizarin existed in coal tar yesterday and it is equally beyond doubt that yesterday we knew nothing of the existence of this alizarin and received no sensations from it.

(2) There is definitely no difference in principle between the phenomenon and the thing-in-itself.... The only difference is between what is known and what is not yet known...

(3) In the theory of knowledge ... we must ... not regard our knowledge as ready-made and unalterable, but must determine how *knowledge* emerges from *ignorance*, how incomplete, inexact knowledge becomes more complete and more exact.

Now if we take what Lenin says at face value, he does seem to think of himself as presenting an *argument*: thus he speaks of 'conclusions', and of something's being a 'deduction'. (I shall come back to this whole question later in Section 10.) Meanwhile let us treat what has been cited as an argument. What then are the premises, what the conclusions, and how are they related?

The main *premise* would seem to be that there exist (indefinitely many) cases of the coming to be (as a result of practical interventions) of knowledge - at a certain time people know things they did not know before. That is, the preliminary *assumption* is that some knowledge about the world exists. Lenin's example, taken from Engels, is the knowledge that coal tar contains alizarin. Now he says that three epistemological 'conclusions follow' from this. These are listed (1) - (3) in the passage cited above.

Conclusion (1) is essentially the 'ontological' formulation of materialism embodied in the IT. What is the relation between this 'conclusion' and the basic premise? In particular, what, if any, is the *argument*? The answer would seem to be that, in a sense, there is *no* argument. The train of thought, as it might be called cautiously, seems to be the following. (a) Today we know that coal tar contains alizarin. (b) Yesterday the alizarin which comes from coal tar was not an object of knowledge for us. (c) Coal tar contained alizarin yesterday. Therefore (d) alizarin existed in coal tar yesterday, independently of our knowing it did. Now (a) and (b) may be taken to be just versions of the initial main premise. Of (c) Lenin says that it is 'beyond doubt': 'to doubt it would be to make a mockery of modern science'. In other words, someone cannot consistently both deny (d) and also take the results of modern science seriously. (An alternative to (c) is to assume, for example, that knowing about alizarin in coal today actually brings it into existence, so that it is a matter of creation rather than discovery.) Indeed this seems to be also the general character of the justification of the primary assumption that knowledge exists. So, overall, the 'argument' is that if you take the results of scientific practice seriously then you are committed to IT.

Now if conclusion (1) bears upon the first component of the materialist position - the 'ontological' one, IT - conclusions (2) and (3) bear on the second component, the 'epistemological' one, embodied in KT.

The train of thought to (2) seems to be this. If we have examples of what was not known yesterday becoming known today, then, in the absence of reasons to the contrary, we are justified in thinking that this process of acquisition of fresh items of knowledge has no limit, that there is no point where what is unknown today cannot become known tomorrow. Conclusion (2) is thus anti-*sceptical* in import.

Conclusion (3) is, in effect, the converse of the preceding, and the train of thought similar. If cases like that of the discovery of alizarin in coal tar give us grounds for affirming the open-endedness of the process of acquisition of knowledge, and are thus anti-*sceptical* in significance, then the very same cases and the very same conclusion, when considered from this very aspect of open-endedness, reveal, as their other face, the idea that any given stage in the development of knowledge is only a tentative, alterable, revisable, corrigible one, subject to transformation into more exact knowledge, but still knowledge no less subject to correction. Thus conclusion (3) is anti-*dogmatic* in import.

The combination of conclusions (2) and (3) is the full thesis of the openness of knowledge from a materialist standpoint, that is, the thesis that the development of knowledge is not limited in principle by any horizon, either of unsolvable or of definitively solved problems - in other words KT.

Thus (1) - (3) conjointly add up to the 'official' characterization of materialism in terms of IT and KT.

5 'Philosophical' and 'scientific' materialism

But how much nearer are we to an adequate characterization of materialism? Certainly we can now see more clearly that both constituents of the original characterization of materialism are in some sense consequences or implications of this original, primary assumption of the existence of items of knowledge generated in material practices, and hence that this assumption is a more fundamental approach to materialism than either IT or KT.

Nevertheless, we still have the problem of circular argument. Thus in the case of 'conclusion' (1), for instance - namely, that X existed yesterday, though only discovered today - it would of course have been possible to make contrary assumptions: that it simply came into existence, uncaused, at the moment of discovery, or that God caused it to do so, or that the procedure of discovery brought it into existence (so that it was not so much discovery as creation), or whatever. We are inclined to dismiss such possibilities because we think that they are - to put it mildly - scientifically implausible: inconsistent both with scientific results and with regulative principles of scientific thinking (e.g. regarding the search for identifiable sufficient conditions). This is basically to register a commitment to the unglossed results of material practices which aim at the acquisition of knowledge and the solving of problems. That commitment having been made the theses of materialism are easily unpacked - but not until then.

