

Chronology of materialist philosophy: Its implications, core principles, and key founders

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Abstract---Materialist philosophy has been present since the earliest stages of human intellectual history. It developed significantly during Greek philosophical thought and reached a high level of theoretical maturity—especially in explanation, interpretation, and analytical sophistication—with the rise of Darwinism and Marxism. As a philosophical tradition, materialism represents the cumulative contributions of numerous thinkers, and it has served as a foundational reference for interpreting various psychological, social, political, and economic theories. Nevertheless, like all human theoretical constructs, it has not been immune to critique or philosophical objections.

Keywords---philosophy, matter, meanings and concepts, materialist principles.

INTRODUCTION

Materialist philosophy is among the oldest intellectual traditions developed by the human mind. It presents a philosophical worldview that regards matter—or material reality—as the sole true and fundamental form of existence. Any explanation of the universe or existence that extends beyond matter is seen, within this framework, as illusion or falsehood. Accordingly, all phenomena, including those typically considered non-material such as the mind, consciousness, thought, emotion, spirit, and soul, are interpreted as natural outcomes of physical, chemical, and biological interactions. Just as the stomach digests food and the liver secretes fluids, the mind, from the materialist standpoint, produces thought.

Materialist philosophy maintains that matter is the essence and primary principle of the universe, whereas what is referred to as the mental, spiritual, or psychological realms is merely a secondary reflection of material reality. Regardless of how complex mental or spiritual operations may appear, they are ultimately reducible to physical, chemical, or mechanical processes. For proponents of materialism,

How to Cite:

BIDA, A. (2025). Chronology of materialist philosophy: Its implications, core principles, and key founders. *The International Tax Journal*, 52(6), 3734–3750. Retrieved from <https://internationaltaxjournal.online/index.php/itj/article/view/364>

The International tax journal ISSN: 0097-7314 E-ISSN: 3066-2370 © 2025

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Submitted: 08 May 2025 | Revised: 24 August 2025 | Accepted: 17 November 2025

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mechanical causation constitutes the exclusive explanatory framework for cosmic motion and natural processes. The concept of purpose or teleology is therefore dismissed entirely, regarded as an illusion—indeed, an idol of misguided reasoning.

The foundational premises of materialist philosophy rest on the idea that reality originates from pure matter; that consciousness, spirit, and mental or spiritual states arise from material interactions; and that scientific explanation must be grounded solely in empirical and experimental methods. Consequently, materialism categorically denies the existence of non-material entities, rejecting notions such as the soul or metaphysical realms.

Throughout history, materialist thought has evolved into diverse schools, including—though not limited to—mechanistic materialism, historical materialism, and dialectical materialism, especially under the influence of Marxist philosophy. Given the profound impact of this philosophical tradition on human thought in general, and on philosophical inquiry in particular, this article seeks to explore materialist philosophy by addressing the following overarching question:

Problematic Question: *What is materialist philosophy? What are its key concepts and implications? What are its foundational principles, and who are its most influential thinkers?.*

FIRST: DEFINING THE DOCTRINE

The materialist doctrine, or materialism, derives from the concept of *matter*. It is a philosophical position that explains all phenomena through tangible, material causes. According to this view, the foundation of existence is matter and nature, and no entities such as spirit or metaphysical realities possess independent existence. Matter and nature thus constitute the basis of both knowledge and being.

From the materialist perspective, the mind begins as a blank slate, and the primary source of knowledge is sensory experience and the objective material world. Materialism also maintains that primordial matter is the fundamental substance of reality, whereas the mind is merely a secondary byproduct that emerges from the organization and accumulation of material processes. The world, in this view, is eternal, infinite, and unbounded in both time and space. Likewise, human consciousness and knowledge are regarded as reflections of the external material world¹.

Although traces of materialist thought can be identified in early human civilizations and ancient Eastern cultures, it assumed a distinctly philosophical and theoretical form with the natural philosophers of ancient Greece. These early thinkers transformed scattered intuitive insights about matter into structured philosophical doctrines.

In response to the question “*What is materialism?*”, Roger Garaudy offers the following definition: Materialism holds that the events and phenomena of the world are merely different manifestations of matter in motion. Matter is that which exists independently of the spirit and does not require any spiritual essence for its being. It constitutes the primary and fundamental reality, whereas our sensations, perceptions, and thoughts are merely reflections and products of this material reality².

The materialist doctrine—or the material interpretation of existence and its constituents—is a philosophical orientation grounded in the principle that matter, nature, sensory experience, and empirical observation take precedence over mind, consciousness, and thought. Within this framework, consciousness is viewed merely as a secondary derivative of material processes.

¹ Bagoura, Zawawi. *Meddkhal Jadid ila Falsafat al-'Ulum* (A New Introduction to the Philosophy of Science), collective work, 1st ed., Mentouri University Press, Constantine; Dar al-Huda, Ain M'lila, Algeria, n.d., p. 10

² Garaudy, Roger. *al-Nazariyya al-Maddiyya fi al-Ma'rifa* (The Materialist Theory of Knowledge), trans. Ibrahim Qrout, n.e., Dar Damascus, Damascus–Syria, n.d., p. 5

Accordingly, the materialist interpretation entirely dismisses any metaphysical, spiritual, or supernatural explanations that diverge from material nature and its empirical laws. Materialists deny the existence of any realm or entity that cannot be subjected to sensory observation or practical, material explanation. The mind, soul, and spirit are understood merely as material projections or shadows lacking any independent existence. Consequently, materialism rejects outright anything that cannot be empirically perceived. Metaphysical concepts and phenomena that do not admit a material explanation are thus deemed nonexistent—mere illusions or myths arising from human ignorance, limited understanding, and the inability to investigate and explain natural phenomena. From this perspective, human beings historically invented imaginary supernatural forces to compensate for scientific, philosophical, and methodological shortcomings.

