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Introduction

O judgment! Thou art fled to brutish beasts,
And men have lost their reason!
— William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar* (1599)¹

The modern scientific movement developed in the early seventeenth century confident that the world was divinely created and supervised, and, therefore, ordered and intelligible. This stable, meaningful, and purposeful worldview was the legacy of medieval rationalism and theology. Over the following three centuries, Newtonian physics provided empirical evidence; philosophy and theology provided rational assurance; and literature and art provided aesthetic reinforcement of this teleological worldview. From the Enlightenment to the First World War, this widely accepted conception of reality withstood the religious skepticism of David Hume, the deification of humanity by the Young Hegelians, and the evolutionary theory of Charles Darwin. And then ... Armageddon.

The First World War (1914-18), the Great War as it became known, struck with a vengeance and produced the axial event in modern Western civilization. The war exploded the nineteenth-century myth of unbounded progress, impugned long-standing Enlightenment confidence in human reason, and ended European bourgeois civilization.² On August 3, 1914, the eve of Britain's declaration of war against Germany, British Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey foresaw the impending destruction of Western civilization: "The lamps are going out all over Europe. We shall not see them lit again in our time."³ By the war's end, after more than four years of unprecedented human carnage, Grey's dire prophecy appeared to have come true. In *Outline of History* (1920), H. G.

Wells declared that war had altered the world's fixed ideas in a manner "unparalleled in all history."⁴ In *England after War* (1923), C.F.G. Masterman called the war "the greatest singular catastrophe which has tormented mankind since the fall of Rome," and worried "whether civilization as we understood it will endure."⁵

The war shook the very foundations of Western civilization, caused an unprecedented revolution in European thought, and cast humanity adrift on a threatening sea of uncertainty. Before the war, the West truly had ruled the world, producing most of its economic output, controlling most of its population and land mass, and developing most of its vibrant culture. Then, in a cataclysmic four-year war, the West devoured itself and sacrificed its young. By the Battle of the Marne after the first month of combat, the war had already cost one million casualties. On a single day, July 1, 1916, when Britain launched the Battle of the Somme, its army suffered 60,000 casualties, including 20,000 dead. This obscene single-day human toll would exceed by six-fold the casualties and by eight-fold the deaths among the Allies on D-Day during World War II, the world's largest amphibious invasion. The major combatant nations in the First World War experienced a casualty rate of about 50 percent and lost a generation of young men. By war's end the grim toll was 15.4 million wounded and 9.45 million dead—averaging 6000 deaths per day over 1500 days.

The war destroyed four Imperial Dynasties (the Habsburgs, the Hohenzollerns, the Romanoffs, and the Ottomans) and caused massive labor, economic, and political strife throughout postwar Europe. It disenfranchised sizable ethnic minorities within the newly created European nations and spawned a virulent indifference to human life. Russia plunged into a barbaric civil war that caused 1.5 million deaths and 6 million total casualties. The Turks perpetrated a genocide that killed one million Armenians.

After a full century of war, we have become somewhat desensitized to such monstrous human casualties. But consider the impact on Europeans, including its leading artists and intellectuals, who greeted war in 1914 with a naïve and near-universal enthusiasm. They found the gruesome butcher's bill in 1918 a hideous embarrassment and unimaginable catastrophe. Cultural disillusionment quickly took hold. Postwar writing and art imagined the war in

terms of betrayal, loss, and alienation. The civilian and military leaders had deceived and betrayed the returning soldiers; war dead had become sacrifices rather than heroes. In Ezra Pound's words, young men had died "For an old bitch gone of the teeth, / For a botched civilization." Truly, the Great War changed Western reality.

World War I and the Ascent of Materialism

The war's effect on Western culture and its intellectual elites was profound. In his comprehensive study of the subject, American historian Roland N. Stromberg concluded: "The Western world would never quite recover from the shock; the mind's distrust of itself, of thought and expression and reason, was a permanent legacy, a legacy of skepticism and nihilism and cynicism found in all intellectual circles—one is tempted to say—ever since."⁶ Those intellectuals, artists, and writers who endured and survived the war retreated from their prewar cultural heritage and worldview. They distrusted human reason, abandoned metaphysical inquiry, and began to doubt the transcendent. Instead of reengaging the eternal questions about the nature of reality and restoring meaning and purpose to the fractured postwar world, Western culture defaulted. A modern scientific worldview filled the cultural vacuum and came to dominate the shattered postwar landscape.

