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Why Materialism is a Dead-End

How misunderstanding matter has led us astray



15th November 2019



Bernardo Kastrup | Dutch computer scientist and philosopher who has published fundamental theoretical reflections on the mind matter problem.

1,450 words

We live in an age of science, which has enabled technological advancements unimaginable to our ancestors. Unlike philosophy, which depends somewhat on certain *subjective* values and one's own sense of plausibility to settle questions, science poses questions directly to nature, in the form of experiments. Nature then answers by displaying certain behaviors, so questions can be settled *objectively*.

This is both science's strength and its Achilles' heel: experiments only tell us how nature *behaves*, not what it essentially *is*. Many different hypotheses about

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nature's essence are consistent with its manifest behaviors. So although such behaviors are informative, they can't *settle* questions of being, which philosophers call 'metaphysics.' Understanding nature's essence is fundamentally beyond the scientific method, which leaves us with the—different—methods of philosophy. These, somewhat subjective as they may be, are our only path to figuring out what is going on.

Materialism—the view that nature is fundamentally constituted by matter outside and independent of mind—is a *metaphysics*, in that it makes statements about what nature essentially is. As such, it is also a *theoretical inference*: we cannot empirically observe matter outside and independent of mind, for we are forever locked in mind. All we can observe are the contents of perception, which are inherently mental. Even the output of measurement instruments is only accessible to us insofar as it is mentally perceived.

We infer the existence of something beyond mental states because, at first, this seems to make sense of three canonical observations:

- (i) We all seem to share the same world beyond ourselves
- (ii) The behaviour of this shared world doesn't seem to depend on our volition
- (iii) There are tight correlations between our inner experience and measurable patterns of brain activity

A world outside mental states, which we all inhabit, makes sense of observation (i). Because this shared world is thus non-mental, it isn't acquiescent to our (mental) volition, thereby explaining (ii). Finally, if particular configurations of matter in this world somehow *generate* mentality, it could also explain (iii). And so our culture has come to take for granted that nature is essentially material, non-mental. Again, this is a *metaphysical inference* aimed at tentatively explaining the canonical observations listed above, not a scientific or empirical fact.

The problem is that such metaphysical inference is untenable on several grounds. For starters, there is nothing about the parameters of material arrangements

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—say, the position and momentum of the atoms constituting our brain—in terms of which we could deduce, at least in principle, how it feels to fall in love, to taste wine, or to listen to a Vivaldi sonata. There is an impassable explanatory gap between material *quantities* and experiential *qualities*, which philosophers refer to as the ‘hard problem of consciousness.’ Many people don’t recognize this gap because they think of matter as already having intrinsic qualities—such as color, taste, etc.—which contradicts mainstream materialism: according to the latter, color, taste, etc., are all generated by our brain, inside our skull. They don’t exist in the world out there, which is supposedly purely abstract.

Second, materialism lives or dies with what physicists call ‘physical realism’: there must be an objective world out there, consisting of entities with defined properties, whether such world is being observed or not. The problem is that [experiments over the past four decades have now refuted physical realism](#) beyond reasonable doubt. So unless one redefines the meaning of the word ‘materialism’ in a rather arbitrary manner, metaphysical materialism is now physically untenable.

Third, a compelling case can be made that the empirical data we have now amassed on the correlations between brain activity and inner experience cannot be accommodated by materialism. There is a broad, consistent [pattern associating impairment or reduction of brain metabolism with an expansion of awareness](#), an *enrichment* of experiential contents and their felt intensity. It is at least difficult to see how the materialist hypothesis that all experiences are somehow generated by brain metabolism could make sense of this.

Finally, from a philosophical perspective, materialism is at least unparsimonious—that is, uneconomical, unnecessarily extravagant—and arguably even incoherent. Coherence and parsimony are admittedly somewhat subjective values. However, if we were to abandon them, we would have to open the gates to all kinds of nonsense: from aliens in the Pleiades trying to alert us to global catastrophe to teapots in the orbit of Saturn—neither of which can be empirically disproven. So we better stick to these values, for the price of

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having to apply them *consistently*, even to materialism itself.

Materialism is unparsimonious because, in addition to or instead of mentality—which is all we ultimately know—it posits another category of ‘substance’ or ‘existent’ fundamentally beyond direct empirical verification: namely, matter. Under materialism, matter is literally *transcendent*, more inaccessible than any ostensive spiritual world posited by the world’s religions. This would only be justifiable if there were no way of making sense of the three canonical observations listed earlier on the basis of mind alone; *but there is*.

