Idealism and Materialism
being
Chapter Two
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Part 1: Philosophy
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Development of the Material World

The gradual development of the material world, as well as of organic animal life and of the historically progressive intelligence of man - both individual and social - is perfectly conceivable. It is a wholly natural movement from the simple to the complex, from the lower to the higher, from the inferior to the superior; a movement in conformity with our daily experience and accordingly also with our natural logic, with the very laws of our mind, which, being formed and developed only with the aid of this same experience, is nothing else but its reproduction in the mind and brain, its meditated pattern.

The System of the Idealists

The system of the idealists is quite the opposite of this. It is the complete reversal of all human experience and of that universal and general common sense which is the necessary condition of all understanding between man and man, and which, in rising from the simple and unanimously recognized truth that two times two is four to the sublimest and most complicated scientific speculations - admitting, moreover, nothing that has not been strictly confirmed by experience or by observation of facts and phenomena - becomes the only serious basis of human knowledge.¹

The Course of the Metaphysicians

The course followed by the gentlemen of the metaphysical school is wholly different. And by metaphysicians we mean not only the followers of Hegel's doctrine, of whom few are now left, but also the positivists, and all the present votaries of the goddess of science; likewise all those who, proceeding by various means, even if by the means of the most painstaking, although necessarily imperfect study of the past and present, have set up for themselves an ideal of social organization into which they want to force at any cost, as into a Procrustean bed, the life of future generations; and all those, in a word, who do not regard thought and science as necessary manifestations of natural and social life, but
narrow down this poor life of ours to such an extent that all they can see in it is only the practical manifestation of their own thought and of their own rather imperfect science.²

The Method of Idealism

Instead of pursuing the natural order from the lower to the higher, from the inferior to the superior, and from the relatively simple to the more complex; instead of tracing wisely and rationally the progressive and real movement from the world called inorganic to the organic world, to the vegetable, and then the animal kingdom, and finally to the distinctively human world; instead of tracing the movement from chemical matter or activity to living matter or activity, and from living activity to the thinking being - the idealists, obsessed, blinded, and pushed on by the divine phantom which they inherited from theology - take precisely the opposite course.

They begin with God, presented either as a person or as a divine substance or idea, and the first step that they take is a terrible fall from the sublime heights of the eternal ideal into the mire of the material world; from absolute perfection into absolute imperfection; from thought to being, or rather from Supreme Being to mere nothingness.

Idealism and the Mystery of Divinity

When, how, or why the Divine Being, eternal, infinite, absolutely perfect, (and who probably became weary of himself), decided upon this desperate somersault is something that no idealist, no theologian, no metaphysician, no poet, has ever been able to explain to the layman or to understand himself. All religions, past and present, and all the systems of transcendental philosophy revolve around this unique and iniquitous mystery.³

Holy men, divinely inspired lawgivers, prophets, and Messiahs have sought life in it and found only torment and death. Like the ancient Sphinx, it devoured them, because they could not explain it. Great
philosophers, from Heraclitus and Plato down to Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Kant, Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel, not to mention the Indian philosophers, have written heaps of volumes and built systems both ingenious and sublime, in which they said in passing many grand and beautiful things, and discovered immortal truths, yet they left this mystery, the principal object of their transcendental researches, just as unfathomable as before.

And if the gigantic efforts of the most wonderful geniuses the world has ever known, and who through at least thirty centuries have each under taken anew this labor of Sisyphus, have resulted only in rendering the mystery still more incomprehensible - how can we hope that it will be unveiled for us by the uninspired speculations of some pedantic disciple of an artificially warmed-over metaphysics? - and this at a time when all vital and serious minds have turned away from that ambiguous science which came as a result of a compromise - which doubtless can be explained by history-between the unreason of faith and sound scientific reason.4

It is evident that this dreadful mystery cannot be explained, which means that it is absurd, for only the absurd admits of no explanation. It is evident that whoever finds it essential to his life and happiness must renounce his reason and return, if he can, to naive, blind, and crude faith, to repeat with Tertullian and all sincere believers the words which sum up the very quintessence of theology: Credo quia absurdum. (I believe because it is absurd.) Then all discussion ceases, and nothing remains but the triumphant stupidity of faith.5

