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An Introduction Materialist Theory of Mind in Western Philosophy

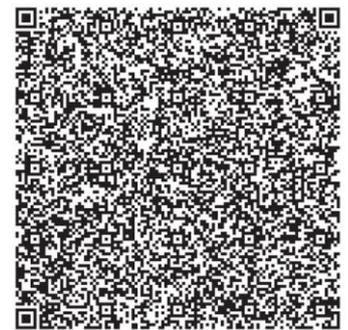
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Abstract:

Materialism is the belief about what really exists. Everything that exists is material or physical. The materialistic philosophers attempt to establish that the whole universe is made of matter. Matter is the only ultimate constituent of the world. They believe that the human body is created by the four elements - earth, water, fire and air. And mind is nothing more than body. The mind can be known only through the various activities of the brain according to them. Materialist advocates that matter are real and matter causes the mind. Hence mental properties are identical with physical. Some contemporary philosophers have argued that minds do not exist at all and only the physical things exist. For them, everything, which happens in the mind, is the result of the events in the body. Our mental states like pains, beliefs, desires, etc. are fundamentally physical states. They deny that the mind exists independently. In this article, I show how materialist philosophers explain the mind. I first discuss the materialist views of soul or mind in ancient Greek philosophy. Various thinkers like Thales, Anaximenes, Anaxagoras, Epicurus, Democritus, and many others supported materialistic theory of soul or mind. Heraclitus and Xenophanes have addressed the soul in materialism. I also cover some modern philosophers who have discussed the materialist soul.

Keyword: Soul, Mind, Body, dualism, Materialism.

Generally, we know that Western philosophy deals with finding out certain truths about reality, mind, and matter. There are many branches in Western philosophy. Among them, the philosophy of mind is a significant area. The philosophy of mind studies the existence, nature, and connection between the mind and the body. The problem of the mind-body relation is a paradigm issue of the philosophy of mind (Kim, 2011). These problems have the greatest philosophical ramifications, influencing areas such as moral philosophy, religion, and metaphysics (Searle, 2004). Here, an important question arises: What is 'mind' in Western philosophy? How do Western philosophers describe the nature of mind? Is the mind related to the body? If it is related, how is it related? If it is not related, what is its status? Another important question arises: Is the mind totally independent of the body? In this article, I will explain 'what is mind' and 'what is the nature of the mind' according to Western philosophers. Firstly, it can be said that it is not easy to explain what the mind is. Over a long period, the term 'mind' has been explained by many philosophers in various ways and many great philosophers of different ages have tried to find satisfactory solutions to these problems. In order to answer these questions, different kinds of theories have been developed, such as dualism, monism, pluralism, and materialism. I want to discuss materialist theories in short detail. According to some, minds are spiritual entities that differ from bodies: the mind enters at birth and departs at death. Others hold that the mind is not a spiritual entity; rather, the mind arises when the body is arranged in a specific way—otherwise, it is not present. Hence, they hold that the mind is actually a physical entity; minds are just brains (Churchland, 1988). According to Dr. Kidzu T. Oweh, "The mind, as we conceived it is that aspect of the human being that gives him/her the ability to be conscious of things. That is, it involves the application of our empirical perceptive power where all that matters in experience or sense perception is evoked to work. When we think of it again from the point of view of intelligence, thought and memory, we may mean the ability of its power to cognitively and intuitively eclipse what is given out there in reality for our understanding" (Oweh, 2021). He says the mind may be defined as that aspect of being. Ability of perception, imagination, thought, intelligence, emotion, memory, identity and action are accepted by the mind. The different ideas about the mind



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include intellect or reason, thinking substance, attribute of God which is thought, soul or spirit, understanding, judgment, reason, self-consciousness, universal knowledge, totality of mental processes, and principle of purposeful behaviors, among others. Granted this brief definition of what the idea 'mind' refers to, we shall see how the ancient Greeks conceive it and what they mean when they speak of mind.