Materialism also denies the notion of chance or coincidence, viewing it instead as the expression of an unidentified or unrecognized necessity. For materialists, the universal law or foundational principle that explains existence is mechanism rather than teleology. Accordingly, the English philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) argued that existence is nothing but matter defined by its dimensions—length, width, and height—and that every phenomenon is the result of mechanical material motion. Even emotions and feelings, in his view, are merely physical movements occurring within the body.

Similarly, the English physicist Isaac Newton (1642–1727) asserted that all natural phenomena in the universe are fundamentally material, and that what appears to be psychological or spiritual is ultimately reducible to mechanical processes. The mind, for example, is regarded as a particular configuration of matter endowed with specific properties such as power, diversity, movement, and cognition. Emotional and psychological phenomena are simply functions of material organs: the brain thinks, the liver secretes bile, and the stomach digests food. This view was famously articulated by the French physician and philosopher Pierre Jean Georges Cabanis (1757–1808), who declared: “*The brain secretes thought just as the liver secretes bile and the stomach digests food.*”

Within this worldview, motion in nature precedes life itself. Moreover, motion is not understood merely as simple mechanical displacement; rather, it signifies transformation in a general sense and manifests in multiple forms—chemical, thermal, electrical, mechanical, and others³.

The German philosopher Baron d’Holbach (1723–1789) held that every phenomenon or event in existence and nature can be explained materially on the basis of *motion* and *matter*, which he regarded as eternal and immutable natural principles governed by the law of necessity. In nature, therefore, there is no place for chance, divine intervention, teleology, or any form of supernatural direction. This view is fully articulated in his famous book *The System of Nature* (1770), in which he rejected any metaphysical explanation that does not rest exclusively on purely material principles. There is no doubt that the rise of experimental science further strengthened and legitimized the materialist interpretation of the universe.

As for the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900), he believed that the conviction that extraordinary or supernatural forces govern the universe is nothing but an illusion—indeed, it constitutes a condemnation of life itself and a denial of its validity. Nietzsche rejected the concept of dualism in existence and viewed metaphysics as mere myth: an idol of falsehood and deception that must be shattered.

SECOND: CONCEPTS AND IMPLICATIONS

Matter and the Material: In language, *matter* refers to anything that provides substance for something else, and the “matter” of a thing is its origins and components from which it is formed, whether sensory

³ Ibid., pp. 63–87

or abstract, such as building material or the material of knowledge. Among philosophers, the term *matter* carries multiple meanings depending on intellectual and epistemological contexts:

1. **Matter according to Aristotle:** For Aristotle, matter is the opposite of form. This implies that matter has two aspects:
 - The first aspect refers to the undetermined elements from which a thing may be composed, called *prime matter* or *hylē*. It is pure potentiality and does not move into actuality except through the presence of form. Ibn Sina (Avicenna) defines *hylē* similarly as a substance whose actual existence occurs through receiving bodily form, due to a capacity within it to accept forms, while it has no form inherent to itself except the meaning of potentiality⁴.
 - The second aspect refers to the natural and rational givens that thought works upon to complete and refine. Everything that can be perfected through combination with something else is considered *matter*. Everything that a thing is composed of is the matter of that thing, whether sensory or abstract, such as the “matter of art.”
2. **Matter according to Descartes:** For Descartes, matter is opposed to form on the one hand and to thought on the other.
 - Its opposition to form stems from the idea that a body consists of two things: its geometric shape, which is its form, and its individuated actual substance, which is its matter.
 - Its opposition to thought lies in the fact that matter is a natural mass perceived through sensory intuition as existing outside the mind, while thought is something internal, abstracted from matter and its attributes. This led Descartes to claim that matter is *extension*. Similarly, some thinkers hold that matter—and the concept of matter—cannot be separated from power, motion, and energy.
3. **Matter according to Immanuel Kant:** Kant holds that the concept of matter refers to the givens of sensory experience as independent of the mind’s categories. The matter of an event is its sensory data and attributes, while its form consists of the relations that structure and organize its occurrence.
4. **The use of “matter” in logic:** In logic, *matter* refers to the propositions that make up a syllogism or the terms that constitute a proposition. The matter of a proposition is the subject and predicate, while its form is the relation that binds them (universal, particular, affirmative, negative).
The matter of a syllogism consists of the propositions from which it is formed (major premise, minor premise, and conclusion), while its form lies in its structure. Classical logicians also use the term *matter* to refer to states of necessity, impossibility, and possibility pertaining to propositions, because the subject and predicate are logically inseparable. Necessity corresponds to essential existence, impossibility to the impossibility of occurrence, and possibility lies between them—similar to the classification expressed by one theologian: “*Our rational judgment is a proposition independent of custom or convention, its divisions—exclusively—are necessity, impossibility, and permissibility.*”⁵
5. **Matter in ethics:** In ethics, *matter* refers to the action performed by an agent regardless of intention. Thus, accidental killing is considered *killing* in terms of the matter of the act, but in terms of its form (intention), the agent is innocent. *Materialism* also applies to those who believe that life is purely material and that one must enjoy it to the fullest, a view similar to the *Dabriyyah*, mentioned by Jamal al-Din al-Afghani in “*Refutation of the Materialists*”, who summarized their viewpoint as: “*Nothing but wombs that deliver and earth that devours.*”

⁴ Ibn Sīnā, Abū ‘Alī. *Risālat al-Ḥudūd* (The Treatise on Definitions), 2nd ed., Dar al-‘Arab lil-Bustānī, Cairo, Egypt, n.d., pp. 83–84

⁵ Ibn ‘Āshir, Abū Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Wāḥid. *al-Mursbid al-Mu‘in ‘alā al-Ḍarīri min ‘Ulūm al-Dīn* (The Helpful Guide to the Essentials of the Religious Sciences), n.e., Maktabat al-Qāhira, Midan al-Azhar, Egypt, n.d., p. 1

