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# WHAT IS MATERIALISM? WHAT IS IDEALISM?

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### Summary

Three competing cultural worldviews — Materialism, Immaterialism, and Idealism — are described and contrasted. Materialism as a worldview emphasizes sensory experience and material concerns to the exclusion of spiritual and religious considerations; Immaterialism, the polar opposite, entails excessive concern for spiritual and religious matters. Idealism can be understood as reconciling, harmonizing, or integrating Materialism and Immaterialism. While these cultural orientations may be clearly seen in history, and also as important forces in modern society, a clear understanding of them is often lacking, partly for terminological reasons. Another source of confusion is failure to recognize Idealism as a distinct, vital, third alternative to Materialism and Immaterialism, rather than merely a mid-point or compromise between them. The distinguishing features of each worldview are concisely described with reference to traditional divisions of philosophy (Metaphysics, Anthropology, Epistemology, Ethics, Religion, and Politics). According to the theories of Pitirim Sorokin, an end to the current cultural condition of intense Materialism is inevitable, though when this will happen remains in question. We should consciously strive to move modern culture from Materialism to Idealism. Principal means of accomplishing this include orienting higher education more towards liberal arts, and placing greater emphasis on teaching Classics. This is especially important for the disciplines of psychology, philosophy, history, and literature, and for Christian colleges and universities.

## What is Materialism? What is Idealism?

### Introduction

Most people would probably agree with some version of following statement: "A major problem with life in America today is a radical spirit of *materialism*; and not just materialism in the sense of greed, but rather a fundamentally materialistic view of life". But what is materialism, exactly, in this broader sense of a cultural orientation? And the fact that we criticize materialism suggests we have some alternatives in mind, compared to which materialism falls short. What are these alternatives?

As we begin to examine these questions more closely, we quickly realize that an initial obstacle is the lack of a clear definition and understanding of what materialism is. Definitions are essential for productive thinking. The surest way to remain confused about a problem is to have only vague definitions, so that the mind cannot latch onto any definite concept with which to reason logically. This, then, is the purpose of the present article: to help readers gain a more definite understanding of what materialism is, and what the alternatives are. With clearer concepts, one will then be able to more productively reflect on the subject as it affects one own life, and on society in general.

It should be noted at the outset that our principal concern here is not materialism itself, but rather with a specific competing worldview — what this is and why it is important; in the process we will also have to consider what to call it. Another central task will be to establish that there are actually two principal alternatives to materialism, one being the polar opposite or antithesis of materialism and the second being a worldview that reconciles, harmonizes, or integrates materialism with its opposite. For reasons to be explained, we will call this third, optimal worldview Idealism. . We will also argue that this harmonized worldview is a traditional, natural, and perhaps even instinctive way of approaching life, taught by Christianity and other religions, and the worldview most likely to promote individual self-actualization and happiness.

### Materialism

What, then, is the worldview of materialism? We are not interested here in the colloquial sense of materialism as greediness or preoccupation with material possessions. Rather, we seek to understand materialism as a general worldview; we want to know, that is, what *philosophical materialism* is. We will term this worldview Materialism.

When we enquire closely as to what Materialism means, we soon discover a constellation of many related terms associated with it. These include empiricism, logical-positivism, rationalism, and reductionism, just to name a few. Part of our task in defining

Materialism, therefore, is to consider how these other terms relate to it. (A Glossary of relevant terms is supplied at the end of this article.)

The task of understanding Materialism will be greatly facilitated by considering in succession what it means relative to several traditional divisions of philosophy, specifically: metaphysics (what is the nature of reality?), anthropology (what is man?), epistemology (what forms of valid knowledge are there?), ethics (what is the best manner of life? how does one obtain happiness?), religion and politics.

*Metaphysics.* In metaphysics, the central premise of Materialism is that only matter is real (materialistic monism). There is no other, spiritual reality. In a sense, then, materialism might be understood as denying metaphysics altogether; there is nothing beyond ('meta') the observable, material world. A corollary of Materialism is **determinism**. Every state of the universe results, merely by simple cause-and-effect, from the previous state. Just as one billiard ball strikes and sets in motion another ball, which strikes another and so on, so all events in the universe are completely determined by previous events. This is considered a modern view, but it actually dates back at least as far as the Greek philosophers Democritus (c. 400 BC) and Epicurus (c. 300 BC).

