

MATERIALISM

by Terry Eagleton, *New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016*

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Endless discussions on the state of theory tend to tire the modern reader. The fine-tuning of the characterization of what, exactly, constitutes “theory” as a distinct discipline never fails to elicit an exasperated yawn. In recent decades, conversations regarding theory’s potential, history, and future have almost filled more pages than its supposed areas of inquiry. The age of high theory, so says Terry Eagleton, departed with the likes of Foucault, Derrida, Lacan, Deleuze, et al.¹ The vigor of the age of the giants of French post-structuralist thought has cast a long shadow, to be sure. Here in the early parts of 2017, Terry Eagleton, like many practicing theorists, finds himself in a difficult position: a choice in practice between the consolidation and advancement of theory long-past, or the commitment to the creation of new, vibrant speculative gestures. *Materialism*, Eagleton’s latest, opts for the former option. More attuned to the history of thought than perhaps interested in theory’s erstwhile development of concepts, Eagleton’s text marks yet another entry into the blasé collection emerging of late. To call it lazy would be disingenuous. Eagleton moves seamlessly and with vigor between disparate thinkers: Nietzsche and Wittgenstein, for example. What lacks in *Materialism* is not a full-blooded development of a snapshot of intellectual history, but a sense of real and urgent *purpose*. Expecting a vigorous challenge to some of the

1 See Terry Eagleton, *After Theory*, (London: Allen Lane, 2003).

latent questions currently puzzling the academy, one cannot help but feel somewhat disappointed in Eagleton's approach. Some explanation may be found within Eagleton's intellectual history. A foremost literary scholar, Eagleton appears to prefer a style of characterization and comparison over sustained development of individual concepts. In its finest form, this mode of inquiry has produced breath-taking results, but perhaps Eagleton is correct that those days are behind us.

The sometimes careful, sometimes slipshod practical application of high theory to cultural artefacts makes for some fun, but given the breadth and depth of modern intellectual production, not to mention careful consideration of classical texts, one cannot help but feel there might be a better use of our limited time. It is here that Eagleton finds his niche: caught between a renaissance of high theory and its somewhat mundane recent applications to myriad capital-o-genic offspring, Eagleton adopts the role of the cartographer. Less rigorous than the average historian, but more serious than Wikipedia, Eagleton here inhabits that carefully cultivated literary space of the career academic. A graduate student of the liberal arts likes to think of their work as rending open the old stitches of a festering wound, creating a new and exciting world in the process. The tenured professor tends toward a different approach. Lacking urgency makes for more careful development at times, and Eagleton's subtlety is perhaps his greatest strength. Readers seeking jaw-dropping theoretical development will leave *Materialism* disappointed, but Eagleton's sure-footed prose does manage to leave an impression. One will not leave *Materialism* proclaiming themselves a *materialist*, an *idealist*, a *Nietzschean*, or otherwise, and this is to Eagleton's credit. Rather than staking his claim, calling for *grand alliances between science and philosophy*, etc., Eagleton maturely outlines a very brief introduction to a variety of theory of the material. His affinity for *historical materialism* is clear, and as such, remains the most esoteric of the categories on offer. The usual suspects emerge: Meillassoux and the arche-materialists, Marx, and two thinkers one might not expect: Wittgenstein and Nietzsche. *Materialism* is not a book about the debates which raged

between the new materialists and post-Kantian idealists a few years ago. Eagleton is concerned more with the dynamic between reason, rationality, and materialism than pursuing any fundamental ontic understanding. On page one he characterizes his concerns as follows:

My interest is not in certain highly technical questions of monism, dualism, eliminativism, or the mind-body problem in general, but in forms of materialism that are in some broad sense social or political, and about which the neuroscientists have had for the most part nothing very exciting to say.²

Hence, *Materialism* reads as something of a primer for the concept of historical materialism, which Eagleton relates to somatic (bodily) or even anthropological materialism. What proceeds is the usual mystic / spiritual ground split. Eagleton is quick to delimit the possibilities of pure reason, seeking instead, as countless others before, to imagine the ground of thought as subsisting within matter as such. Differentiating between *dumb* and *conscious* matter is a tricky business, and Eagleton uses some well-worn rhetoric to help nullify an ontological split:

The truth is that men and women are neither set apart from the material world (as for idealist humanism), or mere pieces of matter (as for mechanical materialism). They are indeed pieces of matter, but pieces of matter of peculiar kind.³