The Contradictions of Idealism

The idealists are not strong on logic, and one might say that they despise it. This is what distinguishes them from the metaphysicians of the pantheistic and deistic school, and imparts to their ideas the character of practical idealism, drawing its inspiration much less from the rigorous development of thought than from the experience, - I might almost say from the emotions, historical and collective as well as individual - of life. This imparts to their propaganda an appearance of wealth and vital
power, but an appearance only; for life itself becomes sterile when paralyzed by a logical contradiction.6

This contradiction consists in the following: They want God, and they want humanity. They persist in linking up two terms which, once separated, cannot be conjoined without destroying each other. They say in one breath: "God and the liberty of man," or "God and the dignity, justice, equality, fraternity, and welfare of men," without paying heed to the fatal logic by virtue of which, if God exists, all these things are condemned to non-existence. For if God is, he is necessarily the eternal, supreme, and absolute Master, and if such a Master exists, man is a slave. Now if man is a slave, neither justice, nor equality, nor fraternity, nor prosperity is possible for him.

They (the idealists) may, in defiance of sound sense and all historical experience, represent their God as being animated by the tenderest love for human liberty, but a master, whatever he may do, and no matter how much of a liberal he may want to appear, will nevertheless always remain a master, and his existence will necessarily entail the slavery of all those who are beneath him. Therefore, if God existed, he could render service to human liberty in one way only - by ceasing to exist.

A zealous lover of human freedom, deeming it the necessary condition of all that I admire and respect in humanity, I reverse Voltaire's aphorism and say: If God really existed, it would be necessary to abolish him.7

The Contemporary Defenders of Idealism

With the exception of the great but misled hearts and minds, to which I have already referred, who are now the most obdurate defenders of idealism? In the first place, all the reigning houses and their courtiers. In France, it was Napoleon III and his wife, Madame Eugenic; it is still all their former ministers, courtiers, and marshals, from Rouher and Bazaine down to Flewy and Pietri; the men and women of this imperial world who
have done such a good job in idealizing and saving France; journalists and savants - the Cassagnacs, the Girardins, the Duvernois, the Veuillots, the Leverriers, the Dumas; the black phalanx of Jesuits and Jesuitesses in whatever garb they may appear in; the entire nobility as well as the upper and middle bourgeoisie of France; the doctrinaire liberals and liberals devoid of doctrines: the Guizots, the Thierses, the Jules Favres, the Pelletans, and the Jules Simons - all hardened defenders of bourgeois exploitation. In Prussia, in Germany - it is William I, the current representative of the Lord God on earth; all his generals, his officers-Pomeranian and others; his entire army, which, strong in its religious faith, has just conquered France in the "ideal" way that we have come to know so well In Russia it is the Tsar and his Court; the Muravievs and the Bergs, all the butchers and pious converters of Poland.

**Idealism Is the Banner of Brutal Force**

Everywhere, in short, religious or philosophical idealism, (the one being simply the more or less free interpretation of the other, serves today as the banner of bloody and brutal material force, of shameless material exploitation.

**Materialism Is the Banner of Economic Equality and Social Justice**

On the contrary, the banner of theoretical materialism, the red banner of economic equality and social justice, is unfurled by the practical idealism of the oppressed and famished masses who strive to bring about the greatest liberty and realize the human right of each individual in the fraternity of all men on earth.8

**The True Idealists and Materialists**

Who are the true idealists-the idealists not of abstraction, but of life, not of heaven, but of earth - and who are the materialists?

It is evident that the essential condition of theoretical or divine
idealism is the sacrifice of logic, of human reason and the renunciation of science. On the other hand, we see that in defending the doctrines of idealism, one finds himself drawn into the camp of the oppressors and exploiters of the masses. These are the two great reasons which, it would seem, should be sufficient to alienate from idealism every great mind and every great heart. How does it happen that our illustrious contemporary idealists, who certainly lack neither mind, nor heart, nor good will, and who have placed their lives at the service of humanity—how does it happen that they have persisted in remaining among the representatives of a doctrine henceforth condemned and dishonored?