6. **Materialism in metaphysics:** In metaphysics, the materialist doctrine refers to the view that matter alone is the true substance or primary principle through which we explain all phenomena of existence, life, and mind—this being the opposite of the spiritualist doctrine.
7. **Materialism in psychology:** In psychology, *materialism* refers to the approaches that consider states of consciousness to be secondary phenomena arising from corresponding physiological bodily processes.
8. **Other philosophical meanings of materialism:** Materialism also refers to philosophical schools such as:
 - **Classical Greek materialism**, where Epicurus⁶ held that matter is the basis of existence and the key to explaining all phenomena.
 - **Dialectical materialism**, according to Karl Marx, which posits matter and dialectic as the fundamental principles for explaining everything. Dialectical materialism views matter as a dynamic reality incorporating opposing variables and quantitative–qualitative changes, leading ultimately to independent spiritual life, though matter remains the initial driving force. Existence is thus a whole composed of evolving matter that grows increasingly complex until a qualitative leap occurs.
9. **Historical materialism:** Historical materialism holds that historical and social phenomena arise from specific economic causes. Karl Marx argues that the economic structure of society is the actual foundation upon which the superstructure—political, judicial, educational, cultural—rests.

Every form of social consciousness corresponds to this economic base, and every social, political, or spiritual movement is determined by the nature of economic production. Economic conditions constitute the infrastructure⁷ upon which the spiritual superstructure stands⁸. Historical materialism thus opposes historical idealism, which holds that intellectual and spiritual factors determine social structures, while economic realities are produced by spiritual forces.

THIRD: A HISTORICAL (CHRONOLOGICAL) OVERVIEW OF THE DOCTRINE

Through an inductive examination of the stages of development of the materialist philosophical doctrine, it becomes evident that this conceptual philosophical orientation toward existence and life is deeply rooted in human history, dating back to ancient Babylonian and Eastern civilizations. However, the doctrine attained theoretical and intellectual maturity through Greek philosophers, beginning with the early natural philosophers. Materialist thought then underwent significant development and refinement in the medieval and modern eras with the advancement of natural, experimental, and physical sciences.

One key observation that emerges when comparing ancient materialism with modern materialism is that the former interpreted the universe, existence, and phenomena in a purely absolute material sense. Modern materialist interpretations, by contrast, do not explain phenomena in an entirely absolute material manner, but rather by establishing mechanical and causal relations between phenomena and existing entities.

The philosophical origins of the materialist doctrine began in the Greek era, specifically with the successive generations of Greek natural philosophers whose primary concern was addressing a fundamental question that formed the core of their thought: What is the origin of the universe and nature? Their answers were largely aligned in asserting that the origin of the cosmos lies within the basic

⁶ **Epicurus:** An ancient Greek philosopher who lived between 341–270 BCE. He founded a philosophical school that was named after him, known as **the Epicurean school**

⁷ **Infrastructure:** A Marxist term referring to the economic conditions and material circumstances that shape consciousness.

⁸ **Superstructure:** A Marxist term referring to the various cultural and social structures, and the forms of consciousness that arise as a result of the surrounding material and economic conditions

elements of nature: air, water, earth, and fire, along with references related to atomic or indivisible-substance theories.

Among the most prominent Greek natural philosophers is the philosopher, mathematician, and natural scientist Thales of Miletus (624–546 BCE), who attributed the origin of the universe to the element of water—acknowledging that the Babylonians had preceded him in this view. His explanation followed a specific mechanism known as the *Ionian method of interpretation*. As for Anaximenes (588–525 BCE) and his teacher Anaximander (610–546 BCE), they attributed the origin of all things to air. Meanwhile, Heraclitus (540–480 BCE)⁹ ascribed the origin to fire. Each philosopher had his own reasoning and justification supporting the credibility of the element he chose, based on its distinctive attributes.

We also find the Greek philosopher Democritus (460–370 BCE), known as the founder of the *atomic school*, which held that the atoms composing natural entities are eternal, infinite in number, and perpetually in motion. Through the combination and arrangement of these atoms, all existing beings are formed—including spiritual beings. Even the soul, according to Democritus, is composed of fine material atoms.

Greek philosophical thought appears to have gained greater maturity with the emergence of the philosophical triad: Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. Aristotle in particular made major philosophical contributions and is regarded as a foundational figure of materialist doctrine, due to the ways in which he diverged from his idealist teacher Plato. Aristotle leaned toward natural, realistic, and material explanations of phenomena and beings, to the extent of asserting the geocentric model—that the Earth is the center of the universe.

But with the beginnings of the European Renaissance in the 15th century, materialist thought developed and grew stronger alongside scientific discoveries in multiple fields such as physics, astronomy, mechanics, chemistry, and others. In the 16th century, the Italian scholar Nicolaus Copernicus (1473–1543)¹⁰ authored a book titled “*On the Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres*,” in which he presented scientific discoveries that overturned the prevailing scientific assumptions—most notably the claim that the sun, not the earth, is the center of the universe, contrary to what the Greeks and Aristotle had believed.

The Italian astronomer Galileo Galilei also made significant discoveries, including the rotation of the earth. For this reason he was tried by the Church’s Inquisition, which forced him to renounce these discoveries, and he nearly faced execution because of them. Due to the severe restrictions imposed on scientists and on scientific inquiry, intellectual and political voices began calling for the Church’s withdrawal from public life, the adoption of secularism, and the separation of religion from life and politics.

In the 17th century, a major shift occurred with the English physicist Isaac Newton (1643–1727). Benefiting greatly from the scientific contributions of Copernicus and Galileo, Newton introduced new scientific efforts and discoveries in physics, astronomy, and mechanics. He laid the foundational principles of classical physics, making science and scientific research fundamentally quantitative, based on measurement and material analysis.