In his 1925 Harvard lectures, Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947) labeled this worldview "scientific materialism" and described its deep roots in Western thought.⁷ Epistemically, its proponents maintain that the scientific method is the only reliable source of truth about reality, a belief system often called scientism. Metaphysically, they maintain that ultimate reality is merely mindless matter observing physical and natural laws without meaning or purpose. For scientific materialists, this worldview is not a matter of belief but of scientific truth. Consequently, continued belief in a purposeful world, a providential God, or a transcendent power is intellectually indefensible self-delusion. Scientific materialism constituted a paradigm shift in the Western worldview.

For three centuries leading up to the war, Western culture had actively engaged with and effectively marginalized epistemic scientism and metaphysical materialism. But after the First World

War, theology, philosophy, literature, and art disengaged from metaphysical inquiry. Western culture turned inward, focusing on humanity's post-traumatic stress and abandoning its historic curiosity about fundamental reality. Scientific materialism promptly filled the void. It emerged like Phoenix from the ashes of the Great War to become the reigning metaphysic of the twentieth century to the present.⁸ This newly emergent reality was impersonal, remorseless, and indifferent, and God was dead. This godless cosmology is the largely unrecognized legacy of the Great War. Scientific materialism still dominates the Western consciousness and spans the Western academic disciplines. Its modern proponents are highly credentialed and irrepressibly outspoken, and the academic and popular presses abound with prominent examples.

World renowned English physicist Stephen Hawking, recently retired from the position at Cambridge University once held by Sir Isaac Newton, declares that complex gravitational forces alone caused the Big Bang, creating the world out of nothing and eliminating the need for "intervention of some supernatural being or God."⁹ French biochemist and Nobel laureate Jacques Monod asserts that macromolecules emerged from the pre-biotic soup by chance and produced DNA, the chemical machinery solely responsible for "the origin and descent of the whole biosphere."¹⁰ English zoologist Richard Dawkins credits Darwinian evolution entirely for nature's complexity and creativity and for the emergence of human life and mind, adding that "Darwin made it possible to be an intellectually fulfilled atheist."¹¹ Basing his materialist worldview on science's acceptance of DNA-based reproduction and Darwinian evolution, American philosopher Daniel C. Dennett dismisses the Judeo-Christian God as a demonstrable illusion—"that God is, like Santa Claus, a myth of childhood, not anything a sane, undeluded adult could literally believe in. *That* God must either be turned into a symbol for something less concrete or abandoned altogether."¹²

The death-of-God theme, of course, did not originate in the post-World War I era. Three decades before World War I, Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) had famously proclaimed, "God is dead."¹³ But Nietzsche sensed that he had come too soon; Western civilization was not yet ready to receive his momentous critique. Furthermore, Nietzsche's message had a cultural rather than a scientific ba-

sis. According to Nietzsche, Christianity and its value system had eroded over the centuries due to its inherent contradictions and had left humanity “straying as through an infinite nothing.”¹⁴ Consequently, prewar Christian thinkers construed, even embraced, Nietzsche’s message as a call for spiritual renewal.¹⁵ It was only after the war that existential philosophers focused upon Nietzsche’s Will to Power, the powerful “drive for distinction,” as the ultimate motivating force of all reality, a law of necessity in the impersonal world of fate.¹⁶ Thus, Nietzsche’s impersonal and godless metaphysics took hold only in the post-World War I era, complementing and reinforcing the rise of scientific materialism.

The most striking feature of scientific materialism’s godless cosmology is its claim of scientific truth. Religion rests upon the fundamental conviction that reality is ultimately trustworthy and transcendently meaningful, despite its empirically inaccessible mystery.¹⁷ For monotheism, exemplified by Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, God is the deepest ground for this ultimate trust in reality and in life’s meaningfulness.¹⁸ “Religion can get on with any sort of astronomy, geology, biology, physics,” writes Princeton philosopher W. T. Stace, “but it cannot get on with a purposeless and meaningless universe.”¹⁹ Consequently, materialism’s claim of scientific truth for its worldview poses a profound challenge to theism, to religion, and to their ethical value systems. It calls into question the rational justification and intellectual integrity of a purposeful and meaningful worldview; it substitutes a remorselessly indifferent alternative reality, devoid of absolute truths, ethics, and values; and it leaves humanity alone in cosmic darkness.

