

Metaphysical atomism and the attraction of materialism.

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I'm offering here only some very broad brush remarks - not a fully worked through paper. So apologies for the sketchy nature of this. But I am interested in hearing how these kinds of themes strike philosophers from other traditions and philosophers with more knowledge of history than I have.

Some say 'Only the material exists' - others say 'No - there are also immaterial things.' And both sides take the issue to be important. But what is the debate about? How are we to understand it? (There are many versions of this debate. I am talking about a way it has been understood recently. Is it the same thing which is at issue in different times and places? That is something it would be good to talk about, but which I do not address in this paper.)

I shall explore the idea that there are two contrasted metaphysical pictures, different accounts of what reality consists in, against the background of which we may find ourselves thinking about 'immaterialism'. One is logical or metaphysical atomism, the other something of a more pragmatist character. I shall suggest that the debate between materialism and immaterialism develops differently, depending on which metaphysical picture we are working with.

But before we get into the two pictures, I should explain one thing which I shall assume in what follows about the debate between materialism and immaterialism. As I am taking it, the central issue at stake is what status we should give to claims of various kinds, which we divide roughly by their kind of content.

(A) The sun contains at least 10 hydrogen atoms
Water boils at 100 C

on the one hand and

(B) Robert chose to eat toast this morning
Justice is of value to human beings

on the other.

Materialists think that statements like (A) are in very good standing, pick out what exists - the sun, water etc. - and say how things are with them. It is quite clear, they think, that there are things made of stuff which occupy space and time and have a nature described to us by physics, chemistry and the like. And the existence of much of this stuff and the things it makes, or it is made of, does not involve the existence of agency, purposes, values. (The stuff and things can exist even if no agents exist and no one pursues any valuable things.) Also materialists are somewhat suspicious of statements like (B) - about

agents and about things they might value. They think statements like (B) may not be in such good standing - may not pick out what exists, or say how things are with it. If the statements are in good standing it is only because the agents and their values are 'reducible' to the material. And probably they are not so reducible. And hence statements like (B) may need to be construed as doing something other than saying how things are with reality.

By contrast immaterialists (as we'll understand them for purposes of this paper) think that statements like (B) are in just as good standing as statements like (A). There is no contrast to be made as to the reality of what is spoken of, the possibility of truth and such like, in the two areas. So immaterialists hold that there are agents, for whom things can go well or ill, who can have good reasons for doing what they do, namely that something valuable is to be secured. And immaterialists hold that these statements, about agents and their doing well or not well, have their own subject matter, are not to be reduced to, revealed as shorthand versions of, claims about the material.

There is another way of taking the material/immaterial distinction, on which the issue is whether there are things like magnetic fields or gravitational forces, as well as masses of tangible solid or squishy or liquid stuff. That's an interesting question - in what sense magnetic fields exist as well as lumps of iron. But it's not what I'm talking about. On the material/immaterial distinction, as I am taking it, magnetic fields are part of the material world.

But I will have a bit to say about how the two ways of construing the distinction can get run together. To many people, in the Western tradition at least, it has seemed that we can accommodate the robust reality of agents and values, and the idea that they are their own subject matter and are not reducible to the material, only by postulating 'ghost stuff' or some other 'weird' items - things like magnetic fields in not being solid, but even odder - because intrinsically, of their nature, they bring with them agency and value.

But let's leave all that on one side for now. And let's go back to thinking about our two fundamental metaphysical pictures.

Much metaphysics in the western tradition either explicitly argues for, or takes for granted, metaphysical atomism - a view captured in a particularly gripping way by the Wittgenstein of the Tractatus, when he says that the world is the totality of facts, not of things.

Metaphysical atomism is, then, the idea that there is some nature which the world has in itself - that is independently of us and our conceptualising it. It is self-slicing as Putnam vividly puts it. So reality exists in the form of many very small independent molecules of fact, each of which is constituted from some fact-building atomic components (space-time points, bare particulars, universals, relations, tropes - what have you) contingently stuck together into whatever facts there are. Familiarly, this view of what the world is made up of (that it is a totality of facts) goes naturally with a correspondence theory of truth. A true claim is one which maps isomorphically onto some fact, or some collection

of facts.

Pressure to reductionism of a strong, conceptual kind, is built into this metaphysical picture, for any claim we want to see as factual. Facts, on this picture, are quasi-conceptual items and can only be built of other facts, because the components of which facts are made are all there is to the substance of the world. So if some sentence purports to report a fact and is to be in good standing, then there has got to be the right kind of stuff or components, supplied by the atoms in the molecules, to underpin the existence of the alleged fact.

So what are these facts? For most philosophers sympathetic to this view, the kinds of facts that come to mind are likely to be these: that a force of such and such magnitude is operative at so and so point in space-time, that such and such a volume of space contains so and so many atoms of hydrogen, and the like. In other words, a commonly made assumption is that the facts we discover, when we probe into what the world is like in itself, are mind-free and value-free. (This is so for 20th analytic phil. Is it so earlier?)

Why should that be so? Doubtless there are many reasons in intellectual history. But here is one, perhaps.

This fundamental drive of this metaphysics is against admitting into ontology things of a holistic nature, that is things which are intrinsically complex, phenomena where we have to recognise inextricably interdependent elements, which cannot exist in isolation from each other.

Merely conceptual interdependence, and hence conceptual holism, will not be worrying to the atomist. For example, he or she can admit that the concept of a brick is the concept of something which cannot exist without other bricks and without walls. But this does not shake the idea that reality consists of many independent molecules of fact, of which the existence of this brick might, for example, be one. This is because it is a merely contingent matter (on this picture) that this baked lump of clay, which I call a brick, is in fact accompanied in existence by other such baked lumps, which are assembled into some wall. The brick, the baked lump of clay, could exist all on its own. If it did it would not be correctly describable as a brick, but it would exist and be itself.

