

**A GENERAL VIEW OF
THE MATERIALISTIC
PHILOSOPHY**

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A general view of the materialistic philosophy by James Hibbert

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JAMES HIBBERT

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A General View of the Materialistic Philosophy.

CHAPTER I

Materialistic Philosophy amongst the Ancients; Rise and Spread of Christianity and Ecclesiasticism; Mohammedanism and Arabian Philosophy and Science; The Mediaeval Period and Scholasticism.

The instructive series of Lectures delivered in many of our Towns under the auspices of the Gilchrist Trustees, embodying the most recent results and observations in the domain of the natural and physical sciences, have probably caused this reflection in the minds of some who followed their course—To what do they tend? What is likely to be their broad and general effect upon the popular mind? Taken together with the attention which is now occupied by the literature of Materialism; the dissemination of this literature far and wide by means of our Free Public Libraries—representing, as it is one of the functions of these to do, all intellectual phases of human inquiry—and the consequent spread and growth of Materialistic opinions amongst all intelligent ranks and classes of society,—their latent tendency insensibly suggests to the popular mind a Materialistic view of Nature, and of Man's place in Nature: It is true they have not been characterised by the freedom of speculation displayed by Professor Tyndall in his well-known Address, delivered at Belfast in the year 1874, as President of the British Association for the Advancement of Science—speculative conclusions have been barely hinted at in these lectures. Truth, however, and wherever Truth led, has been professedly their ultimate object. Pilate's sceptical question naturally arises here: What is Truth? The inquiry is a very ancient one. The purpose of the following pages, undertaken solely for the general reader, is to suggest that the methods and canons of what is commonly known as Materialism are not to be hastily accepted as the key of that reasoned thought to which we give the name of Philosophy.

To this end the editor has collected from the most recent authorities, as Lange, Lewes, Tennemann, Draper, &c., what he trusts may be a serviceable General View, mainly expository, and as brief as he could well make it, of the various theories that have been started from the time of Democritus, upwards of four centuries before the Christian era, in the course of European Materialism and the Philosophy connected therewith. For Materialism may be regarded as one thing, and Philosophy as another. By Materialism is meant those conclusions respecting Being which rest upon external observation, experiment, and rigid induction alone. By Philosophy, that free play of the recipient and reflective faculty, both within and upon itself as well as upon external nature, whose last and highest reaches elude the scientific analysis, and lie wholly in the realm of Intuition.

Materialism is as old as Philosophy. The cities of Asia Minor, and the Doric colonica of Sicily and Magna Græcia, were distinguished for prosperity and mental cultivation in those centuries that immediately precede the brilliant period of Hellenic intellectual life. In the higher ranks of society in these places, from men, wealthy, influential, and with a wide experience gained from travel, Philosophy arose. Thales, Anaximander, Xenophanes, Heraclitus, Pythagoras, Anaximenes, and Empedocles are amongst the earliest names we meet. We shall see, however, in the course of our inquiry that the modern Atomic theory of Materialism has been gradually developed from the Atomism of Democritus. We may consider the following propositions as the essential foundations of Democritus's metaphysic. (1). Out of nothing arises nothing: nothing that is can be destroyed. All change is only combination and separation of atoms. (2). Nothing happens by chance, but everything through a cause, and of necessity. (3). Nothing exists but atoms and empty space; all else is only opinion. (4). The atoms are infinite in number, and of endless variety and form. In the eternal fall through infinite space, the greater, which fall more quickly, strike against the lesser, and lateral movements and vortices that thus arise are the commencement of the formation of worlds. Innumerable worlds are formed and perish successively and simultaneously (5). The variety of all things is a consequence of the variety of their atoms in number, size, figure, and arrangement: there

is no qualitative difference of atoms. They have no "internal conditions," and act on each other only by pressure and collision. (6). The Soul consists of fine, smooth, round atoms, like those of fire. These atoms are the most mobile, and, by their motion, which permeates the whole body, the phenomena of life are produced.