What has just been said may appear as circular as Descartes noted the infidels found the interlocking of belief in the Scripture and belief in God. And considered as a move purely within the domain of *theory* it is. But, as we shall see, there are extra-theoretical considerations which break the circle. For the moment what the preceding shows is that it is necessary to distinguish between at least two different senses of 'materialism'. The first is what may be

called 'scientific' materialism, and consists of various factual assertions about the world, as for example, that inorganic matter temporally preceded and was the causal condition for organic matter, and that 'mental' phenomena have such and such causal relations to physical ones. (Perhaps 'natural scientific materialism' would be more accurate, in order to allow for historical materialism's also being a scientific materialism. But all that is in question is a label.) The second sort of materialism is what may be called 'philosophical' materialism (perhaps better: 'methodological materialism'). Speaking for the moment wholly from within the domain of theory (the point of the qualification will come out later) this is not a set of assertions about the world (or anything else) but, in the etymologically primitive sense of the word, a 'position': a place where one stands. Lenin says that materialism is a 'line'. In the sense of that multifaceted description which is relevant here, 'line' is a directly political metaphor: they are lines in a way in which political groupings have lines. These are programmes, stances, attitudes, orientations, strategies. Such are based upon factual assertions, but they are not primarily reports of fact; they are the laying down of guidelines for informed action to bring about certain changes. To be a materialist in this sense is to 'take a stand', from the vantage-point of which certain perspectives are vouchsafed and not others. In this sense materialism is literally a 'Weltanschauung' - a 'view' or 'outlook' on the world. Materialism as a line is justified much as a straightforwardly political line is, namely, by considering the ultimate effects on the political situation induced by following that line. So 'philosophical materialism' is the policy (etc.) of seeking the solutions of theoretical and practical problems in the results of appropriate material practices unglossed by interpretations which would call into question the existence of the subject-matter of the practice independent of the inquiry or the possibility of knowing it in detail without primary reference to non-material determinants [8].

6 'Traditional' materialism, and idealism

I have characterized 'philosophical materialism' as a certain programme or standpoint or 'position' to do with the primacy of the idealistically unglossed results of material practices in inquiry and problem-solving in general. Now a practice is a regular way of transforming a certain sort of pre-existing situation by applying various sorts of instruments to it by the use of labour-power (ultimately at least, human labour-power). The practice might be ordinary economic practice, in which case the situation might be one of transforming an ingot of steel into a sheet of the same by using rollers. Or it might be political practice in which case the situation might be one of transforming a certain set of desires, interests, and so on into a set sufficiently consensual to permit the reproduction of the particular society, by means of certain procedures of delegation or representation. Or it might be a scientific-experimental practice, in which an object is worked upon by a beam balance (and associated procedures of computation) so as to yield an answer to the question: 'What is the object's mass?' Or it might be any one of numberless other cases. But what is true of any and all of them is that the fundamental aspect of the situation is the *mode of transformation* and hence the *instrumentation* (in a broad sense of that word). It is this which defines what aspects of the objective situation are open to inquiry, and what the scope of the inquiry thus defined. It is the mode of transforma-

tion or instrumentation that marks off, within a certain context, what, on the one hand, *counts as* the 'object', what the 'object-for-us' (e.g. the electric charge on a body is an aspect of the latter which is irrelevant for inquiry if we do not have some way of dealing with it: it is at most an intrusive factor); it also marks off, on the other hand, what *counts as* the 'subject' of the inquiry, for whatever is going on in the depths of that subjectivity it counts for nothing until it is embodied in some mode of manipulating the world, directly or indirectly, and is then, in effect, identical with it. Thus 'subject' and 'object' are not two items *pre-constituted* with respect to the practice that unites them; rather, it is the practice that is primary, 'subject' and 'object' (in the particular context) being constituted *within* that practice.

Now it is possible of course to abstract the two terms or poles of the practical relation from this relation and consider them in isolation, one of them being inevitably regarded as primary and constituting with respect to the other. The standpoint of the primacy of the subject - in any of the various forms in which subjecthood may be exemplified - is the (theoretical) root of *idealism* (the way of *ideas*, what is special about the subject). The idealism may be of a directly ontological sort (the world-generating Subject of Christianity being the most obvious and influential exemplar), or it may be of an - in origin at least - epistemological sort, where the limits of all knowledge are defined by the characteristics of the subject. (Thus the 'primacy' of mind with respect to nature in the original formulation of idealism can be either a temporal-causal one or one relating to this real or logical construction of knowledge.) The standpoint of the primacy of the *object* is the root of what may be called *traditional materialism*, 'all hitherto existing materialism', as Marx says in the first of the *Theses on Feuerbach*. According to this position the object imprints itself in some way on the subject (another sort of object) which thus reflects the object like a mirror. '... objectivity, reality, the sensible world is conceived only in the form of the *object* or of *observation*....' ('observation': '*Anschauung*', passive registration, intuition [9]). So idealism and traditional materialism belong to the same (dogmatic) problematic, the one simply inverting the order of primacy defined by the other, and hence being simply mirror-images of each other. It is no wonder then that materialisms of this sort tend to lapse into idealisms when the problems of the relations of the subject to the object are looked at more closely (problems of representationalism etc.).