Thus, science came to rely on induction, material explanations, and principles of rationality, causality, mechanism, and determinism. Qualitative reasoning was deemed insufficient, while quantitative,

⁹ **Heraclitus (535–470 BCE):** A Greek natural philosopher, regarded as the father of dialectics

¹⁰ **Copernicus (1473–1543):** An Italian scientist and astronomer who demonstrated that the Earth is not the center of the universe but rather a planet like the others that revolves around the sun. His name is associated with what came to be known as the “Copernican Revolution.”

measurable analysis became the scientific standard. Science, therefore, moved beyond speculative and purely theoretical explanations.

This transformation had a profound impact on philosophy and philosophical thought, which began leaning strongly toward material explanations, considering matter the essence and foundational principle for accurate and certain interpretation. As a result, various philosophical movements emerged that adopted matter and sensory experience as the primary point of reference for values, explanation, and inquiry. These include, under the broad umbrella of materialist philosophy, diverse schools such as the philosophy of the English thinker and founder of mathematical logic Bertrand Russell, neo-positivism, and dialectical materialism¹¹.

The earliest signs of modern materialist tendencies appeared with the English empiricist philosophers, among them: Francis Bacon – John Stuart Mill – David Hume – Thomas Hobbes – John Locke – Herbert Spencer; and in France, Auguste Comte, founder of positivist philosophy in intellectual and philosophical thought.

All thinkers who belong to materialist philosophy are naturalists, and they are also *scientific* to varying degrees. Among them are *empirical naturalists* who possess a certain rational inclination, yet still gravitate toward the materialist doctrine¹².

One of the major factors that strengthened materialist and sensory-empirical thought in the modern era was the advancement of experimental and exact sciences. These developments increased the credibility of material scientific results, which are fundamentally based on experimental methodologies. This, in turn, enriched and expanded the concepts of materialist philosophies, which categorically rejected and excluded all spiritual and metaphysical matters, as well as innate *a priori* concepts.

Materialism also denied the search for ultimate causes or explanations that fall outside empirical investigation, rejected rational principles, considered the mind a *blank slate*, and refuted the concept of teleology entirely, replacing it with mechanical and causal principles. The German *critical empiricist school* is regarded as a direct source of neo-positivism¹³.

It can be said that among the most significant philosophies embodying materialist thought is Marxist philosophy, founded by the German philosopher Karl Marx. This philosophy is built on a set of key principles, most notably: matter and dialectic, dialectical materialism, and historical materialism. The German materialist philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach is considered one of the major founders alongside Marx.

As for the new realism in England, which emerged through Bertrand Russell, its appearance dates back to the second half of the 19th century. Realists opposed idealism, and one of their main principles was that perception can grasp an independently existing external reality, not merely psychological representations¹⁴.

FOURTH: FOUNDATION AND PROMINENT PIONEERS AND FIGURES

Among the most important books that discussed *neo-positivism* is the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein¹⁵. It appears that some of the most prominent pioneers and founders of the materialist doctrine or the

¹¹ Buchenski, M. *al-Falsafa al-Mu'asira fi Urubbā* (Contemporary Philosophy in Europe), trans. 'Izzat Qarni, 'Ālam al-Ma'rifa Series, Kuwait, September 1992, p. 69.

¹² Ibid., pp. 69–70

¹³ Ibid., p. 81

¹⁴ Buchenski, op. cit., pp. 70–72

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 85

materialist philosophical tendency include: Francis Bacon – David Hume – John Stuart Mill – Thomas Hobbes – John Locke – Auguste Comte.

10- Bacon (Francis) (1561–1626): An English empiricist–sensory philosopher, writer, and statesman. He was one of the leaders of the scientific revolution against the classical philosophical concepts inherited from the Greeks. He attempted to establish a philosophy based on material methods, essentially grounded in *observation* and *experimentation*, while rejecting sterile Aristotelian formal logic. Among Bacon’s main intellectual projects was the task of *purifying thought* from the “idols” that obstruct correct reasoning. He believed that the most reliable method for attaining precise knowledge is *experimental induction*. His most famous works include: “*The New Organon*”, a series of writings known as “*The Great Instauration*”, “*The Advancement of Learning*”, and “*The Great Birth of Time*.”

11- Hume (David) (1711–1776): A Scottish philosopher, economist, and historian, considered a major figure of Scottish Enlightenment thought. He was greatly influenced by empiricist philosophers such as John Locke, Isaac Newton, and Adam Smith. Hume’s philosophy was based on distrust of abstract philosophical speculation and emphasized experience as the only source of knowledge. He denied the existence of innate ideas in the human mind, asserting instead that the source of all mental knowledge is *sensation and experience*.

According to Hume, sensory experiences and impressions that appear superficially unconnected are in fact linked by three basic principles: similarity, contiguity, and cause/effect (consequence). He believed that the foundation of morality is not reason but the *sentiment of benevolence* and the common human desire for goodness. Among the most famous issues he analyzed is the question of *causality*. His major works include: “*A Treatise of Human Nature*”, “*Essays Moral and Political*”, and “*Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*.”

12- Mill (John Stuart) (1806–1873): A British philosopher and economist, greatly influenced by English materialist philosophers—especially Jeremy Bentham. It is said that Mill learned Greek at the age of five and studied Greek literature. At twelve, he studied Aristotle’s logic, the philosophy of Thomas Hobbes, and the economic thought of David Ricardo¹⁶.

His father ensured he received a rigorous scientific and rational education. Mill began writing intellectual articles on various subjects in which he praised rationality, the empirical method, democracy, and equality. He strongly attacked religious fanaticism, philosophical idealism, and the absolutism of knowledge.

He is considered one of the pioneers of *liberal philosophy* and is well-known for founding the rules of *induction* as an alternative to scientific hypothesis.

His major works include: “*Principles of Political Economy*”, “*The Principles of Political Liberalism*”, “*On Liberty*”, and “*The Subjection of Women*.”

13- Hobbes (Thomas) (1588–1679): An English mathematician, philosopher, and legal theorist of great renown. Hobbes was an advocate of absolute monarchy and wrote several works in politics and law. He is considered one of the founders of *modern political philosophy*. He is famous for his theory of the social contract, and among his major writings are: “*Leviathan*”, “*Elements of Law*”, and “*Human Nature*.”