Of all the great principles underlying the Materialism of our own time, one only is wanting in Democritus; and that is the abolition of all teleology, or doctrine of final cause, by the principle, so unreservedly set forth by Ernst Haeckel, of the development of the *purposeful* from the *unpurposeful*. What Lamarck and Charles Darwin, relying altogether upon a wide extent of positive knowledge, have achieved for our generations, Empedocles offered to the thinkers of antiquity—the simple and penetrating doctrine, that adaptations preponderate in nature just because their qualities enable them to select, combine, and perpetuate themselves, while what fails of adaption naturally perishes. But Empedocles of Agrigentum cannot be described as a Materialist, because with him force and matter are fundamentally separated. The forces are independent of matter. These forces are two, Love and Hate, or Attraction and Repulsion; and accordingly as each preponderates, so are the circumstances of terrestrial life fortunate or unfortunate. In common with many Pythagoreans he laid great stress on the existence of *Dæmons* (of intermediate order and power between Gods and men) some of whom had been expelled from the Gods in consequence of their crimes, and were condemned to pass a long period of exile, as souls embodied in various men or animals. He laments the misery of the human soul in himself as well as in others, condemned to this long period of expiatory degradation before it could regain the society of the Gods. None of the remaining fragments of Empedocles are more remarkable than a few in which he deploras the impossibility of finding out any great or comprehensive truth, amidst the distraction and suffering of our short life. About the name of Empedocles, as about that of Democritus, there has gathered a mass of myth and legend, much of which is due to a mastery of natural forces, which seemed very wonderful to his contemporaries. He was, in fact, a man of universal endowments and acquirements. Expounder of nature, rhetorician, poet, physician, prophet, magician,—his earnest demeanour, his fiery eloquence, the fame of his ceremonies, imposed upon the people, who

revered him as a God. It is to be noticed that his efforts were directed to the amelioration of the condition of the common people. He died in the Peloponnesus, conjecturally in exile.

Materialistic modes of thought dominated the philosophy of the fifth century before Christ. It was about the middle of this century that a spiritual movement was inaugurated by Socrates, which, after undergoing various modifications in the systems of Plato and Aristotle, influences the succeeding century. Aristocles, the son of Ariston and Perictione, surnamed Plato, as we are told, from the breadth of his forehead or of his shoulders, was born at Egina, 427 B.C. His family was noble, in the sense attached to that word at Athens. It was about the twentieth year of his age when his acquaintance with Socrates began. He served actively in the military duties that were required from the Athenian youth. The treatment of Socrates by the Government so revolted him that he not only withdrew from public functions, but in his writings concealed his own personality. In no one of the "Dialogues" does Plato address us in his own person. These Dialogues were composed during the fifty-one years of his life after the death of Socrates. They are professedly addressed only to select and prepared minds. The hatred that Socrates had experienced in consequence of his extreme publicity of conversation and speech, would appear to have determined Plato's mind against the risk of encountering the fate of his master. He therefore propounds his views behind the veil of discussions, under the names of his associates. The "Apology" and the "Crito" are, perhaps, the only dialogues that give the real words of Socrates himself.

It is difficult to give any adequate description of the vastness and profundity that distinguish the writings of Plato — of a mind that conceived the human spirit to retain, in a present state of lost perfection, reminiscences of its former state and of its former knowledge. To

"Unsphere
The spirit of Plato, to unfold
What worlds, or what vast regions held
The immortal mind, that hath forsook
Her mansion in this fleshly nook,"*

transcends the reach, and is beyond the scope of our task. Plato's attempts to combine Poetry and Reason resulted in his doctrine of Ideas. He maintains that the existence of

* "H. Passmore."

things, underlying all their appearances, rests (and in this he is the intellectual progenitor of Berkeley and Kant) finally in their essential, their inner nature, their Idea; which may be likened to that which existed in the mind of God, prior to the creation of the worlds. That alone is constant, unchangeable, unconditioned.

These Platonic Ideas, because of their deep opposition to the philosophy which springs from experience, are for us of especial importance. They possess universal significance; they rest on the broad basis of our whole psychological organisation. Both methods are necessary stages of human thought, and although Materialism may, as compared with Platonism, always maintain its special position, yet it may be that the whole picture of the world which this latter affords stands nearer to the unknown truth: has deeper relations to the life of the emotions, to art, to the moral functions of mankind.

It is admissible that these Platonic conceptions have been, down to our own days, only hindrances and will-o'-the-wisps for the mastery of phenomena by the understanding, and by sure methodical science. But, just as the human spirit will never be content with the world of understanding which an exact empiricism might afford us, so the Platonic philosophy will ever remain the first and most elevated type of the exaltation of the spirit above the unsatisfying patchwork of knowledge. And we are as much justified in this exaltation on the wings of imaginative speculation, as in the exercise of any function of our mental and physical faculties. Only we must, once for all, clearly comprehend that we have here not Knowledge but Poesy, even though this poesy may, perhaps, symbolically represent to us a real aspect of the essential nature of all things, the immediate apprehension of which is denied to our understanding.

Aristotle, Plato's successor, was dissatisfied with the doctrine of Ideas, and, having mastered the whole philosophical and historical knowledge of his age, addressed himself to the exploration of Nature. His endeavour to collect into a harmonious system the whole sum of the learning and positive knowledge of his time was a gigantic intellectual achievement, the influence of which was predominant even in the remote mediæval period. The difference between these two great men is striking. Goethe calls Aristotle a man of an architectural genius, who seeks a solid basis for his building, but looks no further; who describes an immense circuit for its