

# Sophos In Our Time

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## The Birth of the Science of the Spirit

It has been nearly 100 years since the outbreak of the First World War. The roar of the guns on the fronts terrorised those on the battle field as bullets tore into the flesh of men. Rumbling of cannons could be heard miles away—even in neutral countries such as Switzerland—haunting families trying to settle for the night, families undoubtedly having friends, sons, and fathers on the battlefields.

Civilisation had reached a time of crisis, or expressed differently, it was poised on the edge of the abyss. Science stood in the world promising the key to knowledge, the theory of everything. Darwin's theory of evolution became ever more widely adopted. The socialists believed themselves to hold the key to paradise on Earth, if only the bourgeois could be overthrown. Psychoanalysis and experimental psychology would uncover the riddles of the soul. After the war, an international confederation of countries would ensure everlasting peace. Yet war, misery, and darkness still reigned despite these promises, born of the enlightenment.

Meanwhile, another—much less well known call—was being made, predominantly in Central Europe. Around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Rudolf Steiner began publicly disseminating the results of his newly founded Science of the Spirit, called Anthroposophy.

Unlike others in his time, Rudolf Steiner did not promise peace to the world, happiness to everyone. He did not encroach upon the freedom of others. He did not use his immense genius to coerce, persuade, and enforce. He did not provide people with ready-made, simplistic solutions to their problems. He did, however, provide in clear and sharply defined thoughts, accessible to any unprejudiced person, a genuine knowledge of humankind.

Thus, in the course of his 64 years of earthly life, he made an immense contribution to many domains of life, including: philosophy, science, art, religion, agriculture, education, medicine, psychiatry, social order, and history. Most remarkably—speaking from the point of view of someone who has had made great effort to investigate this—his work, now around 100 years old, has not been outdated by the cultural and scientific development occurring since then, but rather been made all the more important.

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Das Goetheanum (pronounced Gur-tuh-ah-num), in Dornach Switzerland. This is a building designed by Rudolf Steiner, based on new architectural principles.

## C.S. Lewis on Materialistic Thoughts

'If the solar system was brought about by an accidental collision, then the appearance of organic life on this planet was also an accident, and the whole evolution of Man was an accident too. If so, then all our present thoughts are mere accidents—the accidental by-product of the movement of atoms. And this holds for the thoughts of the materialists and astronomers as well as for anyone else's. But if their thoughts—i.e. of materialism and astronomy—are merely accidental by-products, why should we believe them to be true? I see no reason for believing that one accident should be able to give me a correct account of all the other accidents. It's like expecting that the accidental shape taken by the splash when you upset a milk jug should give you a correct account of how the jug was made and why it was upset.'

C.S. Lewis (1898–1963), *The Business of Heaven*, Fount Paperbacks, U.K., p. 97, 1984.

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If Rudolf Steiner's Anthroposophy is so great, you may ask, why is it not more widely known? Why do we not learn more about him in school, just as we hear about Einstein, for example?

This question is complicated and any true answer will have many different aspects to it. The simplest answer is perhaps that, instead of making remarkable progress in the last 100 years, we have in many respects stagnated and descended further into materialism. Have not the conquests and clashes of arms simply shifted inward, such that we suffer under a plethora of mental illness, superficiality, and social decline? Are we really any closer to understanding life, or ourselves?

All solutions that take account only of the external, material aspect will sooner or later lead to destruction. This is not to belittle the wonderful progress made in the last 100 years in science, human rights, and tearing down many prejudices.

By definition, materialism is the view that human beings and the universe are composed only of matter, therefore, all of our thoughts, feelings, and deeds are caused by chemical reactions and electrical signals. The climate is affected only by chemical compounds. Plant growth is determined by the chemical composition of the soil and surrounding environment. This is materialism.

Over and against this stands the Spiritual Science of Anthroposophy. Although the role of matter is recognised, it is only one aspect of the Universe. In fact, according to Anthroposophy, matter is only the carrier of a spiritual event. Thus, when I have a particular thought, my "I" through a complicated process, leads to an alteration of the brain's physical configuration. Similarly, the forming of the human being after conception occurs in accordance with forces that originate in the spiritual world, forces which work within the constraints provided by genes and environment.

Likewise, we cannot understand history properly if we focus only on what external events and documents mention. Rather we must look for the spiritual undercurrents (that is, the true causes) that lead to the waves (the external manifestations) on the surface.

Most importantly, Rudolf Steiner's Anthroposophy allows one to tear down the barriers of knowledge that were erected by Kant and materialism. There are no limits to knowledge, only limits to current understanding. Thus if one is prepared to undergo the appropriate development, these barriers can be overcome. The excuse "we can never know that" has been made into an untruth by Rudolf Steiner.