They must have been impelled by very strong motives. These cannot be logic nor science, for logic and science have pronounced their verdict against the idealistic doctrine. And it stands to reason that personal interests cannot be counted among their motives, because these people are infinitely above self-interest. Then it must have been a powerful motive of a moral order. Which? There could be but one: These celebrated people think, no doubt, that idealistic theories or beliefs are essential to the dignity and moral grandeur of man, and that materialistic theories reduce him to the level of the beast. 9

But what if the opposite were true?

Every development implies the negation of its point of departure. And since the point of departure, according to the doctrine of the materialistic school, is material, the negation must necessarily be ideal. Starting from the totality of the real world, or what is abstractly called matter, materialism logically arrives at the true idealization, that is, at the humanization, at the full and complete emancipation, of society. On the other hand, and for the same reason, the starting point of the idealistic school is ideal and it necessarily arrives at the materialization of society, at the organization of brutal despotism and a vile, iniquitous exploitation in the forms of the Church and the State. The historic development of man according to the materialistic school is a progressive ascension, while in the idealistic system it can be nothing but a continuous fall. 10
Points of Divergence Between Materialism and Idealism

Whatever question pertaining to man we may happen to touch upon, we always run into the same basic contradiction between those two schools. Thus materialism starts from animality in order to establish humanity; idealism starts from divinity in order to establish slavery and doom the masses to perpetual animality.

Materialism denies free will and ends in the establishment of liberty. Idealism, in the name of human dignity, proclaims free will and founds authority on the ruins of every liberty. Materialism rejects the principle of authority, rightly viewing it as the corollary of animality, and believing, on the contrary, that the triumph of humanity, which materialism regards as the main object and significance of history, can be realized only through liberty. In a word, when approached on any question, you will always find the idealist in the very act of practical materialism, while on the other hand, you will invariably see the materialist pursuing and realizing the most ideal aspirations and thoughts.  

Idealism is the despot of thought, just as politics is the despot of will. Only Socialism and positive science show due respect to Nature and the freedom of men.  

Marxism and Its Fallacies

The doctrinaire school of Socialists, or rather of State Communists of Germany... is quite a respectable school, a circumstance which, however, does not prevent it from lapsing into errors from time to time. One of its main fallacies is that it took as the basis of its theories a principle which is profoundly true when viewed in its proper light - that is, from a relative point of view - but which becomes utterly false when observed in isolation from other conditions and held up as the only ground and primary source of all other principles (as is done by that school.)

This principle, constituting moreover the essential foundation of
positive Socialism, was first given its scientific formulation and developed by M. Karl Marx, the chief leader of the German Communists. It is the dominant idea of the famous Communist Manifesto.13

**Marxism and Idealism**

This principle is in absolute contradiction to the principle recognized by the idealists of all schools. While the idealists deduce all the facts of history - including the development of material interests and the various stages of economic organization of society - from the development of ideas, the German Communists, on the contrary, see in all human history, in the most ideal manifestations of collective as well as individual human life, in every intellectual, moral, religious, metaphysical, scientific, artistic, political, juridical, and social development taking place in the past and in the present, only the reflection or the inevitable result of the development of economic phenomena.

While the idealists maintain that ideas produce and dominate facts, the Communists, in full agreement with scientific materialism, maintain on the contrary that facts beget ideas and that ideas are always only the ideal reflection of events; that out of the sum total of phenomena, the economic material phenomena constitute the essential basis, the main foundation, while all the others - the intellectual and moral, political, and social phenomena - follow as a necessary derivative from the former.14

**Who Are Right-the Idealists or the Materialists?**

Who are right: the idealists or the materialists? When the question is stated in this way hesitation becomes impossible. Undoubtedly the idealists are wrong and the materialists are right. Yes, facts come before ideas; yes, the ideal, as Proudhon said, is but the flower, the roots of which lie in the material conditions of existence. Yes, the whole history of humanity, intellectual and moral, political and social, is but the reflection of its economic history.

