

Materialisms

MATERIALISM COMES IN various shapes and sizes. There are hard-nosed versions of it as well as soft-bellied ones. Given the daunting size of the subject, however, not to speak of my own intellectual limitations, only some of these currents of materialist thought will be the concern of this book. My interest is not in certain highly technical questions of monism, dualism, eliminativism or the mind–body problem in general, but in forms of materialism that are in some broad sense social or political, and about which the neuroscientists have had for the most part nothing very exciting to say.

If you are the kind of materialist who holds that material conditions set the pace in human affairs, you may seek to change these conditions in the hope that you may thereby alter the way people think and act. If your materialism is of a deterministic kind, one which regards men and women as wholly conditioned by their environments, this project may

well seem a promising one. The problem is that if individuals are mere functions of their surroundings, then this must also apply to you, in which case how can you act to transform that context if you yourself are a product of it? Despite such troubling queries, materialism has been traditionally (though not exclusively) allied with political radicalism. Empiricist materialists such as the eighteenth-century English thinkers David Hartley and Joseph Priestley held that the mind was made up of sense-impressions; that sense-impressions stemmed from one's environment; and that if this environment could be so refashioned as to generate the 'right' kinds of sense data, human behaviour could be dramatically changed for the better.¹ Politically speaking, this was not an unambiguously progressive project. As Marx would later point out, the alteration in question was generally in the service of the rulers' own needs and interests. He was not slow to detect the politics implicit in this theory of knowledge.

There is a link between radicalism and materialism in some of the left-wing thought of the English Civil War, as there is in the work of Baruch Spinoza and the *philosophes* of the French Enlightenment. It is a legacy that descends to Marx and Engels, and which crops up in our own time in the work of such dissident theorists as Gilles Deleuze. (Darwin, Nietzsche and Freud are also radical materialists, but not thinkers of the far left.) Though the word 'materialism' was coined in the eighteenth century, the doctrine itself is an

ancient one,² and one of its earliest exponents, the Greek philosopher Epicurus, was the subject of Marx's doctoral thesis. Marx admired Epicurus's passion for justice and liberty, his distaste for the accumulation of wealth, his enlightened attitude to women and the seriousness with which he took the sensuous nature of humanity, all of which he saw as bound up with his philosophical views. Materialism for Epicurus, as for the Enlightenment, meant among other things freedom from priestcraft and superstition.

For Isaac Newton and his colleagues, matter was brute, inert stuff ('stupid', Newton called it) and as such had to be set in motion by the external power of the divine will. The point has a bearing on the human body. Those who look upon the body rather as they regard a corpse are likely to feel the need to add some ghostly entity to it if it is to be galvanised into action. Gross and sluggish as it is, it is hardly likely to activate itself. In this sense, disembodied minds and souls are among other things an attempt to compensate for the crudities of mechanical materialism. If one took a less mechanistic view of matter, they might well prove superfluous. If spirit and Nature are distinct domains, then the former is free to exert its sway over the latter. In the Newtonian view, spiritual forces rule Nature from above rather as monarchs and despots govern their states.

For the radical lineage stemming from Spinoza, by contrast, there is no call for such august authorities. Matter

itself is alive, and not only alive but self-determining, rather like the populace of a democratic state. It is unnecessary to posit a sovereign power that sets it in motion. Besides, to repudiate a realm of spirits is to take the material world with unswerving seriousness, along with the material well-being of the men and women in it. It admits of no ethereal distractions from the business of setting poverty and injustice to rights. It also allows one to reject all clerical authority, since if spirit is everywhere one looks then the priesthood can have no monopoly on it. It is thus that one can speak of a politics of matter.

To be a materialist in this sense is to invest human beings with a degree of dignity by seeing them as part of a material world which is identical with the Almighty. Such, at least, was the view of the pantheistic Spinoza. Materialism and humanism are thus natural bedfellows. By the same token, however, you could take a smack at those more conservative humanists for whom there was an unbridgeable gulf between humanity and the rest of Nature. Such philosophical lordliness could be undercut by pointing to the humdrum status of humanity, humbly at one with the material world and its fellow animals. Humanity is not Lord of Creation but part of its communality, our flesh and sinews woven of the same stuff as the forces that stir the waves and ripen the cornfields. As Friedrich Engels remarks in *The Dialectics of Nature*:

we by no means rule over nature like a conqueror over a foreign people, like someone standing outside nature – but we, with flesh, blood and brain, belong to nature, and exist in its midst, and . . . all our mastery of it consists in the fact that we have the advantage over other beings of being able to know and correctly apply its laws.³

Not long before, Darwin had laid bare our lowly origins, displacing a humanity that would have preferred some more noble provenance for itself into an unglamorous mesh of material processes.