Regarding the division of mind, there are two standpoints—dualistic and monistic. Dualism and monism are the two central schools of thought which deal with the problem of mind. Monism is the view that there is only one major substance which is mind. There are two types of monism—one is materialistic monism and another is idealistic monism. Materialistic monism is closely related to physicalism and idealistic monism to mental monism. According to materialistic monism, the mind is nothing but the matter. Matter is the essential substance of nature. Thales, Anaximenes, Anaxagoras, Epicurus, Democritus, and many others supported materialistic philosophy in early Greek thought. It is also accepted by John Locke, J. J. Smart, D. Armstrong, Thomas Hobbes and Gilbert Ryle in the modern period. However, according to idealistic monism, the mind is all that exists and that the external world is mental either in itself, or an illusion created by the mind. Dualism holds that the mind and the body are two different and independent substances. The mental properties are quite different from the physical properties. Dualistic philosophy is advocated by Pythagoras and Plato in Greek philosophy. But it is great success in modern time by Descartes' philosophy. Some Western philosophers found a close relation between the mind and the soul. Some, of course, mentioned that the mind is identical with the soul (Oweh, 2021).

Materialistic view of mind

Materialism is a theory of mind which claims that mental phenomena are reducible to physical phenomena (Kim, 2011). The trends of materialist philosophy started from the early Greek period. Materialist philosophers attempted to establish that the whole universe is made of matter; matter is the only ultimate constituent of the world (Bostock, 2006). They believed that the human body is created by the four elements—earth, water, fire, and air—and that the mind is nothing more than the body. According to them, the mind can be known only through the various activities of the brain. Materialists advocate that matter is real and that matter causes the mind. Hence, mental properties are identical with physical properties (Churchland, 1988). Some contemporary philosophers have argued that minds do not exist at all and only physical things exist. For them, everything that happens in the mind is the result of events in the body. Our mental states like pains, beliefs, and desires are fundamentally physical states; they deny that the mind exists independently (Smart, 1959).

Some pre-Socratic philosophers did not suggest that God is the First Principle or Cause. Instead, they claimed that the first cause is material (Kirk, Raven, & Schofield, 1983). In the early Greek period, Thales was the first philosopher who claimed that the universe is made of water because water admits of being vaporous, liquid, and solid. According to him, "When water is heated it assumes the form of vapour; when chilled it becomes solid and when it is allowed in its natural course then it is a flowing stream" (as cited in Bostock, 2006, p. 12). Therefore, water is the ultimate constituent of all possible states of being—solid, liquid, and vaporous. In Thales' philosophy, we find two important concepts: first, that water is the first principle of the universe; second, that the soul is the principle of motion. Thales seems to have thought that the soul is the principle of movement. Our intellectual minds are rational accounts of the principle of things. According to Aristotle, "Thales, too, to judge from what is recorded about him, seems to have held the soul to be a motive force, since he said that the magnet has a soul in it because it moves the iron... Certain thinkers say that the soul is intermingled in the whole universe, and it is perhaps for this reason that Thales came to the opinion that all things are full of god" (Aristotle, as cited in Barnes, 2000, p. 43).

Like Thales, Anaximenes accepted the materialistic view of mind. The mind is what makes us rational and aware of reality. Greek philosophy views the mind as a gift from the gods and as part of Greek mythology. It is the prime principle of life that gives light to the body. Anaximenes, among the pre-Socratic philosophers, seems to suggest the idea of mind originated from air. For Anaximenes, air is the source of the whole universe and the source of all creation (Kirk, Raven, & Schofield, 1983). Thus, Anaximenes identified something invaluable as soul, which he thought to be like the basic element air that binds us together. Anaximenes is quoted as saying, "just as our soul, being air, holds us together, so do breath and air encompass the world" (Freeman, 1949, p. 28). Hence, the soul is a capacitor that gives strength to the human body. The soul or mind is a basic substance from which we are propelled, apart from what we think of the universe to consist of. Their ability to think about the element that makes up the universe confirms that a similar element exists. This is the basis for comparing the basic element. Our actions are justified by our reason, which proceeds from an unseen inner force called thought, and our thoughts proceed from a soul or mind (Barnes, 1987). In early Greek period Heraclitus was the most famous and last Ionian philosopher. He was thirty years