All branches of modern science, of a conscientious and serious
The First Dogma of Materialism

[Mazzini] contends that we materialists are atheists. We have nothing to say to this, for we are indeed atheists, and we take pride in it, in so far as pride can be permitted to wretched individuals who like waves rise up for a moment and then vanish in the vast collective ocean of human society. We are proud of it, because atheism and materialism are the truth, or rather the actual basis of truth, and also because, above everything else, above practical consequences, we desire the truth and only the truth. And besides, we believe that despite appearances, despite the cowardly promptings of a policy of caution and skepticism, only the truth will bring practical well-being to the people.

Such is the first dogma of our faith. But it looks ahead, toward the future, and not backward.

The Second Dogma of Materialism

You are not content, however, with pointing out our atheism and materialism. You infer from it that we cannot have love for people nor respect for their virtues; that the great things which have caused the most noble hearts to throb - freedom, justice, humanity, beauty, truth - must be altogether alien to us, and that, aimlessly dragging out our wretched existence-crawling rather than walking erect upon earth - we
know of no other cares than to gratify our coarse and sensual appetites. 16

And we tell you, venerable but unjust master [Mazzini], that this is a grievous error on your part. Do you want to know to what extent we love those great and beautiful things, the knowledge and love whereof you deny to us? Let it be known to you that our love for them is so strong that we are heartily sick and tired of seeing them everlastingly suspended in your Heaven - which ravished them from earth - as symbols and never-realized promises. We are not content any more with the fiction of those beautiful things: we want them in reality.

And here is the second dogma of our faith, illustrious master. We believe in the possibility, in the necessity, of such realization upon the earth; at the same time we are convinced that all those things which you worship as heavenly hopes will necessarily lose their mystic and divine character when they become human and earthly realities.

The Matter of Idealism

You thought you had disposed of us completely by calling us materialists. You thought that you had thereby condemned and crushed us. But do you know where this error of yours comes from? What you and we call matter are two totally different things, two totally different concepts. Your matter is a fictitious entity, like your God, like your Satan, like your infinite soul. Your matter is infinite grossness, inert brutality, it is an entity just as impossible as the pure, incorporeal, absolute spirit, both of whom exist only as figments of the abstract fantasy of theologians and metaphysicians - the only authors and creators of those two fictions. The history of philosophy has revealed to us the process - a simple process indeed - of the unconscious creation of this fiction, the origin of this fatal historical illusion, which the long course of many centuries has hung heavily, like a terrible nightmare, upon the oppressed minds of human generations.
The Spirit and the Matter

The first thinkers were necessarily theologians and metaphysicians, the human mind being so constituted that it must always start with a great deal of nonsense, with falsehood and errors, in order to arrive at a small portion of the truth. All of which does not altogether speak in favor of the holy traditions of the past. The first thinkers, I say, took the sum of all the real beings known to them, themselves included, of everything that, so it seemed to them, constituted force, movement, life, and intelligence, and called it spirit. All the rest - the formless, lifeless mass which, as they saw it, was left after their own minds had unconsciously abstracted it from the actual world, they named matter. And then they wondered that this matter, which, like the same spirit, existed only in their imagination, was so inactive, so stupid, in the presence of their God, the pure spirit.17

The Matter of Materialists

We frankly admit that we do not know your God, but neither do we know your matter; or rather, we know that one as well as the other does not exist, but that they were created a priori by the speculative fantasy of naive thinkers of bygone ages. By these words matter and material we understand the totality, the hierarchy of real entities, beginning with the most simple organic bodies and ending with the structure and functioning of the brain of the greatest genius: the most sublime feelings, the greatest thoughts, the most heroic acts, acts of self-sacrifice, duties as well as rights, the voluntary renunciation of one's own welfare, of one's egoism - everything up to the transcendental and mystic aberrations of Mazzini - as well as the manifestations of organic life, chemical properties and actions, electricity, light, heat, the natural gravitation of bodies. All that constitutes, in our view, so many different but at the same time closely interlinked evolutions of that totality of the real world which we call matter.
Materialism is Not Pantheism

And note well, we do not regard this totality as a sort of absolute and everlasting creative substance, as the Pantheists do, but as the perpetual result produced and reproduced anew by the concurrence of an infinite series of actions and reactions, by the incessant transformations of real beings who are born and who die in the midst of this infinity.

