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This book deals with the first steps in the development of the materialist conception of the world. It is a sequel and supplement to an earlier work, *An Introduction to the Logic of Marxism*, which outlined the main ideas of the dialectical method of thought but made only incidental reference to the materialist foundations of the Marxist outlook. Here attention is centered upon the materialist side of Marxism.

In the first chapter the fundamental positions of materialism and idealism are presented in schematic form. These two viewpoints on the nature of reality, which were first projected by the Greeks, mark out the boundaries of philosophic thought. Today they stand in outright opposition to each other. But it has taken 2,500 years to work out the full ramifications of these philosophical positions, counterpose their essential differences clearly and sharply, and expose their total incompatibility.

It has taken no less time to bring the outlook of materialism to its present clarity and comprehensiveness. One of the principal propositions of dialectical materialism asserts that nothing can be fully understood unless and until its entire course of development has been disclosed and grasped. This demand of the Marxist method has to be applied to materialism itself.

The second chapter proposes to show that the materialist attitude is not primarily a matter of theory but of fact proved by practice. It is first of all solidly rooted in the circumstances of everyday life, in the interactions between people and their natural environment and in their interconnections with one another. Materialism arises from the common practices and productive activities of mankind. But there was, and remains to this day, an immense gap be-
between unreflecting behavior based upon unconscious materialist premises and a generalized theory corresponding to that practice and verified by scientific procedures. Toiling mankind went through hundreds of thousands of years to create the historical conditions required to bridge the gap between the naive realism of primitive life and the first formulation of a distinctively materialist method and world outlook in conceptual terms.

The bulk of this book traces the evolution of materialist theorizing from its emergence among the Ionian Greeks through its elaboration in Graeco-Roman society.

This should form the first section of a broader work which would go on to discuss the reasons for the 1,200-year exile of materialism from European thought following its Mediterranean birth; its transmission to the West through Moslem and Jewish thinkers; its fugitive appearances here and there during the Middle Ages; its revival in Western Europe as part of the rise of bourgeois society; and its career in the modern world culminating in the rounded development it has received in the teachings of Marxism.

Materialism cannot claim to have burst upon the world full-grown, like a religious revelation. It has been the product of a prolonged historical development in the field of ideas. First fashioned by the Greeks, it passed through complex processes of intellectual labor by many keen minds. Modern materialism is the outcome, the valid residue, of several thousand years of conscious inquiry into the most fundamental and far-reaching aspects of the universe we inhabit and our ways of knowing them.

To understand the most up-to-date means of agricultural production, with their tremendous powers, it is necessary to go far back to the crudest implements of our savage ancestors and then follow their developments step by step. The British Museum of Science in London houses a chronological series of agricultural implements used to prepare the soil for planting seeds. The exhibit starts with the digging sticks and hoes of the savages, moves forward to the animal-drawn plow and harrow, and ends with the tractor. The primitive digging stick, taken from the root or branch of a tree and
sharpened to a point, is far removed from the power-driven metal machinery on today’s farms. Yet it was the first in the sequence of tools which has revolutionized food and fiber production and elevated civilization to its present eminence.

These are implements of labor which, although proceeding from collective activity and individual thought, are material things used in the productive process. Philosophies are combinations of ideas which, while referring to objective realities, are essentially mental in character. However, the tools of thought, the concepts, used for intellectual production in the field of philosophy, have origins similar to the material means of production that men fabricate. These concepts have been created in accord with the evolution of man’s productive powers and out of his changing social relations. The first general ideas of a materialist character were very crude and hazy. But they contained the seeds of further growth and from them have come the more precise and versatile tools of thought, the more correct concepts, the clear and comprehensive formulations provided by the dialectical materialism of Marxism.

When we analyze the course of materialism from its beginnings among the Greeks up to today, we can distinguish three main stages in its unfolding and three fundamental types of materialist thought bound up with them. These are:

1. Ancient materialism, starting with Thales in the 6th Century B.C. and culminating with Lucretius in the 1st Century B.C.
2. Bourgeois materialism which originated in the 16th Century in Italy and concluded with Feuerbach in the 19th Century.
3. Dialectical materialism, the outlook of the industrial working class, created by Marx and Engels in the middle of the 19th Century and advanced since their death largely through their German and Russian disciples.

The first phase, from the naturalism of the Ionians to the mechanical atomism of Lucretius, brought out the basic principles of materialism but in elementary and restricted ways. The ancient materialists announced the themes which their successors were to elaborate. Both the dialectical and the mechanical aspects of their
thought were set forth—but neither received a well-rounded development.

