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REALITY & REASON

Dialectic and the Theory
of Knowledge



SEAN SAYERS

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For
Nicholas and Daniel

Reality and Reason
Dialectic and the Theory of Knowledge

Sean Sayers

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First published 1985

Basil Blackwell Ltd

108 Cowley Road, Oxford OX4 1JF, UK

Basil Blackwell Inc.

432 Park Avenue South, Suite 1505,

New York, NY 10016, USA

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Sayers, Sean

Reality and reason: dialectic and the theory of knowledge.

1. Knowledge, Theory of

I. Title

121 BD161

ISBN 0-631-14022-0

ISBN 0-631-14274-6 Pbk

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data

Sayers, Sean.

Reality and reason.

Bibliography: p.

1. Knowledge, Theory of. I. Title.

BD161.S28 1985 121 84-28352

ISBN 0-631-14022-0

ISBN 0-631-14274-6

Typeset by Katerprint Co. Ltd, Oxford

Printed in Great Britain by Billing and Sons Ltd, Worcester

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Everything possible to be believed is an image of truth
(*The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Blake)

Introduction

In this book I deal with some of the central problems in the theory of knowledge. I cover the sort of ground that a student would encounter in an introductory epistemology course. Moreover, I argue for a view of knowledge – namely realism – which is a familiar, even a common sense one. However, in the course of pursuing these arguments, I have been obliged to explore ideas and to put forward theories which will, most likely, be novel and unfamiliar to many readers. For my aim is to develop and defend a dialectical and materialist account of knowledge.

Dialectical materialism is, of course, the philosophy of Marxism, and, as such, is well known. However, the account of this philosophy to be found here will differ fundamentally from many of the accounts which are currently fashionable. In the first place, it is genuinely materialist; and in the second place, it takes dialectic seriously. Beyond insisting on these points, however, I do not spend much time trying to prove the Marxist credentials of my views. My concern is with the philosophical issues involved in the ideas that I discuss, rather than with their pedigree. My aim is to show that the approach I am defending, however it is labelled, is capable of providing a satisfactory and illuminating account of knowledge.

In any case, it must be recognized that the Marxist tradition in this area is a problematic one. Marx himself wrote virtually nothing on the theory of knowledge as such; there are only a few brief, if suggestive, passages by him on the subject.¹ It was left to others to spell out the epistemological implications of his theories. This was done first by Engels, in somewhat brief and sketchy terms, in his

¹ In particular, 'Theses on Feuerbach' and 'Introduction (1857)'.

piece on Feuerbach;² and subsequently, on the basis of this and much more fully, by Lenin in *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*.

For better or worse, these writings have set the terms and the focus of the epistemological debate within the Marxist tradition. But they have been some of the most controversial works of Marxist thought. Lenin's book, in particular, must surely be one of the most abused pieces of writing in the whole long history of philosophy. Lenin is regularly accused of giving a purely empiricist, mechanical, and 'photographic' account of knowledge.

There is truth in these charges, it must be acknowledged. Undoubtedly, there is confusion and lack of clarity in *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*; and it is undeniable that Lenin's approach, in that book, is often flawed and unsatisfactory. Yet there are other and more valuable aspects of Lenin's work, which have not been sufficiently appreciated. In particular, despite its undoubted defects, the book has the virtues characteristic of Lenin's genius. It is absolutely clear, decisive and uncompromising on the principal issues in the theory of knowledge. For Lenin's main purpose is to insist that there are two basic lines in philosophy: materialism and idealism. He spells out, in lucid and unmistakable terms, the basic questions involved in the dispute between these 'lines', and the fundamental tenets of materialism in the theory of knowledge.

Lenin defends materialism in the form of the reflection theory of knowledge. The objective world can be known to consciousness, Lenin insists, only because consciousness is a reflection of reality. This idea, in some form or other, is basic to all versions of realism and materialism in epistemology. For, as I shall argue below, if the essential reflective connection between consciousness and reality is denied, an unbridgeable gap is created between consciousness and the objective world, and knowledge by the subject of the material world becomes inexplicable and impossible. On this fundamental issue, and others too, I side with Lenin and with Engels. Despite the abuse that has been heaped upon them, I do not hesitate to avow myself their pupil in philosophy; and I would be happy if the ideas I express here are seen as contributing to the philosophical tradition in which they have a central place.