Materialism, Scientism, and the Development of Modern Science

Materialism. Metaphysical materialism and epistemological scientism have a long, incremental history preceding their postwar rise to prominence, which warrants preliminary examination. In 1925, Whitehead defined scientific materialism as “the fixed scientific cosmology which presupposes the ultimate fact of an irreducible brute matter, or material, spread throughout space in a flux of configurations. In itself such material is senseless, valueless, purposeless.”²⁰ Scientific materialism (or, simply, materialism) rules out the

nonphysical in reality, and reduces all phenomena to their biological and chemical components. Materialism is sometimes clothed in different terminology, such as “scientific naturalism” and “naturalism,” intended to recognize nature’s emergent phenomena manifested in human life and intelligence.²¹ But scientific naturalists, like scientific materialists, consider that these emergent processes of nature, such as life and mind, are wholly explicable in terms of their antecedent physical components.²² At bottom, they are just physics and chemistry—mindless, valueless, senseless physical “stuff,” the chance products of Darwinian evolution. For materialists, all non-naturalistic or theological explanations for these emergent phenomena are groundless, objectionable, and inadmissible.

This view of reality—impersonal, remorseless, and indifferent—is as old as Western civilization. The Greek philosopher Democritus (460-370 B.C.E.), for example, reduced reality to indestructible atoms of matter existing in space or “the void.” Yet Whitehead considered the Athenian tragedians, rather than the Greek philosophers, to be the actual fathers of materialism.²³ For the classical Greek tragedians, Necessity (*Ananke*) and Fate (*Moirai*)—the determinist world that could not have been otherwise—gave order to reality and even ruled the Olympian gods.²⁴ There is a crucial difference, however, between the ancient and the modern materialists. The early Greeks accepted the impersonal world of Necessity as a matter of belief; today’s materialists proffer it as scientific truth. Modern science, they claim, has demystified existence and explained why there is something rather than nothing and what that something is, namely, mindless matter.

In early nineteenth-century Germany, the materialistic view of nature began to gain prominence as scientific developments in atomic theory, chemistry, and energy indicated the persistence of matter and the constancy of energy.²⁵ Support for materialism continued to grow in the second half of the nineteenth century with publication of Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* (1859). Ernst Haeckel, for example, used Darwin’s evolutionary theory in *Riddle of the Universe* (1899) to argue that life ascended from non-living carbon compounds due to spontaneous generation and that matter alone constitutes fundamental reality (the so-called monism of matter).²⁶ Yet Darwin’s great advocate Thomas Henry Huxley

(1825-1895) denied that he was a materialist, except when debating his religious opponents; instead, he claimed to be an agnostic, a term which he coined.²⁷ Furthermore, Yale intellectual historian Franklin L. Baumer cautions against exaggerating materialism's prewar impact. The idea of nature as mechanism was more central to nineteenth-century scientific thought than nature as essentially inert matter. Mechanism also resonated with the industrial age and its interest in machines. It reflected humanity's perceived control over nature and benign view of technology as its beneficial servant.²⁸ Only after the First World War, when reductionist thinking took hold, did materialism reach its zenith to become the reigning metaphysic of the twentieth century.²⁹

Scientism. The history of modern materialism, however, is incomplete without consideration of scientism, its epistemological backbone. American philosopher John Wellmuth defined scientism as "the belief that science, in the modern sense of that term, and the scientific method as described by modern scientists, afford the only reliable natural means of acquiring such knowledge as may be available about whatever is real."³⁰ English philosopher Bertrand Russell (1872-1970) exemplifies this point of view: "I cannot admit any method of arriving at truth except that of science" and "what science cannot discover, mankind cannot know."³¹ This epistemological axiom holds that the various natural sciences, such as physics, chemistry, and biology, reveal the entire field of available and authoritative knowledge about reality, and, further, that the scientific method constitutes the only reliable means of broadening and deepening accurate knowledge.