As society and science marched forward, materialism grew more complex in its structure and richer in the content of its discoveries and thought determinations. The second stage of materialism, which grew out of the rise of capitalism, was predominantly mechanical in its world outlook and rigidly metaphysical in its mode of thought. Although the present form of materialism, associated with revolutionary socialism, acknowledges the validity of mechanics in its proper sphere, it is thoroughly evolutionary in its approach and dialectical in its method.

Within each of these extended periods of its development, materialism had many shadings and went through many meanderings. Materialism in antiquity, for example, passed through three major stages, each of them linked with a specific period in the history of Mediterranean society: the Ionian School of the 6th and 5th Centuries; the original Atomists of the 5th and 4th Centuries; and the Epicureans who flourished from the 4th Century B.C. to the 2nd Century A.D.

There were also transitional trends such as the currents of materialist thought among the Arabs who preserved some of the teachings of antiquity and thus prepared the rebirth of materialism in Western Europe, or like Feuerbach’s work which served as a bridge between the mechanical materialism of the 18th Century and dialectical materialism. But the three traditions mentioned are the historically dominant types which followed one another in the evolution of the materialist conception of reality.

The historian of materialism should try to show the social and scientific conditions which produced these three stages of materialist philosophy; the historical changes which transformed, outmoded and elevated them; and the identities and differences between them. One of the objectives of scientific study is to demonstrate, contrary to the skeptics, that history, including the history of philosophy, makes sense and has positive and progressive results. Despite its aberrations, repetitions and relapses, philosophy has had a logi-
cal line of growth which has been governed by the changing conditions of social and intellectual life in the Western world. So has the history of materialism which has been the most fruitful product of that growth and provides the best guide to understanding the universe around us.

This work does not deal with the whole stream of philosophy but concentrates upon one current in it; the principal stages in the early evolution of materialism and the decisive features of each stage. Even this account has limitations. It is restricted to Western philosophy. As the horizon of ancient history has widened, it has dawned upon the West that China and India produced parallel initiatives in rational speculation, logic and materialist thought. In *The First Philosophers* George Thomson has recently given a rewarding comparative study from the Marxist standpoint of such beginnings in China and Greece.

But these Eastern lines of philosophical pioneering have to be left unconsidered. They would take us too far afield from our principal purpose which is to follow the progress of materialism from its first appearance to its present fulfillment. For special historical reasons, the promising buds of philosophy in the East did not ripen and bear such fruit as in the West. Only the materialist tendencies and traditions in Western Europe have had a sustained course of development, despite interruptions and divagations. They alone culminated in the scientific school of Marxism, the highest form of materialism, which has become an indispensable acquisition of contemporary world culture.

This is a study of materialism in its evolution rather than a record of the materialists. Although the two are inseparable, they are not identical. Materialism as a world outlook has had an objective development greater than any one of its exponents, however profound their understandings and important their individual contributions.

But this is not a complete history of materialism in all its windings and complications. Such a detailed study may be necessary for scholars; it cannot serve as an introduction to the subject. Of course, socialist scholars should strive to acquire a profound knowledge of
the entire range of philosophy. But that task is different from the present one which is to set forth the main findings in this field as simply and clearly as possible.

There are special obstacles in the way of accomplishing either of these aims. Philosophy has largely been studied and its history written not by materialists but by idealistically-inclined scholars. These authors have often disregarded, minimized or distorted the ideas and roles of the materialists in the making of Western thought. Others, directed by a purely rationalistic view of the history of philosophy, have given extremely inadequate accounts of the materialist thinkers, severing the development of their ideas from the specific historical circumstances and social antagonisms which nurtured and formed them.

This unsatisfactory state of affairs is emphasized by the scarcity of treatises on the history of materialism. There are many histories of philosophy but very few general treatments of its materialist expressions. To be sure, numerous excellent expositions of the fundamental ideas of materialism and separate aspects of its development have been written. But the only comprehensive account of materialism in English I am familiar with is the three-volume History of Materialism originally delivered as a course of lectures at the University of Bonn and first published in 1865 by the German professor of philosophy Frederick Lange. This work, while still useful, is pitifully deficient and misleading.

Lange himself was not a materialist; he was a semi-idealist of the Kantian school who attempted through his history to correct the shortcomings of materialism as he understood—or, more correctly, misunderstood—them. Marx and Engels knew his work and criticized it sharply. Lenin correctly characterized it as a “falsified” history of materialism. Yet no better has been written to supersede it almost a century later.