Thus what I have called 'traditional materialism' is a doctrine which holds in solution, as it were, two materialisms. On the one hand there is 'scientific' materialism, which is the proper bearer of traditional materialism's assertions about the world. On the other hand there is 'philosophical' materialism, which is what remains: not a doctrine which *occupies* a part of theoretical space, but one which *demarcates* a part of that space.

7 This formulation of materialism and the problems of the earlier one

The approach to the problem of a characterization of a Marxist materialism indicated in Sections 5 and 6 (and particularly 5) above has a number of advantages, not the least of which is that it is not subject to the two problems outlined in Section 3. I shall consider just the second of those problems here, leaving the discussion of historical materialism until

Section 11.

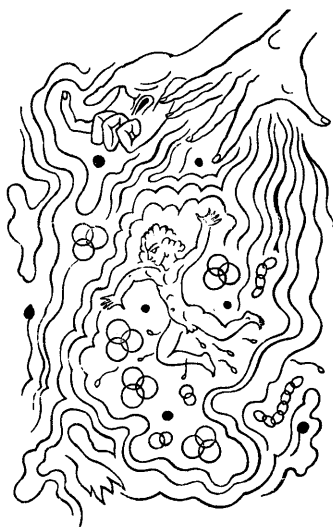
The distinction in question renders innocuous the problem of the defensibility of IT and KT. For, given a commitment to philosophical materialism, scientific materialism vouchsafes solid evidence for the existence of the world independently of consciousness. And since philosophical materialism is a programme and not a set of straightforward assertions, the commitment is not to the assertion of the knowability of the world in general and in detail, but to a mode of inquiry which is not limited by assumptions to the contrary. It could be that the method of exploring the world with the tools of material practices should eventually run into insuperable difficulties; but there is no reason at the moment to think that this is likely, so, as far as this goes at least, commitment to philosophical materialism is in order. (Cf. the Principle of Determinism interpreted as a maxim of inquiry rather than as a substantive assertion about the world.)

Apart from the reasons already given for introducing a distinction between 'philosophical' and 'scientific' materialism, there is a further reason, namely, that this distinction permits a decisive rejection of any tendency to identify materialism with some particular scientific theory or theories, a tendency which has one or both of two results: either in 'materialism' forming an obstacle to the advance of inquiry or in such advances being interpreted as refutations of 'materialism'. Though he does not in fact make the above distinction between materialisms, Raymond Williams has put this danger so well that I cannot do better than quote him on the point:

... materialism ... in its earliest phases ... defines its own categories in terms of demonstrable physical investigations. Yet ... in the continuing process of investigation, the initial and all successive categories are inherently subject to radical revision, and in this are unlike the relatively protected categories of presumed or revealed truths; ... [further] in the very course of opposing systematic universal explanations of many of the common-ground processes, provisional and secular procedures and findings tend to be grouped into what appear but never can be systematic, universal and categorical explanations of the same general kind. Thus material investigation ... finds itself pulled ... toward closed generalizing systems: finds itself *materialism* or *a* materialism. There is thus a tendency for any materialism, at any point in its history, to find itself stuck with its own recent generalizations, and in defence of these to mistake its own character: to suppose that it is a system like others, of a presumptive explanatory kind, or that it is reasonable to set up contrasts with other (categorical) systems, at the level not of procedures but of its own past 'findings' or 'laws'. What then happens is obvious. The results of new material investigations are interpreted as having outdated 'materialism'. Or, conversely, defence of 'the materialist world-view', specified in certain positions now frozen in time, involves contempt for or rejection of apparently incompatible evidence and procedures, and their categorical assignment to systems taken to be alternative and of the same kind: in the ordinary rhetoric, 'idealism'. Intellectual confusion is then severe enough, but it is made worse by the fact, on the one hand, that much of the new 'evidence' and 'procedures', especially in its

interpreted and theoretically presumed forms, is indeed incompatible, not only (which is not important) with the frozen 'world-view' but with the significant criteria of the materialist enterprise; and by the fact, on the other hand, that within the world-view, however frozen, there is still hard, often very hard evidence of a kind that is indeed likely to be smothered in the difficult process of the search for genuine compatibilities and necessary reformulations. [10]

It was precisely this identification of a transitory (if long and crucial) phase in the history of natural science with materialism as such which brought it about, round the turn of the century, that advances beyond this phase tended to drive some into a reactionary defence of the 'old' against the 'new' science (the former becoming an 'obstacle' - on which see later) but some into idealism, the claim being that 'matter' had 'disappeared'.



8 Materialism or idealism?

It is now necessary to ask a further question (for the moment, in the inadequate language of a teleology of choice): Why adopt the position of 'philosophical' materialism?

