

The Materialist Sixties

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Abstract: The 1960s saw the publication of many works in philosophy in which materialism (or physicalism) was a major theme even if not always endorsed. But how should we assess the ‘materialist sixties’? This paper argues that what is distinctive about the period is that it combines materialist metaphysics with materialist meta-philosophy, and, in so doing, solved a problem that dogged the discipline of philosophy since it assumed its modern form in the 19th century.

1. Introduction

At the beginning of *Word and Object*, Quine introduces us to the heroes of the book: physical objects. Physical objects, he says (1960, 1), are the “points of condensation in the primordial conceptual scheme.” While you might explain one such object in terms of another, you don’t explain physical objects as such in terms of anything else; rather you explain other things in terms of them. Hence Quine’s project is the materialist one of understanding “our talk of physical phenomena as a physical phenomenon” (1960, 5).

Quine’s book appeared at the beginning the 1960s, a period marked by the appearance of many major works in philosophy in which the doctrine of materialism (or physicalism)¹ is the central theme, even if not always endorsed. In addition to *Word and Object*, this list might include: Sellars’s ‘Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man,’ Smart’s *Philosophy and Scientific Realism* and ‘Materialism’, Putnam’s ‘The Analytic and the Synthetic’ and ‘Brains and Behaviour’, Nagel’s ‘Physicalism’, Lewis’s ‘An Argument for the Identity Theory’, Feigl’s ‘The ‘Mental’ and the ‘Physical’, Armstrong’s *A Materialist Theory of the Mind*, Fodor’s *Psychological Explanation*, Davidson’s ‘Actions, Reasons and Causes’ and ‘Anomalous Monism,’ Dennett’s *Content and Consciousness*, and Kripke’s lectures delivered in 1970 that were ultimately published as *Naming and Necessity*.

How should we think of this period of philosophy—“the materialist sixties,” as we might call it?² In the case of the real sixties—that is, the swinging sixties, the decade of Vietnam, long hair, and the Beatles—opinion is even today sharply divided (Marwick 2011). Some take it to be a golden age, a special period in which human creativity and freedom

¹ I will assume that ‘materialism’ and ‘physicalism’ are synonymous but will use the first here. For some history, see e.g., Stoljar 2010

² Is ‘the sixties’ a plural or not? I will often speak as if it is not, on the model of ‘the United States,’ but English does not seem to me entirely consistent on this point, and I won’t be either.

reached its full extent, at any rate for certain lucky people.³ Others agree it was special but evaluate it differently; they think it was a moral disaster in which, as Margaret Thatcher put it, “the old values of discipline and restraint were denigrated” (quoted in Marwick 2011). Still others reject the idea that the period is distinctive in the first place; in the huge tide of history, they argue, this is just one duration among innumerable others, and is in no clear sense exceptional.

In the case of the materialist sixties, it’s possible to discern similar patterns of reaction or potential reaction—at least if you squint in just the right way. Here too some seem to take it to be a golden age, a period in which metaphysics and philosophy more generally finally managed to formulate itself as a modern discipline.⁴ Others view it as, if not a moral disaster, then certainly a wrong turn. Ordinary language philosophers, positivists, continental philosophers, some experimental philosophers, and some contemporary naturalists are different in many ways, but they are united in their opposition to the materialist sixties, at least as I interpret them. Still others might say that it wasn’t distinctive at all, no better or worse overall than any arbitrary decade in the history of philosophy.

This paper offers a view of the period that is close to, but not the same as, the first of these attitudes, but which also includes a small admixture of the third. I don’t think it was a golden age—for one thing, there are no such things. Nor do I think that the central themes of the sixties cannot be improved upon or developed; they can and should be. Nor is the decade entirely unprecedented: in important ways these materialist philosophers show the influence of the positivist philosophers that came immediately before them. What I will argue, however, is that the materialist sixties considered as a period is both distinctive and laudable in that it offered for the first time a plausible solution to a problem that dogged philosophy since it became a professional discipline in the nineteenth century, namely, the problem of saying what questions constitute the subject matter of the discipline, and how it might go about addressing those questions. What happens in the sixties, to put it in slogan form, is that materialist metaphysics meets materialist meta-philosophy.

