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Book Reviews and Notices

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Book Reviews and Notices

E. Pasini

Reviews and Notices of Wolfe, Materialism: A Historico-Philosophical Introduction, Springer 2016; Floris Cohen, The Rise of Modern Science Explained, 2015; Hanlon, Early Modern Italy: A Comprehensive Bibliography, 2016.



1 CHARLES WOLFE, *Materialism: A Historico-Philosophical Introduction*, Cham, CH: Springer International Publishing Switzerland, 2016, p. 144. ISBN 9783319248189, \$54.99 (softcover).

No one philosopher or thinker ever seems to have liked to be deemed a materialist, the author of this small and dense book remarks, with the exception of that kind of hard-boiled figures that are *autoproclamé* materialists. In modern philosophy, it is not before the 18th century that such figures can be found, La Mettrie being the first to adopt this ominous label as a device.

‘Materialism’ is a polemical term, and it is mainly “defined by anti-materialists”. So the author wonders: “What then is materialism? Is there only one, or are there many variants?” (p. 2). Materialism is not a topic totally new to historical studies, and Charles Wolfe draws much, for instance, from Olivier Bloch’s works. Additionally, the historical focus is extended by some major theoretic enhancements: 20th-century French thought and today’s philosophy of the mind are the most conspicuous frameworks of reference. But Wolfe’s own questions—and his answers—are, it seems to me, gone much beyond his general sources.

Although readers will find in this book mostly Early-Modern stuff, there are three rambles into philosophical contemporaneity: a contrast between ‘French materialism’ and present-time philosophy of mind; an enthralling genealogy of 20th-century Australian materialism; a discussion of the phantom-limb problem. This might hint that the dominant question on which the connection to today’s debates is made is the relation between mind and brain, the reduction of thought to its biologic-material conditions. It is not precisely so. Rather, in this domain, the reflections proposed in this book revolve around the definition, supported by historical evidence, of a ‘materialist’ sense of embodiment, and of an “embodied determinism” (p. 39).

Determinism notwithstanding, in fact, materialism as a reduction to physics is not the focus of the book: “physicalism is something of a negative *Leitfaden* in my story”, says the author at p. 4. Instead we might say that *naturalism* is a positive one, and a necessary development of this book would be some look into the latter’s history as much as into that of materialism. And in the book there remain still some open questions in naturalism’s whereabouts, like the relation of materialism to mathematics, which is sadly exemplified here by Diderot’s prophecy that analysis would not develop beyond D’Alembert.

With a theoretic historian’s gaze, the author picks elements that are significant in quality and usefulness. As Wolfe himself says of his ambition, “I hope that a short historical and philosophical overview which combines Aristotle contra materialism, the problem of phantom limbs, evolution (...), brains, machines and ‘hylophobia’ will serve some purpose” (p. 15). And Aristotle has indeed in this book a prominent role. In the Stagirite’s works Wolfe shows effectively the presence of a sophisticated relationship of material necessity and natural teleology. In the more general part of this analysis, at times some passages seem a bit on the rash side: “This substratum turns out to be matter (*Phys.* I 9, 192a31-32, 34)—except ultimately he will decide that it is form” (p. 33). But Wolfe is convincent in his effort to show that Aristotle’s perspective is not inconsistent, and possibly corresponding, with what he calls an ‘enriched materialism’ integrating a theory of levels of organization. Aristotle, who has no Descartes or Lamettrie to abominate, although he has his handful of problems with Democritus, does not, in Wolfe’s view, oppose life and meaning to dead matter in the Modern simplistic way: “Aristotle in fact integrates the materialistic level rather than denying it”. Instead of merely asserting internal teleology

against materialist chance and necessity, he “asserts the ‘for the sake of’ as being the internal structure of matter itself” (p. 40). This viewpoint Wolfe sees to be reconfigured in Renaissance with the addition of appetites to matter—maybe with some obliviousness to the Medieval (Albertist) debate on the *eductio formarum e materia*.

Historically, the most powerful objection to materialism has been precisely “that it reduces the world of life to the world of dead matter” (p. 14), and precisely this objection the history of materialism must here disprove. An attempt to understand what might be in common in the diverse forms of materialism, does not necessarily mean to assert its ‘truth’ in some meta-historical sense; nonetheless this book, among other intents, seeks to *do justice* to materialist thinkers. According to the author, there is “something gravely wrong” (p. 64) with the picture of materialism according to which soul, mind, intentionality would be simply denied.