14- Locke (John) (1632–1704): An English empiricist philosopher and politician. Locke was a sensory philosopher with strong empirical tendencies. Among his greatest works are “An Essay Concerning Human Understanding” and his book on the human mind. He is known for the famous statement: “*If someone asks you: When did you begin to think? The answer should be: When I began to sense.*”

Locke sharply criticized Descartes’ rationalist view that the mind is born with innate ideas. Locke believed that the mind acquires basic concepts through experience and sensory perception. The mind, in his view, is a *blank slate*, since innate principles are not universally shared—children, the mentally

¹⁶ **David Ricardo (1772–1823):** A British political economist and one of the most influential classical economists, alongside Thomas Malthus, Adam Smith, and James Mill.

deficient, and even many healthy individuals do not possess them. He is also known for his political theory of the social contract, though unlike Hobbes, Locke did not support absolute monarchy. On the contrary, he was an advocate of constitutional monarchy, making his version of the social contract distinct from Hobbes'.

His major works include: "*An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*", "*Tracts on Natural Law*", and "*The Works of John Locke*."

15- Comte (Auguste) (1798–1857): A French philosopher, sociologist, and political thinker with a strong positivist orientation. He lived during the French Revolution and its social consequences, and he developed numerous ideas in philosophy, politics, and sociology. He is often credited as the founder of *sociology*.

However, many specialists and scholars emphasize that the Muslim Arab thinker Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406) is the true and original founder of sociology—indeed, the father of sociology—having established not only this science but nearly seven of its subfields. Comte is considered the founder of *positivism* in philosophy and was a student of the economist Saint-Simon. He became well known for his *classification of the sciences* and for advocating the establishment of a general positivist philosophy. He also formulated the law of the three stages in the development of human thought: from the mythical–theological stage to the metaphysical stage, and finally to the positive scientific stage, based on observation, experimentation, and empirical field methods. His major works include: "*The Positive Philosophy*."

FIFTH: PRINCIPLES AND IDEAS

The most important principles and ideas upon which the materialist doctrine is built can be summarized as follows:

16- Materialism holds that the *absolute truth* governing the universe, existence, and life is matter in all its manifestations, laws, and principles¹⁷.

17- Materialism excludes every spiritual or metaphysical truth¹⁸.

18- It considers the mind a *blank slate* and rejects the existence—under any circumstances—of innate concepts, a priori principles, or inherent categories. All principles believed to be innate are, according to materialism, the product of sensory perception, accumulated sensations in the brain, and their transformation from quantitative to qualitative mental forms.

19- The fundamental and sole method for attaining knowledge is the experimental, inductive, empirical, field-based, and applied method¹⁹.

20- Mechanism: The essential system or foundational principle governing the universe, existence, and life is the mechanical–causal principle, and there is *no* teleological principle whatsoever.

21- Positivist philosophy: The effective philosophical orientation for understanding existence, the universe, and life—and through which we attain true and accurate knowledge—is positivist philosophy, or materialist positivism, following the model of Auguste Comte.

22- Dialectical materialism: One of the core principles of Marxist materialism. It holds that the **dialectic of matter** is the fundamental law governing existence. Marx, being a materialist, adopted Hegel's idealist dialectic but *reversed its direction* so that **matter**, not idea, spirit, or mind, becomes the foundational substance and primary reference. According to Marx, material factors—such as economic laws—are what shape human consciousness. Economic and material conditions form the axis of all human systems: political, social, educational, and all intellectual and social structures.

Dialectical materialism, according to Marx, is based on several laws, including:

a) The Law of the Unity and Struggle of Opposites: There is a fundamental dialectical principle that drives the universe, existence, and life: the struggle between things and their opposites. Every existing entity has an opposite. Due to this inherent feature, a perpetual struggle arises—not necessarily to

¹⁷ al-Sharqawi, op. cit., p. 46

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 47

¹⁹ al-Sharqawi, op. cit., pp. 46–48

destroy the opposite, but to overcome and surpass it. New compositions emerge from these struggles, which constitute the essence of development that applies to all beings without exception. For example:

- private ownership vs. public/collective ownership
- the bourgeois capitalist class vs. the proletarian working class.

b) The Law of the Transition from Quantitative Accumulation to Qualitative Change: Among the laws of dialectical materialism is the idea that quantitative material accumulations lead to qualitative changes. An increase in quantitative developments eventually leads to qualitative transformations. Before qualitative shifts occur, there must be accumulated quantitative change. Revolution, for example, is a *qualitative transformation* resulting from a historical process of slow developments caused by accumulated quantitative changes.

c) The Law of the Negation of the Negation: The history of human developments and transformations consists of cycles of *negations* and *counter-negations*. Every system—whether economic, political, or social—carries within itself the seeds of its own dissolution, along with its weaknesses and decline.

Negation, in this context, means preserving the positive elements of the old system and integrating and elevating them within the new system. This process leads to becoming, development, change, and transformation.

23- Historical materialism: This refers to studying the processes and transformations of matter and its phenomena and the extent to which its material and economic laws are embodied throughout history. Historical materialism is the *practical and applied side* of dialectical materialism across historical development.

Marx believed that **economic factors**, such as the type and mode of economic activity and production methods, determine the social and human superstructures—not conscience, mind, or spirit. Thus, economic factors determine every type of political and economic system throughout history. Primitive communism, slavery, feudalism, capitalism, socialism, and finally communism are all products of the development of economic activity such as hunting, gathering, herding, agriculture, industry, trade, and services. Marx held that each previous system contains internal contradictions leading to its historical demise as new conditions accelerate contradictions in both the superstructure and the infrastructure.

24- Class struggle: Marx believed that class conflicts—between economic and social classes—are the main driving force of historical developments and transformations across all fields. Thus, the existence of classes such as masters and slaves, exploiters and exploited, bourgeois and workers, rulers and ruled, private ownership and public/collective ownership—all represent the two poles of the historical and material dialectic that propels the evolution of history, systems, and institutions. Scientific socialism eventually emerges from this development, later evolving further into advanced stages until it becomes communism.