Put most broadly the answer is developed as follows. (1) The alternatives are materialism and idealism. (2) Idealism is unacceptable because (A) it generates certain cognitive consequences for theory and practice which (B) are inconsistent with (what may be called) 'emancipatory' interests. These summary indications must now be spelled out a little.

(A) Idealism has certain distinctive cognitive consequences

Very broadly speaking we can distinguish three sorts of such consequences. (1) Idealisms invariably involve complications and mysteries which materialism does not. (2) In particular every consistent idealism is ultimately either a theism of some sort or a solipsism. (3) These may be regarded as special cases of another consequence, namely, that every idealism generates 'closures' in theory, puts 'obstacles' of certain sorts on the path of the development of knowledge.

Let us look at these in a little more detail.

(1) Idealisms typically invite entanglement in one or other of the constructions which have their classic exemplifications in the history of philosophy

- the elaborate philosophical stories of a Berkeley, a Kant, a Hegel. This is what Lenin is driving at in saying that idealism 'is nothing but a disguised and embellished ghost story' [11]. Now it is not impossible that ghosts exist. The point is that normally we take it that they do not, and special reasons have to be provided to make us believe in their existence, given the acceptance of certain broad features of ordinary practice and scientific theory. From this point of view the argument for materialism has rather the character of an onus-argument: in the circumstances it is rather that idealism has to show cause why it, rather than materialism, should be taken seriously.

It may be noted that the point made here jibes neatly with what Engels says in a passage of *Ludwig Feuerbach* which has been but little attended to in comparison with the sentence which Lenin cites. Engels begins by giving a characterization of materialism in terms of the independence of the natural world from mind, and in terms of the knowability of the former by the latter. But later in the same work (towards the beginning of Chapter IV), he makes a rather different statement on materialism, the connection of which with the earlier one he does not make clear. He tells us in the later passage how the post-Hegelian tendency in the 1840s, 'essentially connected with the name of Marx', involved a return to 'the materialist standpoint':

That means it was resolved to comprehend the real world ... just as it presents itself to everyone who approaches it free from pre-conceived idealist crotchets (Schrullen). It was resolved mercilessly to sacrifice every idealist crotchet which could not be brought into harmony with the facts conceived in their own and not in an imaginary inter-connection. And materialism means nothing more than this. [12] (emphases added)

Note that Engels does *not* say that materialism is committed to a view of the world as it immediately presents itself - which would be crass empiricism/positivism, rejected by him elsewhere [13] - but as it presents itself to someone free of *idealist* pre-conceptions, 'crotchets'. (Cf. Engels' use of this term in the passage cited at the beginning of Section 4 above.) In the light of the exegesis presented here the inner connection between Engels' two *prima facie* quite heterogeneous characterisations of materialism should be clear.

(2) The logical conclusion or presupposition of every consistent idealism is a theism of some kind or another [14] (or a solipsism). That is, if nature is not independent of a subject or subjects, as materialism claims, then it must be the product of some creative subject - and to this, as Aquinas says succinctly, 'everyone gives the name of God'. (If not, we may add, what is at least *prima facie* nature must be an illusion of some kind and this - since the external world includes other people, or what passes for such - is solipsism.)

(3) More generally, idealism tends to have a 'blocking' effect, that is, the effect of putting of obstacles on the path of inquiry. It is unnecessary to list here detailed examples of the various barricades which idealist philosophy has placed from time to time on the progress of inquiry: the 'foundations' of all possible knowledge (e.g. 'impressions' and 'ideas'), or type of inference (e.g. Aristotelian logic), or explanation (e.g. teleological), or the nature of space and time (e.g. Kant), or the nature of consciousness (the mind as necessarily conscious of its own nature), and so on. (This is not to say that knowledge has never developed within the context of an idealism, or that materialism has never func-

tioned in blockages. But insofar as the first has occurred it was not due to the framework *qua idealist* and idealism always exacts its price eventually by holding up the development even of the knowledge which may have originally developed within it. The history of Platonism furnishes examples. On the second possibility see the end of Section 7 above.)

Indeed one of the most general things that may be said about traditional philosophy is that it has endeavoured to *subject* science to itself in one or another way, either by subsuming science as a mere stage on the path to more perfect knowledge (e.g. the Platonic *eidōs* or the Hegelian *Idea*), or by circumscribing it by some allegedly unalterable forms of 'understanding' or 'reason' (e.g. Locke, Kant, Husserl each in his own way). And this attempted subjection of science has its root in idealism's point of departure in the knowing subject: the nature and limits of knowledge are allegedly set by the cognitive powers of this subject. For materialism on the contrary the limits of knowledge are contingent, variable, shifting, set by the contingent, variable, shifting limits of forms of practical intervention. The limits are typically set in the twin modes of *dogmatism* and *scepticism* [15]. In some cases this dogmatism simply prescribes what is knowable *tout court*. In other cases these limits are seen as having a 'beyond' with respect to rational scientific procedures, a beyond which is then the province either of scepticism or of some allegedly higher form of knowledge, either metaphysical or of a sort perhaps better identified as faith or the like.