Materialism conflates the need to posit something outside *our personal minds* with having to posit something outside *mind as a category*. [All three observations can be made sense of if we postulate a transpersonal field of mentation beyond our personal psyches](#). As such, there is indeed a world out there, beyond us, which we all inhabit; but this world is *mental*, just as we are intrinsically mental agents. Seeing things this way completely circumvents the ‘hard problem of consciousness,’ as we no longer need to bridge the impassable gap between mind and non-mind, quality and quantity: everything is now mental, qualitative, perception consisting solely in a modulation of one (personal) set of qualities by another (transpersonal) set of qualities. We know this isn’t a problem because it happens every day: our own thoughts and emotions, despite being qualitatively different, modulate one another all the time.

Finally, materialism is arguably incoherent. As we have seen, matter is a theoretical abstraction *in* and *of* mind. [So when materialists try to reduce mind to matter, they are effectively trying to reduce mind to one of mind’s own conceptual creations](#). This is akin to a dog chasing its own tail. Better yet, it is like a painter who, having painted a self-portrait, points at it and proclaims himself to *be* the portrait. The ill-fated painter then has to explain his entire inner life in terms of patterns of pigment distribution on canvas. Absurd as this sounds, it is very much analogous to the situation materialists find themselves in.

The popularity of materialism is founded on a confusion:

somehow, our culture has come to associate it with science and technology, both of which have been stupendously successful over the past three centuries. *But that success isn't attributable to materialism; it is attributable, instead, to our ability to inquire into, model and then predict nature's behavior.* Science and technology could have been done equally well—perhaps even *better*—without any metaphysical commitment, or with another metaphysics consistent with such behavior. Materialism is, at best, an illegitimate hitchhiker, perhaps even a parasite, in that it prays on the psychology of those who do science and technology.

Indeed, in order to relate daily to nature, human beings need to tell themselves a story about what nature is. It is psychologically very difficult to remain truly agnostic regarding metaphysics, particularly when one is doing experiments. Even when this internal story is subliminal, it is still running like a basic operating system. And so it happens that materialism, because of its vulgar intuitiveness and naïve superficiality, offers a cheap and easy option for such inner storytelling. In addition, it has arguably also [enabled early scientists and scholars to preserve a sense of meaning](#) at a time when religion was losing its grip on our culture.

But now, in the 21st century, we can surely do better than that. We are now in a position to examine our hidden assumptions honestly, confront the evidence objectively, bring our own psychological needs and prejudices to the light of self-reflection, and then ask ourselves: Does materialism really add up to anything? The answer should be obvious: it just doesn't. Materialism is a relic from an older, naiver and less sophisticated age, when it helped investigators separate themselves from what they were investigating; but it has no place in this day and age.

Neither do we lack options, [as we can now make sense of all canonical observations on the basis of mental states alone.](#) This constitutes a more persuasive, parsimonious and coherent alternative to materialism, which can also accommodate the available evidence better. The fundamentals of this alternative have been known at least [since the early 19th century](#); arguably

even millennia earlier. It is entirely up to us today to explore it and, frankly, get our act together when it comes to metaphysics. We should know better than to —bizarrely—keep on embracing the untenable.

Bernardo Kastrup
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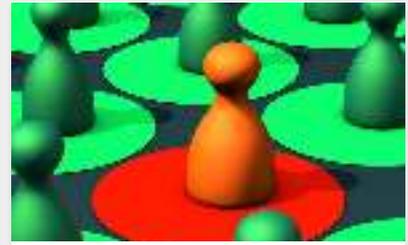
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Thomas Groover

6 March 2020

In response to Logan Leatherman: I'm wondering if your work is more successful than materialist investigations into mental health and mental illness, which despite a century and a half of effort, has been a colossal failure.

And in support of the blogger, the advent of non-reductionist investigations into mind have been quite revealing, and as Stanislav Grof put it, non-ordinary states of (human) consciousness have yielded by far the most useful information in regards to the human mind. And to further the somewhat dire predicament of the materialist perspective, the burgeoning field of psychedelic research is populated entirely by dualist researchers (with exceptions being a handful of brain imaging experts intent on "proving" that mind is physical). This is because, except for the imaging data, the research is non-reductionist and questions of why psychedelics are such a powerful tools cannot escape the dependence upon the subject's experience, in evaluating