*Anthropology.* Man is a body — a machine, an animal — nothing more. All his thoughts and mental experiences are caused by and have no independent existence apart from biological brain states (**reductionism**). In keeping with the principles of determinism, man has no free will. Man has no immortal soul.

*Epistemology.* A person is born into the world with the mind as a blank slate (*tabula rasa*). The human mind has no innate ideas. The only means of gaining valid knowledge is direct observation (**empiricism**) and discursive logical reasoning (**rationalism**). Intuition, inspiration, or religious modes of knowledge (faith, revelation) are invalid because they are incapable of demonstration and experimental test (**logical positivism**).

*Ethics.* Sensory pleasure is the supreme good (*summum bonum*); health, prosperity, and material possessions have instrumental value in promoting sensory pleasure and are also good. The best manner of life is an uninhibited acting on instinct to the maximum extent society permits (**naturalism**).

There are no absolute standards of right or wrong. Ethical rightness can only be determined relative to a particular situation and cultural frame of reference (**relativism**). The ultimate basis of right or wrong is physical pleasure and pain. What feels good is good (**hedonism**). The end justifies the means (**pragmatism**).

Such social virtues as compassion, altruism, and generosity are genetically programmed; they have value because they are natural instincts, and because they produce positive feelings (**sentimentalism**).

*Religion.* God does not exist (**atheism**; unless, perhaps, we think of the entire material universe and God as the same thing

*Politics.* Society is a *bellum omnium contra omnes* (a war of each against all, i.e., social Darwinism). There being no spiritual realities to say otherwise, we must accept this as the natural order of things and make the best of it. The best society is one that produces the greatest good for the greatest number (**utilitarianism**). Altruism is focused only on improving the material welfare of others. Since other human beings and countries can be relied on to act selfishly and aggressively, the prudent strategy is to try to gain the superior position and greater power, whether economically or militarily (**political realism**).

## Immaterialism

As already stated, two other worldviews compete with Materialism. One, considered in this section, is the polar opposite of Materialism; the other, considered in the next section, is a reconciliation or harmonization of Materialism with its opposite (what this means will become more tangible as we proceed).

As the first order of business we must decide what to call these two other worldviews. Terminology here is problematic. Historically, several different words have been used to denote each of them. Moreover, the same word, 'idealism,' has often been used indiscriminately to refer to both. This has produced considerable confusion, the clearing up of which is one principle aim here.

We will herein use the generic word *Immaterialism* to denote the worldview that is the polar opposite of Materialism; this has the advantage of making the fewest metaphysical assumptions – it merely asserts that this worldview maintains that what is truly real is something non-material, and that matter, if it is real at all, has only some derivative or lesser form of existence.

What, then, is the stuff of reality if not matter? The answer, according to immaterialist philosophers, is that reality is mental experience. There is, in other words, no dualism of phenomena and noumena. We have mental experience (phenomena), and that's all there is; there are no noumena behind some 'veil of perception'. Hence we could also call this worldview **psychism**.

Immaterialism often comes bundled with various religious beliefs, such that God exists, that human beings have immortal souls, and so on. Therefore Immaterialism is sometimes called **spiritualism**. Other terms used for this worldview include radical idealism, pure idealism, subjective idealism, and idealistic monism; but, as suggested above, such terms gloss over the important distinction between Immaterialism and the third, harmonized worldview, to which the term 'idealism' more properly applies. The sociologist Pitirim Sorokin (whom we will consider more shortly) termed the immaterialist worldview 'ideationalism'; however this term has the drawbacks of being both unconventional, and easily confused with 'idealism'.

As before, to understand Immaterialism it is helpful to consider its meaning relative to traditional divisions of philosophy.

*Metaphysics.* Immaterialism states that matter *per se* does not exist; there is no objective material world beneath or beyond our sensory experience. Because it has no objective reality, the world as we experience it may simply be a dream or illusion (*maya*). In some systems, a limited degree of reality may be granted to the material world, with the proviso that it is either evil (as in some forms of Gnosticism), or only semi-real (e.g., as in some Neoplatonism, a distorted or vaguer emanation of some more real level of reality).

*Anthropology.* Human beings have an immortal, immaterial soul, and a body (or at least the appearance of one). The body is a tomb or a prison of the soul. Bodily passions disturb the soul and reduce the clarity of its spiritual vision. The philosopher uses spiritual practices to deny the body and subdue its passions (**asceticism**); death is welcome because it releases the soul. In the most radical forms of Immaterialism, a person may be a monad, a disembodied soul outside of time and space, dreaming it is embodied in a material world.