(B) *The cognitive consequences of idealism for theory and practice are inconsistent with what may be called (without any but verbal allusion to Habermas) 'emancipatory interests'*

I started this section by asking a question (in the justificatory mode): Why materialism? I said that this question was to be answered in two steps. The first of these was to point to certain consequences of the contrary standpoint, namely, idealism. These consequences or effects are, I have suggested, twofold, namely, the interpretation of the knowledge-situation in an unnecessarily complicated manner, and the generation of theisms and of obstacles to the production of knowledge. Now a final question confronts us, assuming the cogency of this preceding part of the argument: What exactly is unacceptable about these consequences from a materialist standpoint?

As to (1), I shall not dwell upon the complications of idealism beyond saying that, other things being equal, a straightforward account is to be preferred to a complicated one: I explicitly flag this as something which I am taking for granted.

As to (2), history shows that theisms and religions in general have, overall, worked to initiate other forms of human enslavement or to maintain old ones. The only possible thoroughgoing, consistent enemy of theism is a standpoint from which nature exists independently of all forms of mind, namely, materialism. (As to solipsism, we have yet to hear of a politics on this basis.)

As to (3), blocks to the advancement of learning are not in the interests of emancipation from exploitation: it is always in the interests of the exploited to know as much as possible about the nature of their situation.

In these respects it should be noted that I am not saying either of two things. Firstly, I am not saying that knowledge by or in itself (whatever that means) is emancipatory. This would be an idealism. Knowledge can be emancipatory only when it is embodied in appropriate social practices. Secondly,



I am not saying that the advance of knowledge cannot, in certain circumstances, be counter-emancipatory: such advances may open up the possibility of creating new mechanisms of exploitation and oppression as well as new ways of fighting them. The point is just that lack of knowledge is in *general* something which works in the interests of exploitation whereas new knowledge *may* work in the interests of the exploited.

Thus, in sum, the argument has been that idealism typically generates certain consequences in theory which in turn have effects as regards the distribution of social power. So, in the final analysis, the answer to the question 'materialism or idealism?' is a *political* answer, though one mediated by the *theoretical* consequences of idealism.

9 'Spontaneous' materialism and idealism. The contradictory unity of materialism and idealism

On the above view, then, materialism and idealism, as philosophies, should be looked at in Marxist perspective as 'lines' in the sense of regulative principles or procedure, like political lines. They induce opposed effects, cognitively and socially. Since these effects relate to specific objective social forces, materialism and idealism are also 'lines' in the yet further sense of *military* lines: they divide groups into warring camps. Hence the thesis that the history of philosophy is the history of the *struggle* between the two.

But we can trace further the root of the struggle between materialism and idealism. The point of departure here is the reflection that what I have called 'philosophical' materialism (in contrast with 'scientific' materialism) did not always exist: both phylo- and onto-genetically, philosophical materialism as an explicit line is rooted in and based upon what may be called 'spontaneous' materialism, which is a certain quotidian, unreflexive attitude towards the world. In a different context Lukács has put the relevant point here so well that I cannot do better than to quote him:

... people in their everyday life typically react in a spontaneously materialist fashion to the objects of their environment, whether or not these reactions by the subject of the practice are afterwards interpreted. This is an immediate consequence of the nature of labour. Every process of labour presupposes a complex of objects, of laws, which determine it with regard to its type, its motions, its modes of performance, and so on, and these are treated spontaneously as existing and function-

ing independently of human consciousness. The nature of labour consists precisely in the observing, the exploring and utilising of this independently existing being and change. Even at the stage where the primitive does not yet produce tools, but only seizes on stones of specific shapes and throws them away after use, he must already have made definite observations about which stones are suitable for specific uses, by virtue of their hardness, form, and so on. The very fact that, from among many stones he chooses one as apparently suitable, the very type of choice, shows that man is more or less conscious of the fact that he is obliged to act in an external world that is independent of him, that he therefore must attempt, as well as he is able, to explore this environment which exists independently of him, to dominate it in thought through observation, in order to be able to exist, in order to avoid the dangers that threaten him. Even danger as a category of the inner life of human beings shows that the subject is more or less conscious of confronting an external world which exists independently of his consciousness. [16]

This phylogenetic situation has its ontogenetic complement in the formation of the life of every individual human being.