According to Marx, the total evolution of communism ultimately leads to anarchism and the withering away of the state, which is merely a tool used by one class to dominate another. The disappearance of the state is, in Marx's view, a positive and natural outcome for just societies that achieve the highest forms of social justice²⁰.

25- The epistemological system of Bacon: Francis Bacon, one of the founders of the materialist doctrine, believed in the necessity of establishing a materialist philosophical epistemology in order to attain certain truth.

To achieve this new scientific conception, the following steps are required:

26-A comprehensive classification of the sciences.

²⁰ al-Sharqawi, op. cit., p. 49

- 27- Establishing the fundamental principles of the art of interpreting nature and its phenomena.
- 28- Engaging with material data through observation and field examination.
- 29- Experimentation.
- 30- Material induction and the tracking of phenomena.
- 31- Abstraction and generalization.
- 32- Establishing a comprehensive philosophy for understanding and interpreting nature.

b) Demolishing the Idols²¹: This is a fundamental and necessary process for purifying work and thought by destroying all obstacles that hinder correct objective thinking. Among these obstacles are the following:

- **Destroying the Idols of the Tribe:** These are the ideas ingrained in the cultural residues of each race, tribe, or group, which block sound reasoning—such as superstitions and collective illusions²².
- **Destroying the Idols of the Cave:** The name is borrowed from Plato’s allegory of the cave. What is meant here is avoiding personal inclinations, emotions, biases, and moods in interpreting things.
- **Destroying the Idols of the Marketplace:** These refer to errors arising from commonly used expressions and linguistic communication styles that fail to represent the true nature of things. They were called “marketplace idols” because language—frequently imprecise—is the main tool of communication and trade in markets, and often words do not accurately express realities²³.
- **Destroying the Idols of the Theatre:** These refer to errors in knowledge, concepts, and assumptions that have infiltrated people’s minds through traditional or modern philosophical doctrines. The name comes from Bacon’s analogy that such philosophies resemble theatrical plays—creations of their authors but not necessarily reflective of true reality.

c) Classification of the Sciences: Bacon classified sciences based on mental faculties and the nature and type of phenomena they study.

d) The Scientific Method: It is based primarily on **observation, experiment, and induction**, while excluding anything purely theoretical.

e) Induction: A fundamental method in material experimentation for attaining knowledge and moving away from merely speculative reasoning.

According to ‘Abdel Wahab El-Messiri’, the concept of nature holds significant importance in materialist philosophies, which operate within a framework of absolute reference. He considers it a polite substitute for the word *matter*²⁴.

He identifies several fundamental principles of materialist philosophy:**33-** Belief in the unity of nature—nature is a continuous whole.

34- Belief in the legality of nature based on determinism and causality.

35- Belief that nature is an interconnected network of strict laws.

36- Nature moves spontaneously, and motion is purely material.

37- Denial of the teleological principle (purposefulness).

38- Strict belief in mechanical determinism as the foundational mechanism of the universe.

39- Rejection of metaphysics as mere myths and superstitions.

40- Matter is the foundation of the universe.

²¹ Maher ‘Abd al-Qādir Muḥammad ‘Alī. *Falsafat al-‘Ulum – al-Manṭiq al-Istiqrā’i* (Philosophy of Science – Inductive Logic), vol. 1, 1st ed., Dar al-Nahda al-‘Arabiyya li-l-Ṭibā’a wa-l-Nashr, Beirut–Lebanon, 1984, pp. 96–97

²² Ibid., p. 97

²³ Maher ‘Abd al-Qādir Muḥammad ‘Alī, previously cited, p. 97

²⁴ al-Misiri, ‘Abd al-Wahhāb. *al-Falsafa al-Māddiyya wa-Tafkik al-Insān* (Materialist Philosophy and the Deconstruction of Man), 4th ed., Dar al-Fikr al-Mu’āṣir, Damascus–Syria, 2010, p. 15

SIXTH: SCHOOLS OF MATERIALIST PHILOSOPHY

a) Mechanical Materialism: Philosophers of the Enlightenment such as La Mettrie – Diderot – d’Holbach – Feuerbach²⁵ represent a philosophical tendency that offers *mechanical interpretations* based on causal laws and the results that explain the motion of things. A group of materialist philosophers believes that all natural phenomena can be understood by knowing the size, shape, arrangement, and motion of small particles—atom-like entities. This group reduces the world, existence, and the universe to a large machine or a system of interrelated parts; just as engines and large devices operate through interconnected components, so too does existence follow mechanical relations.

This approach contrasts sharply with *teleological philosophy*, which maintains that the fundamental principle explaining existence and life is *purpose*, and that all beings move toward predetermined ends or aims defined by fate or pre-established direction.

The mechanical outlook gained further strength from the rise of experimental and exact sciences, as well as the rapid development of mechanical sciences.

b) Dialectical Materialism: (Karl Marx – Friedrich Engels) This is one of the major orientations within materialist philosophy, created by Karl Marx and his colleague Friedrich Engels, and it constitutes a central pillar of Marxist materialism. In our view, there is a strong link between matter and dialectic, with matter serving as the primary driver of dialectical movement—contrary to Hegel, who believed that *thought, mind, spirit, the Logos, or the Absolute* is the fundamental engine of dialectic and the laws of existence.

Supporters of dialectical materialism argue that matter, representing the *infrastructure*, determines and produces all forms of *superstructure*.

The essence of this orientation is that Marx merely performed a fusion between Feuerbach’s materialism and Hegel’s dialectic, culminating in a dialectical materialism based on natural material laws:

- The Law of the Negation of the Negation
- The Law of the Transition from Quantitative Accumulation to Qualitative Change
- The Law of the Unity and Struggle of Opposites²⁶.

