

Nature and Matter

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There are some who doubt the value of studying matter, since they doubt the existence of matter. Prejudice would deter others from such an investigation, even when they have developed a concept of matter--consciously or unconsciously--under another name. It is no longer fashionable to say that nature is the realm of matter; for the development of modern science has brought the traditional conception of matter into disrepute. Nature, and nature is the romantic name for the physical world, is the source and the matrix of all things; yet such is the modern mistrust of matter that philosophers have hesitated to give the name matter to that source and that matrix. It is much more fashionable to speak of events, space-time or process--denying to these terms any suspicion of matter. Nature may be a structure of events, or a construction out of space-time, but only Santayana has the courage to call nature the realm of matter. The source of this mistrust of matter perhaps lies in the tremendous prestige of modern science. I would not dispute the right to that prestige, but I cannot but feel sorry that prejudice has closed men's minds to the ultimate meaning of the concept

of matter. If such philosophers who reject the concept of matter were to realize that matter is the principle of existence and that experience would be meaningless without objective status, then perhaps they would be willing to undertake an analysis of the nature of matter.

Even those philosophers who speak of 'events' do not seem to realize that 'events' possess many of the attributes of matter. Even when we speak of nature as a structure of 'events,' we are attributing to nature a material content; for nature is not simply a product of our minds and our imaginations; somehow it lies beyond our experience, closed to our minds and to thought.* Nature expresses an obdurate character of existence in which it stubbornly refuses to bow to human desires or human conceit. It expresses something in our experience which thought cannot obliterate or dissolve. The nature of existence demands the existence of nature, since nature is the frame or matrix of all human and inhuman activities. Nature is the ontological frame of existence --and because existence is ontological, we cannot be indifferent to it. It continually forces its attentions upon us. This is the main reason that nature is the realm of matter--it is the ontological background against which all experience is played and all sensation portrayed. We cannot refuse nature a material function because nature obdurately resists any attempt to rob it of its independence or its objectivity.

* "Nature can be thought of as a closed system whose mutual relations do not require the expression of the fact that they are thought about. Thus in a sense nature is independent of thought." (Whitehead, CN, 3)

Thus unfortunately it is much easier to describe nature, as science does, than to develop a concept of matter. A concept of matter demands a rigorous intellectual analysis which most men are unwilling to make and an intuitive insight which most men do not possess. Nature is familiar to us and we hold warm human feelings for her as the setting of human history and the source of our experience. As such nature is the scene within which our sense-experience portrays its happenings and events. Our senses are titillated until we are aware that there is a strange and fascinating world beyond the limitations of our personal experience. Thus we 'have' experience and this experience seems to 'have' some external source. It is an undeniable fact that we do have experience and that this experience is meaningful and significant. * There can be no doubt that man feels and experiences *something*, that he does have sensations, whether one may call those sensations appearances or illusions or not. We cannot deny that man does experience something and that 'something' is the *source* of our experience. * That which is the source of our experience I shall call matter. Matter is the ontological principle or that without which there could be no experience,

* "Altho we are doubting the physical existence of the table, we are not doubting the existence of the sense-data which made us think there was a table; we are not doubting that while we look, a certain color and shape appear to us, and while we press, a certain sensation of hardness is experienced by us. All this, which is psychological, we are not calling in question. In fact, whatever else may be doubtful, some at least of our immediate experiences seem absolutely certain." (Bertrand Russell, PP, 27)

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1 | no sensations, no sense data at all. In short our experience has ontological reach. The concept of matter simply expresses the fact that we are not solipsists and that we do somehow experience a 'world'. It says that we experience something objective and independent--a realm which is the referent of that experience.