There is, then, an ethical dimension to materialism as well as a political one. In the face of a hubristic humanism, it insists on our solidarity with the commonplace stuff of the world, thus cultivating the virtue of humility. Dismayed by the fantasy that human beings are wholly self-determining, it recalls us to our dependence on our surroundings and on each other. ‘The original helplessness of human beings,’ writes Sigmund Freud, ‘is . . . the primal source of all moral motives.’⁴ What makes us moral beings is not our autonomy but our vulnerability, not our self-closure but our open-endedness. True to this materialist spirit, the Marxist philosopher Sebastiano Timpanaro writes of how

the results of scientific research teach us that man occupies a marginal position in the universe; that for a very

long time life did not exist on earth, and that its origin depended on very special conditions; that human thought is conditioned by determinate anatomical and physiological structures, and is clouded or impeded by determinate pathological alterations of these . . . ⁵

Materialism of this kind fosters not nihilism but realism. As in the art of tragedy, our achievements, if they are to be well founded, must involve acknowledging our frailty and finitude. There are other moral benefits, too. Aware of the intractability of matter, materialist thought promotes a respect for the otherness and integrity of the world, in contrast to the postmodern narcissism that sees nothing but reflections of human culture wherever it looks. Materialism is equally sceptical of the postmodern prejudice for which reality is clay in our hands, to be stretched, hacked, pummelled and remoulded by the imperious will. It is a late-capitalist version of the old Gnostic aversion to matter.

Marxists like Timpanaro are also exponents of so-called historical materialism, which we shall have more to say about later.⁶ Some of them (though a dwindling band these days) are also advocates of dialectical materialism, sometimes known more simply as Marxist philosophy.⁷ Historical materialism, as the term suggests, is a theory of history, whereas dialectical materialism, the founding work of which is Engels' *Dialectics of Nature*, is a vastly more ambitious vision of reality. Its

theoretical horizon is nothing less than the cosmos itself, which is doubtless one reason why it is out of favour in these pragmatic times. From ants to asteroids, the world is a dynamic complex of interlocking forces in which all phenomena are interrelated, nothing stays still, quantity converts into quality, no absolute standpoints are available, everything is perpetually on the point of turning into its opposite and reality evolves through the unity of conflicting powers. Those who deny this doctrine stand accused of being metaphysicians, falsely assuming that phenomena are stable, autonomous and discrete, that there are no contradictions in reality and that everything is itself and not some other thing.

It is not clear what to make of the claim that everything is related to everything else. There seems little in common between the Pentagon and a sudden upsurge of sexual jealousy, other than the fact that neither can ride a bicycle. Some of the laws that dialectical materialism finds at work in the world cut across the distinction between Nature and culture, a case which sails embarrassingly close to the bourgeois positivism Marxism rejects. As a Marxist worker of my acquaintance triumphantly put it: 'Kettles boil, dogs' tails wag and classes struggle.' There are plenty of Marxists, however, for whom dialectical materialism is either a disguised form of idealism or philosophical nonsense.⁸ The latter was the opinion of a group of so-called analytic Marxists some years ago who were in the habit of sporting T-shirts bearing the

slogan ‘Marxisme sans la merde de taureau’, or ‘Marxism without the bullshit’.

It is worth noting that historical materialists need not be atheists, though many of them seem curiously ignorant of the fact. Though most of them reject religious belief, they generally fail to recognise that there is no logical connection between the two cases. Historical materialism is not an ontological affair. It does not assert that everything is made out of matter, and that God is therefore an absurdity. Nor is it a Theory of Everything, as dialectical materialism aspires to be. It has nothing of pressing importance to say about the optic nerve or how to rustle up the fluffiest soufflé. It is a far more modest proposal – one which views class struggle, along with a conflict between the forces and relations of production, as the dynamic of epochal historical change. It also regards the material activities of men and women as lying at the source of their social existence, a view which is not confined to Marxism. There is no reason why a religious Jew like Walter Benjamin or a devotee of Christian liberation theology should not sign on for this way of seeing. There have also been Islamic Marxists. In theory, you could look forward to the inevitable triumph of the proletariat while spending several hours a day prostrate before a statue of the Virgin Mary. It would be less easy to hold that matter is all there is and believe in the Archangel Gabriel.

Dialectical materialism, so some have argued, belongs to a current of vitalist materialism which passes from Democritus and Epicurus to Spinoza, Schelling, Nietzsche, Henri Bergson, Ernst Bloch, Gilles Deleuze and a range of other thinkers. One benefit of this creed is that it allows you to make room for spirit without going disreputably dualist, since spirit, in the form of life or energy, is built into matter itself. It has also, however, been rebuked as a form of irrationalism. Reality on this view is volatile, mercurial and constantly mutating, and the mind, which tends to carve up the world according to certain rather arthritic categories, finds it hard to keep abreast of this constant flux. Consciousness is too maladroit and cumbersome a faculty to cope with the intricacies of Nature. Whereas the mind used to outrun the inertia of matter, matter is now quicksilver stuff that outstrips mind.