³ This attitude is expressed in Philip Larkin’s poem “Annus Mirabilis”; see Larkin 2003. Compare Hobsbawm: “For 80 percent of humanity, the Middle Ages ended suddenly in the 1950s; or perhaps better still they were *felt* to end in the 1960s” (1994, 288)

⁴ Yablo 1998, p. 229: “Ontology the progressive research program (not to be confused with ontology the swapping of hunches about what to exist is usually traced back to Quine’s 1948 paper “On what there is”. Of course 1948 is well before the sixties, but Quine is the central figure of the decade, and *Word and Object* is the culmination of many papers of which ‘On What there is’ is one. See also the remarks on periodization below.

I will begin in section 2 with preliminary remarks, before sketching the main proposal in section 3. Subsequent sections, as Quine might have put it, are concerned with details.

2. Preliminary Remarks

Remark 1. The phrase ‘materialist sixties’ has its own history. In his 1925 preface to Frederick Lange’s *History of Materialism*, Bertrand Russell says that Lange’s book appeared in German at a time known as ‘the materialist sixties’ (Lange 1925, Russell 1925). For Russell this is the *eighteen* sixties, a period he assumes to be an anomaly in the history of philosophy, and especially German philosophy, in that it takes materialism seriously. Russell partly has in mind Lange’s own book, which did not endorse materialism but was friendly to it. But he also means the 1864 English translation of Ludwig Büchner’s *Stoff und Kraft*, perhaps the dominant defence of scientific materialism in the 19th century. Of course Russell is right that the eighteen sixties, and especially Büchner and Lange, are well-worth study.⁵ But I will set these topics aside, and adapt Russell’s terminology to our own purposes which are resolutely focused on the twentieth century and after.

Remark 2. Even while we adapt Russell’s terminology, we should be wary of any rigid approach to periodization. In the historical scholarship on the swinging sixties, this is major issue. Marwick (2011) takes it to go from 1958 to 1974. Hobsbawm (1994) takes it to be part of period that stretches from 1945 to 1973. So far as I can see, *nobody* takes the literalist view that it began on Jan 1, 1960 and ended on Dec.31, 1969. Indeed for some the whole practice of periodization is suspect: “to speak of the ‘situation’ in the 60s, however, is necessarily to think in terms of historical periods and to work with models of historical periodization which at the present moment are theoretically unfashionable, to say the least” (Jameson, 1984, 178).

However, while these issues are important, the basic shape of our discussion allows us to sidestep them. For the works of the sort listed above contain a set of recognizable ideas about both materialism and the nature of philosophy. We may use the phrase ‘materialist sixties’ to pick out these ideas, but for us the ideas matter more than the period in which they are expressed; the period is used, if you like, to fix reference on the ideas. Hence we can

⁵ Büchner’s older brother Georg was the playwright, his sister Luise a writer and campaigner for women’s rights; as Lange (1925, p. 270) put it, “He comes from a family of rich poetic gifts.” On Lange, see, e.g., Stack 1983 and Russo Krauss 2023

afford to be forgiving and easy-going about when the decade begins and ends, and about whether it even is a decade in the first place.

Remark 3. What then are the key ideas of the materialist sixties? Materialism is often understood as a thesis specific to philosophy of mind according to which the mind is nothing over and above the brain. In the sixties—especially in the work of Smart, Feigl, Lewis and Armstrong—this position took the form of an identity theory: for the mind to be nothing over and above the brain is for mental states to be identical to neural states, where in turn ‘identity’ is understood in the logical sense: if x is identical to y , then every property of x is a property of y . Indeed, in the works listed above, the identity theory is to so much to the fore one might be forgiven of thinking that to be a materialist just is to hold the identity theory and vice versa.

But materialism may also be understood, and was understood in the sixties, as a more general thesis of which the identity theory is simply one instance. First, it may be understood as encompassing proposals within philosophy of mind that, while materialist in a general sense, do not endorse the identity theory. Positions such as behaviourism (the view that mental states are nothing over and above behavioural states) and eliminativist materialism (the view that mental states don’t exist) fall into this camp; neither entail that mental states are identical with neural states, and yet both are materialist in orientation. Second, it may be understood as a view, not merely about the mind, but about the world at large. At the end of *A Materialist Theory of the Mind*, Armstrong writes (1968, 366) a “physicalist theory of mind is a mere prolegomenon to a physicalist metaphysics.” Many other writers similarly use ‘physicalism’ or ‘materialism’ to pick out a worldview, a picture of the totality of existence, rather than simply a view about the mind. Unless indicated otherwise, that is the way that we will interpret it here.