But, as Lukács also points out [17], this spontaneous materialism, though inextinguishable, can and does peacefully coexist with all manner of non-materialist ideas of a magical, animistic and religious nature, in short a far-reaching anthropomorphic and ultimately idealist view of the world. This has roots which demand a separate inquiry. It must suffice to mention two factors. The first is the importance of the early division of social labour which separates out a group largely or totally free from the exigencies of material productive labour and so from the sources *par excellence* of spontaneous materialism. Such a group tends to ascribe to the ideas with which they are largely concerned a primary, demiurgic significance [18]. The second is the pervasive tendency of pre-scientific thought to explain the unfamiliar in terms of the familiar (as it is characteristic of scientific thought to explain the familiar in terms of the unfamiliar). Now there is nothing more familiar than our experience of intentional action, of agency, and hence the universal occurrence, at least in early stages of thought about the world, of explanations of the mysterious in terms of the actions of beings more or less like ourselves in important respects.

This 'spontaneous' idealism, corresponding to 'spontaneous' materialism, is the fount and origin of idealism as an explicit, more or less systematised philosophical trend. The latter, in struggle with a primitive materialism, articulating the spontaneously materialist attitude to the world, and already in struggle with spontaneous idealism, evokes, calls into being, both idealism and materialism, each representative and agent of social forces. This is a process that can be followed paradigmatically in early Greek philosophy which can be seen as a first attempt to de-anthropomorphize earlier thought by an essentially materialist viewpoint (dialectical too, but that is another story), and then as an attempt, culminating in Plato, to combat precisely this materialist assault. (Plato, in his famous passage on the battle of the Gods and the Giants [19], said long ago just what Engels said more recently about the fundamental place of the struggle between materialism and idealism in the history of philosophy.)

Idealism is constantly reborn, both in its spon-

aneous form and as reflected and systematized in philosophical doctrines. As pointed out above it finds a natural 'culture' in the division between mental and manual labour; and the tendencies generated here are fostered by the role which idealism plays in ideologies appropriate to the maintenance of exploitative societies (cf. the preceding section). Again, as indicated above, idealisms take root at points where it is a question of coping with the unfamiliar by means of inadequate theoretical tools, either those restricted to concepts taken from everyday thinking, or ones stemming from scientific theories which have reached the limits of their applicability. Hence the familiar presence of idealism in thought about human beings and society, any sort of adequate theorization of which does not precede roughly the mid-nineteenth century (Marx and Freud), and at turning-points in the history of scientific theory (relativity and quantum theory).

Thus the idea of struggle is *constitutive* of the materialism/idealism couple. They are, both systematically and historically, Siamese twins. But this, the very ground of their unity, their inseparability - that they continuously generate each other - is also the ground of the conflict between them, since the whole *raison d'être* of the one is to oppose the other. Thus they are 'internally' related by struggle: it is not that each is constituted independently of the other and only afterwards engages in struggle with the other, but rather that they are born in struggle. (They form a 'unity of opposites'.)

10 The idealism of the philosophical enterprise

I began the main part of the discussion of the nature of materialism and idealism from Section 3 onwards in a mode which smacked strongly of the teleology of choice, of the framework of justification. The course of the argument led to the view that materialism and idealism are, in the final analysis, expressions of certain practical orientations which are themselves both bases and consequences of specific social groupings. Though it was inevitable that the discussion would have to begin in the justificatory mode which is familiar and customary, it is necessary at this point (borrowing Wittgenstein's metaphor) to kick away the ladder by which I have reached it. Questions of *justification* give way to questions of *explanation*. If I have so far put the question in terms of constructing justificatory arguments for the adoption of materialism or idealism, arguments which might be taken to be ones apt to produce conviction in someone as regards the materialist or idealist positions, I must now replace this mode with another and see that the real question (which cannot be pursued any further here) is: *What determines the distribution of bearers/agents of ideology to materialist/idealist positions?* The programmatic, schematic answer is: those factors which determine the course of the class struggle. (One consequence of this is an exclusion of voluntarism in the matter of ideological class struggle. For if the standpoints of materialism and idealism are rooted in the sphere of the practical, then ideological class struggle in these directions has an only 'relative autonomy', and change of distribution of ideological agents is basically not a matter of recommending different interpretations of the world, but of changing it in such a way as to effect different distributions. This is of course only to reiterate the theme of Marx's 11th Thesis on Feuerbach about the necessity to change rather than simply 'interpret' the world.)

Now it is characteristic of the whole traditional philosophical enterprise that it conceives of philosophy as a special, genuinely theoretical branch of

knowledge issuing in distinctive sorts of propositions the choice between which is decided within the subject itself by means of theoretical arguments. (There are exceptions, probably the chief of whom is Nietzsche. But in a definite sense he too was lodged in the same problematic by virtue of identifying reason with argument, and in dismissing the primacy of argument found himself on the field of irrationalism.) Thus philosophy is thought of as having an essentially autonomous history determined by the internal logic of its arguments.

But all this is, from the standpoint summarized in the opening paragraph of this section, thoroughly idealist. Thus the traditional philosophical enterprise is *inherently idealist*. In particular, idealism itself is, *quite apart from its content*, idealist, and, paradoxically enough - from the ordinary standpoint - *so is traditional materialism* (a result which might have been expected, considering the thesis, earlier set out, that idealism and traditional materialism are mirror images of one another theoretically). There are no valid arguments from true premises, rationally believed, which issue in the materialist position - even if deduction is used in the common-sense, Sherlock Holmes sense. Indeed, there are no *purely discursive arguments* of any sort which have materialism as a conclusion.