One might expect *Dasein* to make an appearance, but Martin Heidegger is conspicuously absent from the discussion. Indeed, some of Eagleton's language echoes the late German phenomenologist: "...we are unfinished creatures perpetually in process and out ahead of ourselves."⁴ Alas, *Materialism* is a text on *material*. The reader is thus spared considerable stickiness in thinking *Being* or ground in any significantly developed way. Instead, Eagleton re-

2 Terry Eagleton, *Materialism*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016).

3 Ibid., 12

4 Ibid., 23

turns us to more classical conceptions of soul and body, haughtily drawing Nietzschean battle lines between sense-experience and reason and rationality. In a brief chapter on Marx the usual move of privileging the apparent primordial quality of material appears: “Terms like ‘sense data’ and ‘sense impression’, not to speak of the quaint notion of concepts as images in one’s head, betray a reified view of what it is to be flesh and blood.”⁵ This sort of skepticism toward thought is often refreshing, but here it is all too apparent Eagleton has adopted some of the more caustic diagnoses of Friedrich Nietzsche, who, in Eagleton’s own words, was a “sworn enemy of pace, compassion, democracy, effeminacy, independent women and proletarian rabble... in love with everything cruel, severe, wicked, manly, malicious and domineering.”⁶

It is difficult to criticize Eagleton’s *Materialism*, except perhaps on stylistic grounds. At times Eagleton adopts a defensive posture (as with historical materialism), while at others he plays the role of the mediator, bringing together similarities in disparate thinkers. Wittgenstein makes an unanticipated appearance in the later chapters, where Eagleton blends a mix of his political outlook (based primarily on accounts of friends) with some light work on the man’s theories of language. Finding Eagleton developing the political outlook of his cast struck this reader as something of an oddity in a text on materialism, but he provides a somewhat compelling justification in his conception of historical materialism.

Special attention is given to the notion that philosophers, despite their clamoring for the universal, are ultimately merely interpreters of their present. It is easy to imagine a metaphysics tinged with the ontic concerns of an era, but to fully dispose of what appear to be, at least, the perennial concerns of philosophy is to demonstrate a romantic inclination toward a form of temporality which is radically contingent. A fine position, but even the stalwarts of nothingness, once they have done away with any existent meaning from the world, are forced to contend with repetition / eternal return. It is an oddity, too, for us to encounter

5 Ibid., 62

6 Ibid., 102

Eagleton’s *Marxism* adulating the universal while simultaneously raising the radically contingent temporal quality of philosophy to a primary position.⁷ Perhaps here we encounter a premiere problem of materialist thought: how does one distinguish between matter as ground and thought as materially derived yet lacking substance? Where does the body end and the “mind” begin? Eagleton provides something of an answer through Nietzsche and Marxism: “Marxism is among other things an account of how the human body, through those prostheses known as culture and technology, comes to ensnare itself in its own power and overreach itself.”⁸ And on Nietzsche: “Reason is interwoven with our practical projects, but those projects are not themselves purely rational affairs.”⁹ Language seems to be ahead of the body, perpetually speculating on the possible while the corporeal goes through the regular, grounded motions of the day-to-day. As with most material schemes the question of just what exactly is doing the apprehending of material is avoided, a dynamic of which Eagleton is very much aware. Speculative materialism, he remarks, “holds that there is no reason for the cosmos, and that to imagine otherwise is to fall prey to theism.”¹⁰ The time-worn trope of the social sciences makes its usual appearance: i.e.: that any speculative theory must be free from metaphysical possibility, lest the theory not be taken seriously.

Much of modern theory neglects its origins in Kant’s Copernican revolution—read as the rigorous questioning of the universal structures which give rise to thought, speculations on the various faculties of cognition, and the attempted placement of indeterminacy within the epistemological order. No doubt much of modern materialist thought causes post-Kantian philosophers to squirm, not for threatening their historically privileged position, but rather because very few speculative material systems have proven compelling enough to displace Kant and his lineage. A quick perusal through the literature of modern neuroscience shows a de-

7 cf. *Ibid.*, viii-ix.

8 *Ibid.*, 81

9 *Ibid.*, 56

10 *Ibid.*, 30

finitively Kantian quality. This, combined with dismissive readings of more speculative idealist philosophy have given much modern materialist theory an amateurish veneer. Eagleton, for his part, adopts the somewhat regressive position of the sometimes bullyish Nietzsche. To his credit, the later chapters on Wittgenstein demonstrate a more fluid understanding, but Eagleton is quick to move toward an explication of the philosopher's politics over a sustained meditation on the relation of language to material. It is in these later sections where Eagleton demonstrates an adequate ability to contribute to ongoing scholarly conversations, but one cannot help but yearn for the high-flying and exciting speculative philosophy of years past.