Remark 4. Once we think of materialism as a worldview, the idea of it constituting or being associated with a meta-philosophy is not far away. For a worldview is a picture of everything that exists, and everything that exists has a place within the picture. It follows that philosophically interesting items (consciousness, intentionality, meaning, language, social phenomena, morality, causation, colour, knowledge, rationality, chance, probability and so on) likewise have a place within the picture, or at least do so if they exist. If so, it is natural from a materialist point of view to construe philosophical questions about such items as placement questions (as they are sometimes called): a philosophical question about X is a

question of what X must be for it to exist in a physical world, i.e., a world in which materialism is true. Indeed, in many of the works listed above, there is an implicit suggestion that placement questions largely constitute the subject matter of philosophy. The subject matter of *Word and Object*, for example, is the place of linguistic meaning—the fact that we mean things by words—in the physical world, and Quine’s discussion here, even if not his conclusions, are a template for many of the works that followed.

Remark 5. Identifying a subject matter for philosophy is one element of materialist meta-philosophy; another is an account of how we might go about answering the questions that constitute its subject matter. Here again Quine is particularly prominent. *Word and Object* and similar works by Quine are often read as promoting what is sometimes called ‘methodological naturalism’. It is challenging to give a coherent and plausible statement of methodological naturalism—see, e.g. (Maddy 2001, Williamson 2013, Williamson 2021, Maddy 2022)—but here I will understand it to be the view that the methods by which we answer philosophical questions are the same in some fundamental sense as the methods by which we answer questions in the sciences generally. In practice, what this means is that to address, for example, a question about the place of linguistic meaning in a physical world, is to provide information about that place, where the canons of provision information are the same in philosophy as anywhere else: start with what’s obvious but be open to correction; don’t be too general or too specific; fit in with what is already known about related questions; aim for accuracy etc.

So understood, methodological naturalism is a modest doctrine. It doesn’t rule out, in particular, that the methods of the sciences might include forms of a priori reasoning or appeals to analytic or self-evident truths. Of course, some philosophers of the materialist sixties did propose ways to understand the methods of the sciences that ruled such things out—a good example is Quine himself. However, while it is plausible to say that, in the sixties, we see widespread acceptance of methodological naturalism understood in the modest way just described, it is far less plausible to say that we see widespread acceptance of Quine’s further developments that doctrine. In “The Analytic and the Synthetic” for example, Putnam argued that, while Quine might be right to criticize the use of analyticity in philosophers such as Carnap, he is wrong to deny that there is a distinction between analytic and synthetic truths altogether; somewhat similar ideas are present in Armstrong and particularly Lewis.

Remark 6. I have said that the works we are interested in take materialism seriously both as a worldview and as a meta-philosophy. But in saying this, I don't mean they all suppose that materialism is true. In *Naming and Necessity*, for example, Kripke writes:

Materialism, I think, must hold that a physical description of the world is a complete description of it, that any mental facts are 'ontologically dependent' on physical facts in the straightforward sense of following from them by necessity. No identity theorist seems to me to have made a convincing argument against the intuitive view that this is not the case (1972, 342).

This passage concludes a long argument that materialism is false, but Kripke is nevertheless thinking in broadly materialist terms. He is assuming, for example, that philosophical questions about the mind are to be understood as asking about the place of mental facts in a physical world, a world whose physical description is a complete description. It is in this sense that Kripke too is a member of the materialist sixties.

3. The Discipline Problem

Now that we have more of an idea of what we are talking about when we talk about the materialist sixties, we may turn to our main business: the question of what sort of attitude we should take to it. As I have indicated, the proposal here is that the period is distinctive and laudable in that it solves the problem of what the subject matter of the discipline of philosophy is and how the discipline might address that subject matter. If we call this problem 'the discipline problem,' we may say that the sixties as a period is distinctive and laudable because it solved the discipline problem.