However, it must also be recognized that there are aspects of their account of knowledge which are not satisfactory. This is particularly the case with Lenin's presentation of realism and the reflection theory in *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*. This account needs to be

² Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*. There are also important passages on epistemology in *Anti-Dühring*, and scattered throughout *Dialectics of Nature*.

rethought in some fundamental respects – it will not do as it stands. For, clear though it is on the first principles of the materialist outlook, it is much less sure on some of the deeper philosophical and theoretical issues involved. In particular, it grasps dialectic at best only in an intuitive manner, and not in a sufficiently theoretically-conscious and philosophical one. These are shortcomings that Lenin himself later came to recognize, as he records in his *Philosophical Notebooks*. He writes, for example, 'concerning the question of the criticism of modern Kantianism, Machism, etc. . . . Marxists criticized (at the beginning of the twentieth century) the Kantians and Humists more in the manner of Feuerbach (and Büchner) than of Hegel' (p. 179). These 'Marxists' presumably include the Lenin of *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, first published in 1908. Moreover, it is evident from this and other similar remarks, that Lenin came to see the limitations of his previous work as a result of his study of Hegel. It is sometimes suggested that he entirely repudiated the reflection theory at this point; but that is false.³ On the contrary, it is clear that Lenin's reading of Hegel showed him the way in which a realist and reflectionist theory of knowledge could be deepened and strengthened, extended and developed.

I, too, will draw substantially on Hegel's philosophy in what follows, with the aim of extending and deepening the realist and reflectionist theory of knowledge. For Hegel's work constitutes by far the most profound and far-reaching development of the philosophy of dialectic, and it provides particularly important ideas for the defence of realism. Despite the much talked-about revival of interest in Hegel which is supposed to have occurred among English-speaking philosophers in recent times, his theories are still not well understood. In particular, his ideas on the theory of knowledge are among the least discussed and least known aspects of his thought. It is even claimed that Hegel repudiated epistemology, and that he was merely sceptical in his views; but there is no basis for such assertions.⁴ There is nothing of the sceptic in Hegel. As I shall show, he repudiates epistemology only in its traditional form, as the search for absolute and immutable foundations upon which knowledge can be securely based. In place of this, however, he develops a historical account of knowledge, a dialectical epistemology.

³ The evidence for this is well marshalled by Hoffman, *Marxism and the Theory of Praxis*, ch.5; and by Ruben, *Marxism and Materialism*, ch.6.

⁴ For Hegel as an 'anti-epistemologist' see Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests*, Part I; and also the more useful and measured discussion in Norman, *Hegel's Phenomenology*, ch.1. For Hegel the sceptic, see Rorty, 'Pragmatism, Relativism and Irrationalism'.

This contains lessons of the greatest importance for realism. For the dialectical approach offers the only framework within which it is possible to answer the arguments which are so regularly brought against realism. In particular, Hegel develops an important critique of Kant's epistemology, which deserves to be much better known among philosophers than it is. I hope that my book will help to illuminate this aspect of Hegel's work. For, in so far as Hegel's ideas can be used to support a realist and materialist outlook, I have relied heavily upon them. In so doing, I have tried to make their meaning clear and available to an English-speaking audience. Indeed, I have gone out of my way, at times, to mention his views and to give some account of them.

There is no question, however, of adopting Hegel's outlook in its entirety; still less of giving a commentary upon any of his works. Rather, I borrow from Hegel; I use some of his arguments and ideas in developing my own. That is all. In so doing, I try to extract the 'rational kernel' from his philosophy. On the other hand, for the most part I simply discard the 'mystical shell' silently and without comment. For discussion and criticism of Hegel's system as such would be out of place in the present context.

I also aim to relate the ideas that I am developing to recent work in the analytic tradition. In this respect I am following in the footsteps of a number of other English-speaking philosophers who have recently written on Marxism. However, I should make it clear that, unlike many of these, I am not trying to effect a marriage of analytical and dialectical thought; nor am I trying to 'clarify' or 'criticize' Marxism with the tools of analysis. If anything, my criticism works the other way round. For the argument that I will develop here is that the dialectical method, which is at the basis of Hegel's philosophy and of Marxism, represents a distinctive approach in philosophy, which alone is capable of resolving the fundamental issues in epistemology, and in terms of which the methods both of analytical philosophy and of currently influential alternatives, like structuralism, must be criticized and rejected.

I am also conscious of limitations in what I have been able to achieve. I sketch out a large vision with broad strokes. I do not prove my position in detail. I do not demonstrate that the dialectical and realist account I am defending is tenable in every case, and against all possible objections. That is not my intention in the arguments that follow. I seek to show, rather, that such a theory provides a viable and instructive approach to epistemology in certain key areas; and that it holds out the promise of being able to resolve some of the age-old problems and difficulties that continue to

perplex more familiar approaches. Beyond that, moreover, I argue that the dialectical account of knowledge is uniquely capable of comprehending and illuminating some of the most significant developments in the modern understanding of the world. For an important strand of my argument is that the discoveries and methods of Marx, of Freud and, more generally, of the historical and social-scientific approach to knowledge, can properly be understood only in terms of the dialectical and materialist account of knowledge which I am seeking to develop here.