In addition to other complementary laws in Marxist materialism such as *historical materialism and class struggle*.

Dialectical materialism attempted to lend scientific legitimacy to its explanations by drawing upon theories from experimental science—such as Darwin’s theory of evolution, and the physical and chemical theories of Lavoisier, Newton, and others—regardless of how successful it was in doing so.

Marx held that human history is nothing but a struggle between social and economic classes, and that class conflict is the primary engine of history and existence, grounded in the interactions between the *superstructure* and the *infrastructure*.

Postmodern philosophies introduced the concept of the “subjectivity of knowledge”, challenging the objectivity claimed by dialectical materialism. This led to deep philosophical, conceptual, and ideological conflict between Marxists and capitalists. One influential Marxist even claimed that one of the tools used by capitalist ideology—which he described as imperialistic—is *undermining the theoretical foundations of knowledge*, because it failed to defeat dialectical and historical materialism on philosophical and logical grounds²⁷.

SEVENTH: EXAMPLE OF A PHILOSOPHICAL FIGURE

David Hume (1711–1776) — an English (Scottish) philosopher with an extreme sensory-materialist inclination. He was born in the city of Edinburgh in Scotland, northern Britain. His father, a lawyer,

²⁵ Bagoura, op. cit., p. 10

²⁶ al-Sharqawi, op. cit., p. 48

²⁷ al-Misiri, op. cit., p. 29

died in 1714. Hume was raised by his uncle George Home, a church minister known for strict religious and moral discipline. Hume lived for a period in the English countryside, and this environment—coupled with his uncle’s excessive rigidity in Christian religious practice—generated in him a deep aversion and hostility toward Christianity, the Church, and religious authority.

Hume attended a secondary school in Edinburgh, where he took courses in *natural philosophy*—equivalent today to natural sciences and physics. His early intellectual and philosophical orientation was Cartesian, but he soon became a devoted supporter of the famous physicist Isaac Newton.

In 1731, Hume traveled to France, where he wrote his first philosophical book, “A Treatise of Human Nature.” However, this book was essentially “stillborn”—it received almost no readership. Around the same period, he met a philosophy professor named Hutcheson in the Scottish city of Glasgow, who was also the teacher of the famous economist Adam Smith.

In 1741, Hume published a series of essays titled “Essays, Moral and Political.” In 1748, a complete edition of his work “A Treatise of Human Nature” was issued anew²⁸.

In 1751, he published another influential book entitled “An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals.”

Due to these works, Hume gained considerable fame. He corresponded with the well-known legal thinker Montesquieu, author of “*The Spirit of the Laws*.” As Hume’s writings and essays spread and earned him recognition among European intellectuals, he developed friendships and intellectual connections with prominent Enlightenment thinkers, including d’Alembert, Denis Diderot, d’Holbach, and others. These intellectual relationships were further strengthened through the *Encyclopédie* (Encyclopedia)—the major Enlightenment project in which many European writers and philosophers collaborated²⁹.

And in 1766, Hume established contacts and companionship with the famous Swiss philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, but their friendship did not last long due to Rousseau’s melancholic temperament, filled with persecution anxieties, fears of exile, and political conspiracies. These tensions grew sharper when Rousseau began to suspect that Hume was cooperating with government authorities to arrest and mistreat him—suspicions later mentioned in Hume’s own confessions. Rousseau died in 1778, while Hume returned to live in his birthplace, Edinburgh, known at that time as the “Athens of the North,” likely due to the abundance of its thinkers and philosophers. Hume died there in 1776.

– Hume’s Philosophy:

Hume’s philosophy can be summarized through the most important areas in which he proposed theories, opinions, and intellectual contributions:

a) Theory of Knowledge

Hume was a strict sensory—materialist philosopher, as clearly reflected in his writings. In his book “A Treatise of Human Nature”, he states that all perceptions of the mind fall into two distinct types: impressions and ideas, with *ideas being nothing but copies of impressions*. This means that ideas, concepts, and representations are merely extensions of sensory impressions.

By using memory and the mind’s functions, we can arrange, process, and store our ideas. Hume denies the existence of *abstract* ideas or universal concepts.

Certainty in ideas, according to him, arises from direct sensory identification of similarities or differences between them, or through inferential operations that link data—similar to mathematical reasoning³⁰.

²⁸ Badawi Encyclopedia, op. cit., pp. 611–614

²⁹ Ibid., pp. 618–619

³⁰ Badawi Encyclopedia, op. cit., pp. 614–615

Hume's sensualism is tied to skepticism, unlike Condillac's or Locke's sensualism which is tied to certainty. Therefore, Hume's empiricism is often called skeptical empiricism.

Hume divides impressions and ideas into simple and complex:

- Simple ones cannot be divided.
- Complex ones consist of clusters of simple elements.

He summarizes his position by saying that all our ideas arise from experience, and that there are absolutely no innate rational principles. The mind is a *blank slate*, operating with two faculties: memory and imagination.

b) Causality³¹

In *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Hume explains that the idea of causation stems from relations between things. The relation of contiguity (contact) is the core element of causality.

Nature, in his view, is a network of relations that link phenomena regardless of time and place.

Hume analyzes three fundamental components of causality:

1. **Contiguity (contact)**
2. **Priority (the cause precedes the effect)**
3. **Necessary connection**

For Hume, causality is nothing more than repeated temporal and spatial succession between causes and effects—a habit formed through repetition and custom.

c) Doubt (Skepticism)³²

Hume is renowned not only for his extreme sensualism but also for his probabilistic skepticism. He believed that knowledge has strict limits that cannot be exceeded. Scholars agree that Hume establishes boundaries for the very possibility of knowledge.

He distinguishes between ideas and matters of fact. While impressions impose themselves forcibly on the mind, *the conclusions drawn from them do not*. This includes the principle of causality.

From here arises Hume's skepticism about induction: Inductive conclusions derived from experience are merely probabilities, not certainties.