One way to approach the discipline problem is to observe that, while philosophy is often said to be an especially ancient discipline, there is a good sense in which this is either false or misleading. At least if we understand the notion of a discipline in the sociological sense as a group of researchers and teachers organized in a specific way, the discipline of philosophy is about the same age as many others. It dates from the formation of modern secular research universities, something that happened largely in the second half of the 19th century, when the German vision of the university articulated by Kant and especially von Humboldt was transplanted to the US, and via that to the rest of the world; e.g., (Reiss 1991,

Reuben 1996, Anderson 2010, Menand, Reitter et al. 2017, Marginson 2019).⁶ During this process universities transformed in several major ways. They became secular rather than religious. They came to focus on research rather than merely on teaching. They assumed the central social role in democratic societies that they currently have.⁷

It is natural to expect that this process had a differential effect on philosophy, since so many of the traditional topics of philosophy are entangled with religious issues: the mind-body problem with whether the soul can survive the death of the body; the scope and limits of human knowledge with whether we can understand God's plan for the world, etc. And indeed, since its inception as a discipline, philosophy has confronted a persistent dilemma about its nature. In von Humboldt's (2017) formula, the basic goal of the modern research university is to "join objective knowledge with the process of forming the subject." But how does philosophy contribute to that goal? If it is involved in producing objective knowledge, it seems simply to be incorporated into the existing sciences; but if it is involved in the practical or moral goal of producing a particular type of person ("forming the subject"), it seems to have no epistemic role at all.

This basic dilemma is expressed in several ways in the history of the subject. In 1881, Henry Laurie, then about to become the first professor of philosophy in Australia at the University of Melbourne, formulated one version in his 'A Plea for Philosophy' (Laurie 1881). For Laurie, philosophy is caught between two sets of critics: those under the influence of the "utilitarian spirit of the age," who think of it as rendered pointless by science, and those, such as the Anglican Dean of Melbourne, who discourage rational inquiry into moral and philosophical subjects since, to adapt von Humboldt, it might deform rather than form the subject, i.e., it might discourage a belief in Christianity. What Laurie is pleading for is a place for philosophy in the university.

Almost a hundred years later, and on the other side of the planet, Richard Rorty (1979) gave the dilemma a canonical 20th century formulation in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Rorty first says that the problem has been at the heart of philosophy since the end of the 19th century, precisely the period at which Laurie were wondering about the basic shape of the discipline. He then summarizes the dilemma in the following terms:

⁶ Of course, it is possible to understand 'the discipline of philosophy' to be just people interested in philosophical questions. In that sense, philosophy is certainly an ancient discipline but then so too are many others. For some discussion of these issues see Stoljar 2017, chapter 8.

⁷ For some background on these issues, see Stoljar 2023

...if philosophy becomes too naturalistic, hard-nosed positive disciplines will nudge it aside; if it becomes too historicist, then intellectual history, literary criticism, and similar soft spots in the humanities will swallow it up. (1979, 168)

Rorty's overt concerns are different from Laurie's. For Laurie, the problem is that philosophy sits uncomfortably between science and theology. For Rorty, it is that philosophy sits uncomfortably between science and the humanities. Nevertheless, there is a common problem underneath, namely, that philosophy does not fit the available models of intellectual inquiry. It can't be assimilated to theology, not at any rate if we are thinking of it as a discipline within the secular universities of the kind that came into being in the 19th century. And it can't be assimilated to any model of intellectual inquiry internal to the secular university, since that would mean identifying it either with the natural sciences or the humanities, and that seems impossible. If all this is right, there can be no kind of inquiry for philosophy to be; therefore, it can be no kind of inquiry.

It is this discipline problem that in my view is resolved in the materialist sixties. For suppose that the set of questions to which philosophy is addressing itself are placement questions, i.e., questions about the place of various items of philosophical interest in a physical world; then we have subject matter for philosophy that is disjoint from (though of course related to) the questions addressed in other disciplines, whether they be sciences or humanities. And suppose moreover that the methods for addressing these questions are the methods already found in the sciences; then the relation of philosophy to other fields is no different from the relation of linguistics or biology to other fields: it is distinguished by its subject matter, but the methods it adopts in pursuing this subject matter are at bottom the same as those adopted in other cases. Putting these two points together we have a picture of philosophy on which it is neither nudged aside by science nor swallowed up by humanities.

One might object that it is an exaggeration to say that philosophical problems are placement questions, or at least to say that all are. Some of course may take this form, but there are exceptions. Indeed, one particularly obvious exception in this context is the issue of whether materialism is true. Whatever the correct interpretation of that question, it does not concern the place of materialism in a material world!