*Epistemology.* Sensory experience produces false, illusory, or at best highly fallible knowledge. True knowledge comes by other faculties such as intuition, pure *Reason*, faith, inspiration, and creative imagination.

*Ethics.* Since the material world is evil or illusory, one should flee it (e.g., join a monastery or live as a desert hermit) and live a contemplative life, removed from social affairs. In extreme cases, contemplation is pursued to the exclusion even of other religious activities (**quietism**). Virtue is the only good; a virtuous man is happy even when suffering.

Specific moral precepts are often presented as absolute and unconditional (**moralism**). Others are harshly condemned for violating moral laws (judgmentalism). On the other hand, some forms of Eastern Immaterialism may see the world of sensory experience as so meaningless as to make ethical social actions virtually irrelevant (e.g., seeing a man being eaten by a tiger, one ignores it saying, 'the tiger is illusion, the man is illusion'.)

*Religion.* God exists. Other people exist as immortal souls. Other kinds of disembodied souls (e.g., angels) may also exist. After death of the body, the soul may experience rewards or punishments earned by ones life on earth. In dealing with others our only concern should be to assist them in obtaining a happy afterlife. In extreme forms of Immaterialism, ones own soul may be considered the only thing that exists (*solipsism*); or is a solitary Buddha, dreaming everything in ones private universe.

*Politics.* Government should be run by the church or otherwise ordered religiously (*theocracy*). Governments and churches not only have the right, but the obligation to stipulate and enforce moral restrictions (moral authoritarianism). Legal prohibitions against vices or illicit pleasures are common (*puritanicalism*). Religious conversion by

force if necessary, even of entire nations ('benevolent' imperialism) is proper, in order to save souls; alternatively, a commitment to an absolute moral principle of nonviolence may lead to strict pacifism (i.e., the belief that aggression and war are wrong even if in self-defense).

In sum, one sees that the Immaterialist worldview, strictly interpreted, paints a distinctly unattractive picture. This is one reason it is so important to consider the next worldview, which reconciles the opposites of Materialism and Immaterialism, and for not confusing this reconciled worldview with Immaterialism.

## **Idealism**

We now consider the worldview that constitutes a reconciliation, harmonization, or integration of Materialism and Immaterialism. We cannot proceed very far, of course, until we decide what to call this worldview, which has been given different names by various writers.

Herein we will use the term *Idealism* to describe this reconciled worldview, and base this choice on several considerations. The first is historical. This worldview can be understood as closely related to Plato's theory of Forms or Ideals (Greek: Eide). This theory states that, in addition to the material world, there exists an eternal realm which contains immaterial Forms, of which material objects and their qualities are imperfect copies or instantiations. There are, in Plato's theory, Forms for horses, tables, chairs, right-angles and so on; but more important are special Forms associated with virtues – and highest ranking among these are the Forms of Truth, Beauty, and Goodness. A true, beautiful, or good thing in the material world is so because it partakes of these eternal Forms.

This composite view of reality — a temporal, material universe and an eternal realm of Forms or Ideals — is called Platonic Idealism or simply Idealism. Virtually everything implied by our third, integrated worldview follow from or are implied by Platonic Idealism. To call this worldview Idealism, then, recognizes its close connection with Platonism.

Idealism was also the term Sorokin (1985) used for the worldview that integrates Materialism and Immaterialism. Sorokin's contribution to this subject is a major conceptual innovation (Uebersax 2010). Previous writers (e.g., the American Transcendentalist Orestes Brownson, 1836; cf. Parker, 1907) saw, like Sorokin, in history a dynamic struggle and alternation of Materialism and Immaterialism as dominant worldviews. Implicit in this view is the possibility and desirability of obtaining an optimal balance between them. But Sorokin took the important step of explicitly identifying and describing in detail this third, harmonized state — thus moving it from the status a somewhat vague, implicit concept, to something more clear, definite and scientifically investigable.



Another reason for calling this third worldview Idealism is that we really have no good alternative, short of inventing an entirely new term. Perhaps the best other candidate term is Integralism, a word which Sorokin sometimes used as a substitute or synonym for Idealism. This term, however, is very ambiguous in that it supplies no clue at all as to what is being integrated.

Weighing all options, then, we propose to adopt the convention of calling this third worldview Idealism. Ultimately, of course, it doesn't matter what we call it so much as that we have a consistent term for it.