Wolfe puts thus on display a variety of vital materialists, whose “goal is less to explain life in terms of the basic properties of matter than to give a material basis for life and animation” (p. 53). It is mostly in the Enlightenment, more generally in 18th century thought, that such materialism of life is born, when theories of living matter and self-moving atoms bridge philosophy and other, crucial, disciplines and fields. This is, consequently, a work of history of philosophy, but the history it tells is closely intertwined with the history of medicine and the life sciences, and the amount of physicians that are featured nicely balances that of philosophers.

This approach allows for original results. On a theoretical plane, biologism of vital materialism takes hopefully the place of Althusser’s *matérialisme aléatoire*; on a historical plane, what had always seemed mere Cartesianism, can now be seen as a theory of life: “La Mettrie’s reductionism is a reduction to the organic. When he speaks of watches and springs – classic mechanist analogies – he is careful to point out that the object of his analysis, the body, is a ‘self-winding’ machine” (p. 62).

Some innovative hints remain slightly more than such. In addition to the vital character of Radical Enlightenment materialism, and to organic determinism, “metaphysically, the dead materialism accusation misses something important, in addition: the ontology of relations” (p. 82). This is not to be confused with the usual meaning of ‘ontology of relations’ in the analytic logical and meta-

physical domain; historically it is in turn to be found in the materialistically developed Spinozism of Dom Deschamps and Diderot, as explained in a *leider* very underdeveloped part of this book—and of its conceptual web.

Speaking of the conceptual web, it may be noted that the book lacks a general bibliography (quoted sources are listed at the end of each chapter, with some – likely Springerian – quirks like Goethe listed under V as von), but has a conceptual Index. The Index is concise but telling; the book, for instance, speaks of laughter and not of abstraction (nor any other A- concept, but this is more coincidental). In fact, although abstraction is mentioned a couple of times, laughter has a much more momentous role. Indeed it allows Wolfe to tackle the problems raised against materialism in ethical matters. “Materialism has long had a bad reputation, on two distinct yet related grounds: that it reduces everything to ‘dead’ matter, and that it eliminates the ‘higher’, intellectual or spiritual parts of life, and thereby cannot but be immoral” (p. 6). What kind of ethics can there be “for ‘meat machines’?” (p. 62). In place of “hedonistic, ‘swinish’ brutality” (p. 65), and also of the ethics of *jouissance* which is so important to certain 18th-century materialists¹, answer is found in a Rabelaisian tendency to laugh at humanity (p. 72), that is indeed the proprium of a materialist thinker since the time of Democritus. This brings materialist ethics on a par with the best of classical attitudes, I would say, although leaving it for some aspects short of Marx’s 11th theses on Feuerbach, and maybe also of the same Feuerbach’s attention to the human ‘heart’.

In the scientific intention, this is a book of historical philosophy of science (and metaphysics), that, I would say, is proof to the fact that (to insinuate just one idea of mine into this review) only the history of philosophy can truly be experimental philosophy. I appreciate much intent, hypotheses and results; but sympathize not with the size of the work—a thrice-bigger book would be welcome. Except for its size, anyway, this is a Modernist book, in the literary sense, for richness of ideas and characters, and for boldness of thought and expression. When the author wants to say that La Mettrie’s corporeal mind is not a blow to human self-esteem, for instance, he words it so, reminiscent of

¹ See f.i. Marie Leca-Tsiomis, “La morale diderotienne dans l’Encyclopédie n’est pas où on l’attend”. *Cultura. Revista de história e teoria das ideias* 34 (2016): 19-30 (<http://cultura.revues.org/2452>).

an Adornian phrase: “Instead, it fuels a fiery, sanguine *demaskierende Tendenz* proper to hedonistic, embodied agents” (p. 56). All this fullness of content and expression makes undoubtedly for an intriguing and instructive reading.



2 HENDRIK FLORIS COHEN, *The Rise of Modern Science Explained. A Comparative History*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge U.P., 2015, p. 298. ISBN 9781107545601, £18.99 (paperback).

This book is the welcome English translation (in cooperation with Chris Emery) of prof. Cohen’s *De herschepping van de wereld* (2007). It is an abridged and less academic presentation of the ideas, and of the stories those ideas are put to work explaining, contained in Cohen’s 2010 book on *How Modern Science Came into the World. Four Civilizations, One 17th-Century Breakthrough*. It also is, as the author’s intention was, a very perspicuous book, that can be read by students but is appropriate in general for scholars that are not historians of science¹.