However, while this objection is important, it is less devastating than it might appear at first. For a proponent of materialist meta-philosophy can clarify their position by saying that philosophical problems are either placement problems or else are problems that arise in connection with placement problems. True, the question of materialism, and more generally

the question of what worldview to adopt, is not a placement question. However, since it is a question whose answer makes available placement questions, it may be understood as falling within the scope of the proposal broadly construed.⁸ We might add that, whatever its classification, one may still address this question using normal standards of inquiry. For philosophers of the sixties, one becomes a materialist not, to adapt Yablo's phrase (see fn. 4), by "swapping hunches" about the nature of the world, but because materialism summarizes the worldview implicit in the natural sciences.

4. Alternative Solutions

I've suggested that the materialist sixties considered as a period is laudable because it solves the discipline problem. But even if that is so, it doesn't quite justify the attitude I advertised at the outset, which is that the period is not merely laudable but distinctive. To establish this further claim of distinctiveness, it is necessary to show, not merely that the philosophers of the materialist sixties solved the discipline problem, but that the solution they offered is superior to other potential solutions.

What are these other solutions? One may see the space of options here by looking again at the discipline problem and noticing that it itself has the structure of a placement problem. We are offered an apparently exhaustive taxonomy of the forms of acceptable inquiry. We are then invited to agree that philosophy cannot be identified with any of them, but also cannot be understood as a *sui-generis* field, unrelated to other forms of inquiry. Finally, we are threatened with the conclusion that there is nothing it could be. In the sixties, we see a response to this argument that denies that the taxonomy is exhaustive but at the same time denies that philosophy is in any interesting sense *sui generis*. Philosophy is different from other subjects in focusing on a particular set of questions, but apart from that is not distinctive.

If this is the structure of the discipline problem, however, an obvious alternative way to try to solve it is to offer a reductionist conception of philosophy. On a view of this sort, philosophy *is* to be identified either with one or more of the natural sciences, or perhaps with one or more of the humanities.

⁸ This way of liberalizing the view that philosophical questions are placement questions may also be extended to what we might call 'identification questions', i.e., questions that are usually formulated with a 'what'-interrogative, i.e., what is consciousness, intentionality, causation etc; for some discussion of this extension, see Stoljar 2021a.

A notorious example of a proposal along these lines can be found in Quine's "Epistemology Naturalized," at any rate on a common reading (Quine 1969). As often interpreted, the message of that paper is that the questions of epistemology are, if they are genuine, simply questions of empirical psychology: epistemology, Quine says, is 'a chapter of psychology'.⁹ If epistemology is a typical part of the discipline, this point generalizes to philosophy as such. The result is a dramatic expansion of methodological naturalism: philosophy does not simply share its methods with the natural sciences, but its topics also.

This is a much more radical meta-philosophical proposal than the one suggested by the materialist sixties. It is one thing to construe epistemological questions as concerning the place of epistemological notions in a physical world; it is quite another to regard them as *identical* to empirical psychological questions. Indeed, one may well view the latter proposal as an eliminativist view of philosophy rather than a reduction of it. We would therefore need considerable reason to prefer it to a more realistic alternative.

However, as many commentators have pointed out, there is little by way argumentative support in Quine's paper for such a dramatic conclusion; see, e.g. (Kim 1993). What Quine mostly objects to in the paper are various proposed analyses of physical concepts or statements into phenomenal concepts or statements, analyses Quine thinks of as part of traditional epistemology. Perhaps such proposals are implausible, just as Quine says, but it doesn't begin to follow that epistemological questions should be construed as psychological questions.

There is a second alternative proposal for solving the discipline problem that is logically like that of 'Epistemology Naturalized' (on the standard reading) but proceeds in the opposite direction: Rorty's proposal that philosophy should be recast as a "soft spot" in the humanities, and as a kind of literary criticism in particular. Just as a literary critic might, for example, consider scientific works from the 19th century as contributions to, and reflections of, a surrounding culture, so, Rorty thinks, we should approach contemporary philosophy.