* * *

In referring to Hegel's writings, I have used the commonly available English translations. In the case of the *Phenomenology*, I have quoted from both the Miller and Baillie translations as it suited the context. A 'z' in citations of Hegel's *Encyclopaedia* works means that the reference is to one of the additional passages (*zusatz*).

* * *

My thoughts on these topics have been formed over a period of many years. Some of them were presented, in an initial fashion, in 'Materialism, Realism and the Reflection Theory'; and I have used a few passages from that piece here. I am grateful to generations of students, in a variety of courses, for their reactions and responses. I am also grateful, for their comments and ideas, to Jim Hopkins, David Morgan, Richard Norman, Colin Radford, Janet Sayers, Tana Sayers and Tony Skillen. I have used the computing facilities at the University of Kent in order to type the manuscript of this book, and for help with these I would like to thank Ursula Fuller.

A Note on Terminology

I will be using general philosophical terms such as 'realism' and 'materialism' a good deal in this book. Since different writers use these terms somewhat differently, it will be as well for me to say clearly at the outset what I mean by some of the more important of them.

By **realism** I mean the belief that there is an objective, material world, which exists independently of consciousness, and which is knowable by consciousness. According to this definition, it should be noted that Kant, for example, is not a realist, even though he liked to call himself an 'empirical realist'. No doubt Kant believed in the existence of things independent of consciousness (things-in-themselves); and, in this way, he satisfies the first requirement of the definition I have given. However, he specifically and repeatedly denies that we can have any knowledge of these things-in-themselves, for reasons which I shall discuss in chapter 2. He calls this position transcendental idealism combined with empirical realism. But such merely empirical or phenomenal realism will not qualify as a form of realism in the sense in which I am using the term. This, I believe, conforms to common contemporary usage. Besides that, it has the advantage that it makes 'realism' into a useful term to refer to the materialistically-minded approach in the theory of knowledge. If even Kant's empirical realism is allowed to count as a form of realism, it is difficult to think of any philosopher who is not a realist. Even Berkeley would qualify; and the term becomes useless.

I must also say a few words about the way in which I will be using the term **materialism**; for it has been so much abused in recent years that it often seems to mean no more than 'the theory I hold' (whatever that may be). I must stress, therefore, that I will here be using the term in its strict and philosophical sense, to refer to the

theory that consciousness does not exist independent of matter and that all reality is ultimately material in nature. **Idealism** is the opposite of this: it is the view that reality is ultimately ideal in character, and can be seen as a construct or creation of mere ideas, interpretations, or whatever.

Perhaps the most influential approach in the theory of knowledge, however, is **dualism**. This involves the rejection of both of these alternatives, and the attempt to find a middle way between them. For dualism is a philosophy which maintains that there are both material and ideal entities, and that neither can be reduced to the other. These two basic kinds of thing are absolutely distinct, independent and exclusive of each other.

Realism can take all these various different forms. Thus there have been materialist realists (like Lenin and Armstrong), idealist realists (Hegel and Bradley), and dualist realists (Locke and Descartes).

I also talk of empiricist and rationalist approaches. By **rationalism** I mean a theory which puts the primary stress upon the role of reason in its account of the nature and genesis of knowledge. **Empiricism**, by contrast, stresses the primary role of sensory experience. These are broad definitions, it should be noted. The term 'rationalism', for example, is sometimes taken more narrowly to refer to the view that our knowledge can be given purely rational and *a priori* foundations. However, I am using the term in a wider sense, to include also those neo-Kantian relativists (like Kuhn, Rorty and Derrida) who, although they deny that knowledge can be given any rational (or empirical) foundations whatsoever, nevertheless draw their ideas and inspiration from the rationalist tradition (and particularly from Kant); and who, like their less sceptical predecessors, put primary stress upon the role of reason – of theory and interpretation – in the formation of knowledge.

Dialectic is another much-abused term; but since a main part of the purpose of this book is to explain the dialectical approach in epistemology, I shall get down to that task without further ado.

Part I

Realism and its Critics

1 The Empiricist Argument

Traditional Forms of Realism

The main aim of this book is to develop and defend a realist theory of knowledge. By ‘realism’ I mean the theory that there is an objective, material world, which exists independently of consciousness and which is knowable by consciousness. This idea will, I know, appear so evident and obvious to many people – and particularly to those unfamiliar with philosophy – that it will seem strange to dignify it with an imposing philosophical title like ‘realism’, and stranger still to spend time and effort defending it. For this is the view of common sense, which most people adopt in a quite natural and unquestioning way in the course of their everyday lives. Nevertheless, realism has been one of the most controversial and disputed theories in the history of philosophy. These disputes turn around the relation of subject and object; they concern the nature of appearance and reality, and the character of reason and truth; they raise some of the most basic and fundamental questions of philosophy. It soon becomes clear that in order to defend realism – which at first seems so obvious – it is necessary to entertain views and to develop philosophical theories which are far from obvious or commonsensical.