There are strains of vitalism that tend to idealise and etherealise matter. As such, they run the risk of taking the pain out of it, turning their gaze from its recalcitrant bulk.⁹ Matter on this benign view is no longer what hurts – what spikes our projects and baffles our aims – but instead assumes all the fineness and malleability of spirit. It is a strangely immaterial brand of materialism. As Slavoj Žižek remarks, the so-called New Materialism which promotes this view

is materialist in the sense in which Tolkien's Middle-earth is materialist: as an enchanted world full of magic forces,

good and evil spirits, etc., but strangely *without gods* – there are no transcendent divine entities in Tolkien's universe, all magic is immanent to matter, as a spiritual power that dwells in our terrestrial world.¹⁰

Like Tolkien's, it is essentially a pagan vision. As the editors of a volume entitled *New Materialisms* put it, 'materiality is always something more than "mere" matter: an excess, force, vitality, relationality, or difference that renders matter active, self-creating, productive, unpredictable'.¹¹

Another piece in the same volume describes matter as 'a vital principle that inhabits us and our inventions',¹² which lends it pseudo-metaphysical status. Yet another contributor writes that 'the deconstructive understanding of materiality indicates a force that is impossible, something not yet and no longer of the order of presence and the possible'.¹³ With the Derridean buzzword 'impossible', materialism would now seem to be moving rapidly in the direction of the apophatic or ineffable. Rey Chow calls for 'a revamped materialism defined primarily as signification and subject-in-process',¹⁴ which is rather like calling for a revamped idea of a rhino defined primarily as a rabbit. Why should 'signification and subject-in-process' be thought the prime example of materialism?

Matter, in short, must be rescued from the humiliation of being matter. Instead, it must be regarded as a sort of

materiality without substance, as fluid and protean as the post-structuralist notion of textuality. Like textuality, the stuff is infinite, indeterminate, unpredictable, non-stratified, diffuse, free-floating, heterogeneous and untotalisable. Eric Santner aptly describes the case as ‘a sort of multiculturalism at the cellular level’.¹⁵ It is obvious enough from *New Materialisms* that the brand of materialism it advocates is really a species of post-structuralism in wolf’s clothing. Where thinkers like Jacques Derrida say ‘text’, new materialists say ‘matter’. Otherwise, not much has changed.

Like many an apparent innovation, then, the New Materialism is by no means as new as it seems. It shares post-structuralism’s suspicion of humanism – of the belief that human beings occupy a privileged place in the world – and seeks to discredit this view with a vision of material forces that flow indifferently across both human and natural spheres. But you cannot play down what is peculiar to humanity simply by animating everything around it. Matter may be alive, but it is not alive in the sense that human beings are. It cannot despair, embezzle, murder or get married. The moon may be in some sense a living being, but it cannot prefer Schoenberg to Stravinsky. Particles of matter do not move within a world of meaning, as people do. Humans can have history, but poppies and bagpipes cannot. Matter may be self-activating, but this is not the same as achieving one’s ends. Matter has no ends to achieve.

If vitalism rejects a view of matter as brute, insensate stuff, it is partly because it would seem to leave room for disembodied spirits. If you reduce human bodies to the status of coffee tables, you might feel the need to tack an impalpable soul onto them to make sense of a lot of what they get up to. Mechanical materialism can thus easily capsize into its opposite. Against its own intentions, it may clear the way to assigning humanity a unique spiritual status. Vitalism is right to reject the false dichotomy between dumb matter and immortal spirit, but it does so by claiming that all matter is alive, which simply elevates coffee tables to the level of humans. The truth is that men and women are neither set apart from the material world (as for idealist humanism), or mere pieces of matter (as for mechanical materialism). They are indeed pieces of matter, but pieces of matter of a peculiar kind. Or, as Marx puts it: human beings are part of Nature, which is to think of the two as inseparable; but we can also speak of them as being 'linked', which is to point up their difference.¹⁶ Some vitalist materialists fear that to highlight the difference between humans and the rest of Nature is to establish an invidious hierarchy. But men and women are indeed in some ways more creative than hedgehogs. They are also unspeakably more destructive, and for much the same reasons. Those who deny the former are at risk of ignoring the latter.

Human beings are outcrops of the material world, but that is not to say that they are no different from toadstools.

They differ from them not because they are spiritual while toadstools are material, but because they are instances of that peculiar form of materiality known as being an animal. They also have a peculiar status within the animal kingdom, which is by no means to say an unambiguously 'higher' one. The New Materialism, by contrast, is too quick to see talk of the special nature of humanity only as arrogance or idealism. It is a postmodern brand of materialism. Alarmed by the prospect of privilege – of a disabling division between human creatures and the rest of Nature – it risks levelling such distinctions in a spirit of cosmic egalitarianism, while pluralising matter itself. In doing so, it ends up with the kind of contemplative vision of the world that (as we shall see later) Marx criticises in Feuerbach. You do not escape such a standpoint by seeing everything as vital and dynamic rather than mechanical and inert.

If reductive materialism finds it hard to make room for the human subject, not least for the subject as agent, so too does this 'new' version of the doctrine. Whereas mechanical materialism suspects that human agency is an illusion, vitalist materialism is out to decentre the all-sovereign subject into the mesh of material forces that constitute it. In drawing attention to those forces, however, it sometimes fails to recognise that one can be an autonomous agent without being magically free of determinations. Autonomy is rather a question of relating to such determinations in a peculiar way. To

be self-determining does not mean ceasing to be dependent on the world around us. In fact, it is only through dependence (on those who nurture us, for example) that we can achieve a degree of independence in the first place. The autonomous subject set up by most postmodern thought is a straw man. To be free of all determinations would not be freedom at all. How could one be free to score a goal for Real Madrid if one's legs did not operate in a certain anatomically determined, reliably predictable way?