Now we consider: what is Idealism? As should be evident, the colloquial use of 'idealist' to mean an impractical dreamer has little if any connection with what we mean by Idealism here. We have already said that Idealism, as we mean it, is not to be confused with various immaterialist philosophies that are sometimes called "idealist." It is also important to recognize that Idealism is much more than a mid-point or compromise between Materialism and Immaterialism. Rather, it is a distinct and rich worldview, much more than the sum of its components. An analogy might be made to focusing a pair of binoculars. When one first looks through unfocused binoculars, one sees two blurred images. But as one adjusts the focus, quite suddenly the two blurred images merge into one vivid and clear image. This is the effect when the Materialist and Immaterialist worldviews are properly harmonized: an entirely new and much better — perhaps even transfigured — way of seeing the world emerges.

### ***Idealism and the perennial philosophy***

What, then, do we mean by Idealism? Idealism could be understood as the *philosophia perennis* (perennial philosophy), the religious and philosophical worldview that emerges repeatedly across time and place in human culture, and is particularly associated with those cultures that have strong, stable and productive religious orientations. [Note 1]

The leading principles of the *philosophia perennis* are that (1) there is a temporal material and an eternal spiritual world; (2) the latter is perhaps more important, but the former still has a definite meaning and purpose, as well as sanctity; and (3) man is a composite being, partly material and partly spiritual, bridging between the two realms. These, we suggest, are the main principles, though many others follow from them. [Note 2]

The perennial philosophy, as its name suggests, has a long history in human culture. It is found in many indigenous societies, for example, in Native American religion. In Western antiquity it emerged from Egyptian, Mesopotamian, and probably other (e.g., shamanistic) roots in a somewhat more rationalized form as Greek philosophy (Pythagoras, Empedocles, Plato, etc.). [Note 3] Of all the Greek philosophical schools in the Classical, Hellenistic, and Roman periods, Platonism most tended to a harmonization of man's spiritual and material natures. By contrast, for example, Stoicism tended to emphasize man's spiritual nature to the exclusion of his material nature, whereas Epicureanism did the opposite.

Christianity followed Platonism as the dominant expression of the perennial philosophy in the West. The most dramatic evidence of this is seen in its view of Jesus Christ as God incarnate, 'true God and true Man'. Inasmuch as Christ is the ultimate role model, the implication is that each Christian, like Christ, should be a mediator of heaven and earth. In associating Christianity with the perennial philosophy, we mean, it should be noted, Christianity at its best, and not necessarily as it is always practiced. Christianity is often prone to become too worldly, on the one hand, and too otherworldly on the other. Orestes Brownson, in his *New Views of Christianity, Society, and the Church* (1836), for example, criticized what he saw as Protestant materialism and Catholic immaterialism, and expressed hope for the emergence of a new and permanent Christianity which would integrate both principles.

Interest in the perennial or Ideal philosophy peaked during the high Middle Ages (e.g., St. Thomas Aquinas), and again in the Renaissance (e.g., Marsilio Ficino, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, the Cambridge Platonists). [Note 4]

Following the Renaissance there occurred the Reformation, the discovery of the New World, and the Age of Science, which all contributed in their ways to a marked cultural turn towards Materialism in the West — a phase in which we still live. Idealism partially resurfaced, temporarily, in the form of New England Transcendentalism as a conscious reaction to the excesses of modern rationalism and Materialism. Inasmuch as we are still in the same materialistic cultural phase that the Transcendentalists criticized, their writings remain relevant today.

With respect to modern Christianity, Catholicism, beginning in the 20th century, has moved progressively in the direction of Idealism. Protestant doctrine, on the other hand, has floundered, in some cases making too many concessions to the Materialist worldview (e.g., a desacralized 'Social Gospel'), and in other cases avoiding engagement with Science and devolving into evangelical fundamentalism.

We now turn to a more detailed description of Idealism in terms of the various divisions of philosophy.

*Metaphysics.* The temporal, material world is real; there also exists an eternal heavenly or spiritual world. The material world has purpose, meaning and sanctity, but only or primarily because of its relationship to the eternal realm.

A Creator God has a benevolent plan for all creation. Central to this plan is a superintending Providence by which God orchestrates all that happens. Man plays a special role in the economy of creation, connecting the spiritual and material realms.

Evil exists, although the nature of evil remains a mystery. What appears to be evil is often God's Providence in disguise, prodding us to fulfil our mission, challenging us, and making us stronger.