The indispensable guides to understanding the doctrines of materialism and its history are contained in the works of the founders of Marxism from their earliest writings on philosophical questions in the 1840’s to Engels’ final letters on historical materi-
alism in 1895. The best expositions of Marxist philosophy are still to be found in the writings of Plekhanov. Plekhanov educated the entire generation of Russian Marxists who led the Bolshevik Revolution and all his essays on theoretical problems still sparkle with insight and information.

His most extensive work is *In Defense of Materialism* which Lenin praised as “a remarkably logical and valuable exposition of dialectical materialism.” This starts with the French materialists of the second half of the 18th Century and concludes with an explanation of the views of dialectical materialism. That served Plekhanov’s polemical purposes at the time against the Russian subjectivist school of sociology. But it restricted the scope of his treatment to the culminating episodes in the development of bourgeois materialism in the 18th and 19th Centuries and its passage from the high points of that materialism over to scientific socialism.

The English Marxists, headed by George Thomson and Benjamin Farrington, heavily influenced by the official Communist movement, have made notable contributions to our understanding of materialism in antiquity which I have drawn upon. Farrington has illuminated the influence of technology upon Greek science; Thomson has set forth the roles of commodity production, money circulation and the democratic revolution in the formation of Greek philosophy.

But there remains an unfilled need for a connected account of the whole span and sequence of materialist thought. This is a small installment on that account in a field where so much has still to be explored and charted.

* 

One other noteworthy difficulty stands in the way of setting forth the development of materialism. Philosophizing is a highly specialized function of social activity; it is only one aspect of the complex of civilized culture. Materialism, one of the two major trends of philosophy, has coexisted and pre-existed in other forms
than that of abstract philosophical theory.

Materialism flows from the practical activities of society and pervades many departments of human life. In fact, a generalized statement of a materialist outlook and a correspondingly well-defined method of procedure is much rarer than concrete materialistic attitudes manifested in politics, law, manners and morals, craftsmanship, the arts and sciences. The formulation of a materialist philosophy comes about as the highest expression of such tendencies in other spheres of vital action.

The urge for its expression is so powerful that materialism can even be banished from official philosophy and still assert itself elsewhere. Because of its heretical implications materialism was anathema, for example, in medieval Europe where the theology of the Catholic Church held philosophy captive. Yet the materialist impulse, blocked from direct formulation in theoretical conclusions, welled out through other channels.

It was manifested in the irreverence toward the clergy expressed artistically in the French popular tales called fabliaux, in the wood carvings on choir stalls and gargoyles on cathedrals, in the literary works of Boccaccio and Chaucer which made fun of priests and depicted monks as fornicators, liars, gluttons, drunkards, idlers and hypocrites.

Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales exemplifies how the materialist devil creeps in despite official bans. Materialism was as remote from Chaucer’s intentions as it was absent from the philosophy of 14th Century England. At the end of his poem the devout Catholic asks Christ in his great mercy “to forgive his sins,” among them his “writings of worldly vanities.”

However Chaucer’s critical attitude toward high dignitaries of the Church in his Tales betrayed a latent materialism. This comes out most plainly in his portraits of the Nunne Prioress and the Monk-Prior in the Prologue. The poet depicts the Nunne Prioress as a lady preoccupied with such earthly things as cultivated speech, fine manners, fashionable clothes, gay jewelry beneath the veneer of her ecclesiastical vocation. Her rosary is tricked in green with a
golden broach inscribed: *Love Conquers All*. He slyly insinuates that this motto is not focused exclusively upon heavenly adorations.

His “fat and personable” Monk and greedy Friar have equally worldly concerns. Chaucer exposes the gap between the real features of these clerical personages and the pretensions of their offices. And he accentuates the contrast through his portrait of the poor Parson who not only taught Christ’s creed but “followed it himself before.”

The point is that the poet’s realistic observation of the social types around him in medieval England was animated by an unconscious but no less influential materialist spirit. The criticism of the Church hierarchy, though far from formulation in general terms, was nevertheless present in the penetrating vision of the creative artist. He, together with Langland and Wyclif, heralded the protests against the abuses of that omnipresent feudal institution which were to gather force from many sides and explode in the unrestrainable outburst of anti-Catholic thought and feeling which tore the British Church from Rome less than two centuries later.