In *New Materialisms*, as in most forms of vitalism, terms like 'life' and 'energy' hover ambiguously between the descriptive and the normative. In designating certain dynamic forces, the authors also tend to invest them with value, despite the fact that by no means all manifestations of life, force and energy are to be commended. Not all dynamism is to be admired, as the career of Donald Trump might testify. A view of matter as mutable, multiple and diffuse can also bring with it a distaste for 'constraining' social institutions and political organisations. It is thus possible to move from New Materialism to anti-Marxism in a few excessively rapid steps.

Some of the chief vices of vitalism can be found in the work of Gilles Deleuze, a full-blooded metaphysician for whom Being consists in an immanent creativity which is both infinite and absolute, and of which the highest expression is pure thought.¹⁷ In the Gnostic universe of Deleuze's *The Logic*

of Sense, Anti-Oedipus and *Difference and Repetition*, subjects, bodies, organs, agents, discourses, histories and institutions – in fact, actuality as such – threaten to obstruct this virtual, unfathomable force, rather as the body was traditionally thought to incarcerate the soul. For the most part, Deleuze can see constraint only as negative, a view that faithfully reflects the marketplace ideology he otherwise finds objectionable. History, ethics, law, property, territory, signification, work, family, subjectivity, everyday sexuality and mass political organisation are by and large normalising, castrating, regularising, colonising powers, as they are, by and large, for Deleuze's admirer Michel Foucault. One must look askance at unity, abstraction, mediation, signification, relationality, interiority, interpretation, representation, intentionality and reconciliation. From the viewpoint of an alienated intelligentsia, there is little that is constructive to be discovered in everyday social existence. Instead, with a handful of qualifying clauses, we are offered a banal antithesis between the vital, creative, desirous and dynamic (to be unequivocally endorsed) and the oppressive realm of stable material forms (to be implicitly demonised). Deleuze's cosmic vitalism is virulently anti-materialist. 'Life' is an etherealising force, blankly indifferent to corporeal human beings, whose highest attainment is to divest themselves of their creatureliness so as to become the pliant medium of this implacable power. The chief question is how we can be rid of ourselves. Some of those who

applaud aspects of Deleuze's case reject it out of hand when they stumble upon it in different guise in the writing of D.H. Lawrence.

What we are offered, then, is a Romantic-libertarian philosophy of unbridled affirmation and incessant innovation, as though the creative and innovative were unambiguously on the side of the angels. It is a universe without lack or flaw, indifferent to breakdown and tragedy. Being is univocal, which means that all things are faces of God or facets of the life force. Human beings are accordingly raised to quasi-divine status; but by the same token God loses his transcendence and merges with material reality, as he does for Deleuze's great mentor, Spinoza. In what Heidegger regards as the characteristic error of metaphysics, Being is modelled on beings, so that God becomes in idolatrous style an all-powerful Super-Object. Besides, if we are all part of an immanent Deity, then we can have access to absolute reality simply by knowing ourselves, since it is this Absolute which thinks and feels in us. I can know the truth simply by consulting my own intuitions.

Whatever else the political implications of such a case may be, they are certainly not on the side of radicalism, although the case advanced in *New Materialisms* presents itself as precisely that. Yet it is not hard to see how well it consorts with the nature of post-industrial capitalism – with a world in which labour and capital are dematerialised into signs,

flows and codes; social phenomena are mobile, plural and ceaselessly mutable; and images, simulacra and virtualities hold sway over anything as grossly simplistic as material objects. In this infinitely plastic environment, the sheer intractability of matter presents something of a scandal. A materialistic society harbours no great affection for the material, since it can always muster a degree of resistance to its ends. Not all vitalist materialism has been notable for its progressive politics. Mormonism, not generally considered the most socially enlightened of creeds, is one such example. For its founder, Joseph Smith, spirit is simply a finer, purer variety of matter – gentrified matter, so to speak. Materiality is eminently acceptable as long as it is hard to distinguish from spirit. The New Materialism emerged in part to replace a currently unfashionable historical materialism. Yet whole currents of it would seem to have no particular concern, as historical materialism does, with the destiny of men and women in an exploitative world.

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What other varieties of materialism are on offer? There is cultural materialism, the brainchild of the British cultural critic Raymond Williams, which investigates works of art in their material contexts.¹⁸ For all its undoubted insights, it is not easy to see how this is much more than a politicised version of the traditional sociology of art, which also enquires into such questions as audiences, readerships, the social

institutions of culture and the like. There is also semantic materialism, a style of thought popular in the high-theoretical 1970s but not greatly in vogue nowadays. It argues that signifiers are material (marks, sounds and so on); that signifieds or meanings are the product of an interplay of signifiers; and that meaning accordingly has a material foundation. Ludwig Wittgenstein, as we shall see later, regards meaning as a question of how material signs function within a practical form of life. If the life of a sign lies in its use, and its use is a material matter, then it is not as though its sense lurks somewhere behind it, as the soul for a Cartesian dualist lies concealed within the body. We are tempted to imagine, Wittgenstein notes in *The Blue and Brown Books*, that there is an ‘inorganic’ or material part to the handling of signs, and then an organic or spiritual aspect which is meaning and understanding.¹⁹ This, however, is in his view a false dichotomy. Meaning is a matter of what we get up to with signs, of how we deploy them for specific ends in the public world. It is no more invisible than the act of wielding a can-opener. Understanding is the mastery of a technique, and as such a form of practice.²⁰

