

The philosophy of materialism

PHILOSOPHY FOR THE FUTURE

Edited by Roy Wood Sellars, V. J. McGill
and Marvin Farber

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IT is unfortunate that the word "event" has been so much used to describe the publication of various books, for when the term really applies it has become too threadbare to have much meaning. However there is no other word to categorize the appearance of *Philosophy for the Future*. Its subtitle, *The Quest of Modern Materialism*, indicates the eventful character of this book.

Philosophical materialism has been under an intellectual cloud for so long now—roughly half a century—that its sudden re-emergence as a fully articulated system that makes no concessions to idealism, theism, deism, or any of their philosophical fellow-travellers, cannot fail to produce shock waves which will reach even the most isolated metaphysical ivory towers. The present volume is made particularly significant by the fact that its three editors are all top names in American philosophy, and the majority of its twenty-seven contributors are equally well known in their respective philosophical or scientific fields.

Naturally a volume of six hundred and forty small print pages, with thirty separate essays by almost as many contributors, cannot be of uniform quality throughout nor of uniform interest to any single reader. After three weeks of careful reading, however, this reviewer is impressed by the excellence of nearly all the essays; perhaps even more impressive is the integration of the book and the consistency of the general viewpoint set forth by the many different authors. In only one case (C. W. Churchman's "A Materialist Theory of Measurement") is there an impression that the article is here for a free ride on the coat tails of materialism.

For this is no loosely knit collection of random essays masquerading as a book, but rather a full expression of a single pervasive position as formulated by more than a score of separate thinkers. After a brief but challenging Foreword by the three editors, there are five articles on the history of materialism. Of these, perhaps the best is that by Christopher Hill on "Hobbes and English Political Thought," which is a fresh treatment of what would appear to be an exhausted subject. Next come two difficult but worthwhile essays on some epistemological aspects of materialism by Roy Wood Sellars and E. J. Nelson. Four essays on mathematics, astronomy, cosmology and quantum mechanics follow.



All seem excellent, although experts in these areas might find some points to criticize which escape a mere philosopher.

The biological and psychological section contains particularly good chapters on "Levels in the Psychological Capacities of Animals" (T. C. Schneirla) and "Psychoanalysis" (Judson Marmor). The social science chapters which follow are less even in quality and significance, but Leslie White's "Ethnological Theory" is extremely enlightening and thought-provoking, at least for a non-expert. The concluding essays are more strictly philosophical; here again the general level is high, with Abraham Edel's essay on the theory of ideas and John Reid's "Nature and Status of Values" particular favorites of mine.

In terms of general intellectual significance, the Foreword indicates the radical character of the book. Especially revolutionary (philosophically speaking) is the criticism of philosophical naturalism: "Unfortunately, the historical forms of naturalism have often been distinguished by their readiness to compromise, or cautiously to set limits to the use of scientific method."

In another passage the most popular form of naturalism in America today, that influenced by Dewey and his followers, is attacked as ". . . reluctant to commit itself to a positive theory of the world, (whereas) materialism endeavors to set forth a synoptic view of man and the universe implicit in the sciences at their present stage of development."

Nor will the editors of the present volume take refuge in the usual precaution of repudiating their historical antecedent as "crude" materialism. Acknowledging that all systems become more refined as they are filtered through the minds of successive thinkers, and acknowledging also that the concept of "matter" has undergone much change of late, these resurgent contemporary materialists still believe that their "crude" eighteenth and nineteenth century predecessors were far nearer to philosophical truth than either their historical opponents or the twentieth century anti-materialists.

For the present reviewer, long accustomed to having his own philosophical naturalism attacked as everything from "degrading" through "crude" to "atheistic," it is an unusual and refreshing experience to be told by the authors of *Philosophy for the Future* that his viewpoint is "cautious," "compromising" and "conservative." It is, in fact, a pleasant relief to fall back from the front-line trenches to a comparatively safe rest area while Sellars, McGill, Farber and their many collaborators carry on up front where the battle is hottest.