But metaphysical holism, complexity and interdependence which are built into the nature of things themselves, and do not arise from contingent relations of things to other things, is a problem for this metaphysics. The metaphysically holistic is precisely that which cannot be reductively unpacked into atoms, molecules and their relations.

(3) Arguably agency and value are holistic notions. I cannot argue this in detail here, but there is some intuitive force in the claim, I suggest. We can agree that a wall can be disassembled into a pile of bricks. But we have no idea at all of what a part of mind or part of a thought would be.

And if this is right then it is not a surprise that atomism has a problem with agency and

value.

(4) So atomism has real trouble fitting us and our concerns into the world. But it is not obligatory as a metaphysical view. Indeed it brings with it a great raft of problems and may well be incoherent. There is (as already noted) the problem of locating ourselves and our concerns in the picture. But quite independently of that we may ask (with the Wittgenstein of the early part of the Investigations): what would it be for our minds to latch on to these atoms, to discern the slicing principles? We can also ask: What could be the nature of the atoms, such that when they come together there is real existence?

So here is an alternative metaphysical picture. It is a sort of pragmatism, not of a crude reductive or empirical kind, but of a more nuanced kind. Think this way instead, it says. The world is not self-slicing, rather it just exists, in all its enormous richness. To say it is not self-slicing does not mean that it is a fog, about which we can say anything we like. On the contrary, if we come to it with some particular claim to test, it may well render back to us a pretty clear verdict. And that verdict may be objective, in the sense that anyone else judging on the same issue can only be right by making that same claim.

The point of saying that the world is not self-slicing is rather to stress that the world does not dictate to us any concepts which we must use if our attempts to think about it are to be successful, to result in true judgments. Instead we should picture it as open to various conceptualisations which we can try out on it (and of course on ourselves also, since we are part of it), as we go about living our lives. Our concepts do not represent our attempts to latch on to the atoms/slicing principles. Rather they are our devices to help us live, cope with the world. Any concept is an aspect of a life and is shaped by the interests of the agent/community of agents living that life.

So the important question for us, in our reflective moments when we think about our concepts, is whether the world is hospitable to them, whether carrying on with the life which using those concepts is part of, is working out for us, and seems likely to go on working out. In summary, concepts are in good order (i.e. are such that judgments using them can be true or false, do correctly represent what is there, are fit for reporting facts) if the life using them works out ok - and would continue to work out ok if pushed as far as we can make sense of pushing it.

So - are there material objects? For sure there are. The life of using the concept of material object works out. Indeed it is the only life which we have the remotest idea how to live.

Are there other minds? Or to put this slightly differently, are there reflective agents, of whom I am one and of whom those around me are others? For sure, says this view. The life of applying the concept of reflective agent to myself and others works out. For example, I expect of myself that I will confront various questions about what is so and what to do and that I will arrive at answer to them, sometimes at least, by thinking about the issue in question and discovering considerations which favour one answer over

another. And this expectation is borne out. Also I expect when I offer remarks to others, about what is so, about we might sensibly do, that I will get back responses which I can read as expressions of their points of view, which are sometimes surprising to me, open up new ideas, make me aware of considerations and options I had not previously considered. And this too is how things work out. And I expect that searching for common understanding with others will work - and indeed it does.

It is not the case (as it is with the concept of material object) that a life using the concept of reflective agent is the only life a person could live. There are lives, for example those of the severely autistic, which (or so it seems) have little or no place for exercising concepts of other agents. But on nobody's account of 'fact' does the inability of some thinkers to recognise a certain sort of fact show that there are no such facts. The point is rather that for one who is equipped to exercise the concept, then the world sustains, is hospitable to, its exercise. And on that account the existence of agents, together with the ideas that they can flourish or suffer, can find things fit their viewpoint or not, is as solid as any fact could be.

So pragmatism has much less difficulty than atomism in fitting us and our concerns into the world.

(5) If debates about 'immaterialism' are debates about the status of agency and value (the 'materialist' wanting to downgrade or debunk and the 'immaterialist' to defend), then the 'immaterialist' would do well to avoid metaphysical atomism and to work in a different framework.

If we operate in a pragmatist framework we'll be open to the thought that the existence of minds and values might require there to be living bodies. We can say Aristotelian sounding things about needing form and matter. But we'll be able to reject the reductive pressures which come in when acknowledging the necessity of embodiment comes combined with an atomistic metaphysics.

But what if we are really gripped by the self-slicing, atomist, picture of things? What will we do when the tension between this picture and acknowledging mind and value begins to manifest itself in our thinking?

One way out of the tensions we feel is by postulating strange kinds of stuff or entity. For example we see this in recent philosophy where some (e.g Nagel) have tried to make place for agency and value in a metaphysical atomist world. The idea is that reality contains molecules which in turn contain atoms which are of their nature suited to be the building blocks of mind and value - little fragments of mind and value. But this doesn't look good.

And perhaps earlier 'immaterialisms' are the result of the same pressures? Is this why, in our tradition, the two kinds of 'immaterialism' tend to get run together - that people who want to defend the centrality and importance of agency and value have found themselves postulating funny kinds of stuff, funny entities?

Does metaphysical atomist thinking about reality, truth, facts run very deep in the human mind? Does a version of it figure e.g. in Chinese thought? In the thought of the long middle ages?

What it would be really interesting to think about are whether the kinds of large-scale considerations I have gestured at – conceptions of truth, of fact, of what is at stake in materialist/immaterialist debates etc – are just features of some comparatively recent episodes in intellectual history, roughly those in western Europe from the 17th on, or whether they play a role in shaping pictures and arguments in other times and places.