A genuine study of Anthroposophy requires much effort and perseverance. One's peers may even develop hostility toward someone making such an effort. One may lose career, reputation, and even family. However, if a sufficient number of people do not make an effort to really come to terms with the needs of the age, then we will all lose much, much more. [Sebastian Suggate]

### The Harpist\*

By Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832)

He who has never eaten his bread with tears,  
He who has never spent sorrowful nights,  
Sitting on his bed weeping,  
He does not know you, Heavenly Powers!

You lead us out into life,  
You allow the poor to become guilty,  
Then you abandon him to his pain,  
For all guilt is avenged on Earth.

\*Der Harfenspieler translated by Sebastian Suggate

### Quote: Blaise Pascal (1623-1662)

"We know the truth, not only through our reason, but also through our heart. It is through this latter that we know first principles, and reason, which has nothing to do with this, vainly tries to refute them. The sceptics have no intention other than this, and they fail to achieve it. We know that we are not dreaming. Yet however unable we may be to prove this by reason, this inability demonstrates nothing but the weakness of our reason, and not the uncertainty of all our knowledge, as they assert."

### Upcoming Events

- What is Materialism? Wednesday, September 16 at 6pm, OUSA Building, Room 2. This will be a public event with four speakers followed by discussion.
- Informal meeting of the OASA on Friday, 11 September. Time: t.b.a. (email us). All welcome.
- Given the importance of issues related to money in the current world climate, we draw your attention to the following advertisement: A public talk will be given by Elke Baublies, a Priest of the Christian Community (Movement for Religious Renewal) entitled What is a Christian Approach to Work and Money? Wednesday 26th August, 7.30pm. Theosophical Society, Upstart Building, 333 Princes St., Jetty St. Donations are requested to contribute towards air fares. Email: [otago.asa@gmail.com](mailto:otago.asa@gmail.com) for enquiries.

For back-issues, e-subscription, submitting a contribution, or comments, email: [otago.asa@gmail.com](mailto:otago.asa@gmail.com)

Sophos In Our Time is produced by the Otago Anthroposophical Student Association.

# What is Materialism?

## What is Materialism?

The word materialism is often bandied about in pop-culture. According to common usage, it probably means generally 'something undesirable' when ascribed to a person, perhaps being similar to 'superficiality'. It usually means that a person is fixated on having material possessions, such as a flash car, nice clothes, or a brand new fridge!

In philosophy, materialism means the belief that only material processes exist, there is no God, spiritual world, soul or spirit, heaven or hell.

The importance of understanding what materialism is, and identifying its essence, could not be understated. On the one hand, materialism has led to many of the great achievements of our age, such as modern science and civilisation. On the other hand, it has led to the greatest imaginable suffering; consider the great practitioners of materialism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Bolsheviks in Russia, the industrialists in the West, the endless consumerism throughout the world, and the relegation of the human being's status to that of a clever animal...

We invite you to join us for an evening discussion and talk on materialism. We will have four or five people who will speak about the nature of materialism from an Anthroposophical perspective and then we will have a discussion. Refreshments will be provided. [Sebastian Suggate]

Time: 6pm, Wednesday 16 September

Venue: Room 2, OUSA Building on Albany Street

## The Human Body as a Mirror

Many people describe the brain as having thoughts or producing thoughts and feelings. This is an example of someone describing a predominately non-materialistic event in purely materialistic terms. If you observe the firing neurons can you say that these firing neurons are your actual thoughts? If you take the chemical that is produced when experiencing feelings of love and put this chemical in a bottle, can you say that this liquid substance is love itself?

To take the situation further, if your brain thinks, that means that when you think about your thoughts, your physical brain is thinking about itself. In other words, a material substance is thinking about itself. If you are consistent with this line of thinking, then it follows that your digestive system should have the ability to digest itself, just as the brain, the thinking system, can think about itself.

In contrast, a different approach may say that we need our brain in order to be able to think. It would say that the brain is the tool through which we express our thoughts and that the chemicals that our brain produces and the neurons that our brain fires are the physical representations of our thought and feeling processes.

Rudolf Steiner gave the following analogy: Imagine two scientists who come across tyre marks in the road left by a car. The purely materialistic scientist may say that the tyre marks are due to the forces that reside beneath the road, forces that have imprinted this mark upon the road, similar to the brain producing chemicals. A non materialistic scientist may say that the tyre marks are due to a car that has driven along the road, even though one cannot actually see the car anymore.

If it is not the brain that actually thinks, then what is it that thinks? When you are walking down the street, you cannot observe yourself walking. You know you are walking but you cannot actually see yourself walking. In order to be able to see yourself walking, you need a mirror through which you can see a reflection of yourself walking. If a person were to point to the mirror and say "That is my real self walking in the mirror", it would be like saying that it is the brain that thinks. Let me explain why this is so.