*Anthropology.* Human beings are a composite creature, possessing a material body and an immaterial, immortal soul. Dwelling in both the temporal and eternal realms simultaneously, human beings constitute a link or bridge between the two. Man is made in God's image and likeness, from which several things follow: that each person has immense dignity; that one must be willing to work hard to actualize one's latent God-image; and that a central part of this process is self-knowledge ('Know Thyself').

When people die, their souls return home to the eternal realm; souls of the living and dead are in communion in some way dimly understood.

Life on earth is a school for the soul. Everything that happens to us on earth has some spiritual meaning and purpose.

Certain disciplines and practices promote an integration of body and soul — e.g., yoga, tai chi, etc.

*Epistemology.* Human beings have other means of gaining valid knowledge besides the external senses and discursive reasoning. These other modes of knowledge include higher Reason or **noesis** (Uebersax, 2013b), Conscience, intuition, spiritual imagination, inspiration, and faith. Conscience, more than a mere Freudian super-ego, implies an ability to perceive true moral goodness and badness. Spiritual imagination enables people to understand and express spiritual truths in figurative terms or art, to discern the spiritual significance of events in the external world, and to understand allegorical meanings of Scripture.

Faith is not blind credence, but a kind of 'dark knowing' by which one has a strong and authentic conviction that a religious doctrine is true, but cannot explain the source of this conviction or supply, at least at first, a reasoned basis for it.

By some means poorly understood, divine knowledge (gnosis, grace) may proceed from on high; but these 'divine irradiations' are subtle, and to detect and understand them one's thoughts and affections must be suitably purified.

*Ethics.* Each of us is continually at the juncture between two paths or personality orientations: to follow our selfish will, or to follow God's will. In his optimal state of functioning, Man directs his attention to both heaven and earth, inclining somewhat more towards the former. By this means and by grace, intuition, or Reason, he discerns God's will and manifest God's will in his worldly actions. Man thereby acts in harmony with God's plan; and Providence supports him in all his endeavors ('All things work to good to them that love God.'). Human happiness is 'life in accord with Nature' — that is, in harmony with God's actions in Nature as a whole.

Man also has free will. When he chooses to follow his own self-will — such as because of inordinate desire for sensory pleasures — rather than seek God's will, he falls from his intended position in creation ('the Fall'), and succumbs to the fundamental error of hubris or pride. To counteract this, the virtues of humility and piety are essential.

When man falls through self-will, he is disconnected from the plan of creation; disharmony and unhappiness result. A process of *redemption* must then occur to bring him back to his intended status and level of function, also understandable as a union with God or a 'state of grace'. Life itself is a process of gradual redemption by which the soul becomes increasingly perfected and divinized. The process of fall and redemption also happens on a smaller scale throughout life — daily or even momentarily.

Each person has a unique purpose and mission in this life. This is partly to be understood as an epic or mythic quest which each person must complete. Much of the work to be accomplished concerns ones moral development. Ultimately each person alone must accomplish this for him- or herself; although we are also able to assist one another.

Part of man's work is precisely to integrate what may appear to be the competing and conflicting demands of a dual (material and spiritual) nature. It is the very difficulty of this challenge that makes it valuable in forming character and virtue. Material interests and physical pleasures are not to be denied outright or eliminated — for this merely evades the very struggle which moulds our character — but rather harmonized with and subordinated to spiritual concerns.

On earth we are stewards of God, bringing measure, order, beauty and justice and into the material world.

Human nature is not 'innately depraved'. Rather, human beings, made in God's image, have the innate capacity to be moral. Moral development is promoted not by mandated codes of behavior ("Thou shalt...", "Thou shalt not..."), but by cultivation of the moral sense and by education.

*Religion.* It is proper to worship God both privately and in communal gatherings. Expressions of gratitude and supplications for assistance are essential parts of private and public worship. Rituals and sacraments have both psychological and spiritual effect.

Human beings have a capacity for prayer, and may assist one another by means of prayer. The prayers of the living may assist the dead, and vice versa.

Scripture is divinely inspired and supplies supernatural assistance.

*Politics.* That each human being is made in God's image has profound political implications. It means that: (1) each and every person has immense dignity; (2) all people are, in an important spiritual sense, equal; and (3) that society should endeavor to supply each person with whatever is necessary for their fullest self-realization and moral development. There is also a close correspondence between the social and the intrapsychic realms ("As within, so without."); social divisions and conflicts have counterparts in the personality dynamics of each individual.