Every claim about facts must be restricted to impressions and particular experiences, not general conclusions drawn from them. Thus, Hume concluded with a purely psychological interpretation of causality—not as a victory for empirical reason but as a limit to it.

d) Aesthetics, Ethics, and Politics

Hume applies his epistemological method even in evaluative disciplines and normative sciences such as aesthetics (esthetics) and ethics (morality).

He argues that evaluative sciences and the values related to them are subjective, rooted in human nature. Therefore, all such judgments are relative and changing, tied to emotional and affective human responses toward beauty.

In ethics, Hume sees morality as subjective: Good and evil are not objective qualities; they are grounded in feeling and sentiment, not reason.

The aim of ethical inquiry is to uncover the universal principles underlying moral praise and blame. For Hume:

- **Benevolence** is praiseworthy for two reasons:
 1. human sympathy
 2. social utility
- **Justice** is praiseworthy for one reason only: **utility**, according to the Humean perspective³³.

³¹ Ibid., pp. 615–616

³² Ibid., vol. 2, p. 616

³³ Badawi Encyclopedia, op. cit., pp. 616–617

e) **Hume's Works:** Hume authored several works, including the following:

- *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739)
- *Essays Moral and Political* (1741)
- *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (1751)
- *Political Essays* (1752)
- *The History of England* (1754)

Eighth: Critical and Evaluative Reading

Several criticisms have been directed at the materialist doctrine, including the following:

41- The mind is not merely a blank slate; rather, it contains a minimal set of innate concepts and primary principles. Evidence for this lies in the fact that humans possess the unique capacity for speech, thought, reasoning, and understanding—unlike animals, even those closest to humans in brain structure.

On this basis, the mind became the criterion for moral responsibility in revelation and worship. Moreover, there are concepts and representations that have no counterpart in the sensory world, being purely intellectual productions³⁴.

42- The mind and mental capacities are responsible for translating and interpreting various sensations coming from external reality—even though such sensations are chaotic and unstructured. Moreover, mental operations provide logical coherence and organization to these sensations, adding complementary structures that are *not* derived from sensory data.

43- Materialists claim that material rationality is based on elements such as uniformity, repetition, quantity, causality, and mechanism. However, the human mind is *not* confined to the limitations of material oneness. For instance:

- How can the *soul*, which moves, thinks, understands, analyzes, and interprets—yet remains unknown in essence—be explained purely in material terms?
- The human mind possesses capacities that surpass material explanation.

This led **Noam Chomsky** to describe language as a “miracle”—a phenomenon that cannot be fully explained within a purely materialist framework but requires a *generative* one. Similarly, the psychologist **Jean Piaget** proposed a generative view of human development and of how humans acquire their sense of time and space—contrary to the cumulative material model.

44- The materialist doctrine claims that thought is merely one form of matter, and that thinking is only the result of quantitative material accumulation transforming into qualitative states. However, how can this explain the vast differences in types of thinking, cultures, principles, and all forms of abstract phenomena, if the mind and mental processes are nothing but chemical operations, materials, enzymes, and neural activities? If matter were of a single nature, **where did the rich diversity of human thought originate**³⁵?

45- How does the materialist doctrine explain *normative and evaluative sciences* such as ethics and aesthetics, and their values such as good, evil, ugliness, and beauty? These are emotional, spiritual, and affective states with abstract meanings that transcend rigid physiological and material processes. How do materialist perspectives explain **sacrifice, honor, bravery, martyrdom for the sake of God, principles, and convictions**? Furthermore, how does a materialist worldview explain **revolt and uprising** against certain political, economic, and social conditions, when nature and its laws—according to materialists—do not exhibit such “leaps” or sudden transformations?

46- How does the materialist doctrine interpret humanity's persistent quest for meaning, truth, existence, life, and the universe? Religion existed before civilizations—regardless of whom people

³⁴ al-Misiri, op. cit., pp. 80–87

³⁵ al-Misiri, op. cit., p. 11

worshipped. This is why **Alija Izetbegović**³⁶ argues that *religion and art have existed since the beginning of humanity*, while materialist thought is a *modern* development.

47- The materialist worldview rests on a **unitary material explanation**, but how does it account for the **dual nature** evident in the human phenomenon? And how does it explain differences among these dualities in living beings that share with humans a fundamental principle—life?

Moreover, materialist explanations fail to account for the overwhelming human inclination to believe in supernatural forces beyond the material universe. Humans build houses of worship and perform rituals to acknowledge and please these transcendent powers.

48- How do materialist doctrines explain the existence of **life** itself? It has been scientifically, empirically, and experimentally established that life cannot be produced from purely chemical or physiological interactions.

CONCLUSION

Materialism is a philosophical tendency rooted in Greek thought and later developed by English philosophers. It includes several schools such as mechanical materialism, historical materialism, and dialectical materialism. Its primary principles are **matter and experience** as the sole foundations of existence.

Materialist philosophy is an attempt to interpret the universe and existence, representing a qualitative shift in human thought and offering a distinct analytical framework for understanding the world from a purely material standpoint. It relies heavily on the results of natural and applied sciences, adopting scientific experimentation as its principal method for interpreting reality.

Materialist philosophy has contributed significantly to the development of intellectual and scientific analysis, offering explanatory frameworks for many theories in the humanities and social sciences—especially after the emergence of Darwinism and Marxism.

However, one of the main criticisms leveled against materialism is its **denial of the spiritual and metaphysical dimension of existence**, and its inability to explain phenomena that resist material interpretation. A significant number of scholars argue that materialism is **not a balanced philosophy**, as it excludes essential dimensions of human existence—such as spirituality, rationality, ethics, values, consciousness, and freedom—thus overlooking critical non-material concepts that profoundly shape human nature and experience.

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³⁶ **Alija ‘Izetbegović (1925–2003):** The first President of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina after the end of the Bosnian War. He was a Bosnian political activist and an Islamic philosopher, and the author of several books, the most notable of which is *Islam Between East and West*

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