Descending from the more rarefied regions of religion and literature in the Middle Ages, we can discern an even more powerful outburst of materialist sentiment in the political arena of North America five centuries later. Tom Paine was not a poet; he was the principal propagandist for the first successful colonial revolution of modern times. He was neither a Catholic nor an atheist but a deist, that is, a Protestant rationalist. But his religious beliefs stopped short at “the divine origins and right of kings.”

In order to justify the colonists’ struggle for independence and the rightness of republicanism, he was impelled not only to ridicule and reject the godlike pretentions of the monarchists but to turn them upside down. He castigated the role of King George III as a spawn of the devil and a curse upon mankind. This was a materialist assault upon the theological supports of royalism, inspired by the political aims of the revolutionary cause.

Similar contradictions between anti-materialist theory and materialist practice can be observed closer to home in our own time.
among the working people. A religious-minded worker, for example, can go to church Sunday and nod assent to the preacher’s talk that all men are brothers, God is their father, and the things of this earth count for nothing compared to the rewards of a heavenly hereafter. The next day he can belie all these pious sentiments by going on strike for a raise in wages against a boss who may belong to the same denomination. He will fight scabs and police and carry on the class struggle very materialistically in his own way. His most general ideas can be completely at odds with all these practical actions in defense of his material welfare.

As we see, materialist practice does not always march in step with materialist thinking. Their relations have been complex and often contradictory throughout civilization. But in these pages we are mostly concerned with studying materialism as it has gained expression in its most generalized and self-conscious form through the philosophers from Thales to Marx.

Why has the history of materialism been so neglected and distorted? The materialist philosophy was born in opposition to the archaic religious outlook of an agricultural aristocracy by the new forces of a commercial slave society. It has had to contend for “living space” against conservative master classes ever since.

In Greece, not only materialism but the mere exercise of methodical reasoning, directed as it had to be against old religious ideas and sanctified customs and institutions, was dangerous. Many Greek philosophers suffered persecution, were expelled from their communities, and even put to death for their teachings. In the Athens of Pericles, Anaxagoras was condemned for irreligion and forced to flee for having said that the sun was a “glowing mass of stone” and the moon was of earthly nature. Didn’t the priesthood teach that the sun and the moon were divine beings and wasn’t religion one of the means for holding the masses in check?

It was even more perilous to profess materialist ideas in the
Middle Ages under penalty of being condemned for heresy like Roger Bacon, excommunicated from the Church or killed. Such was the fate inflicted on Giordano Bruno as late as the 17th Century.

Materialist-minded thinkers were hounded and their ideas anathematized throughout the bourgeois epoch. Hundreds of cases could be cited from the expulsion of Descartes from France through Spinoza’s excommunication from the Jewish community of Amsterdam to the attacks upon Hobbes and Joseph Priestley in England. Not all of these persecuted philosophers were thoroughgoing materialists. But there was enough of a materialist bent in their criticisms of the prevailing religious and idealist doctrines to render them suspect of unorthodoxy and susceptible to punishment.

Up to our time materialist thinkers and their adherents have almost always and everywhere been in a minority. Some have been forced to lead a hole-and-corner existence and often to withhold the full implications of their ideas. They have been the oppressed tendency in the field of philosophy. However extensive its influence has been at times in certain departments, the materialist outlook has never yet ruled society or the intellectual world as a whole. Nevertheless, the ideas of the materialist scholars and scientists have been among the greatest motive forces of ideological and scientific progress. They have inspired epoch-making achievements in natural science from the broaching of the atomic hypothesis by the Greeks to Darwin’s theory of organic evolution.

Despite all this, the materialist viewpoint is still unpopular throughout the Western world, and not least in the United States. Materialism is disfavored not only because it is the principal theoretical weapon against supernaturalism, spiritualism and obscurantism of all kinds. It is so vehemently fought nowadays because the materialist philosophy has become so closely associated with the Socialist movement and Marxism, with the struggles of the workers for liberation from capitalism, with political opposition to the established order.

The struggle between materialism and its opponents which began over 2,500 years ago is still being waged around us. The de-
fenders of capitalism from the universities and churches to the agen-
cies of mass propaganda exert persistent efforts to ward off the pen-
etration of materialist thinking. Here is one typical instance.

The Luce publication, Life, the most widely circulated magazine
in the United States, is one of the most vigilant participants in the
anti-materialist crusade. In 1956 it published a series on The Epic of
Man which presented the latest findings of science on the origins of
civilization. It was impossible to make such a report without un-
dermining, at least by implication, orthodox Christianity. If, as the
theory of evolution undeniably demonstrates, mankind rose up out
of the animal kingdom, then what credence can be given to Adam
and Eve and similar fables of man’s divine parentage?