Rorty's proposal is also eliminativist about philosophy; he famously rejects upper case 'Philosophy' in favor of lower-case 'philosophy'; see, e.g., Rorty 1982. But as before it is hard to see the motivation for such a position, especially when compared with the proposal of the materialist sixties. Rorty himself defended his view by offering a critique of the correspondence theory of truth and a correlative notion of representation defined in terms of a

⁹ I will set aside here the scholarly debate as to whether the standard reading of this essay is properly attributed to Quine; see e.g. Creath 2021, Johnsen 2005 and Livengood et al 2021

such a theory. But once again, even if we were to accept this critique, it would constitute no reason to adopt an eliminativist view about philosophy.

A quite different approach to the discipline problem may be found in Carnap's "Empiricism, Semantics and Ontology", an extremely influential paper that came out just prior to the materialist sixties. Carnap's key idea is that philosophical questions, and in particular questions about the existence of numbers or physical objects, can be understood either as "internal" or "external" questions. If a question is an internal question, in Carnap's terminology, it will be addressed by the sciences whose language the question is internal to, mathematics or physics for example. If it is an external question, by contrast, it is not a factual question at all but is instead a practical question about the pros and cons of adopting the language of mathematics or physics. So Carnap's overall conclusion as regards philosophy may be understood as follows. If philosophy is concerned with internal questions, it should be reduced to one or other of the sciences. But if philosophy is concerned with external questions, then it is *sui generis* at least in the sense that it is a discipline for which usual standards of theoretical rationality do not apply.

Once again however, this is a less attractive picture of philosophy than the one present in the materialist sixties. One problem, which emerged in the course of the famous 'Quine-Carnap' debate, is that it is hard to see what the distinction between internal and external questions is in the first place; see, e.g., (Soames 2007, Creath 2021). But perhaps a more straightforward objection is that Carnap's proposal tends toward eliminativism just as do the two reductionist proposals we just looked at. One might have imagined that a solution to the discipline problem would provide a way of thinking about philosophy on which it is, while different from other disciplines, nevertheless similar to them in pursuing the truth about the questions it is concerned with. Carnap's proposal offers no such thing.

5. Criticisms of the Materialist Solution

At this point you might ask why I adopted the guarded tone I did at the outset. I said before that the materialist sixties cannot be regarded as a golden age and can be improved upon. But what I have just been suggesting is that the solution to discipline problem emerged uniquely in the materialist sixties. Why not then go ahead and say that the period was a golden age after all?

The answer is that there are several interrelated ways in which the materialist ideas we have been considering are problematic, despite their attractions. One overarching concern is with the formulation of materialism. I have suggested that materialism is a metaphysical

doctrine and that it may be understood as being part of a meta-philosophical view, but I have said nothing so far about how exactly it is to be formulated. In fact, this is a major problem.¹⁰ A classic version of the problem was offered by Carl Hempel at the end of the sixties who pointed out that if materialism is understood in terms of present-day physics, then it is presumably false, since nobody thinks that present theories are complete, but if materialism is understood in terms of ideal physics then it is hard to know what it is saying, since nobody knows what ideal physics will look like (Hempel 1969). In my own work I have attempted to both criticize and improve upon Hempel's formulation, by formulating an analogous issue in a modal rather than a temporal framework; see, e.g., (Stoljar 2009, Stoljar 2010).

A related set of concerns arises from what is perhaps the most popular response to the formulation question, namely, to suggest that materialism is tied—to adopt a phrase Smart (1978) uses—to contemporary physics, the one that happens to be true now. A proposal along these lines can be interpreted in several ways. It might be taken as a straightforward endorsement, as Lewis once put it (1986, x), of “the truth and descriptive completeness of physics more or less as we know it.” So understood, materialism entails an extremely optimistic view of our powers and achievements, so optimistic in fact that one might well regard it as obviously implausible (cf. Jackson 1982, Stoljar 2006). But the idea of tying materialism to contemporary physics may also be taken as a methodological recommendation, namely, that in philosophy we should act as if contemporary physics is complete, even if no-one thinks this is literally true. Here the idea is that further empirical information, whether in physics or elsewhere, will not change the predicaments we are in when we are confronted by philosophical questions; hence we may ignore the fact that we are missing such information.