How uncivilized Europe brought about what more refined and technically-gifted civilizations would not accomplish, that is, modern natural science, is the object of the book—a question many times raised and not once persuasively answered. The ‘scientific revolution’ is considered here solely as a historical phenomenon, that Floris Cohen divides into six equally historical developments. The main focus is the period between Galileo and Newton, but much attention is given to comparative history of science and technology then and in preceding times, and some to further developments.

In the theory of science, what explanations are is much disputed. Whether and when what happened or not, is inevitably the object of those kind of explanations that sneaky philosophers of science would call a ‘just-so’ story. But this

¹ Cohen himself has told the history of the book on CambridgeBlog (<http://tinyurl.com/fc2015rmse>).

is an obvious and rather useless remark. To parrot a comment made by Leibniz about Cartesian chemistry, it is not that one could ask for a recipe like ‘take an ounce of this and two cups of that, and out of natural necessity you will have a scientific revolution’.

As with any honest comparative historical analysis on a very general level, what is proposed here is yet a discourse of the ‘while-some-were-doing-wrong,-others-began-doing-right’ kind, although clad in the very sophisticated (and plausible) system of theoretical and historical coordinates known to Floris Cohen’s readers as Athens and Athens-Plus, Alexandria and Alexandria-Plus, fact-finding experimental knowledge, abstract-mathematical nature-knowledge, etc. This apparatus allows to analyze in terms of conflicting approaches, and of cultural similarities and differences in attitudes, much of what happened, as said, or did not happen, in the history of the raising of natural science and connected phenomena.

As a matter of fact, there is also more to it, as we can see with an example. When talking about “mathematical science enriched with corpuscles”, Floris Cohen writes: “An indispensable precondition for coupling the philosophy of particles in motion firmly to one of the other two modes of nature-knowledge was first to strip it of its ‘Athenian’ knowledge structure” (p. 223). This can be said out of the existence of constraints in the relationships between concepts and in the putting of concepts to use. Of course such constraints are one of the most elusive and interesting aspects of the history of ideas, but their nature is all but clear to us yet.

Anyway, at least in a historical sense, it is true that in both in the 2010 book and here what has happened is very clearly explained. It becomes so much more clear than in so many other accounts, maybe, precisely because such apparently esoteric constructs as ‘Alexandria-Plus’ are descriptive devices, much more than ‘explanative’ in some sort of self-styled causal sense.

In the final part, Floris Cohen discusses briefly the idea that, during the 19th century, the ‘near-fusion’ of the mathematical and the ‘exploratory-experimental sciences brought about a “Second Scientific Revolution”. As the author says, it is rather “an ‘expression’—not yet a concept” (p. 278), and he and others are still working on it. But it speaks for the combinatory power of his historical constructs that they can provide not only descriptions, but hints of further developments beyond their initial scope.



3 GREGORY HANLON, *Early Modern Italy: A Comprehensive Bibliography*, 12th edition, 2016, p. 1109. Open access at <https://dal.academia.edu/GregoryHanlon>, <http://tinyurl.com/hanlon2016>.

One hundred pages and 3,000 titles more than the 2014 edition, this is a didactic and reference tool of some importance for Early-Modern studies also beyond its geographic confinement. It has been once again updated, and extends now to more than 21,000 titles, listed according to the unchanged categorial arrangement of: “1) General and Historiography; 2) Travel and Historical Geography, 3) Politics & Administration; 4) Demography and Economy; 5) Social Stratification & Behavioural Studies; 6) Religious History; 7) Language Arts and Erudition; 8) Music and Spectacle; 9) Beaux-Arts and Architecture; and 10) History of Science”. The most interesting chart that analyses English and French production by category has also been updated.

Most of the introduction has not changed from the preceding edition. The slight biologism put against a “cultural” conception of attitudes and behaviours still brings to the question that in the 11th edition read as: “Does anyone still believe this, in 2014?”—and has now become: “Does anyone still believe this, in 2016?” (p. 19). The (maybe appropriately) abrasive assessment of work in the history of Early-Modern Italian science—“do we really need more studies on Galileo?” (p. 20)—also stays. Small but significant changes lurch here and there. Where the 11th edition said: “Still today, many Italian historians publish some of their best work in French-language journals” (2014, 9), now we read: “Italian scholars who hesitated between the two international languages until the 1970s now publish outside Italy primarily in English” (2016, 9). As for what might by some be considered history of ideas, Hanlon notes an “increasing focus on the Italian origins of western atheism” (p. 19).



Louis-Michel Van Loo, Portrait of Diderot, 1767.