The editors hastened to steer their readers away from any mate-
rialist heresy. “The materialist cosmogony,” they wrote, “has proven
just as unsatisfactory as a literal reading of Genesis, or as Ptolemy’s
earth-centered welkin, or as the clock-work universe of Newton.
And the secret of man’s origin and purpose on this planet remains
no more and no less mysterious than before.” All the conclusions of
science, that is to say, tell us nothing more than the Israelite tribes
knew about the development of the world and the destiny of man-
kind!

Having thus disposed of “the materialist cosmogony”—and oblit-
erated the results of science in the bargain—the editors point to the
emergence and activity of “conscience” as the decisive proof of man’s
divine nature. They counterpose eternal morality to the conclusions
of modern science based upon the method of materialism. The theo-
retical arguments of these apologists for the existence of God are as
weak as their financial resources and influence are immense.

But one thing is plain. These defenders of religion and capital-
ism regard materialism as the main ideological enemy to be over-
come even at the cost of scientific suicide. These brains at work in
skyscrapers fall into line with the adversaries of materialism in an-
cient Greece, the heresy-hunters of Catholic Europe, and the Bap-
tist bumpkins who tried to ban the teachings of Darwinism in Ten-
nessee decades ago.
The issues between the materialists and anti-materialists have immense practical importance and are far from being settled in real life. This gives our theoretical study its social and political purpose.

In this prolonged and unfinished contest for supremacy between materialism and anti-materialism, science and religion, enlightenment and obscurantism, there is no doubt which will eventually be victorious. Although materialism does not command the field in philosophy or in everyday affairs, on the historical scale it has been gaining and consolidating its ground. It has rich traditions, an ever-growing content and the most diversified applications. It operates today upon much firmer foundations than in the past and has far keener weapons with which to combat its adversaries and solve the problems of science and society.

Materialism receives constant confirmation from the onward march and verified results of technology, the sciences and the developments of industry. It is further fortified by the progress of the class struggle and the successes of the international workers movement. It derives the most powerful social support and fresh sources of replenishment from the activities of the masses in their quest for a better life.

But its biggest battles lie ahead. As in its infancy, materialism has still to contend for its rightful place as the outlook of emancipated humanity. Its definitive triumph in the domain of thought is still to come. May this introduction to its early history help bring that conquest closer.

George Novack
Every philosophy has dealt with two questions: what does reality consist of and how does it originate? And, after the earliest Greeks, every philosopher has had to answer the further question: how is reality known? The answers given to these fundamental questions have determined the nature of the philosophy and the position of the philosopher.

Almost from the beginning of philosophy there have been two principal viewpoints on these problems: the materialist and the idealist. In his pioneering *History of Philosophy* Hegel declared that “throughout all time there has only been one Philosophy, the contemporary differences of which constitute the necessary aspects of the one principal.” To be sure, in distinction from other forms of intellectual activity the function of philosophizing has maintained certain common features which give it continuity from the Greeks to the present day. But this process of generalizing thought has been at bottom a unity of divergent, and ultimately opposing, ways of rationally explaining the universe. The materialist method stands at one pole; the idealist at the other.

What are the essential principles of materialism which mark it
off from all other tendencies in philosophy? What are its distinctive features which enable us to recognize a materialist thinker and to classify a person as reasoning along materialist lines? Let us list them in a very summary manner.

1. The basic proposition of materialism refers to the nature of reality, regardless of the existence of mankind. It states that matter is the primordial substance, the essence, of reality. Everything comes from matter and its movements and is based upon matter. This thought is expressed in the phrase: “Mother Nature.” This signifies in materialist terms that nature is the ultimate source of everything in the universe from the galactic systems to the most intimate feelings and boldest thoughts of homo sapiens.

2. The second aspect of materialism covers the relations between matter and mind. According to materialism, matter produces mind and mind never exists apart from matter. Mind is the highest product of material development and animal organization and the most complex form of human activity.

3. This means that nature exists independently of mind but that no mind can exist apart from matter. The material world existed long before mankind or any thinking being came into existence. As Feuerbach said: “The true relation of thought to Being is this; Being is subject, thought is predicate. Thought springs from Being, but Being does not spring from thought.”

4. This precludes the existence of any God, gods, spirits, souls or other immaterial entities which are alleged to direct or influence the operations of nature, society and the inner man.