True social progress is better understood as a natural unfolding of God's plan, rather than as something man alone must create. Just as the individual is prone to egoism, so states and institutions generally suffer from a collective egoism. A peril of modern democracy is that the collective material instincts (desire for security, prosperity, power, etc.) are not balanced by collective religious instincts (trust in God, belief in fairness and justice, charity, humility, awareness of kinship among peoples, etc.)

## Conclusion

We have thus outlined the main principles of three main cultural worldviews — Materialism, Immaterialism, and Idealism — and explained why Idealism is greatly preferable. It remains to make some remarks about future prospects.

The present cultural phase of intense Materialism has been dominant at least since the beginning of the 18th century. One school of thought is that this materialistic phase will continue and advance inexorably for the indefinite future: that we are at the end of history and no radical changes in worldview will occur; technology will continue to improve our lives and supply the kind of utopian life that Immaterialism and religion never achieved.

But this view is unpersuasive or at least incomplete. First, while modern technology has obviously brought many benefits, it just as clearly has brought many hazards and problems. As has often been remarked, our power has increased much faster than our wisdom to use our power well and safely. While we cannot anticipate what further technological advances will occur in the next 100 years, we have good reason to believe that the more crucial advances in human welfare must come from addressing basic social, environmental, and psychological problems of modernism.

Second and more fundamentally, inasmuch as human nature is innately attuned to both the material and the immaterial, neither element can be suppressed indefinitely. When one is denied expression, it continues to work below the surface and exert a pressure until it actively manifests itself again. Thus the periodic alternations of worldview reflect a fundamental dialectical tension that is not likely to go away any time soon. As the American Transcendentalist Octavius Frothingham wrote:

"It can hardly be supposed that the present movement in the line of observation is the final one that henceforth we are to continue straight on till, by the path of physiology, we arrive at absolute truth; that idealism is dead and gone for ever, and materialism of a refined type holds the future in its hand. The triumphs of the scientific method in the natural world are wonderful. The law of evolution has its lap full of promise. But one who has studied at all the history of human thought; who has seen philosophies crowned and discrowned, sceptred and outcast; who has followed the changing fortunes of opposing schools, and witnessed the alternate victories and defeats that threatened, each in its turn, to decide the fate of philosophy, will be slow to believe that the final conflict has been fought, or is to be, for hundreds of years to come." (Frothingham, 1876, p. 205)

The real question, then, is arguably not whether the present phase of radical Materialism will end, but rather when it will end, and whether it will give way to an epoch of Immaterialism or one of Idealism. One great advantage we have relative to previous times is that we now have some limited understanding of intellectual history and the dynamics of changes in worldview. Armed with this knowledge we have, potentially, the ability to help direct our evolution to an Idealistic culture in a self-conscious way.

One principle means of effecting a transition to an Idealist culture is, of course, is through education, and especially in higher education. In place of the current radical Materialism taught in our colleges and universities, we need to make more place for the Idealist worldview (for more extended discussion of this subject, see Uebersax, 2013a). The traditional concept of liberal arts education, as opposed to the narrow view, currently the de facto prevailing philosophy, that higher education should concentrate on technical and vocational training, must be taken seriously. One of the simplest, best, and most cost-effective means to give a liberal higher education is by placing greater emphasis on reading classics. It is through reading classics that students become acquainted with the perennial philosophy and its central and enduring relevance to Western civilization. Not just Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Aeschylus and Thucydides (authors which no well educated person should neglect) but the great tradition of Idealism in English literature, Shakespeare, Milton, the metaphysical poets, Coleridge and Wordsworth, belong on the college modern curriculum. The scope of classics should include the works of Emerson, Thoreau, and other New England Transcendentalists, whose Idealist critique of modernism retains special significance today.

What is said here is true for college education generally – with respect to all majors and fields of studies. But it is all the more important in those fields in which the human mind and thought are of special importance; thus classics should be given even more prominence in disciplines like psychology, philosophy, history, and literature.

Inasmuch as Christianity is the inheritor, carrier, and living manifestation of the Idealist tradition in the modern world, the need to affirm liberal education and to reaffirm classics is all the greater for Christian colleges and universities. A serious re-examination of principles in this sector is required, along with the mustering of sufficient will, vision, and inspired confidence to oppose the current of Materialism that dominates higher education in America today.

