

BOOK REVIEW

Terry Eagleton, *Materialism*. Yale University Press, 2017, pp.192.

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Significance of matter, possibility of philosophy and life of embodied creatures are the key themes discussed in *Materialism*. The book aims to reveal the theoretical connections between Friedrich Nietzsche, Karl Marx, Ludwig Wittgenstein and their ideas on materialistic outlook on society and language. The first chapter discusses various materialisms, of which somatic materialism depicts the approaches of Marx, Nietzsche and Wittgenstein. Somatic materialism exposes the collective experience of embodiment as disclosed in reality of agency and dependency equation fashioning our perception of the world. Recognizing the socio-political ramifications of metaphysical principles, Eagleton employs a perceived defense on tradition and human nature making a consequential association with metaphysics.

Anti-philosophy views philosophy as a restorative practice rather than theoretical supposition. Marx and Nietzsche, within this context, established an argumentative stance on philosophy as *ad hoc* elaborations with the pretext of *a priori* expressions. Wittgenstein, however, discards classical texts and philosophers as waste of time. All three philosophers think that philosophy has “an autonomous sphere of its own” but maintains “its role in a broader material history.” While there are notable differences in these philosophers’ materialistic conception of society, there are shared suppositions as in the case of Nietzsche’s idea of *übermensch* as boundless effect of history and Marx’s view on communism as finality. Communism envisages surmounting capitalism and Overman is intended to prevail over the “Last Man.” Both these ideas discard conceptual notions of equality holding knowledge as significantly realistic based on material things. Falsity of consciousness troubles humanity and supposed altruism and humanitarianism veils ruthless realities. The necessity of a dialectical process that could culminate on a progressive end is acknowledged by both thinkers.

Marx’s political point of view incorporates a vision where human beings realize each other’s potential for collective good. Nietzsche, however, acknowledges the materialistic and

disparaging quality of humans who remove bodies out of history. Eagleton perceives that Marx would have repealed Nietzsche's politics as "cosmic capitalism" because he argued for inclusive human activities that challenge exploitation and alienation. He finds repose on Aquinas for his somatic and epistemological materialism. Aquinas envisions human beings as dynamic entities who need no spiritualizing or idealistic dualism. His position "takes seriously what is most palpable about men and women—their animality, their practical activity, and corporeal constitution."

Human beings are represented minds and minded bodies. Body and mind are distinct yet entangled without any pecking order or dominance of one over the other. Such a stance is contrary to naturalist notion of exclusivity of body. Naturalists believed that bodies are interleaved into the regulations of culture and politics. Eagleton finds universalists, neo-Stalinists and anti-essentialists "sufficiently scandalous." The place of body in the world is a complicated course between bodiless psyche of rationalism and accessible wit of empiricism. Human beings cannot escape biological needs and has to administer bodily feelings and desires. These desires are not passive but "are constitutive features of human practice, modes of engagement with the world." *Materialism* argues for "the otherness and integrity of the world" over against "the postmodern narcissism that sees nothing but reflections of human culture wherever it looks." Freud's deviant body is "always overshadowed by a residue that resists articulation." However, it is also a medium for sappy rustic "unalienated labour." Bringing together un-Freudian wistfulness and un-Freudian utopianism, within capitalism, material world "is no longer a humanized terrain on which men and women move easily and spontaneously." From a literary point of view, the nostalgic artlessness allows "to restore to language something of the sensuous fullness that abstraction and utility have stripped from it."

The book "stretches all the way from the mind-body problem to the question of whether the state exists primarily to defend private property." Contemporary postmodern orthodoxy "sees nothing but reflections of human culture wherever it looks" to configure an autonomous disembodied human being devoid of material environment and inheritance. Rather than putting up "cultural constructedness," Eagleton acknowledges human beings as present in an intricate and altering relationship with nature. Therefore, he is cautious of reductive materialism, idealist

humanism and mechanical materialism. He maintains that: “Matter may be alive, but it is not alive in the sense that human beings are. It cannot despair, embezzle, murder or get married.” The stance that material nature precedes culture is ethical: “In the face of hubristic humanism, [humanism] insists on our solidarity with the commonplace stuff of the world, thus cultivating the virtue of humility. Dismayed by the fantasy that human beings are wholly self-determining, it recalls us to our dependence on our surroundings and on each other.” While socialism attempts to set free human beings from the shackles of sensory powers, capitalism divides the world into abstract commodities and demand for labor. Parallel to Marx, Eagleton accounts that our physical constitution and practical dealings with nature, our labor, is an epistemological category, a way to comprehend the world. We can offer a powerful basis for language and meaning different from the (poststructuralist) interplay of signifiers. Language and meaning are resilient but anchored within the boundaries of socio-cultural practices limiting our existence. Various forms of life, death, violence and sexuality, are configured through “language games” altered (alterable) with fresh forms of meanings. However, philosophy places alterity into discourses that would otherwise coalesce as natural and permanent.

Materialism is perceptive, ingenious and terse. Eagleton’s introduction to the philosophical idea of materialism and its contemporary relevance is creditable. The book places its argument cogently and demonstrates structural tautness. It is certainly a boon for those who endeavor research on inter/transdisciplinary perspectives on materialism. However, the book is not an end in itself. It points towards the requisite for further discussion on various philosophical perspectives on materialism and its relevance to contemporary culture. Moreover, Eagleton does not deal with mind-body relationship or how human relationships with natural world shape their embodied nature. Universality of human body is the chief concern rather than its contextual significance and implications. Our knowledge of human beings comes through our senses. Eagleton bridges Aquinas through Wittgenstein into contemporary discourse to discuss and defend universalism from becoming a new form of “ideological colonization.” While theologically dealing with St. Thomas’s idea on soul and incarnation and St. Paul’s idea of soma, variety of issues akin to gender identity and problems are left without any mention.