According to Rudolf Steiner, the physical body is similar to a mirror or reflecting apparatus that is needed in order to be able to observe processes such as thinking. Every human being has within himself an ego (ego is Latin for "I") that contains the divine spark of the spiritual.

This ego is analogous to the car in the example above. This ego initiates our thoughts. In order to be able to become conscious of these ego-initiated thoughts, we must utilise a reflecting apparatus through which we can consciously observe our thoughts (similar to a mirror that allows us to observe our walking). This is the reason that during sleep you lose consciousness of yourself because you are removed from your physical body and have therefore lost the reflecting apparatus that allowed you to examine and reflect on your thoughts. Thus, when we initiate thoughts out of our ego, these thoughts rush up against our physical brain and return to us in reflected conscious awareness. The physical imprintation of this process occurs in the grey matter of the brain. If we do not have our physical body (as in sleep), these thoughts remain unconscious as we lack the reflecting apparatus through which we can become aware of these thoughts.

To return to the earlier example, if the road did not exist, we would not be aware of the effect of the tyre on

the road, for it would not have the physical road upon which it could reflect its action.

If we continue with this line of thought, it can become clear why people sometimes experience perceptual difficulties or struggle with certain thought processes. If we look at ourselves in a cracked mirror, we will receive back a distorted image of ourselves. Similarly, if our physical brain (reflecting apparatus for our thoughts) is damaged (e.g. chemical imbalance, anomalies in brain structure), then we will receive back a distorted reflection of our thoughts. [Simon Kuttner]

## The Telescope

A materialistic scientific historian may say that the telescope was invented in the 17<sup>th</sup> century because the material conditions were right for such a discovery to be made. Such an approach would assert that the invention of the telescope is due to modern man's superior intellect over ancient man.

In contrast, an individual who sees world events as more than purely external and physical events may say that the telescope was invented in the 17<sup>th</sup> century not only because the material conditions were right for such an event to take place but also because of the specific makeup of the human constitution at that stage in time.

Thus, such an historian may say that the invention of the telescope actually points to the fact that people living thousands of years ago were of a constitution that meant that they approached the world around them differently to the human being of today. It could be said that they were in possession of a 'nonphysical telescope' that allowed them to participate in activities of the cosmos in ways that are very different to today. He would say that it is precisely because modern man did not possess certain faculties that ancient man possessed that the telescope was invented.

To put it differently, imagine if human beings had super human vision that could see through walls. Over time, this vision was reduced and consequently human beings developed a special x-ray machine that allowed them to see through walls. These same people would then talk about how clever they were at being able to develop such a sophisticated machine. [Simon Kuttner]

## A Tyre Change or a New Road?

Why is it important to make these distinctions between a purely materialistic outlook and one that incorporates more than the purely material? It is important because it affects the way we will interact with our fellow human beings in the future. It is important

because once we understand these things properly, we can actually treat the causes and not the symptoms of problems.

To return to the earlier analogy, the materialistic scientist would treat the materials beneath the road in order to get rid of the tyre mark whereas the non-materialistic scientist would change the tyres on the car. It should be obvious which solution will be more effective in the long term. [Simon Kuttner]

## The Task

By William Cowper (1731-1800)

Knowledge and wisdom, far from being one,  
Have oft times no connection.  
Knowledge dwells in heads replete with thoughts of other  
men;  
Wisdom in minds attentive to their own.  
Knowledge, a rude, unprofitable mass,  
The mere materials with which wisdom builds,  
'Till smoothed and squared and fitted to its place,  
Does but encumber whom it seems to enrich.  
Knowledge is proud that he has learned so much:  
Wisdom is humble that he knows no more.

## Letter from the Editors,

it has been nearly one year since the last appearance of *Sophos In Our Time*. Unfortunately, it has not been possible to produce this as frequently as was possible last year.

This edition contains articles on materialism, spiritual science, and—amongst others—a classic poem from the famous poet, scientist, and thinker, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. We also direct your attention to this edition's quotes from Blaise Pascal and C. S. Lewis.

In this issue we advertise three upcoming events. On 16 September we will hold an evening event to consider the question: What is materialism? This will involve guest speakers and discussion.

We are also pleased to advertise a talk on 26 August entitled: What is a Christian approach to work and money?

Finally, the editors of *Sophos In Our Time* and current organisers of the Otago Anthroposophical Student Association will be relocating overseas in 2010. Therefore, we are looking for people willing to continue this association. If you are interested, please contact us (email: [otago.asa@gmail.com](mailto:otago.asa@gmail.com)).

We hope that you enjoyed this edition,

Simon and Sebastian

For back-issues, e-subscription, submitting a contribution, or comments, email: [otago.asa@gmail.com](mailto:otago.asa@gmail.com)

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