## Notes

1. Theosophists of the 19th and 20th century used the term *perennial philosophy* to mean an elaborate metaphysical system characterized, for example, by many levels of reality, transmigration of souls, cyclical destructions and recreations of the cosmos, etc. Whatever the basis and merit of those theories, this is not what we mean. The essence of theosophical doctrines is that they are secret; the mark of the genuine perennial philosophy is precisely that it is commonly known. It is the folk religion common to humankind, universal in principles because it appeals in all times and places to the same human nature and religious instincts. One is more likely to find it reflected in the beliefs of a simple farmer or fisherman than in the speculations of a metaphysician.
2. For a further outline of essential features of the perennial philosophy, see Emerson's (1903) essay, 'Spiritual Laws.'
3. David Beardsley (2010) has supplied an excellent history of Idealism in the West.
4. It is noteworthy that both these historical episodes were associated with an influx of works by Plato, Aristotle, and Neoplatonists into Western Europe, effected by contact with Islamic culture (Middle Ages) and the fall of Byzantium and consequent diaspora of Greek-literate scholars (Renaissance).

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## Glossary

**asceticism.** In its extreme form: a rejection of the material world as evil or sinful, with a corresponding rejection of the human body and emotions; the body is seen as a tomb or a prison of the soul; 'flight from the world'; meditative and physical practices (fasting, 'mortification of the flesh') aimed at permanently detaching interest from bodily concerns. In milder form, spiritual and meditative practices aimed at giving one greater self-command.

**determinism.** The doctrine that events in the physical world, and also all human actions, thoughts, and choices, are determined by preceding physical states. This is the classic 'billiard balls' model of reality. There is no human free will. See **reductionism**.

**empiricism.** The theory that all knowledge is derived from sense-experience. A person's mind begins at birth as a *tabula rasa* (blank slate). All thoughts, beliefs and ideas are the results of or constructed from sense experiences writing upon this blank slate. There are no innate ideas. Two main figures associated with this view are the British philosophers John Locke and David Hume.

**hedonism.** The ethical theory that moral good and bad are defined only in terms of pleasure and pain. From the Greek word for pleasure, *hedone*. Typically (though there are exceptions) hedonism is concerned only with gross physical pleasures, and not higher pleasures like mental satisfaction at having performed a charitable act or difficult task.

**humanism.** 1. *Transcendental humanism.* A moral and social philosophy predicated on the belief that human beings have a spiritual as well as physical nature. Culture, social policy, laws, and institutions aim to advance the human condition morally, spiritually, intellectually, and physically. Notable examples include American **Transcendentalism** and the Renaissance humanism of, e.g., Marsilio Ficino and Pico della Mirandola. 2. *Secular humanism.* A materialist philosophy that sees, for example, the duty to help others as rooted in biological instinct and emotions (see **sentimentalism**); social progress involves improving the material status of human beings. The paradox of secular humanism is that to the extent that it denies a spiritual side to human nature, it implies a diminished view of human dignity.

**Idealism/idealism.** 1. *Platonic Idealism.* Objective, immaterial, transcendent realities exist. The material world also exists and reflects the eternal realities of the Ideal world. Human beings exist simultaneously in the material and the Ideal realm, bridging the gap. The material world is a training ground which assists in the development of our eternal souls. 2. *Subjective idealism.* See **psychism**.

**ideationalism.** In the writings of Russo-American sociologist Pitirim Sorokin, the antithesis of the materialistic worldview. The material world is either an illusion, or considered irremediably evil. Can be considered a synonym for **immaterialism**. Potentially also applicable to philosophies or political theories which place exaggerated

emphasis on technical abstractions — such as religious scholasticism, moralism, radical political ideologies. Not to be confused with idealism, which in Sorokin's theories balances and harmonizes materialism and immaterialism.

**immaterialism.** The theory that material things have no objective existence. What appears to be material reality is an illusion, a dream (see **psychism**). The polar opposite of materialism.

**materialism.** In philosophy, the theory that nothing exists except matter. Human consciousness is either directly caused by material events (e.g., brain states; **reductionism**), or perhaps is itself a subtle form of matter. There being no transcendent values, judgements of goodness or badness can be based only on material considerations like physical health, prosperity, and sensory pleasure.

**moralism.** Moralism, as opposed to morality, is the view that certain kinds of actions are unambiguously — always, unconditionally, and without exception — morally right or wrong. It seeks to produce moral behavior by teaching these rules, rather than by formulating and teaching the *principles* by which an individual may discover rightness or wrongness.

