Summary of Course C.8-6: Elements of Ontology (Contemporary Materialism)

General

The course Elements of Ontology: Contemporary Materialism examines the philosophical foundations and scope of modern materialism, which adopts scientism - the unproven assumption that the natural sciences are the only valid source of knowledge and encompass all beings - as an axiom.

Drawing on the work of the American philosopher of mind Daniel Dennett, the course analyses how cognitivism and a radical form of evolutionism attempt to reduce the human 'self' and consciousness to purely electrochemical robotic processes and information processing.

Within this reductive framework, the 'self' appears not as an immaterial soul, but as a useful fiction or a "center of narrative gravity" woven out of words, while values and meaning are constructed by human beings themselves in an inherently amoral universe.

The course concludes with a critical counterpoint from the philosophy of language: John Searle criticizes this "digital violence" and demonstrates, through his Chinese Room thought experiment, that human consciousness and intentionality cannot simply be equated with a computer's syntactic calculations.

1: Foundations of Contemporary Materialism and Scientism

Contemporary materialism, which emerged in the late 1950s, with D. M. Armstrong among its proponents, is fundamentally based on scientism. This entails the unproven assumption that the scientific method of the natural sciences is the only valid form of knowledge (cognition) and encompasses the entirety of reality. This monism treats human beings - including all their mental processes - as purely physical objects subject to exactly the same laws of nature as the rest of the material world.

This view conflicts with the philosophy of common sense (folk psychology), in which the 'self' is experienced as an autonomous reality that does not simply coincide with the material body.

For materialism, however, explaining this conscious 'self' presents an urgent problem. To accommodate consciousness within a physical framework, the materialist method is compelled to strip the human subject of its most essential and distinctive characteristics.

Through this simplification, the 'self' is reduced to a mechanically explicable phenomenon, although the question remains whether this actually explains consciousness as it is experienced.

2: Cognitive Sciences, Information Processing and Intentional Stances

A remarkable shift took place in the development of psychology. Whereas Sigmund Freud took the conscious 'self' as an established fact and sought to demonstrate the existence of unconscious mental life, modern cognitivism has no difficulty with unconscious data processing but struggles with the phenomenon of conscious awareness. Following pioneers such as the ophthalmologist Donders, who attempted to measure internal mental processes through reaction times, cognitive psychology reduces mental life to information-processing models and communication flows, as in computer science and the Turing machine.

Within Daniel Dennett's framework, mental processes are divided into phenomenal experiences, such as pain, and intentional propositional attitudes (stances or poses), such as beliefs ("I believe in God") or desires.

A being that can be analyzed in terms of beliefs and desires is defined as an intentional system. This applies to apes, but within this materialist reduction it applies equally to human beings.

A critical observation is that cognitivism often erases the distinction between an authentic, sincerely held attitude to life and a mere pose, because it analyses mental states exclusively from a third-person perspective.

3: Evolutionism and the 'Self' as a Centre of Narrative Gravity

Contemporary materialism is closely associated with a radical and widespread form of Darwinian evolutionism. Dennett firmly rejects classical Cartesian dualism - the view that human beings consist of a material body and an immaterial soul - and regards it as an outdated relic from the age of alchemy and astrology.

From this perspective, the human being is essentially a complex electrochemical robot or a "high-tech snail". Biologically, the human brain does not differ fundamentally from that of a chimpanzee or a dolphin; animals, too, possess a form of 'self' insofar as they distinguish between their inner world and the external world.

What specifically distinguishes human beings is their ability to tell stories and use language. Just as a snail secretes slime or a spider spins a web, human beings produce a network of words to secure their future.

According to Dennett, the human 'self' is therefore neither a deeper substance nor a little 'being' inside the head, but a useful fiction: a "center of narrative gravity". It is not the subject that establishes language; rather, language constructs the mistaken idea of a subject ("loquor, ego sum"-"I speak, therefore I am"). The 'self' is merely a virtual organizing point for data, comparable to the way a computer operates.

4: Human Beings as Creators of Values and Amoral Nature

The reduction of consciousness extends into axiology, the theory of values. Within evolutionary materialism, the universe has no pre-existing meaning, purpose or cosmic destiny of its own. Nature is entirely amoral and, by nature, exhibits only biological behaviors such as violence, murder, selfishness and betrayal.

This means that higher values - such as justice, Love and brotherhood - have no transcendent or divine origin. Values are human constructions. Human beings are the sole creators of their own norms and autonomously give meaning to their existence.

According to Dennett, a deity or a revealed ethical code of conduct, such as the Decalogue, is therefore unnecessary. The self-creation of values is presented as the ultimate expression of human autonomy and democracy.

Critical thinkers point out that materialism thereby exceeds the limits of the natural-scientific method: by making claims about metaphysics and ethics on the basis of biological models, it ceases to be a scientific method and becomes an ideology.

5: Criticism of Digitalism: John Searle and the Chinese Room

In opposition to the "digital violence" of artificial intelligence (AI) and the claim that the human mind is merely a computer, the American philosopher of language John Searle formulates a fundamental critique. Searle begins from ordinary-language philosophy and emphasizes the essential role of human intentionality.

To demonstrate that computational power does not produce consciousness, Searle devised the Chinese Room thought experiment. Imagine

that a person who does not know a single word of Chinese is sitting in a closed room with a rulebook. When Chinese characters are passed in through a slot, the person can use purely syntactic rules ("if you see symbol X, return symbol Y") to provide the correct responses. To outsiders, it appears that the person understands Chinese, whereas in reality there is no genuine understanding of content or meaning.

Searle concludes that computers operate purely syntactically (manipulating sequences of zeros and ones), whereas human consciousness and thought are characterized by semantics (the attribution of meaning and intentionality). The human brain therefore cannot simply be equated with a sophisticated calculating machine, and human consciousness remains a biological and mental phenomenon that cannot be reduced to digital computer programs alone.