



Why We Need Materialism

Description



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by Trent Wilde

Philosophical Materialism is not the over-zealous desire to accumulate possessions. No, it is a position on the fundamental nature of reality which holds that all that exists is made up of matter, or physical stuff – stuff which takes up space, has mass, density, and other physical properties. Materialism is not simply believing that physical stuff exists; most people believe that physical stuff exists and most people are not materialists. Materialism goes further and states that *only* physical stuff exists and nothing else – there is no non-physical reality and there are no non-physical objects.

Most people are dualists, which means they believe that there are two basic sorts of stuff that exist, physical stuff and non-physical stuff. There are also people who believe that only non-physical stuff exists, but for our purposes, we just need to distinguish between the idea that only matter exists and ideas that promote the existence of immaterial, or non-physical, realities.

Pretty well all promote the idea that there exists some sort of non-physical stuff. And most religions differ primarily in what they think is true about the proposed non-physical world and also in what they think about how it interacts with the physical world. Hindus believe that the non-physical world is filled with a great variety of gods whereas believers in Abrahamic religions believe the non-physical world is occupied by only one God; albeit most Christians believe that this one God consists of three persons. Most believers in Abrahamic religions also hold that the non-physical world houses other beings such as angels and the spirits of the deceased. How one views the spiritual, or non-physical, realm doubtless has an impact on how one views the interaction between the non-physical realm and the physical realm. Animists and pantheists, for example, believe the non-physical realm overlaps the physical realm (though each understands this overlap differently). With these views, the spiritual, or non-physical, realm is all around us; it lays hidden within the physical realm. It might be possible, then, for someone to access and harness power from the non-physical realm and use it to control things in the physical realm. This is the basic idea of magic. While people who adhere to Abrahamic faiths don't generally practice magic, they have their own ways of accessing the spiritual realm and their own beliefs about how it interacts with the material world. Some Christians believe that the spiritual, or non-physical, essence of Jesus is really present in the eucharistic bread and wine and that by eating it, his spirit really becomes present within the believer. Others use prayer to call forth spiritual power and believe that it can make changes in a body resulting in a faith-healing. Traditional Chinese religion maintains that our bodies contain meridian lines through which flows Qi energy, the spiritual life force. It is thought that disease is the physical manifestation of imbalances and/or blockages in the flow of Qi and thus by correcting the flow of Qi through martial arts, acupuncture, or other methods, disease can be cured. All this said, beliefs about the non-physical world clearly have an impact on beliefs about the physical world and on practices designed to bring about changes in the physical world through interaction with the non-physical world.

This brings us to a real problem. While there is widespread agreement that there is a non-physical realm, there is just as widespread disagreement concerning what it is like and how it operates in relation to the physical world. And what's worse is that there is no way to test which, if any, of these views is more correct than the others. This is because non-physicality is, in principle, beyond sensibility. I mean this in a very literal sense. There are physical things that we cannot sense with our senses. Take a note played at 40,000 hertz, for example. Everything involved in the playing of this note is strictly physical. There is a physical source of sound, say a speaker, and a physical medium through which the sound travels, say air. Here's an explanation of the physical process of sound from an old documentary clip that I included in the [video version](#) of this article.

“As we know, to form any sound something has to move back and forth in quivering movements or vibrate. And it’s these vibrations which form waves of sound. And these waves of sound are transmitted through solid, liquid, or air. Let’s suppose this panel is magnified air. The lights represent the air particles. Let’s suppose, too, that sound waves created by a giant tuning fork are passing through the air. As the blade of the tuning fork vibrates, it first pushes the particles of air near it outward. These particles collide with neighboring particles which move outward and collide with their neighbors and so on. Then, as the blade returns to complete its vibration, the air particles rush back to fill the space left by the blade of the tuning fork. In other words, it’s a bump and a rebound, bump and a rebound of air particles. Vibrations create alternate compressions and partial vacuums of air particles.”

In this instance, they oscillate at a rate of 40,000 cycles per second. Yet, we cannot sense it. Not because it isn’t physical, but because our ears just aren’t sensitive enough. But dogs can sense it and so can appropriately designed microphones. So, while 40,000 hertz is beyond *our* senses, it is not beyond *all* senses. This is not how it is with non-physicality. With non-physicality, there is no physical source, no physical medium, no physical movement, no physical anything, period.

It is important to realize that all the words we use for non-physical stuff don’t actually say anything about the non-physical stuff. They only say what the non-physical is NOT. “Non-physical” simply means that it is *not* physical. Well.... okay, but what is it? “Immaterial” just means that it is *not* material... again, that is describing what it isn’t, not what it is. Words like “spiritual” and “ethereal” don’t get us any further either since they, when used to refer to non-physical stuff, are no more than synonyms for “non-physical” and “immaterial.” So, all we really know about this proposed non-physical stuff is that it is supposed to be *not* physical. It is the complete lack of all physical properties. It takes up no space, has no mass or density, no color, texture, or size.