Scientism shadowed the developments of modern science almost from its origins in the early seventeenth century, with scientists such as Galileo (1564-1642) and Francis Bacon (1561-1624).³² These pioneering scientists began to study the causes and consequences of observable phenomena rather than to reason philosophically about the nature of things. They asked *how* things happen rather than *why* they happen.³³ They disregarded Aristotle's "final cause" or the *purpose* of phenomena, such as why there is universe, why we exist, and why we search for meaning and truth. Instead, they focused on Aristotle's other three causes (material, formal, and efficient) and questioned how our universe functions and how we

human beings function. René Descartes (1596-1650) doubted the products of his senses and even his own existence, but eventually found certitude in his very act of thinking (*cogito ergo sum*). Upon resolving his doubt, Descartes, fatefully, divided reality into mind and matter (thinking and extended substances). Consequently, just as modern science was launching its historic inquiry into the physics and mechanics of nature, Descartes effectively ejected mind from nature.

John Locke (1632-1704) probed the process of human thought, Descartes's *cogito*. He considered the mind an essentially passive substance: ideas originate in sensations, and sensations have either primary qualities (measurable attributes, e.g., shape, motion, solidity, and length) or secondary qualities (subjective attributes, e.g., color, sound, smell, taste). The new mechanistic world of science gave priority to sensation's primary qualities, the measurable characteristics of matter, and ignored sensation's secondary qualities, the subjective characteristics, as scientifically irrelevant. By assuming that these two qualities—the objective and the subjective—were fundamentally different and unrelated, Locke bifurcated the ordinary human experience of nature. Life itself became a dull, colorless, quantitative affair; size, shape, and mass supplanted the beauty, smell, and redness of the rose.

Locke's dissociation of primary and secondary qualities, according to American philosopher William Barrett, planted the seeds of scientism by implying "that the world of physics, the world of material science, gives us the real and basic truth, over against our human world."³⁴ Furthermore, it separates the observer's mind from the material world. "This primary fact of self-consciousness somehow becomes dubious. Sensations seem such clear and distinct, hard and fast, objective data that the consciousness, or mind, by comparison, begins to look like a fleeting or unwarranted ghost."³⁵ In short, the mind became unreal, matter became concrete reality, and science became the source of the "really real." Scientism was on its way. Science readily accepted Descartes's dualism between mind and matter, and narrowly focused on Locke's primary qualities—the measurable aspects of matter, such as mass, force, and velocity. For materialists, these measurable aspects of matter became the whole of reality, and science became the sole means of access.

The scientist's inquiring mind, for materialists, seemed irrelevant. Mind was no longer an intrinsic part of nature; it was explainable basically as brain matter, neuronal physics and chemistry. Scientism and materialism had become bedfellows.

The Elements of Inductive and Critical Reasoning

To assess the materialist worldview, Western culture obviously needed to address the philosophic limits of the scientific method, on the one hand, and to advance an alternative worldview consistent with developments in science, on the other. How should culture undertake this formidable task? From the Enlightenment to World War I, both rationalism and empiricism had vied for preeminence as cosmic diagnosticians and interpreters. By definition, rationalism is "the philosophic view that emphasizes the ability of human reason to grasp fundamental truths about the world without the aid of sense impressions"; and empiricism is the philosophic view "that experience is the source of all knowledge, thereby denying that human beings possess inborn knowledge or that they can derive knowledge through the exercise of reason alone."³⁶ In practice, these two different philosophic viewpoints encroached upon one another even during the period of medieval scholasticism. Whereas St. Anselm (1033-1109) undertook his famous ontological argument for the existence of God entirely within the mind, St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) based his five proofs of the existence of God on a rational understanding of objects within our ordinary experience.³⁷