Matter Includes the Ideal World

I will sum up: We designate, by the word material, everything taking place in the real world, within man as well as outside of him, and we apply the word ideal exclusively to the products of the cerebral activity of man; but since our brain is wholly an organization of the material order, its function being therefore also material like the action of all other things - it follows that what we call matter, or the material world, does not by any means exclude, but, on the contrary, necessarily embraces the ideal world as well.18

Materialists and Idealists in Practice

Here is a fact deserving attentive thought on the part of our platonic adversaries! How does it happen that the theoreticians of materialism usually show themselves in practice as being greater idealists than the idealists themselves? This, however, is quite logical and natural. For every development implies to some extent a negation of the point of departure; the theoreticians of materialism start from the concept of matter and arrive at the idea, whereas the idealists, taking for their starting point the pure, absolute idea, and constantly reiterating the old myth of original sin - which is only the symbolic expression of theft own sad destiny - relapse, in theory and in practice, into the realm of matter from which they seemingly find it impossible to disentangle themselves. And what matter! Brutal, ignoble, stupid matter, created by their own imagination as their alter ego, or as the reflection of their ideal self.19
In the same way the materialists, always conforming their social theories to the actual course of history, view the animal stage, cannibalism, and slavery as the first starting points of the progressive movement of society; but what are they aiming at, what do they want? They want the emancipation, the full **humanization** of society; whereas the idealists, who take for the basic premise of their speculations the immortal soul and freedom of the will, inevitably end up in the cult of public order like Thiers, in the cult of authority like Mazzini; that is, in the establishment and consecration of perpetual slavery. Hence it follows that theoretic materialism necessarily results in practical idealism, and that idealistic theories find their realization only in a coarse practical materialism.

Only yesterday the proof thereof unfolded before our eyes. Where were the materialists and atheists? In the Paris Commune. And where were the idealists who believe in God? In the Versailles National Assembly. What did the revolutionaries of Paris want? They wanted the final emancipation of humanity through the emancipation of labor. And what does the triumphant Versailles Assembly want now? The ultimate degradation of humanity under the double yoke of spiritual and secular power.

The materialists, imbued with faith and with scorn for suffering, danger, and death, want to forge ahead, for they see before them the triumph of humanity. But the idealists, gasping for breath and seeing ahead of them nothing but bloody specters, want at any cost to push humanity back into the mire from which it extricated itself with such great difficulty.

Let anyone compare both and pass judgement.
Source Bibliography

Maximoff prepared the original text of this volume in Russian, and drew the selections in it chiefly from the first Russian edition of Bakunin's collected works, five volumes of which appeared in 1919-1922, but also from the German edition (1921-1924) and from a few pamphlets and periodicals. For the convenience of readers, the French edition and one volume of the Spanish edition are included in the listing below, because they were consulted in the checking of the translation.

RUSSIAN EDITION, Petrograd and Moscow: published by Gobs Truda.

GERMAN EDITION, Berlin: published by Verlag Der Syndikalist.

Vol. IV, 1910; 512 pp.
Vol. VI, 1913; 434 pp.

SPANISH EDITION, Buenos Aires: published by Editorial La Protesta.
Vol V, Statism and Anarchism, 1929; 316 pp.
Key to Abbreviations

Each source is indicated by a set of initials, and the language in which the source material was printed is shown by a single initial, followed by the volume number in a Roman numeral, and then by the page number. R means Russian; G German; F French; and S Spanish. Thus the designation "PHC; F III 216-218" means *Philosophical Considerations, French volume III*, pages 216-218. In some instances reference is made to sources in more than one language.