When we sense things in the physical world, whether with our innate senses or with technological instruments, we sense one or more of the physical properties of the things being sensed. Since non-physical stuff, in principle, and by definition, has no physical properties, it cannot be sensed *at all*. This is what I mean by saying that it is literally beyond sensibility. It is not just beyond *our* senses, it is beyond *all* senses. And since it cannot in any way be sensed, it cannot in any way be known. You can't get a hold of it and probe it and test it to see whether what the animists say about it is correct or whether what the pantheists say about it is correct, or the Christians, Muslims, or Hindus for that matter. Since no test can resolve differences of opinion regarding this proposed non-physical reality and since differences of opinion in this area are more often differences of dogma, people have often resorted to more brutal methods of resolving these conflicts, thus resulting in war and religious persecution.

Materialism, on the other hand, doesn't have any of these issues. Since we have no way to know the non-physical realm, materialism declares that we have no reason to believe that there is such a realm. And beyond acknowledging the fact that there is no evidence in favor of non-physicality, materialism candidly admits that non-physicality is something which simply cannot exist. Again, non-physicality is simply the lack of all properties, of all things. That is precisely what non-existence is – it is the lack of all properties, of all things. In everyday usage of the term, for us to say that something exists, we require that it has some sort of properties. Even if you can't measure those properties at a given moment, it must at least have properties to count as existing. Otherwise, there is no distinction between what exists and what doesn't. If your friend says he has a spaceship in his backyard and you go to see it but don't see anything, what would you think? If he tells you it's invisible and if you happen to be particularly clever at that moment, you might say, "Well, how about if we scan it using technology that can sense wavelengths of light beyond the humanly visible spectrum?" If he says, "No, it has no visible properties at all. It cannot be seen in any spectrum of light" you'd not only be left without evidence, you'd be left without hope for evidence. Without any hope of seeing it, you might venture for hope of being able to touch it. But then what if your friend tells you that it has no texture or shape or size. Not that its texture, shape, or size are beyond the reach of human senses, but that it doesn't have those properties at all. If you keep going like this and find that this spaceship is claimed to have no physical properties whatsoever you would doubtless, and justifiably, conclude that the spaceship simply does not exist. If your friend had claimed that it does actually have some physical properties, but that they are just beyond your senses, you might hold on to some possibility that it might exist. And even though you might not believe it, out of love for your friend, you might remain open to the possibility that some future test might prove its existence. But if all that your friend can say about it is that it lacks all physical properties, all you're left with is a crazy friend and no spaceship. You'd probably be scratching your head wondering why he called it a spaceship to begin with! How do you tell the difference between a spaceship lacking all physical properties and a table lacking all physical properties? Neither of them have shape, or size, or weight, or density, or color, or texture. Moreover, how do you tell the difference between a spaceship like that and no spaceship at all? When you examine the idea put forth, they're precisely the same. Saying that the non-physical spaceship exists appears to be nothing more than a word-game.

Since the word “non-physicality,” in its very meaning, indicates precisely the same idea as the word “non-existence” (that is, the complete lack of all physical properties) the two words are indeed synonyms. To suggest that non-physicality exists is really just a veiled way of suggesting that non-existence exists. It is truly a self-conflicting idea with thus no possibility of being true. Materialism is simply acknowledging this fact.

When we, as people, lack an understanding of materialism, we are left prone to accepting things as true which are not really true. Without materialism, the very idea of truth becomes blurred. In everyday life, we use the word “true” to describe statements and ideas that correspond to material reality. If I say, “You are awake right now,” you judge whether my statement is true by whether it matches material reality. If I say, “You’re not awake right now,” you would say my statement is false. And all you mean by that is that it does not match material reality (and obviously, you’re awake right now because you’re reading this article). Likewise, if you hold your phone in your hand and say, “I am holding my phone in my hand,” that statement is true. And all it means to say that that statement is true is that it matches material reality. If you set the phone down and merely imagine holding it, without actually holding it in physical reality, and you say, “I am holding my phone right now,” everyone would judge that statement to be false. Why? Because it doesn’t match material reality. Your imagination didn’t count. If you say, “I have a sister,” that statement is only true if in material reality you have a sister. An imaginary sister does not count. So again, material reality is *the thing* that makes the difference. It is the thing that we use in everyday life as the standard by which we test whether claims are true or false. If you accept the idea that non-physical stuff exists, this distinction becomes destroyed and the concept of truth itself becomes clouded and unclear. If we are to be able to accurately discern what is true in any circumstance, we need materialism.