Nature's Order. Rationalism has fallen out of vogue, however, as too remote from the empirical world, especially in light of the new science. Nevertheless, as Whitehead emphasized, medieval rationalism and theology provided the scientific movement of the Enlightenment with the necessary assurance of an ordered and intelligible world and the rational justification for the use of inductive reasoning.³⁸ Centuries ago David Hume (1711- 1776) had called into question the assumed order of the medieval worldview underlying the inductive reasoning of Enlightenment science. As Hume pointed out, an inductive inference assumes that what we have examined and found to be true will hold true for what we have not examined. The validity of this assumption, Hume notes,

depends entirely on the presumed uniformity of nature.³⁹ Observing that the sun always has arisen in the east does not mean that it will inevitably do so tomorrow. The sun could explode or the Earth could exit its orbit. Although good empirical evidence supports the assumption that nature's past is a reliable guide to its future, it does not prove that assumption. A non-uniform universe is conceivable. This makes Hume's important point that inductive reasoning is not scientifically provable. Inductive reasoning cannot *prove* that nature is uniform without begging the question because it assumes this very premise. It rests upon a fundamental faith in the basic uniformity and intrinsic order of nature. Significantly, medieval rationalism and theology gave Enlightenment science its underlying faith in nature's inherent intelligibility.

Ever since the Enlightenment, of course, science has relied upon inductive reasoning with truly remarkable success. As Whitehead pointed out, however, "induction presupposes metaphysics." Unless you have justified science's underlying philosophical premise that the universe is intelligibly ordered—that the past affords some knowledge of the future, that the cause discloses information about the effect, and that observed connections are not simply arbitrary—"you have made nonsense of induction."⁴⁰ Materialists have largely ignored Hume's philosophical mountain.⁴¹ They simply adopted inductive reasoning without rationalizing their instinctive reliance upon nature's fundamental order and intelligibility. Indeed, they use induction illogically to justify their metaphysical conception of the universe as basically mindless—only meaningless, valueless, and senseless physical "stuff" observing indifferent physical and natural laws. As American physicist and theologian Ian Barbour noted, the inductive method, for materialists, was "on its way to becoming an account of the world; a *method* was being turned into a *metaphysic*."⁴²

Metaphysical Reductionism. Materialism contains a further methodological flaw; it turns scientific reduction into metaphysical reductionism. Following standard investigative procedure, scientists routinely seek to identify the chemical and physical constituents of some body or organism. Materialists mistakenly assume that the constituents, once identified, constitute the full explanation of the object or entity, whether it is a plant cell, the human mind, or the

cosmos. Whitehead identifies this metaphysical error as the Fallacy of Misplaced Concreteness.⁴³ The materialists have mistaken science's abstract logical reductions for the real world; they have mistaken reductive materialism for ultimate reality. Philosophy, for Whitehead, should serve as "the critic of abstractions." Instead, he says, materialists have "foisted onto philosophy the task of accepting them as the most concrete rendering of fact."⁴⁴ The abstractions by which scientific method organizes its research have become a conception of the universe.

Materialists assume that the increasing hierarchies of life—from plants, to animals, to man—are entirely explainable by their most basic constituents. This viewpoint seems myopic. We cannot hope to understand the Mona Lisa's enigmatic smile solely by studying Leonardo's brushstrokes, oil pigments, and poplar panel. Nor can the reader understand the meaning and purpose of this book solely by examining its words, sentence structure, and grammatical usage. As Georgetown theologian John F. Haught explains, "reductionism is just an unproved and unprovable belief that the *only* valid way to understand things as complex as life and mind is to specify their chemical and physical constituents."⁴⁵ Although science properly focuses on Locke's primary qualities such as mass, force, and velocity, these measurable aspects of matter are only abstract logical constructions; they are not concrete reality as we observe it.

In the search for truth about reality, Whitehead urges that "we should have in our minds some conception of a wider field of abstraction, a more concrete analysis, which shall stand nearer to the complete concreteness of our intuitive experience."⁴⁶ The search requires "dispassionate observation by means of the bodily senses" and comparison of "the various schemes of abstraction which are well-founded in our various types of experience."⁴⁷ Thus, sound metaphysical inquiry should take into account a broader empirical observation of the world than just the theoretic and reductive observations of science. Rather, it requires application of critical reasoning to a broad empiricism, which considers the rich and subjective world as we experience it, not just the abstract and objective world as science presents it to us.