Like many apparently modern ideas, semantic materialism has its source in antiquity. It is also to be found in the writings of Marx, who observes that ‘the element of thought itself, the element of the vital expression of thought – *language* – is sensuous nature’.²¹ It is matter (marks, sounds, gestures) that

is constitutive of meaning. Marx speaks in *The German Ideology* of language as dismantling the distinction between matter and spirit, which as we shall see later is also true of the body. In a sardonic smack at the philosophical idealists, he notes with mock regret how 'from the start the "spirit" is afflicted with the curse of being "burdened" with matter, which here makes its appearance in the form of agitated layers of air, sounds, in short, of language'.²² 'Afflicted', 'curse', 'burdened': Marx is writing here in satirical Swiftian vein, affecting to see the purity of human meaning as contaminated by its lowly material medium. Can such lofty conceptions as the Supreme Being or the Platonic Forms really come to us in the form of agitated layers of air? Are they not exalted enough to exist independently of sound or script? By what mystery can humble black marks on a white page designate human notions, interests and desires?

'Language is as old as consciousness', Marx continues. 'Language *is* practical consciousness that exists also for other men, and for that reason alone it really exists for me personally as well; language, like consciousness, only arises from the need, the necessity, of intercourse with other men.'²³ If Wittgenstein, as we shall see, insists on the public nature of language, as well as on its involvement with the rest of our material existence, Marx anticipates his insights, in however cursory a form. If language is practical consciousness, and if the signs that make it up are material, then we can speak at

a stretch of the materiality of consciousness. It is just that what the phrase means for Marx is not for the most part what it means for contemporary neuroscience.

Language is the work of no single individual, so that this badge of our humanity has a curiously anonymous air to it. It is less a personal possession than a medium into which we are born. For the most part, the finest of poets can give voice to their most intimate feelings only by drawing upon terms that innumerable men and women have employed countless times before. There are, of course, such things as neologisms, but these make sense only in terms of already established meanings. So we are faced with the materialist paradox that the human is born of the non-human. Of course language is in some sense a human invention. But it bears in upon us with a certain implacable force. It is as much a fatality as an arena of creativity. And this is true of more than language. We are also the product of history, heredity, systems of kinship, social institutions and unconscious processes. These are not for the most part things we choose. They, too, weigh in upon us like impersonal powers, even though (with the exception of biology) they are at root human creations. The human subject is thus always to some degree a stranger to itself, constituted by powers it is incapable of fully appropriating; and that this is so is part of the materialist case. It is idealism that begins with the subject as though it were self-born, and thus fails to start far back enough.

Samantha Frost writes illuminatingly of how the greatest of English political philosophers, Thomas Hobbes, reveals a quasi-Nietzschean sense of the unfathomable complexity which goes into our making. He is alert to the subtle interweaving of the powers that constitute us – of the role of custom, habit, fortune, bodily constitution, contingent experiences and so on in the manufacture of so-called autonomous human agents.²⁴ That we are a product of so many forces is not to claim with the eliminativists that human agency is a self-serving myth. It is rather to insist that what self-determination we can achieve exists within the context of a deeper dependency. The fact that our flesh is derived from the flesh of others is one palpable mark of this. Nothing can spring from its own loins and still be human. The most visible sign of our agency-cum-dependency is the body, which is the source of our activity yet which is also mortal, fragile and fearfully susceptible to pain. If the body is the medium of agency, it is also a cause of affliction. It is what renders us vulnerable as well as productive. It is because we are lumps of flesh of a certain kind that we are capable of being historical agents; but to be a body also means to be exposed and unprotected, subject to numerous uncontrollable influences, incapable of complete self-mastery. As Joeri Schrijvers comments, ‘being-in-the-world as a body entails both facticity and freedom, both spontaneous givenness and active constitution’.²⁵ We cannot decide not to breathe or bleed, since like

the unconscious (and somatic processes are themselves unconscious), the body imposes its own rigorously anonymous logic upon our lives.

It is in this spirit that Sebastiano Timpanaro reminds us that 'we cannot deny or evade the element of passivity in experience: the external situation which we do not create but which imposes itself on us'.²⁶ To see human beings primarily as agents is not to succumb to some cult of frenetic activism. Because we are rational *animals*, we are subject to various forms of hardship and exploitation. 'As a natural, corporeal, sensuous, objective being,' writes Marx, '[the human individual] is a suffering, conditioned and limited being.'²⁷ Because we are *rational* animals, and thus peculiarly resourceful, some (though not all) of these ills can be repaired. Pain is a reminder of the facticity of the flesh, its stubborn resistance to spirit. The body is a chunk of matter we never get to choose, and which we can never fully appropriate. If it is our expressive medium, it also retains its own density and part-autonomy. For Jean-Luc Nancy, it represents that which thought can never fully penetrate, even if it is the ground and origin of our thinking.²⁸

There is a sense, then, in which the very material basis of subjectivity threatens to undermine it. As fleshly creatures, we bear about with us something of the dense, refractory nature of matter, only now as close to us as breathing. In Jacques Lacan's useful neologism, the body is 'extimate'. Like death, it is both a fate wished upon us and intimately one's

own. If it is a mode of individuation, it is also a common condition. What makes us inimitably ourselves is stuff we share with countless billions of others. To individuate oneself, as Marx points out, is a capacity that belongs to our species-being in general. That we can become unique persons is an aspect of our shared animality.