But the assumption that materialism is tied to contemporary physics is highly questionable no matter whether we take it as the literal truth or as methodological recommendation. If we make this assumption it seems inevitable that philosophical questions are to be understood as what Richard Cartwright (1987, xv) once called “ultimate impasses”, i.e. disagreements that persist even if all the relevant evidence, arguments and counterexamples are in, and as such may easily seem pointless or uninteresting. Consider, for example, a case in which two philosophers are having a disagreement about the nature of

¹⁰ There are two sorts of issues here. The first concerns the nature of the physical in the first place. The second concerns what sort of relation everything has to stand in to for physicalism to be true. Both of these questions have received considerable attention in the philosophical literature, but it is the first I have in my mind in the text; for extensive discussion of these issues, Stoljar 2010.

(e.g.) linguistic meaning as it exists in a world in which materialism is true. One says it is fundamentally *F*, while the other says it is fundamentally *not-F*. If materialism is tied to contemporary physics, this dispute seems to be taking place in a situation in which all the relevant facts are in or at least may be assumed to be in; in turn, if all the facts are in, it is hard to see how relevant evidence, arguments etc are not. But now the dispute looks to be a kind of disagreement in which there is no point participating. As Cartwright says, philosophers in an ultimate impasse “have nothing left to do...except spread the word. And why would they want to do even that? The thrill must be gone” (Cartwright, 1987, xv).¹¹

6. Conclusion: Beyond the Sixties?

The issues for the materialist ideas of the 1960s that I have just been describing are in fact very complex, much more so than I have let on. I won't try to sort out those complexities here. Still, I think it is fair to say that these and other problems are challenging enough to motivate moving beyond the materialist sixties, i.e., to search for a way to think about philosophy that builds on the one present in the sixties but improves upon it.

How then to move beyond the sixties? This too is a complex question that can't be dealt with properly here. What I will do, though, is end the paper by making a few remarks about the direction in which I think things should go.

The starting point is an observation made in passing at the outset: that the materialist philosophers show the influence of the positivist philosophers than came before them. One place in which this influence may be detected is in Smart's idea that we may solve the formulation problem for materialism by tying it to contemporary physics. To do that is treat contemporary physics as in many ways like the base language familiar from positivism. The positivists' base language, as I understand it, is a language that has sufficient expressive resources to express all propositions, or least all clear or understandable propositions. Some positivists, e.g., the Carnap of “Empiricism, Semantics and Ontology,” regarded it as a pragmatic issue which language is the base language, and moreover that there might in principle be a plurality of such languages; but others, including Carnap himself in earlier work, seemed to suggest that there is a single base language within which philosophical work may proceed; see, e.g., (Carnap 1967). Once it is tied to contemporary physics, Smart's

¹¹ For further discussion of Cartwright's position, particular in comparison with Lewis's, see Stoljar 2021b

version of materialism is surprisingly similar. For him contemporary physics is a language that has enough resources to express, if not all clear propositions, then at least all true ones.¹²

I think it is largely this positivist residue that causes the trouble for the philosophy of the materialist sixties. If you think that contemporary physics operates as a base language, and formulate materialism in terms of it, you will wind up (perhaps inadvertently) with a quite a specific, positive and complete account of the nature of the world. As we have seen, you may not commit to that account fully; you may regard it only as something to accept from a methodological point of view while doing philosophy. Still, if you have such an account, and do philosophy in terms of it, it is unsurprising that you will confront difficulties of the sort we have been looking at.

If that is right, the way to move beyond the sixties is to isolate and reject its positivist aspect. One way to do this is to decline to offer a worldview in quite the sense that the philosophers of the materialist sixties did. One might say, for example, that the world consists of a set of fundamental elements that generate the rest, but not say that contemporary physics or anything like it is an exhaustive account of these elements. The result would be an abstract, negative, and partial account of the world, in place of the specific account of the kind that Smart and others commit themselves to. We may still say much of what was said in the materialist sixties if we move to such an account: philosophical problems may be still be thought of as placement problems (or problems related to placement problems), and we may still pursue those problems in using the methods present in the sciences. However, because this background picture of the world leaves so much to be filled in, philosophy can in turn be seen, not as a discipline in which all the facts are in, and so not as a discipline that stands out from other forms of scientific and rational inquiry. It is instead an open, evolving and creative discipline in which we attempt to provide information about philosophical relevant aspects of the world.

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¹² This is a simplification of Smart's view, since he would have included topic-neutral expressions within the base language as well as the usual physical ones, but I will set aside this complication.

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