These are the elementary principles of the materialist outlook. By these signs shall you know a materialist or conversely, a non-materialist, whether or not that person knows what kind of thinker he really is.

What the materialist principles signify can be further clarified by contrasting them with a quite different way of interpreting the world: the idealist philosophy. One of the dialectical modes of explanation is to show how a thing is related to its own opposite. For example, to understand what a female is also involves knowing what
makes a male and how he functions in the cycle of reproduction. If we want to find out what a capitalist is, we have to know the makeup and development of the wage-worker as well. Only then can we comprehend the essential nature of the capitalist system which is based upon the relations between these two interdependent yet antagonistic social classes.

The philosophical opposite of materialism is idealism. These two modes of thought reciprocally define and limit each other in the province of philosophy. Therefore, unless we know what idealism is, we cannot fully understand the positions of materialism, and vice versa.

What does idealism (that is, consistent idealism) maintain?

1. The basic element of reality is not matter but mind or spirit. Everything else, in the last analysis, comes from mind or spirit and depends upon its operations.

2. Mind generates material things; behind or before the material world lurks the spirit or mind creating it. Nature may be the mother but there is a God-Father who transcends her.

3. Thus mind or spirit exists before and apart from matter. Spirit is the abiding reality; matter no more than a passing phase or illusion.

4. Mind or spirit is identical with or emanates from the divine, or at least leaves open the possibility of supernatural existence, power and interference.

It should be noted that the basic propositions of these two types of thought are absolutely opposed to each other. One must be right and the other wrong. Both cannot be correct. Whoever maintains consistently the position of the one is inescapably led to conclusions exactly contrary to the other.

Materialism and idealism are the two main tendencies, lines, camps in the field of philosophy, just as the capitalist and working classes are the two principal and decisive social forces in contemporary society. This does not mean that there are no other viewpoints in philosophy. In fact, the history of philosophy exhibits many combinations of ideas and methods which occupy a spectrum of
positions between these extremes. Although such shadings of thought cannot be unconditionally grouped under either clear-cut category, their positions can be appraised only by reference to them.

Let us give three examples of these intermediate and amorphous types of philosophizing. There are agnostics who cannot decide whether an external reality actually exists apart from ourselves and whether it is possible to know it. They remain suspended between materialism and idealism, in so far as they remain agnostic.

Closely associated with them is the theory of knowledge devised by the famous German philosopher Kant. He taught that “things-in-themselves” existed as objective realities. This was in accord with materialism. But then he stated that humans could never reach or know them; all we could know were phenomena or “things as they appeared to us.” This conclusion shoved Kant back among the idealists.

Many American pragmatists refuse to take a firm stand on whether or not nature exists independently of human experience. They are not sure whether experience necessarily arises out of nature and after it, or whether nature emerges from experience. These wobblers give all sorts of evasive answers when confronted with this alternative. Although such pragmatists claim to have overcome the opposition between the materialist and idealist standpoints, they actually dodge the decisive issues between them in the theory of knowledge.

All these types of thinking are confused and inconsistent in respect to the fundamental problems posed by the nature of reality and the theory of knowledge. When their adherents are pressed against the wall and obliged to abandon their indefiniteness on these key questions, they usually end up in alignment with idealism.

In addition to philosophers who hold essentially eclectic views, we shall meet many thinkers who deserve to be classified among the materialists or idealists because the chief content of their thought proceeds in the one direction or the other, even though their positions on a number of subsidiary points exhibit contrary tendencies.

But we shall be able to analyze and understand all such complex
and inconsistent formations in the history of philosophy only if we firmly grasp the characteristic ideas of the decisive opponents: materialism and idealism. These two viewpoints do not exhaust the field of philosophy. But they dominate it. They reciprocally determine not only the main course of its development but the real positions of the schools oscillating between them. They provide the guiding lines which enable us to make our way surely through the maze of philosophical opinions and controversy and not get lost.

The elementary principles of materialism have been the same from their first appearance in antiquity to the present day. But the history of materialism has not been the record of a dull repetition of a set of abstract principles which sprang forth fully-grown and were then periodically rediscovered and reasserted in their pristine form. Materialism has passed through a process of genuine growth from the first crude formulations of its essential propositions through its subsequent ramifications to its latest presentation. Materialist philosophy has not only changed its forms but considerably diversified its content and amplified its scope from one stage of its advancement to the next.