Given its impersonality, the body can feel strangely extraneous to the self, so that dualism is in a sense an understandable mistake. Dualists are not wrong to see human beings as self-divided; they simply misidentify the nature of this fissure. It is not that we are split between the lumpish body and an ethereal entity called the soul. Even when we objectify our own bodies, or feel them as an encumbrance on the spirit, the self that has such experiences is an embodied phenomenon. To feel one's flesh as alien and external is actually part of one's 'soul', in the sense of one's significant life as an organism. We are at odds with ourselves not because body and soul are mutually at odds, but because of the temporal, creative, open-ended animals that we are. We shall see later that to speak of the soul is to denote the kind of body that is capable of signifying; and because there is no end to signification, we are unfinished creatures perpetually in process and out ahead of ourselves. To call ourselves historical beings is to say that we are constitutively capable of self-transcendence, becoming at one with ourselves only in death. Besides, as creatures of desire, we are continually split between what we possess and

what we aspire to, as well as between what we consciously imagine we desire and what we unconsciously do. It is in these and other senses that we are split subjects, not because we are an awkward amalgam of brute matter and pure mind. The soul has sometimes been seen as the essence of the body, its principle of unity; but it is actually a way of describing how we are never quite identical with ourselves.

Every time we act, we dismantle the distinction between matter and spirit, interweaving meaning and materiality; but it is only in certain special contexts (dancing, making love, playing world-class tennis) that the body seems luminously transparent to the mind. On these rare occasions, the material and phenomenological bodies seem to converge.²⁹ For some aesthetic theory, this convergence is consummated above all in the work of art. What strikes us as special about the aesthetic artefact is that every material particle of it seems informed by an integral meaning, and so reveals a harmony between sense as meaning and sense as substance. This, as it happens, is also true of the Christian doctrine of the risen human body. The risen or transfigured body transcends the tension between having a body and being one – between the body as given and the body as expressive. As with a piece of poetry, its material stuff is at one with its meaning.

When St Paul writes disparagingly of the flesh, he is speaking not of our physical nature but of a specific way of life, one in which the body and its desires spin out of control

and become monstrously insubordinate. His name for this mode of existence is sin. The body (*soma*) is in Paul's Hebraic view blessed because it is God's creation, while the flesh (*sarx*) is his metaphor for the way it can grow perverse and pathological. When it comes to the flesh, we are in the realm of neurotic compulsions and pathological repetitions, of desires that become rigid and despotic. In this sense, Paul might be said to foreshadow some of the insights of Sigmund Freud. As a somatic materialist, Freud sees the busy traffic between the body of the infant and those of its carers as lying at the source of the human spirit, but also at the root of its sickness. It is from this intimate commerce that the child's gratitude to those who nurture it first arises, a sentiment that in Freud's judgement is the foundation of morality. It is here, too, however, that desire first germinates and the unconscious is opened up; and these forces will warp the psyche from within, bending our projects and perceptions out of true. For Freud, then, the life of the unconscious springs from the kind of material animals that we are. As Alfred Schmidt remarks, 'the understanding of man as a needy, sensuous, physiological being is . . . the precondition of any theory of subjectivity'.³⁰ Part of that subjectivity concerns that within us which outstrips the conscious mind. The fantasia of the unconscious springs from the most mundane of situations – the infant's need for the constant ministrations of its carers, without which it will die. It is the upshot of material necessity.

While the baby is still in this state, the ‘Fall’ into language and desire has not yet happened. Instead, there is a set of tacit somatic understandings between the child and its caregivers on which language will eventually build. As human communication grows more elaborate, however, it becomes thicker in one sense but thinner in another – richer and more complex, yet also perilously abstract, and thus capable of being cut free from the sensuous control of the flesh. We can no longer rely upon instinct and bodily reflex, but are thrown back instead on the more precarious resources of reason. Language, so to speak, no longer has the backing of the body, as it does with Clym Yeobright and his mother in Thomas Hardy’s novel *The Return of the Native*, whose ‘discourses were as if carried on between the right and the left hands of the same body’. Body and language can thus come to be at odds with each other; and this, too, can be misinterpreted as a war between body and soul.