**AM** - *A Member of the International Answers Mazzini*; Russian volume V; French volume VI.

**BB** - *The Bear of Berne and the Bear of St. Petersburg*; Russian volume III; French volume II.

**CL** - *A Circular Letter to My Friends in Italy*; Russian volume V; French volume VI.

**DS** - *The Double Strike in Geneva*; German volume II; French volume V.

**DV** - *Drei Vortraege von den Arbeibern das Thals von St. tinier im Schweizer Jura*, May, 1871; German volume II.

**F5AT** - *Federalism, Socialism, and Anti-Theologism*; Russian volume III; French volume I.

**GAS** - *God and the State*; New York: Mother Earth Publishing Association, [circa 1915], 86 pp. See below, following the abbreviation KGE, a reference to a continuation of the essay embodied in this pamphlet.

**IE** - *Integral Education*; Russian volume IV; French volume V.

**IR** - *Report of the Commission on the Question of inheritance Right*; French
IU - The Intrigues of Mr. Utin; in Gobs Truzenika, a Russian periodical of the Industrial Workers of the World, Chicago, 1925; volume VII, No. 3, pp. 19-23; and volume VII, No. , pp. 9-12.

KGE - The Knouto-Germanic Empire and the Social Revolution; Russian volume II; French volumes II, III, and IV. Part of the text of this also appears in French volume I, under the heading of God and the State. That section, as Rudolf Rocker points out on page 25, was found among Bakunin's manuscripts by Max Nettlau, and is a logical continuation of the essay in the pamphlet bearing the same title.

LF - Letters to a Frenchman; Russian volume IV; French volumes II, IV.

LGS - A Letter to the Geneva Section of the Alliance; French volume VI.

LP - Letters on Patriotism; Russian volume IV; French volume I.

LU - The Lullers;; Russian volume IV; French volume V.

OGS - Organization and the General Strike; German volume II; French volume V.

OI - Organization of the International; Russian volume IV.

OP - Our Program; Russian volume Ill.

PA - Protestation of the Alliance; Russian volume V; French volume VI.

PAIR - The Program of the Alliance of International Revolution; written in French and published in Anarchichesky Vestnik, Anarchist Courier, a Russian publication, in Berlin; volume V-VI, November, 1923; pp. 37- i; volume VII, May, 1924, pp. 38-4!.

PC - The Paris Commune and the State; Russian volume IV; and in a pamphlet, The Paris Commune and the Idea of the State, Paris: Aux

**PHC** - *Philosophical Considerations*; German volume I; French volume III.

**PI** - *The Politics of the International*; Russian volume IV; French volume V.

**PSSI** - *The Program of the Slavic Section of the International, 1872.* (Russian volume III.

**PYR** - *Pechat y Revoliutzia* (The Printed Word and Revolution); a Russian periodical, Moscow, 1921 - June, 1930.

**RA** - *A Report on the Alliance*; Russian volume V; French volume VI.


**STA** - *Statum and Anarchism*; Russian volume I; Spanish volume V. The Russian title of this volume is *Gosudarstvennost i Anarkhiia*, which literally means Statism and Anarchy. But from Bakunin's context therein it is evident that he was weighing one organized system against another, and not comparing a system with a condition of lawless confusion and disorder. So wherever this work is cited in these pages it is consistently referred to as Statism and Anarchism.

**WRA** - *World Revolutionary Alliance of Social Democracy*; pamphlet in Russian; Berlin: Hugo Steinitz Verlag, 1904; 86 pp.
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1. KGE; R II 149; F III 26-27.
2. STA; R I 234.
3. KGE; R II 149-150.
4. Ibid., 150-151.
5. Ibid., R II 151; F III 29.
6. Ibid., R II 162-163.
7. Ibid., R II 163; F III 48.
8. Ibid., R II 183-184; F III 76-77.
9. Ibid., R II 184-185.
10. Ibid., RII 185.
11. Ibid., RII 185-186.
12. CL; R V 167.
13. Ibid., 137-140.
14. Ibid., 142-144.
15. Ibid., 144.
16. AM; F VI 114-115.
17. Ibid., 116-118.
18. Ibid., 118.
19. Ibid., 119.
20. Ibid., 119-120.