Extremely varied superstructures have been built upon the philosophical premises of materialism during the past 2,500 years. The materialism of one epoch displays marked differences from the materialism of another. There are, for example, pronounced differences between the naive evolutionary naturalism of the Milesians of the 6th Century B.C. and the complex mechanical atomism of Lucretius in the 1st Century A.D. Even within the Atomist school itself there are distinct differences; the Lucretian interpretation of Atomism contains many novel observations which are lacking in Democritus and has lopped off some dead branches of ideas.

The dissimilarities between ancient and modern schools of materialist thought are still greater. All materialists have held that matter in motion is the basic reality. But at different times they have put forward different conceptions of matter, different conceptions of motion, and different views of their interconnections.

Consider, for example, the following four definitions of motion,
two in ancient and two in modern times. To the Ionians the chief property of material movement consisted in the manner of its coming into being and passing away. The Atomists stressed the displacement of material particles in the void, or empty space.

The bourgeois materialists made the simple mechanical motion of masses and their external impact into the keystone of their world conception, reducing all other modes of motion to that one. Finally, the dialectical materialists have a far more complex and correct definition of motion as the process of universal transformation in which matter acquires the most diversified qualities of motion from the mechanical type to the mental. Any one of these specific modes of motion can be converted into another under the proper material-historical conditions. And there are undoubtedly important aspects of material motion which remain to be discovered.

A similar diversity can be discerned in the views on the nature of matter and its structure brought forward at successive stages of materialist thought. These range from the simple conception of primary substance (physis) among the Greeks as composed of one or multiple elements through the Hobbesian conception of substance as extended body to the modern evolutionary concept of matter embracing unrestricted determinations of material existence from subatomic particles and galactic systems to living, feeling, thinking humans.

Passing from nature to society, we can note an equally wide variation in the historical outlooks, social standpoints and moral codes of the materialist schools. Although both the ancient and modern schools rested on a materialist conception of the world and man's place in it, the social orientation of the Epicureans, for example, stood at the opposite pole from that of Marxism. The Epicureans counseled submission to nature, withdrawal from worldly concerns and political strife, the practice of contemplation. Its dominant tone was passive, restrictive, pessimistic. As against this philosophy of resignation, dialectical materialism is aggressive toward nature, urging its progressive alteration for the sake of human welfare; revolutionary in its intervention in social and political affairs; and places
practical activity above theoretical contemplation. It has an energetic, expansive, optimistic and endlessly reconstructive outlook.

The striking differences between these two historical forms of materialism stem not only from the different levels of social and scientific development in which they originated and functioned but from the very different class forces they served. Epicureanism emerged in the transition from the Greek city-state to the Alexandrian and Roman Empires; it expressed the recoil of upper and middle-class elements from the disintegration of the old community life and their inability to find secure and stable places for themselves in the new cosmopolitan regimes. The Epicureans were suspended between two worlds: one dying, the other repellent to them. They had no creative function to play in either system.

Marxism, on the other hand, is the ideological instrument of the industrial working class which, while also caught in a declining social system, is itself the bearer and constructor of a new and higher order and is going forward to effect the transition with social confidence and theoretical understanding.

This particular contrast shows that, while materialism is the most correct and progressive of philosophies, it has not invariably been associated with the most progressive social strata, as some commentators assert. There is no simple, direct, one-to-one correspondence between world views and social dynamics. Once in existence, the ideas of materialism could be adapted to the needs of various social forces at specific stages of their careers. Hobbes, the monarchist, was a materialist during the same period of English revolution in the 17th Century that plebeian leaders of the Levellers like Overton also projected materialist ideas. These represented two contemporary but opposing social varieties of the same philosophical position, one aristocratic, the other democratic in affiliation.

All the materialist schools have developed lopsidedly. At one end the Milesians were the first to define the concept of nature—but they did not touch upon the problems of knowledge. At the other end the founders of Marxism probed the dynamics of social evolution to their ultimate source but were not able to do as much with
the laws of nature. Engels had to leave unfinished his brilliant beginnings in the *Dialectics of Nature*.

What one school failed to deal with adequately, its successor took up and even overdeveloped. The one-sidedness of each stage had to be corrected by the further advances of scientific and philosophical thought, leading in the end to the present many-sided conception.

Despite their unavoidable inadequacies, each of the great schools brought forth new aspects of materialist thought in its own way and at its own time. Each contributed essential elements to the creation of the whole by deepening the understanding of nature, society, the human mind and their interrelations, thus producing progressively more penetrating degrees of insight into reality.