Ludwig Wittgenstein was an admirer of Freud, a fellow Viennese whose works were well known to his family. Indeed, few families were more sorely in need of Freud’s ministrations than this psychically disabled bunch, though only Ludwig’s sister Margarethe was actually analysed by him.³¹ Wittgenstein’s attitude to infants, for example, is much closer to Freud’s than it is to the conventional wisdom of suburban England. ‘Anyone who listens to a child’s crying with understanding,’ he writes, ‘will know that psychic forces, terrible forces, sleep within it,

different from anything commonly assumed. Profound rage and pain and lust for destruction.’³² If infants do not do us harm, as St Augustine dryly remarks in his *Confessions*, it is for lack of strength, not lack of will. Wittgenstein and his sister both submitted themselves to hypnosis, and having put up some robust resistance to the process fell into a deep trance as soon as the session was over. Even on the hypnotist’s couch, Wittgenstein had a lordly way with convention. There is no reason to think that his and Freud’s outlooks are mutually incompatible.³³ Wittgenstein’s insistence on the public accessibility of our ‘inner’ states does not rule out the fact that they may be ambiguous and elusive. And one reason for this may well be the stratagems of the unconscious. Neither thinker saw men and women as transparent to themselves. For Wittgenstein, we can easily be deceived about what we are feeling; for Freud, we live in a permanent state of self-opacity known as the unconscious. The human subject emerges from a failure to be identical with itself.

* * *

We may turn now to so-called speculative materialism, a theory associated with the French philosopher Quentin Meillassoux.³⁴ Like Timpanaro, Meillassoux is out to dislodge the human subject from the privileged status with which an idealist humanism invests it. He, too, draws attention to the vast stretches of cosmic time (what he calls ‘ancestrality’) before humanity emerged on earth. For idealism, the world

can be known only from the standpoint of a specific subject (what Meillassoux dubs ‘correlationism’), but in his view there is more to our cognitive powers than this. We can also know that this correlation between subject and object is contingent. There is no necessity for it, or indeed for anything else. In a material world, nothing need be the case, and everything could have been entirely otherwise. Nothing could be further from the thought of a determinist like Spinoza, who argues in his *Ethics* that ‘in the universe there exists nothing contingent, but all things are determined by the necessity of the divine nature to exist and operate in a certain way’.³⁵

Contingency, to be sure, does not mean chaos. It is not that one’s children might wake up one morning speaking fluent Farsi, a language of which they were ignorant when they went to bed. There is indeed law and logic, but the fact that there is is itself non-necessary. Absolute knowledge is not a question of searching out the essences of things, but of knowing that they have no essences. Even flux is contingent. There might always have been fixity instead. In *The Divine Inexistence*,³⁶ Meillassoux says that such contingent status is true even of God. There is in fact no God, but there always could be. He might always pop into existence next Wednesday, perhaps sometime between lunch and high tea. What is logically possible is also actually possible. We may not know whether a certain logical proposition is true of the world, but we know that it always could be. Since Meillassoux regards

this contingency as the fundamental truth of reality, he is that rare kind of materialist for whom it is possible to know the Absolute.

Speculative materialism insists on the fragility of human-kind when silhouetted against the backdrop of cosmic time and space. Anthropomorphism is a form of stupidity. Yet Meillassoux is also an ardent champion of infinitude, like his philosophical mentor Alain Badiou. In a material world, nothing is in principle out of bounds to reason. To set limits to reason in the manner of Immanuel Kant is to allow for the possibility of transcendence – for phenomena that lie beyond the reach of human rationality. And this is to let in a good deal of vacuous spirituality, as well as a tidal wave of religious fanaticism. For a stout Gallic rationalist like Meillassoux, however, there can be no terrain on which the writ of reason does not run. Thought is in principle infinite. It knows no natural closure. The existence of God would place limits on our understanding, whereas his absence means that our cognitive enquiries are potentially boundless.

Ironically, it is because there is no God that we can have access to the Absolute – which is to say, to a knowledge of the utter contingency of things. If a deity did exist, then the world would be governed by divine necessity; one, perhaps, whose operations were known to God alone; and contingency would cease to be the ultimate truth of it. In this sense, Meillassoux is a good old-fashioned medieval nominalist who

holds that God must be banished from the world if its freedom is to be preserved, in contrast to the more orthodox view that God is himself the source of that freedom. Miracles, he mischievously suggests, testify to the non-existence of the Almighty, since they point to a lack of cosmic design.

As long as we can claim that there is a necessary reason why things are as they are, we can also suppose that there is a necessary reason for the world as a whole, which for Meillassoux would mean capitulating to theism. If something has such a reason, so some have argued, then that reason must itself have a reason; and if we are to avoid an infinite regress of such reasons we must posit an end point to this chain of iron necessities known as God, who is his own *raison d'être*. Meillassoux is out to reject this way of seeing, which he perhaps mistakenly takes to be one of Thomas Aquinas's arguments for the existence of God. Instead, it is vital that we refuse to surrender to theism, not least because contingency in Meillassoux's view lies at the foundation of ethics. Because the world is not governed by divine laws, it is provisional, open-ended and thus hospitable to hope. Atheism, not theism, is the foundation of the good life.