Somehow we live in a world, and we call that world, nature. Man, we say, is a part of nature because he has emerged from nature's bosom and because man is a creature among creatures. The world is our world because we experience it and love it, because nature is the source of all things as we know them and because man, too, is a product of nature. Nature is the mother of us all and we can never escape from it--not even in death. "Dust to dust and ashes to ashes...." Even in death we are a part of nature and therefore we must acknowledge and honor her. Matter expresses the fact that we can never escape the brute fact, the stubborn necessity, of our existence and the existence of other things. We may deny that we are the sons of nature, but in the end nature

* "The dog in the fable, who dropped the substance for the shadow, might have found substance even in that shadow, namely water and light reflected from the water....there is a natural hierarchy in the manifestations of substance ; and while no appearance is a mere appearance, but are all in some way appearances of substance, yet some of the essences exhibited to human intuition fit the dynamic movement of nature tightly and consecutively. and can be true guides to action, whereas others are poised delicately there, like a mood or a dream, not long to be traced or trusted; for the flux of substance has other forms beneath to which it proves more faithful." (Santayana, R.M., 220—1)

mocks us and even with our last breath claims us for her own. Man may spin grandiose dreams in his solipsistic delusion, but in the end he must turn back to nature.

If it is meaningful to say that nature is external to our experience, then nature is the external source of our experience. When we speak of the universe as the 'external world', we are perhaps expressing the feeling that nature does not depend upon our experience, upon our mind and its operations. Nature offers us the material of our experience and our reflections. We say that there is *something going on out there* which is self-contained in the sense that it does not depend upon our wills or our desires. Something which is actually indifferent to man's feelings and experiences is occurring.* There is something out there which resists man's activities, something which we cannot control, something we cannot wish or think away no matter how hard we try. "The 'independence' of a thing means, concretely, its continued existence, or the continuance of a connected series of events of which it is a member, at times when it is not being attended to by me, nor necessarily by any one like me. The starting point of the argument for physical realism, I suggest, is the plain man's normal and reasonable belief that the processes of nature do not stop

* "Our experience of the external world is an experience of something bearing upon us, of a dynamic pressure, which may culminate in an impact, from outside; we sense ourselves as resisting the pressure, and, if aggressive, as the origin of counter drives. The experience of external constraint and internal resistance is equivalent to a perception of two counteracting or opposite directions, i.e. of a contrast of vector qualities." (Ushenko, *Power and Events*, 88)

when he stops noticing them. It is not the 'otherness' of the object perceived, when it is perceived, but the persistence of something which is in some manner connected with what is perceived during the inter-perceptual intervals, that is the primary natural postulate out of which the belief in an external world, in objects which exist though they are not given in experience, arises." (Lovejoy, RAD, 267-8)

Thus there is something, Parker calls it a countercontrol (cf. Dewitt H. Parker, ES, 38-41), which resists and hinders our actions. * To express this 'out-thereness' we say that nature is the terminus of thought and feeling, an independent brute fact which we cannot in any case ignore. There is in our experience a 'shock of existence' which is perhaps our first experience or feeling of the physical world. This resistance, this countercontrol, this 'shock of existence' leads us to postulate a realm of matter which is the source of this resistance and this compulsion in our experience.

* "There are always the two aspects : the experience of our own control as we guide the course of sense and the experience of a counter control to this. The intuition of countercontrol is an original element of our total experience, impossible of derivation from or reduction to anything else, the empirical evidence for our concept of the external world. Our conception of countercontrol bears an obvious resemblance to the traditional conception of 'resistance' as the source of belief in an external world, and is analogous to Spencer's and Santayana's 'shock' and to Fichte's 'anstoss'." (Parker, ES, 38-39)