**naturalism.** In ethics, the view that the best way of life is that which accepts instincts and impulses at face value, without overlaying abstractions or moral principles upon ones experience. In the extreme case, an ethics of "if it feels good, do it." A popular view beginning in the 19th century. Often associated with atheism (e.g., Nietzsche).

**noesis.** A special faculty by which human beings may know by immediate apprehension, analogous to sight, certain mathematical, logical, and spiritual truths.

**phenomenalism.** The view that only conscious experience is real; see **psychism**.

**positivism (or logical positivism).** The philosophical view that whatever is true must be capable of objective demonstration or logical proof. Metaphysics and religion are, on this basis either meaningless or untrue. Often associated the French philosopher Auguste Comte.

**pragmatism.** In a broader sense, the view that truth or falseness should be determined by practical implications. Any belief that 'works' (i.e., produces positive practical benefits), can be taken as true. This implies **relativism** (for example, religion may be true for one person to whom it may increase happiness or productiveness, but untrue for another to whom it yields no practical benefits.) In ethics, the view that what is right or wrong is determined only by practical consequences of an action. See **utilitarianism**.

**psychism.** The doctrine that only sensory experience is real. There is no objective, enduring reality beneath sensory experience. Can easily lead to solipsism (the philosophical theory that nothing exists except ones own mind).

**rationalism** (or **scientific rationalism**). In philosophy the view that discursive reasoning (logic, ratiocination), is the sole foundation of certain knowledge. Other putative epistemic faculties like higher intuition, faith, and creative imagination do not produce valid knowledge. An important corollary is that all truth must be expressible in literal terms. Particularly antagonistic towards religion, dismissing faith and religious revelation as invalid.

**realism**. 1. *Platonic realism*. The theory that eternal Ideals (or "Forms", as they are sometimes called) exist, the most important of which being Ideals of Truth, Beauty, Goodness, and those associated with various virtues (e.g., Courage, Wisdom, Moderation, Justice, etc.), and that these are, in some sense, more real than anything else. 2. *realism (materialistic)*. The view that only matter has objective existence. (Note this is the complete opposite of Platonic realism.) 3. *realism (political)*. The doctrines of **pragmatism** and moral **relativism** carried into the realm of politics. The end justifies the means; 'might makes right'; sometimes called *Realpolitik*.

**reductionism**. The theory that human consciousness, will, and mental events are entirely reducible to physiology and brain states.

**relativism**. In ethics, the view that and morality can be determined only in relation to a particular situation, context, or culture. There are no absolute standards of right or wrong. Similarly, in epistemology, the view that knowledge and truth are situation-specific.

**sensationalism**. The philosophical view that only sensory experience is real; see **phenomenalism**.

**sentimentalism**. In ethics and politics, the view that instincts and feelings of compassion, empathy, etc. are the moral basis for charity, altruism, and social policy. Ultimately materialistic, denying any foundation of moral behavior based on higher, non-material values. See Babbitt (1908) for an penetrating critique into the dangers and limitations of both sentimentalism and science as a foundation for ethics and social policy.

**spiritualism**. More or less the same as **immaterialism**, but with somewhat more definite notions of what constitutes nonmaterial reality (God, angels, souls, etc.).

**transcendentalism**. 1. *American or New England Transcendentalism*. Effectively, the same as Platonic Idealism. Eternal Ideals (e.g., Truth, Beauty, Justice, Goodness) exist and are the basis for human ethics. The material world exists, and has even greater importance than materialists would give it because it reflects divine meanings and purposes. Human beings are incarnated divinities. Understanding our Ideal or eternal nature produces a transformation of our experience of and manner of living in the material world. Human beings have a higher as well as lower Reason; inspiration, revelation, higher intuition, and imagination are valid and important sources of gaining knowledge. There is an affinity and complementarity between Nature and human nature.

Nature teaches and helps us, while human beings bring meaning and moral order to the material world. 2. *German Transcendentalism*. A set of philosophical doctrines developed by Immanuel Kant and followers, based on the premise that properties or structures of our mind precondition experience. In this more restricted and technical sense of the term, "transcendental" refers to these preconditioning factors, which are not themselves directly observed, but the effects of which may be inferred from the structure of experience.

**utilitarianism**. Essentially the same view as pragmatism, but more typically considered at the aggregate social level. Social policy should follow the rule of 'the greatest good to the greatest number', where good is determined by material values (health, prosperity, security, etc.). Associated with the British philosopher Jeremy Bentham.

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