11 Historical materialism

I have distinguished the following kinds of materialism: philosophical, scientific, traditional and spontaneous. Where does '*historical materialism*' fit in here? With a consideration of this question I take up a thread explicitly dropped at the beginning of Section 7.

The claim of what Engels later called 'historical materialism' or 'the materialist conception of history' was, in its founding document, *The German Ideology*, to be a *science* of history rather than an ideology which had history as its subject-matter, specifically the particular ideological formation called philosophy. But if it was this that was in question, why call it *historical materialism*? As Althusser has remarked [20], we do not talk about chemical materialism, for example, rather than simply chemistry. The answer, he goes on to indicate, is to be sought in the historical context in which it arose - the predominance not just of *philosophies* of history but of specifically *idealist* philosophies of history. So the name '*historical materialism*' has a *polemical* import. In the first place, then, historical materialism is a materialism insofar as it is consistent with philosophical materialism in the sense given that term at the end of Section 6 above. And this characterization does not run into the trouble that the initial definition of materialism did in this context, for it is perfectly compatible with philosophical materialism that an object of inquiry should be partly constituted by intentions and so on.

But its character as materialist in this general agonistic sense does not suffice to characterize historical materialism as a *particular* sort of materialist theory. What is then considered as such?

Now this may well seem a very easy question to answer, whatever may be the adequacy of the answer to the problems of society and history. For surely Marx said quite clearly what he meant by historical materialism in the famous preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*:

The mode of production of material life conditions (*bedingt*) the general process of social, political and mental (*geistigen*) life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines (*bestimmt*) their being, but, on the

contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness. [21]

There are doubtless tricky problems about what this thesis amounts to - problems for the solution of which concepts like 'determination (in the last instance)', 'dominance', 'relative autonomy', etc. have been formed - and then problems about the empirical adequacy of one or another version. But surely this is what the materialism of historical materialism comes to? Let us call it, just to be able to refer to it briefly, 'economic materialism'. Marx gives us many paradigmatic examples of it. See, for instance, the derivation of the bourgeois ideology of equality and freedom from the material conditions of the exchange-relation in the *Grundrisse* [22] or, to cite a more compendious example, his treatment of the relation of exchange-practices and certain legal structures and practices in the '*Marginalia to Adolf Wagner's Textbook*' [23].

There can be no doubt at all that a central thesis of Marx's historical materialism is what I have called 'economic materialism'. But is this the *only* central aspect of materialism here? To give some purchase to the question, consider the further question: How does economic materialism apply to the economic itself? This may seem a needless subtlety. But consider some of Marx's analyses, which we may take from the first couple of chapters of the first volume of *Capital*. For example:

Men do not ... bring the products of their labour into relation with each other as values because they see these objects merely as the material embodiments of homogeneous human labour. The reverse is true. By equating their different products to each other in exchange as values, they equate their different kinds of labour as human labour. They do not know it, but they do it. Value, therefore, does not have what it is written on its forehead. Rather, it transforms every product of labour into a social hieroglyphic. Later on, men try to decipher the hieroglyphic, to get behind the secret of their own social product, for the characteristic which objects of utility have of being values is as much men's social product as is their language. [24]

Thus, to start with at least, the economic practice is carried on in accordance with principles of which the executors of the practice are unaware - it is not that they have false ideas about the principles, but rather that they do not have any ideas at all. It just happens that way, like a child's speaking of a language. (Marx's analogy with language at the end of the passage is not a mere accidental flourish.) 'They do not know it, but they do it.' [25] At a later stage the executors of the practice may form theories about the functioning of the practice but it is the objective character of the practice that will be decisive here, not least in determining misapprehensions about the practice (e.g. 'the fetishism of commodities').

Or, consider Marx's derivation of money in the following chapter on 'The Process of Exchange'. At the beginning of this chapter he traces, in a passage of the utmost inspissation and subtlety, the way in which money arises as a necessary condition for the operation of a ramified commodity-producing economy. The actual argument cannot even be summarized here, but is in any case unnecessary for the purposes of the present theme. All that is essential is the gloss which Marx adds. 'In their difficulties', Marx writes - that is, in their difficulties of being in the situation of a ramifying commodity-producing economy without the invention of money -

our commodity-owners think like Faust: 'In the

beginning was the deed.' They have already acted before thinking. The natural laws of the commodity have manifested themselves in the natural instinct of the owners of commodities.

[26]

Here again, as in the previous case, a certain practice - that of commodity-exchange - extends itself in accordance with the objective tendencies of its functioning, the executors of the practice conforming themselves to these tendencies. Again, it is not a matter of a relation between a mode of production on the one hand, and a superstructural feature on the other, but between the objective structure of a practice and the way in which it is carried on, the latter including ideas about what is going on.