Critical Intelligence. Critical reasoning, what Haught calls *critical intelligence*, involves four distinct acts: (1) being attentive to some

aspect of experience, (2) being intelligent about understanding that experience, (3) being critical in judging that experience, and (4) being responsible in decision-making about it. In seeking to apprehend the truth of reality, critical intelligence should proceed through humanity's five fields of meaning: (1) *affectivity*, the subjective feeling or mood that stimulates rather than stifles the desire to know, (2) *inter-subjectivity*, the reality of other people's subjectivity that is lost to the world of scientific objectification, (3) *narrativity*, the historical or mythical stories that support our sense of reality, like the Enlightenment trust in the scientific method, (4) *beauty*, the aesthetic experience that historically has aligned beauty and truth from Plato to Keats, and (5) *theory*, the impersonal knowing of subject-object detachment in empirical science.⁴⁸

The true test of a worldview, then, is how well it stands up to scrutiny by one's critical intelligence considering input from a wide experience of existence, or, in Whitehead's characterization, from a broad empiricism. Are the proponents of the worldview being attentive, intelligent, critical, and responsible in assessing the whole of experience? Are the proponents adequately weighing the primal evidence of subjective awareness, interpersonal relationships, aesthetic responses, and historical narratives, as well as objective evidence of theoretic science? Or, are the proponents limiting their critical intelligence solely to theoretic meaning—inferences drawn from objective science—and overlooking the broader empirical evidence available from other means of accessing nature? Finally, are the proponents advancing a worldview consistent with the confidence they place in their minds to pursue the truth about reality? These are the questions to be asked of proponents of any worldview, including materialism.

The Legacy of War on Western Culture, Reason, and Materialism

Materialism's long prewar latency and precipitous postwar ascendancy is a revealing story of cultural breakdown, lost faith in human reason, and anguish over cosmic indifference. Materialism emerged gradually with the burgeoning confidence in science and the scientific method during the Enlightenment, but remained overshadowed by humanity's deeply rooted belief in the divine

governance of nature. Prewar philosophy, theology, literature, and art engaged materialist claims by arguing for a broader kind of cognition than merely scientific analysis and for a broader conception of nature than simple mechanism. Thus, Western culture preserved its confident worldview through three centuries until the catastrophe of World War I. To restore meaning and purpose in the shattered postwar world, Western culture needed to reengage the eternal questions about the nature of reality in light of modern scientific advances. In response to a traumatic war, however, theology, philosophy, literature, and art defaulted. They retreated from metaphysical concerns, accepted the dominance of science, and searched for new meaning in a seemingly meaningless universe.

This book tells this multidisciplinary story: How the First World War left Western culture in disarray and helped overturn the dominant centuries-old worldview; how the leading postwar figures in theology, philosophy, literature, and art abandoned metaphysical concerns, and focused instead on an alienated, anxious, and adrift humanity; and how the war overturned the cultural landscape such that it became the natural breeding ground for a long-latent and newly emergent materialist worldview. Materialists offered a spiritually floundering and increasingly secularist society the scientific assurance that their worldview alone was credible, and Western intellectual elites offered no resistance. These elites stood by, unable or unwilling to challenge scientism and materialism, and their passivity ultimately gave rise to materialism's latest manifestation, the very strident New Atheism, which appeared at the turn of the twenty-first century.

The post-World War I rise of materialism is itself a significant development in intellectual history, but it has grave implications for the traditional monotheistic religions and their value system. They rely and depend upon a meaningful and purposeful reality, which materialism has pointedly questioned in light of modern scientific developments. Have these developments left any intellectual room for belief in God? Is the idea of a providential God illusory in light of Darwinian evolution? Yet materialism also raises serious inherent questions about its own justification and internal consistency. Is the mind merely the chance byproduct of a mindless evolutionary process, and if so, can we trust such a mind? What justifies the

confidence of materialists in their minds to arrive at truth, and is such confidence consistent with their worldview? Are materialists correct in reducing the human mind solely to brain matter or does the mind have intrinsic reality? Finally, is materialism a science or a philosophy, a scientific truth or a metaphysical belief? This book tells the story of materialism's rise in the post-World War I era, suggests possible answers to all these questions, and concludes by assessing the merits of materialism's claims about reality and the death of God.