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younger than Xenophanes. Xenophanes maintained that the basic element was neither air nor water, but earth. He says that all things are from earth and in earth all things end. And sometime he links water with earth as the original source of things. He says that the human body and mind are not permanent. Only God alone is supreme and permanent. He maintained that God is one eternal being in whole universe. All things includes within Him. He is the absolute mind and thought. He believed that the earth stretches beneath us to infinity. But he maintained that the sun was new every day. Heraclitus agrees with Xenophanes' idea. And he says that the sun was constrained by a cosmic principle of reparation. Heraclitus believes a doctrine of universal flux. According to this theory everything is in motion and nothing stays still; the world is changeable. All is flow and becoming. Nobody can step into the same river twice. When we enter the river again, we cannot stand on the same water because the water has changed between those two moments. Hence no man can remain the same for even two moments. Our blood stream changes and our mental phenomena also changes according to Heraclitus. Heraclitus states, "A raging fire, even more than a flowing stream, is a paradigm of constant change, ever consuming, ever refuelled" (Heraclitus, as cited in Freeman, 1949, p. 28). The world is an ever fire. He says all things come from fire and return to fire. And the fiery world not made by Gods or men, but it is originated by logos. Heraclitus seems the soul and the logos are correlated in. According to Heraclitus, "The soul is a part of the omnipresent logos and fire, and the essence of the individual soul is reflected in its ability to get closer to logos" (Heraclitus, as cited in Kirk & Raven, 1957, p. 187). And the mind and harmonization of all life composed by logos.

According to Heraclitus, the soul is part of the logos. The essence of the individual soul lies in its ability to connect with the logos. And sometimes he says the soul is a part of all-prevailing fire. Heraclitus does not strongly claim that between the soul and the body are opposite. Heraclitus explains, "The soul, that is fire, is incessantly exchanged for and transformed into lower elements. To soul it is death to become water, to water death to become earth, but from earth water is born, and from water soul" (Heraclitus, as cited in Burnet, 1920, p. 150). Although the soul exists separately from the body, it is not immune to change. The soul does not have a permanent identity. But it keeps dying and becoming alive again even during one's lifetime.

After Heraclitus, Anaxagoras identified mind as the force of Nous that caused and formed the planets from a primitive mass. The mind has control over all condensation and separation. Anaxagoras says that nous or spirit is the original reality that caused the planets to motion. It is the same as mind. Moreover, the mind oversees the whole universe. Anaxagoras held that "Nous ..., set universe in motion and then began to govern it. Matter is eternal and uncreated. The Material universe is composed of particles and everything in it is a combination of particles of all other things and is related to all other thing ... the only exception of this network of interconnection is Nous. Nous is separate from the material Universe and superior to it ... is infinite and self-ruled, mixed with nothing, but is alone, itself by itself Present everywhere ... power over all things ... power over the whole revolution ... it began to revolve at the start ... without being of the universe ... without being its creator, Nous set it in motion and began to govern it. (Anaxagoras, as cited in Guthrie, 1965, p. 285)

Democritus developed a materialistic view of the mind. He also had ideas about the soul, introducing an atomic perspective on it. Democritus linked the soul or mind to the random collisions of tiny particles. Like everything else in the universe, the soul came about through the chance collisions and combinations of these particles. He believed that the mortal soul consists of particles that dissolve back into a state of collision and randomness when the body dies, just as it was formed when it came together (Berryman, 2016; Graham, 2019). He recognized a distinction between body and soul, asserting that the study of the mind is less significant than the body but still superior to it. Moreover, according to him, the whole universe is deterministic and materialistic, and things come to be by chance and go out of existence the same way. Man is bound to pursue happiness, the greatest of which shall give the right disposition of mind or soul. External pleasure does not count as happiness of the mind or soul. The soul is the attractive point of the divine where cheerfulness and well-being guarantee unmitigated peace of mind according to him (Berryman, 2016). He admits the existence of nothing save atoms and empty space. He conceived the soul to consist of fine, smooth, round atoms, which are also atoms of fire (Graham, 2019).