Speculative materialism, then, holds that there is no reason for the cosmos, and that to imagine otherwise is to fall prey to theism. For orthodox Christian theology, however, it is exactly the non-necessity of the world which points to God. The doctrine of Creation holds among other things that the

universe is purely contingent. God made it not out of necessity, since there is nothing that he must necessarily do, but out of love. The world on this view is purely gratuitous, perpetually overshadowed by the possibility of its own non-existence; and it is this gratuitousness – what the novelist Milan Kundera calls ‘the unbearable lightness of being’ – that alludes to its Creator, rather than any specific item of the cosmos itself. The universe is gift rather than fatality. To resort to a technical theological term, God made it just for the hell of it, out of his own eternal self-delight, rather as an artist produces a painting. It is he who is the supreme guarantor of the contingency of things. The fact that there is anything at all, given that there might just as well have been nothing, is on account of him. Meillassoux thus fails to understand the theology he rejects. But this is nothing new. Most atheists set up theological straw men, which they then proceed to bowl triumphantly over.

It is structuralism, of all things, that can throw some light on the idea of Creation. For this style of thought, every item of the world appears against the background of its potential absence – which is to say that all such items are arbitrary and mutually exchangeable. It is only the locations they occupy within an overall structure that remain constant. It doesn’t matter which colour you use for ‘Go’ on your traffic lights as long as it isn’t the colour you use for ‘Stop’. When one entity is substituted for another, its contingency is thrown into relief;

and this, in turn, makes newly perceptible the places these entities occupy, as that which survives their coming and going. It is as though the places themselves can appear only in negative fashion, as we cease to identify something with the space it fills and instead, in the transition between one temporary occupant and another, gain a glimpse of the location itself.

In a similar way, it is the contingency of the world that reveals its Creator. God is the backdrop that becomes visible only against the constant emerging and passing away of things. As the poet Rilke puts it, he is the one who holds all this endless falling in his hands. Yet it is not exactly that contingency leads us in Platonic style to posit something necessary and eternal lying beyond it. It is rather that any particular non-necessary fact points to the non-necessity of the world as a whole. It suggests that there might just as well have been nothing as something; and for the theologian, the reason why this is not so is God, who loved the universe into being in a purely gratuitous act. Nothingness in the sense of the non-being with which the world is shot through (namely, the fact that it has no need to exist) points to nothingness in the sense of the unfathomable abyss which is the Deity. It is this that the doctrine of Creation is trying to capture. It has nothing to do with how the world got started. You could still hold this view while believing with Aristotle that the world never had an origin at all.

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Materialism is a remarkably capacious concept. It stretches all the way from the mind–body problem to the question of whether the state exists primarily to defend private property. It can mean a denial of God, a belief that the Great Wall of China and Clint Eastwood’s ankles are secretly inter-related, or an insistence that the Golden Gate Bridge continues to exist when nobody is looking at it. Yet it also has an everyday meaning, one that is not in the least philosophical. Materialism for most people means an excessive regard for material goods. ‘By the word materialism,’ writes Friedrich Engels, ‘the philistine understands gluttony, drunkenness, lust of the eye, lust of the flesh, arrogance, cupidity, avarice, covetousness, profit-hunting and stock-exchange swindling – in short, all the filthy vices in which he himself indulges in private.’²³⁷ To call Madonna materialistic is not to say that she holds that spirit is simply matter in motion, or that classes struggle in much the same way that dogs’ tails wag. It is, however, to cast light on her interest in an off-the-peg version of Kabbalah, just as it casts light on John Travolta’s sinister enthusiasm for Scientology. People who have a surplus of material goods are likely to resort to bogus forms of spirituality as a much-needed refuge from them. A gullible belief in wood nymphs, magic crystals, Theosophy or alien spacecraft is simply the flipside of their worldliness. It is no wonder that Tarot, packaged occultism and ready-to-serve transcendence should be so fashionable in the Hollywood hills.

The spiritual in this view is not a specific mode of materiality – a question of feeding the hungry, welcoming the stranger, falling in love, celebrating friendship, speaking up for justice and so on – but a flight from such drearily mundane matters. It offers you a welcome respite from a glut of minders, agents, hair stylists and heated swimming pools. It represents the bad faith of the fabulously rich. There were a good many British colonialists in India who found in Indian spirituality a temporary escape from the tiresome necessity of knocking the natives about. It is said that Heinrich Himmler always carried a copy of the *Bhagavad Gita* with him. If (in a vulgarised version of Hinduism) the world is illusion, then everything is permissible.

There is, finally, a broad use of the word ‘materialism’ to mean a delicate responsiveness to material process. We may speak of this Keatsian vigilance to the flow and texture of material things as the materialist imagination, a phrase which in some other contexts might seem an oxymoron. It is a sense of the term superbly illustrated on almost every page of Marilynne Robinson’s novel *Housekeeping*.

So far, we have surveyed an assortment of materialisms, some of which we will examine further. One type that will concern us most, however, is neither cultural nor semantic, vitalist nor speculative, mechanical nor dialectical. Nor is it a question of stashing away a few extra Range Rovers in the garage. It bears a relation to historical materialism, as we shall

see, but it is not identical with it. In fact, there is not even an exact name for it. Somatic (bodily) or anthropological materialism might do at a stretch, but neither term is quite satisfactory. As a way of seeing, it takes seriously what is most palpable about men and women – their animality, their practical activity and corporeal constitution. Seen from this standpoint, a good deal of philosophy looks like a suppression of the obvious. It was this that moved Friedrich Nietzsche to enquire why no philosopher had ever spoken with proper reverence of the human nose. It is to this approach that we can now turn.