This idea of the primacy of material practices in regard to the explanation of social life and its changes, and in particular with regard to thought about the latter may be called 'practical materialism'. It is different from what I have earlier called 'economic' materialism which asserts that one of these practices, namely the economic, is primary with regard to the determination ('in the last instance') of the other practices which go to constitute a society. 'Practical' and 'economic' materialism are logically independent insofar as neither entails the other.

This distinction between 'economic' and 'practical'

materialisms is not made by Marx; at least it does not come out explicitly in his writings though both are present there. So the overt textual grounds for introducing it are slight. I can only adduce the points that, whilst the *Theses on Feuerbach* stress the fundamental role of practice in the new materialism ('All social life is essentially *practical*' [27]) it is not specifically *economic* practice that is in question at all, at least not explicitly; that in *The German Ideology* the materialist conception of history is demarcated from the idealist conception in respect simply of the fact that the former 'does not explain practice from the idea but explains the formation of ideas from material practice' [28]; that in the same seminal work the materialist conception is sometimes put as generally as: 'It is not consciousness that determines life, but life that determines consciousness' [29]; and that the second of the two formulations quoted at the beginning of this section from the '1859 Preface' is very similar to the last-cited from *The German Ideology* - 'being' or even 'social being' is a great deal less specific than 'mode of production of material life'. But if Marx actually works with this sense of materialism without making it explicit or even being specially aware of it - as I have suggested may be the case - then this is itself an example of the situation to which practical materialism points.

Footnotes

- 1 *Turandot*, Scene 4a (*Gesammelte Werke*, Suhrkamp ed., 5: 221ff).
- 2 *Cities of the Plain*, Part II (*Remembrance of Things Past*, 8: 96f).
- 3 *Capital*, 1: 102. (In this paper published translations are revised - as here - without notice, in accordance with the Marx-Engels *Werke*.) Cf. also *Grundrisse*, 101f.
- 4 Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach*, 345-347.
- 5 Marx-Engels, *Selected Works*, 1: 13.
- 6 Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach*, 347.
- 7 For the whole discussion see *Materialism*, 101ff.
- 8 Cf. also what is said about Engels' alternative characterisation of materialism in Section 8 below. This distinction between 'philosophical' and 'scientific' materialism jibes with Lenin's distinction between two senses of the term 'matter'. On the one hand, there is 'matter' functioning in a *philosophical* context: 'matter' is here that which Lenin calls a 'category'. In this sense 'matter' refers simply to that which (whatever in its specific nature it is) exists independently of consciousness. ('Matter' is here 'topic-neutral' to use Ryle's term.) As a 'category', 'matter' does not change its reference (*Materialism*, 130, 262). But on the other hand there is 'matter' functioning in the *scientific* context: 'matter' is here what Lenin calls a 'concept'. In this sense 'matter' refers to the *specific* nature of what exists independently of consciousness (that which is referred to 'topic-neutrally' by 'matter' considered as a 'category'), and we know about it by reference to particular scientific theories (*Materialism*, 129, 269). Since theories change so does what we take matter in this sense to be. This distinction between two senses of 'matter' is one which would be induced precisely by the distinction between what I have called 'philosophical' and 'scientific' materialism.
- 9 Marx-Engels, *Selected Works*, 1: 13 (Cf. text to note 6 above).
- 10 Williams (reprint), 103f.
- 11 *Materialism*, 182.
- 12 Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach*, 361.
- 13 e.g. *Dialectics of Nature*, 113.
- 14 Cf. Lenin, *Materialism*, 22.
- 15 Lenin's 'relative' and 'absolute' truth are polemical concepts aimed at dogmatism and scepticism respectively.
- 16 Lukács, *Die Eigenart des Ästhetischen*, 45f. Cf. also 112.
- 17 Lukács, *op.cit.*, 50.
- 18 Cf. Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, Marx-Engels, *Collected Works*, 5: 92f., Engels to C. Schmidt, 27 October 1890, Marx-Engels, *Selected Works*, 3: 492ff.
- 19 *Sophist*, 246 a-c.
- 20 *Lenin and Philosophy*, 44.
- 21 Marx-Engels, *Selected Works*, 1: 503.
- 22 *Grundrisse*, 240ff.

23 *Texts on Method*, 210.

24 *Capital*, 1: 166f.

25 Marx clearly thought this sentence was very important. In the French translation of J. Roy, which he supervised, he inverts the order of the original sentence, and, more importantly, emphasizes it: 'Il le font, sans le savoir' (70). See also the important passage of supplementary explanation in the first edition of *Capital*, Vol.1, but not in later editions which may be consulted in *Value: Studies by Karl Marx*, 36.

26 *Capital*, 1: 180.

27 Marx-Engels, *Selected Works*, 1: 15.

28 Marx-Engels, *Collected Works*, 5: 54.

29 *ibid.*, 37.

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