Let's compare a materialistic approach with an immaterialistic approach using a concrete example: acupuncture. Acupuncture is a form of Traditional Chinese Medicine that consists of sticking people with fine needles in specific points on their bodies called acupuncture points, which are supposed to reside along meridian lines through which Qi energy is believed to flow. If you approach acupuncture as a materialist, you quickly discern that Qi energy, being a "spiritual energy" not only has no evidence in favor of its existence but defies existence itself by the very nature of the claim. Thus, since acupuncture is supposed to manipulate the flow of Qi energy and since Qi energy does not and cannot exist, acupuncture cannot be a valid form of medicine. All that needs to be done to establish whether the claims of acupuncture are true is to compare the claims with material reality to see if they match. This is what we normally do to see if things are true anyway. Materialism simply applies this method consistently to all claims. But what if we approach acupuncture from an immaterialistic perspective – a perspective which maintains that non-physical stuff exists? Well, you can't compare the claims of acupuncture to material reality, because, with an immaterialistic perspective, a mismatch with material reality does not indicate that something is false. If you accept any form of immaterialism, acupuncture very well may be true. How could you discount it? If there is no evidence for it in material reality, so what? It isn't supposed to have physical properties anyway. This is the problem. If you believe that non-physical stuff can exist, you can't use correspondence with material reality as the test for truth, and really anything might be true; whether it be acupuncture, homeopathy, animist spirits, or your friend's invisible spaceship.

Without materialism, there is no objective or justifiable means to differentiate between what is true and what is not. What do you use to determine what you should believe? With materialism, you test each claim by comparing it with material reality to see if it matches. If it does, you believe the claim; if it doesn't, you don't believe the claim. But if you believe that non-physical stuff exists, you cannot use this method for determining what you should believe. Without this method, people try to find some other method, whether it be going with personal feelings or a sacred text, or something else. But then, how do you judge which feelings are reliable and which sacred text is actually right? Without materialism, there is ultimately no way to tell. There is no objective standard by which to judge the claims of the sacred text. So how do you choose which sacred text to believe?

This brings us back to the main question: why do we need materialism? We need it because it informs us of what reality is in the most fundamental sense. It is the foundation, the bedrock, upon which we can base everything else and by which we can test every claim.

Unfortunately, materialism is hardly ever discussed. It simply isn't a topic that arises very often, whether among the religious or even the non-religious. And since it isn't discussed, it isn't well understood. Many who promote scientific skepticism don't hold active beliefs in the existence of proposed non-physical essences or objects. Yet, since they usually don't understand materialism (or if they do, perhaps not very well) many still leave room for the perceived possibility of non-physicality. Or, many, even in the scientific community, hold to immaterialistic ideas without realizing that they truly are immaterialistic and, in principle, no different from the various untestable religious ideologies. An example of this is the traditional big bang singularity, thought to be the beginning of time and matter. Materialism shows us that such a hypothesis cannot be correct since it suggests that there was some sort of non-physical non-temporal reality, at least at some point. Thankfully, many physicists and cosmologists are now moving away from big bang singularity models and are moving toward other models that include pre-big bang physicality and temporality. Another example, or really many examples, are many interpretations of quantum mechanics which suggest that the physical world is not fundamental. Again, this violates materialism and is thus definitionally not true. Materialism truly is a broad idea. Since it addresses the most fundamental nature of reality, it touches on everything. Coming to understand materialism is really the only way to move forward, to discard all unjustifiable beliefs, and to come to understand subjects which are still enshrouded in mystery.

On that note, the last thing I want to mention is how this relates to morality. Various forms of religious morality say that morality has its basis in God, whereas secular forms of morality tend to say it has its basis in society in one way or another. Both types of views are problematic and neither of them meets the standard of materialism. Materialism requires that *all* claims be tested according to material reality. A full understanding of materialism and its relation to morality inevitably leads us to the conclusion that morality is simply the assessment of whether actions are in harmony with material reality in the same way that we assess whether ideas and statements are in harmony with material reality. If someone decides to lie, the idea promoted in the lie is false in terms of its truth-value, meaning it is contrary to material reality, but it is also immoral to tell the lie, meaning the person *acted* contrary to material reality by telling the lie. Likewise, to make someone drink bleach would be immoral; the reason why is that it is contrary to their physical make-up. If their body had a physical-chemical composition that reacted well to bleach, on the other hand, it wouldn't be immoral since it wouldn't be contrary to their physical make-up. This basic idea of materialism as the foundation for morality (since, of course, it's the foundation of all things) can help us to answer moral issues and it leaves us with no conflicting moral claims as is the case when basing morality on gods or societies, all of which make contrary moral claims.

We need materialism in order to make sense of the world because the world truly is material in nature. Understanding materialism will weed out superstition, pseudoscience, bad science, bad morals, and untruths of all sorts. In short, we need materialism because without it we're screwed. We need materialism because with it, and only with it, we can bring our thoughts and actions into harmony with material reality and make a better world.

For a concise argument in favor of materialism, give this a listen: