Manifesto of Ontological Agnosticism

by A. T. Gaynor

Despite the materialist’s disdain for other philosophies, those other philosophies exist and have made—and are likely to continue to make—considerable contributions to our knowledge. Ontological agnostics recognize and welcome those contributions. However, they insist that **scientific philosophy is a single body of knowledge**.

The unification of philosophy as a scientific body of knowledge requires a common language that permits us to express and vet the claims of competing philosophies. It is on these grounds that ontological agnostics oppose ontological materialists. Ontological materialism is dogmatic. Its dogmatism arises from an unjustified refusal to use logical notations carefully to construct philosophy scientifically. We suspect that their aversion to such notations is a consequence of their avoidance of proofs and conclusions. For ontological materialists, philosophy is just a matter of opinion. There is no objectivity in philosophic discourse. No one can prove them wrong.

We can easily express the contentious assertion of the ontological materialists and the alternative assertion of the ontological agnostics. Of course we have to do that using the notation of the agnostics. The materialists can't even express their contention in the predicate calculus. So here they are:

- **Ontological Materialists:**
  \[ p \equiv \forall (x) \exists (y): x \equiv y \]
  
  The proposition \( p \) is identical to the expression: For all \( x \) there exists some \( y \)—of 3 spatial dimensions and 1 temporal dimension—such that \( x \) is identical to \( y \).
  All existents are spatio-temporal existents.

- **Ontological Agnostics:**
  \[ Np \equiv \neg \forall (x) \exists (y): x \equiv y \]
  
  The negation of the proposition \( p \) is identical to the expression: It is not the case that for all \( x \) there exists some \( y \)—of 3 spatial dimensions and 1 temporal dimension—such that \( x \) is identical to \( y \).
  Not all existents are spatio-temporal existents.

These expressions assign well-formed, quantified predicate calculus formulas to the propositional variable \( p \) and its negation \( Np \). Of course, the predicate variables \( x \) and \( y \) must have some **universe of discourse**. However, **it is precisely the nature and content of the universe of discourse that is in dispute**. In particular, if the universe of discourse includes the proposition \( p \), then the assertion of the ontological materialists is refuted. Here is the proof:

1. \[ \forall (x): x \in U \]
   
   For every spatio-temporal existent \( x \), \( x \) is an element of \( U \), the universe of discourse.
2. \[ p \equiv \left( \forall (x) \exists (y) : x \equiv y \right) \]
   The proposition \( p \) is identical to the expression: for all \( x \) there exists some \( y \)—of 3 spatial dimensions and 1 temporal dimension—such that \( x \) is identical to \( y \).

3. \[ p \in U \]
   The proposition \( p \) is an element of \( U \), the universe of discourse.

4. \[ \forall (y) : \neg \left( p \equiv y \right) \]
   For any \( y \)—of 3 spatial dimensions and 1 temporal dimension—it is not the case that the proposition \( p \) is identical to \( y \).
   This is necessarily so unless a proposition has extension, i.e., has 3 spatial dimensions and 1 temporal dimension.

5. \[ \forall (x) \exists (y) : x \in U \rightarrow x \equiv y \]
   This is our ontological materialist hypothesis.

6. \[ \exists (y) : p \in U \rightarrow \left( p \equiv y \right) \land \neg \left( p \equiv y \right) \]
   There exists a \( y \) such that if the proposition \( p \) is an element of the universe of discourse, \( U \) then \( p \) is identical to \( y \) and \( p \) is not identical to \( y \).
   **Contradiction!** This follows from 4 and 5. Consequently, our ontological materialist hypothesis is incompatible with the proposition \( p \) being a part of our universe of discourse \( U \).

This puts the ontological materialist in the position of denying the existence of the proposition that expresses ontological materialism! This is because the ontological materialist dogmatically denies existence of any sort to entities that are necessary for the conduct of mathematics, philosophy, history, and even physics. In short, they deny existence of any sort to the tools of the theoretician’s trade.

The ontological agnostic, on the other hand, can happily distinguish between the material entities that the ontological materialist worships and the tools of the trade for every theoretician. She has no reason to forgo the benefits of the incredible progress that has been made over the course of the last 150 years in the elaboration and refinement of the techniques of logical deduction.

Is the ontological materialist's universe of discourse smaller than the universe of discourse of the ontological agnostics? Well, certainly the ontological agnostic's universe of discourse includes the real numbers and the ontological materialist's does not. Is the physical universe infinite? Is the cardinality of an infinite set greater than the cardinality of a finite set? Ontological agnostics assume so. Perhaps the ontological materialists assume that the physical universe is infinite. Of course the ontological agnostics ask: How infinite? You see for them, the infinity that is associated with the natural numbers is different than the infinity that is associated with the real numbers. These fine distinctions are equivalent to discussions about the number of angels that can dance on the head of a pin to the ontological materialists.

As ontological agnostics construct a scientific philosophy using all of the power of modern logics, the ontological materialists will be left behind. Deprived of the advantages of objective abstractions, they are like the villagers insisting on barter while the rest of the world uses the abstraction of money.