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Variety of early modern materialism

A conference at the Gutenberg University of Mainz

Maurizio Morini

An international conference on *Variety of early modern materialism* has been held from 19th to 21st of June at the Gutenberg University of Mainz. According to the organizers, the aim of the conference has been to remedy the situation that sees the presence of materialism understudied, despite the fact that it was widely discussed by many authors during this period. The conference highlighted the differences between the various types of materialism that emerged in the modern era on a national basis. English materialism has been presented from Patricia Springborg, Bolzano (*Hobbes and materialism*), Ann Thomson, European Institute of Florence (*Epicureans and mortalists in late seventeenth-century*), Joshua Wood, Amherst College Massachussets (*Locke on Activity in Matter*), Stewart Duncan, Florida, (*Margaret Cavendish, Materialism, and the Soul*); French materialism has been discussed by Sophie Audidière, Dijon (*Criticism of Metaphysics and Consitution of the Subject: Materialist Effects in the Philosophy of Helvétius and d'Holbach*); Charles T. Wolfe, Ghent (*Body, Soul and Brain in Diderot's Materialism*); Timo Kaitaro, Helsinki (*Eighteenth-century French Materialism Clockwise and Anticlockwise*); Catherine Wilson, York (*Buffon On Nature; Materialism without Metaphysics and its Influence on Hume*). For the German materialism papers have been presented by Paola Rumore, Turin (*Mechanicism and Materialism in Early Modern German Philosophy*); Corey W. Dyck, Western Ontario (*The Threat of Materialism in Early German Philosophy*), Falk Wunderlich, Mainz (*From August Wilhelm Hupel to Karl von Knoblauch. German Materialism in the 1770s and 1780s*); Eric Watkins, San Diego (*Kant on Materialism*). The conference has been enriched by the contribution of Udo Thiel, Graz (*Materialism and Subjectivity in Eigtheenth Century Philosophy*).

It is clear, as emerged from the discussion, that the modern history of materialism does not coincide only with the national materialisms but it is deeply connected with other doctrines. There are several forms of materialism: cosmological, which refers to matter as the ultimate reality of the world; psychological, which focuses the attention on the relationship between body and soul; theological, which

is linked to protestantism; dialectical, which appeared only after the mid-nineteenth century. In addition to this, it is important to distinguish a rich from a poor concept of matter: the former understands matter as a first principle of reality, the latter as a simple and sensitive raw material. The concept of matter had a different value according to the metaphysical model in which it grew and developed. In other words it appears that the conflict were basically among the thought's framework in which materialism was contained. An astonishing example was spinozism which was early associated with materialism and considered the ghost that went through Europe.

Arguably, it was Hobbes that introduced materialism in the philosophical debate of modern times. As Patricia Stolborg pointed out, Hobbes adopted the concept of "matter in motion" as the first principle of his physics and this had enormous consequences for all other aspects of his system, especially his metaphysics and theology. From the axiom of "matter in motion" as the rule of the universe radical consequences followed for Hobbes's ontology, epistemology, and psychology, which may be summed up as the theory of "corporealism". Early in *Leviathan* Hobbes had maintained that the term "incorporeal substance" is a contradiction in terms. Stonborg argued that what is both most radical and innovative about Hobbes formulation is the paradox, on the one hand, of the "deception of sense" underpinned by a materialist ontology and, on the other, its resolution by means of ratiocination. Hobbes's physics set out the fundamental principle of atomism with its corollary: matter at rest remains at rest unless acted upon and that matter in motion remains in motion unless impeded. It is from this axiom, continued Stolberg, that Hobbes moved to a sensitive psychology in which the mind is activated by the friction exerted on the senses by matter from the external world. But it is only in *De Corpore* that Hobbes, for the first time, made the connection between his materialist ontology and his sceptical epistemology. The principle of matter in motion in the physiology of the human brain is posited as the *cause* of *phantasmata* which, so far from being exact copies of the objects perceived, are representations indistinguishable from the phantasms of dreams.

A special place in the history of materialism is that of Locke with his doctrine of *materia cogitans*. In his paper, Joshua Wood has underlined that if thinking matter doctrine is well known to have been considered by Locke, the disagreement concerns what the admission of the

possibility of thinking matter means for Locke's ontology, especially with respect to how the english philosopher viewed the relationship between substances (or individual things) and their properties. In this sense Wood tried to explain how different scholars answered the specific question of superadding a property to something. This controversy arose on the ground that Locke's position seems to swing: sometimes he writes as though he were committed to mechanicism, other seems to distance himself from it. In this problem Wood pointed out that both positions are compatible, namely the fact that Locke's attribution of active power to matter do not entail a rejection of mechanicism.

Sophie Audidière exposed how deep was in France the debate on the Helvetius's works, particularly on *De l'esprit*, the book with which Helvétius wished to enter the circle of philosophers of the eighteenth century and which was read and commented by at least Rousseau, Diderot, and Voltaire so that many interpretations of Helvétius' philosophy lay on a second hand reading relying on reformulation of Helvétius made by these authors. Her paper focused the attention on the relation between Helvetius and Rousseau. In general, said Audidière, Rousseau's statements about his reading of Helvétius are often more strategic than truthful, like when he says that he threw to the fire his refutation of a dangerous as soon as it appeared, when he saw his author persecuted, and understates that this work is *De l'esprit* — while he also says elsewhere that he did not read *De l'esprit* before november 1758, by that time Helvétius already had withdrawn his writing twice.

In Germany, as Paola Rumore explained in her paper, the thesis of a *materia cogitans* was used by the pietists within a theological scheme in which God, through his absolute omnipotence, can confer the power of thinking to matter. In a famous controversy with Wolff, the lutheran theologian Budde accused the philosopher of spinozism and atheism, arguing that God can give the quality of thought to matter. It appeared in this case that materialism was regarded as the appendix of another metaphysical belief. Wolff criticized the philosophical premises of the accusation made by Budde with the argument that essences cannot be changed: Wolff claimed that materialism implied an error or a false notion about the nature of matter. This position paved the way, continued Rumore, to the Wolff's thesis according to which materialism, before a danger to religion as the theologians meant, was absurd to the reason. In this regard it should be noted that in this period the

very first official definition of materialism appeared in Germany. The more general point, taken from a famous work of Feuerbach, is that materialism in Germany, unlike the English and the French one, has religious origins thanks to the doctrine of Luther. In this way it has its own autonomy with respect to other forms of materialisms.

Materialism has been discussed in relation to the question of the soul and the consequent problem of personal identity. This issue was the subject of a paper by Udo Thiel who showed how the theme of personal subjectivity is closely linked to the question of the concept of matter.

All papers will be available in a forthcoming publication.

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