In this sense nature is the realm of matter; for nature is the starting point of all speculation and all experience. In this I would agree with Santayana that the postulate of matter is "the assumption that there are things and events prior to the discovery of them and independent of this discovery." (RM, 186) That we *discover* nature and matter and do not invent them or spin them out of the thin fabric of our imaginations is the crux of the matter. The mind may be powerful and indispensable for man's knowledge, but I believe that not even the most consistent idealist would maintain that the physical world is only a product of some individual's mind--he would at least demand Objective Mind, some sort of absolute which transcends the individual mind (eg. God). This admission, however, would give them away; for as long as the world is objective and discovered, they would have to admit the 'fact' of matter. Thus insofar as experience has ontological reach, insofar as it points to a transcendental object, matter is the ontological principle which quickly strips nature down to her metaphysical underthings, exposing nature as the realm of matter. Perhaps it is an impudence to try to reduce nature to a realm of matter, considering the staggering complexity and confusing prolixity of the happenings and relationships in nature. Our senses reveal to us a world so intricate and so complicated that the simple human mind can hardly comprehend it. We must simplify it and reduce it down to our human scale so that we can handle it with understanding and precision. We do not really have any justification for applying Occam's razor, but it enables man to understand the universe and this perhaps is the only justification any rule of simplicity needs. In

all philosophic thought the concept of nature is considerably refined, since nature is not simple and easy to understand. To this extent all concepts of nature and matter are unsatisfactory in their limitations--this analysis of the concept of matter cannot claim to have avoided this difficulty.

Nature, then, as the realm of matter, is the matrix and the source of all experience. Matter is the principle of existence, the ontological principle, and existence is a 'brute fact', a stubborn necessity in our experience. Matter is such resistance, countercontrol, shock, opposition, repulsion, pressure, which seems to indicate that there is *something out there*, an otherness, a thereness which is prior to, and independent of, our experience. Matter as an item of knowledge may be the product of an intellectual operation in which the materials of the senses are organized into systems or structures, but matter itself does not depend upon that intellectual operation and is independent of it. The *concept* of matter may refer to an intellectual construction, a sort of map, which enables us to understand the universe, but matter is not the product of that intellectual operation--it is a *discovery*. I shall insist that matter is discovered, that it is something which is found and not something which is created by some mind. If matter has any meaning at all, it is that matter is significant apart from *any* mind and *any* experience. For matter has meaning and significance in itself and for itself. *

* "Over the field of action, in which we exist, logic, which is but our way of thinking, can have no prior control. Substance did not drop into a world with a previous constitution ; it was not obliged to squeeze itself into atoms or to spread itself thru infinities, so as to verify the precipitate fancies of future philosophers." (Santayana, R.M., 239)

In short we cannot and do not create matter; we do *discover* it. And insofar as our experience has ontological reach, matter is 'brute factness' and a 'stubborn necessity' external to and independent of that experience. We do not 'create' matter--it forces itself upon us in our experience. This does not mean that we can overlook the part an intellectual operation plays in developing a "concept" of matter (Kant showed us that fallacy), but it does not mean that the "concept" of matter is wholly a creation of a 'mind'. We order, organize and select through an intellectual operation, but this is an ordering, organizing and selecting which is upon materials discovered in nature. The understanding has to operate upon something and what it operates upon is matter. Thus the 'concept' of matter is the product of an intellectual operation upon material which has absolutely no dependence upon that operation. And although 'mind' operates upon matter and hence is linked with matter, matter is completely free from dependence upon mind. For mind is subsequent to matter, following upon it as the shadow follows upon the substance. This does not mean that it is easy to know what matter is or mind is. Matter can and does exist independently of mind. It is completely autonomous and insanely jealous of its freedom. It goes its way whether we human beings like it or not, whether there are any minds or not, or whether there is any intellectual operation or not. "Blind to good and evil, reckless of destruction, omnipotent matter rolls on its relentless way." (Bertrand Russell, *A Free Man's Worship*)

Thus nature is not content to stand aside for human reason and human pride; for nature has
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its own kind of pride which demands that we pay allegiance to its sovereignty. It is jealous of its independence and its existence because it cannot be reduced to a figment of one's experience and because it goes its own way. There is no reason to avoid the word 'matter' for this stubborn independence of nature, even if we do not use the word 'matter' in its traditional sense.