Not the least of these insights was the recognition that materialism is basically incompatible with idealism. The clear-cut opposition between these two standpoints set forth in such categorical terms at the beginning of this chapter was not evident at the birth of philosophy. This understanding too is an historical achievement, the upshot of 2,500 years of social and scientific investigation and of internal conflicts in the domain of philosophy itself. Even today the necessity for maintaining this opposition is denied by muddleheads who have an interest, often unconscious, in perpetuating confusion about their real relations. To do this is to erase the progressive results of centuries of intellectual labor and regress to the infancy of philosophy.

The differences between the materialist and idealist standpoints and methods were well known and often discussed by the later Greek thinkers. But the respective positions of the opposing camps had yet to be worked out in full detail. The substantial differences between them were sometimes submerged and obscured in the common offensive of the entire enterprise of critical and rational thought against old religious ideas and customary institutions.

Still more important was the fact that materialism required the coexistence, conflict and contributions of its idealist antagonist in order to elicit its own full potential and acquire a comprehensive application. Idealism did more than simply prod materialism on-
ward by criticism from the outside. The enduring insights which its exponents from Socrates to Hegel obtained into this or that sector of reality were later incorporated into the structure of materialism.

No single school has monopolized the discovery of new ideas in the evolution of philosophy, especially in its most creative periods. Although the Greek materialists saw the essential reality of the objective world more correctly than the idealists, their views were defective in other respects. On the other hand, almost every idealist school from the Eleatics to the Skeptics and Stoics added something new and valuable to the understanding of reality, despite their errors on fundamental issues.

On the whole the idealists contributed far more to the theory of knowledge than to the theory of nature. But even in this latter field they offered notable innovations. While the Atomists first conceived that nature consisted of small particles moving in a void whose combinations and recombinations made up the passing show of events, the Pythagoreans first pictured nature as composed of mathematical relations and measurable quantities. Both views were valid and valuable. But in ancient society they remained distinct from each other and were pushed to their limits by separate trends of thought.

It was not until the 17th Century, when the development of mechanics coincided with the revival of atomism through Galileo and Gassendi, that these two hitherto antagonistic approaches to natural phenomena were brought together in a novel synthesis under new historical conditions. Their mutual fructification finally flowered into Dalton’s atomic hypothesis which revolutionized the foundations of chemistry.

A similar union of previously unconnected and opposing lines of thought took place in the development of 19th Century European philosophy when the dialectical logic formulated and systematized by the arch-idealist Hegel was detached from its idealist cocoon and integrated into materialism by the originators of Marxism. The opposition between idealism and materialism adumbrated among the Greeks was much more forcibly manifested when mate-
Materialism came forward again with the rise of bourgeois society and acquired a sharp stamp with the struggles against medievalism and the advance of the sciences from the 16th to the 19th Centuries. This is demonstrated by the fact that materialism was then given a durable name of its own which unmistakably distinguished it from all rivals. The word materialism first gained currency in the epoch of Robert Boyle, the illustrious English physicist and chemist, who mentions “materialists” along with “naturalists” in his essay written in 1674 called *The Excellence and Grounds of the Mechanical Hypothesis*. Although Boyle was a pious Protestant, he gave an impetus to scientific materialism through his exposition of the mechanical conception of nature.

The term was taken up by the German philosopher Leibnitz in his *Reply to the Thoughts of (Pierre) Bayle*, the French skeptic, written in 1702. Leibnitz, who was himself an outstanding idealist, consciously counterposed idealism to materialism as the main contenders in philosophy. He traced the opposition between the mechanical type of thought in natural science and his own all the way back to the Greeks and saw it foreshadowed in the contending doctrines of Epicurus, the materialist, and Plato, the idealist.

The opposition was made still sharper by Bishop Berkeley from the side of idealism and then by Kant, who occupied an in-between position. It was finally nailed down by the materialist criticism of the idealists conducted by Diderot, D’Holbach and their colleagues in the latter half of the 18th Century, continuing with Feuerbach in Germany, and concluding with the Marxists of the next century.

In the course of these chapters we shall follow the movement of philosophy in more specific detail and see precisely how and why materialism and idealism, implicitly opposed from their birth, were hatched from the shell of philosophy amidst the class struggles of Greece, acquired their definite traits, came to grips with each other for the first time and strove for supremacy. Now, in our own time, they stand arrayed against each other in a mortal combat for complete possession of the provinces of rational thought and scientific knowledge.