Though the materialistic philosophy was started in early Greek philosophy, it saw more development in the modern period. Hobbes is one of the most famous classical philosophers who supported the materialistic view on mind. According to Hobbes, everything is some kind of material object, and the science of mechanics is sufficient to explain and predict the behaviour of everything, living and non-living (Hobbes, 1651/2017). He does not deny the existence of mental phenomena. Rather, he appears to be reducing them to motion and thus material phenomena. Hobbes is not only a materialist but also a mechanist. He maintained that the notion of an incorporeal substance is a



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contradiction in terms (Hobbes, 1651/2017). He also says that concepts and apparitions are nothing really but motions in some internal substance in the head. According to Hobbes, “Sense, in all cases, is nothing else but original fancy, caused, as I have said, by the pressure, that is by the motion, of external things upon our eyes, ear, and other organs thereunto ordained” (Hobbes, 1651/2017, p. 83). So sense is the motion of appearance, and it is also motion itself. But if sense is appearance, then there are not only material objects in motion or at rest, but also appearances that are quite different. Hence, Hobbes faces the central problem of how to explain those appearances which seem to be purely mental, such as hallucinations, mental images, and other phenomena such as sensations, emotions, and thoughts (Kenny, 2012). When we explain Hobbes’ theory, we find that the theory is self-contradictory. He says that all internal wonders are actually material. The materialist appears to claim that all non-physical wonders are material. So, Hobbes cannot approach internal wonders from a strictly materialistic viewpoint. The materialistic view on mind is more clearly discussed in the identity theory (Smart, 1959).

Mind-Body identity theory is regarded as a version of materialism. J.J.C. Smart and Armstrong are the modern proponents of this theory. According to this theory, mind or mental states are identical with certain neural states. So, this theory claims that thinking a thought or feeling an itch is exactly the same thing as certain neurons firing, and having a belief is the same thing as certain neural connections existing. Any particular type of mental state is a particular type of brain state. Smart (1959) says that sensation is nothing over and above brain processes; it is not correlated, but identical. He argues that the mind and the brain are identical. However, a question arises: with what aspect of the brain are the mind and brain identical? The brain can be understood in two different ways: the stimulus aspect and the response aspect. According to Smart (1959), the mind is to be identified with the stimulus aspect of the brain, or whenever there is a ‘mental state’ there is a brain state.

Another version of identity is proposed by Armstrong (1968). According to him, the identification of mind and brain should be served from the side of the response aspect of the brain. He explains that the concept of mental state is primarily explained in terms of “the state of a person apt for bringing about a certain sort of behaviour” (Armstrong, 1968, p. 82). That means mental phenomena are the states of a person apt for bringing about a certain sort of behaviour. Armstrong (1968) says, “By saying only that mental states are states apt for bringing about behaviour we allow for some mental states being actual occurrences, even although they result in no behaviour” (p. 83). Behaviour has an inner cause. Mind may be found in the inner cause. Some kind of state as an inner principle is something different from behaviour, which is an effect of that state. But a state may not be something actual; it may be a process or an event. It is the efficient cause of behaviour. This state as an inner principle of behaviour is the psycho-chemical state of the brain, or a response state of the brain. Armstrong (1968) says that the mind is causally responsive to stimulus. According to him, mind or mental process is nothing but a brain state which can stimulate responses.

Finally it has been said that materialism provides a strong way to understand the mind by connecting mental states to physical processes. Its connection to scientific inquiry has made it a leading theory in the philosophy of mind, but it faces challenges. Issues like consciousness and debates about free will present critiques that push our understanding. But it is clear that that Materialism claims the sole existence of matter as substance or principle and that everything else, including mentality, can be described in terms of physical mechanisms. In the philosophy of mind, materialism is the view that we can explain the mind through physical processes in the brain. Descriptions of everything that exists can be expressed through physical laws and processes. Our thoughts, feelings, and perceptions are ultimately physical processes occurring in the brain. Materialism is a multifaceted and intricate philosophical stance that has been the focus of debate in the philosophy of mind.

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