If events, actual entities, space-time perform this function of indicating an ontological objectivity, then these events are material; for they are performing the functions of matter. And matter is the postulate of all experience and all sensations, if that experience and those sensations make any pretence at all of existing outside the confines of a single human perceiver. What meaning could existence have, if not that? Without such a postulate there could be no knowledge and existence would be vain and meaningless. "The postulate of substance--the assumption that there are things and events prior to the discovery of them and independent of this discovery--underlies all natural knowledge." (Santayana, RM, 186)

That nature is discovered and not created is the crux of the matter--matter portends the fact that there can be a discovery. To say that nature is not the realm of matter is to deny that nature has any meaning or significance apart from human experience. There have been few philosophers who would commit the folly of denying the existence of an external world (even subjective idealists are forced to acknowledge a physical world, even if that world were a product of God's benevolent gaze, as in Berkeley). In any case Nature is discovered and counted among our possessions as a

matrix of all physical things. It is the field of action, the theatre in which existence spins out its idiot tales, perhaps only full of sound and fury, yet perhaps portending of some significance for human experience. Nature is the realm of matter because nature cannot be circumvented or discounted. It is *there*, stubborn and majestic--surly to man because man wants to enthrone himself in its place and drive his wishes and desires into existence so as to replace nature from her rightful place as the source and matrix of existence. "From the point of view of origins, therefore, the realm of matter is the matrix and the source of everything: it is nature, the sphere of genesis, the universal mother." (Santayana, RM, 189) Matter is the discipline all experience must undergo, since it is the only thing that refuses to be bullied by human desires and human imagination. Matter is the guarantor of all knowledge and the ontological framework of all experience. It is an essential postulate of animal faith and the repository of all existence. We can only deny matter if we deny our existence--and who would stoop to such folly? In denying the material we would be denying our own existence: we would be despising the fact of our existence as creatures of nature. This may or may not be a trivial observation, but it is one which apparently must be made over and over again. This is the significance of holding that nature is *discovered*: to assert that nature is discovered is to assert that nature cannot be coerced by the human mind. To say that nature is discovered is to agree that nature is not created by the human mind and that it exists independently of it.

Nature, then, is the realm of matter. Nature and matter are not disparate terms; rather they express a collaboration which lies at the base of all existence. If existence has any meaning, it is that nature is material, objective and independent. It is that matter is the background of experience and the source of its content. It is that matter is the dynamic field of existence, the 'stuff' of all existent things. All this is not to deny meaning and significance to the immaterial, for the immaterial could not be understood apart from matter. Spirit, truth, beauty, freedom as immaterial categories would be meaningless apart from the contrast they make with the material. As Santayana suggests, to deny matter would be 'treason' against the immaterial, since, "unless sharply contrasted with the matter which they surround, they may be transposed in confused apprehension to the plane of matter, and saddled with material functions." (Santayana. RM, 184)

Nature is the realm of matter because matter expresses the ontological significance of human experience and because human experience would fitter away into solipsism without matter. It is because nature cannot be so reduced to solipsistic delusions of some mind that matter finds meaning. Nature is always more, and more, than human thought can discover and so it is always a source of existence. To deny matter, then, is to deny existence; for then existence would become arbitrary and inconsequential. Our experience would be undisciplined and the physical world would become merely a dream we could not dream. Matter is the price we pay for existence, the discipline we undergo, the foundation of our experience. And nature is the theatre in which matter struts and plays out

existence to its ending pause.

When I consider every thing that grows
Holds in perfection but a little moment,
That this huge stage presenteth naught but shows
Wherein the stars in secret influence comment;
When I perceive that men as plants increase,
Cheered and checked even by the self-same sky,
Vaunt in their youthful sap, at height decrease,
And wear their brave state out of memory;
Then the conceit of this inconstant stay
Sets you most rich in youth before my sight,
Where wasteful Time debateth with Decay,
To change your day of youth to sullied night;
And all in war with Time for love of you,
As he takes from you, I engraft you new.

(SHAKESPEARE)

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