It is not difficult to see the sorts of philosophical problem that realism involves. It seems to want to say two opposed and incompatible things about the relation of subject and object. For realism maintains that the object is independent of the subject, and yet it also insists that there is no absolute gulf between them, and that the object can be grasped and known by the subject. It seems to want to say that subject and object, appearance and reality, are *both* distinct and yet *also* united. Paradoxical as it at first seems, I shall argue that

this is indeed what realism must say, and that it is a true and illuminating thing to say.

Traditionally, however, realism has not taken this form. On the contrary, we are more commonly presented with a choice between two different and incompatible kinds of realism. More usually, realism has been given either a 'direct' or a 'representative' form. Direct realism is the view that we are immediately and directly aware of reality through our sensory experience. It is a philosophy which has been particularly associated with the empiricist tradition. Sometimes, this outlook is referred to as 'naïve' realism; and there is, indeed, a naïve quality to the faith with which some of its early proponents preached the gospel of experience.¹ We are presented with what amounts to an 'Emperor's New Clothes' theory of knowledge. The truth is manifest: just look and you will see; see and you will know. However, direct realism recurs through the history of empiricist thought in more sophisticated forms, developed to meet some of the obvious problems that this philosophy must face.

These problems are considerable. Direct realism involves the view that reality is directly given in appearance. Reality is as it appears. That is to say, this philosophy involves the simple and immediate *identification* of reality and appearance – the *reduction* of appearances to reality. In many cases, however, there seems to be a discrepancy between the way things appear and the way they really are, between our subjective view of things and what is objectively the case. We are subject to errors and illusions: what is manifest to us is not real. Conversely, what is real is often not immediately apparent or manifest, but can be discovered and known only as the result of a process of investigation and thought. In short, there seems to be a real distinction between appearance and reality, between what is subjective and what objective, which must be recognized in any adequate account of knowledge.

These arguments, as we shall see more fully below, have led to the rejection of direct realism and to the development of what has been the most influential and significant form of realism: 'representative' realism or the 'reflection theory'. According to this, we are immediately aware, not of reality, but of appearances, images, sensations, impressions or ideas. I will be defending a version of the reflection theory in this book, but it will be a version quite different to the traditional one. For most commonly, this theory is developed in a dualistic fashion: subject and object, appearances and reality, are

¹ See, for example, Bacon for whom, in Marx's words, 'matter smiled upon man with a poetic-sensuous brightness' (*The Holy Family*, p. 128. I have quoted the older translation).

portrayed as absolutely distinct and separate from each other. Their relation is presented as an entirely external and contingent one. They may or may not correspond and be united. Where we have true knowledge our ideas reflect reality, whereas in the case of errors and illusions they fail to do so.

Locke and Berkeley

A realist account of knowledge along these lines is developed by Locke in simple and attractive terms, and it is with his philosophy that I shall begin. To many people it has seemed the embodiment of common sense. Locke bases his account of knowledge upon a causal and scientifically-inspired picture of the workings of the mind. Objects and forces in the external world have an existence independent of the mind. In certain conditions, however, they act upon the senses. A stimulus is then transmitted from the senses through the nervous system, and eventually gives rise to an idea in consciousness.

If . . . external objects be not united to our minds when they produce ideas therein and yet we perceive such of them as fall under our senses, it is evident that some motion must be thence continued by our nerves to the brains . . . there to produce in our minds the particular ideas we have of them. (*Essay*, II.viii.12)

Locke is a dualist, and his theory involves a sharp distinction between the mental and the material realms, between ideas and things. Mental states – 'ideas' in Locke's language – are private and purely subjective entities, dependent on consciousness for their existence. Material things, by contrast, have an objective and public existence independent of consciousness. In perception, a material process – originating in the external world and physically affecting the bodily organs of the senses – gives rise to a mental process: the conscious perception of the object. The connection between these events is a causal and contingent one. Either can occur without the other. For, on the one hand, physical events are independent of consciousness and can occur without being perceived; and, on the other, in dreams, hallucinations and purely imaginary experience, we have ideas which do not seem to arise from, or correspond to, external events or objects.

Locke is also an empiricist. His great *Essay* constitutes an extended argument for the basic principle of empiricism: that all knowledge is based on and derived from experience. To this end, he

analyses experience into what he regards as its most basic elements ('simple ideas'), and attempts to show how the faculty of the 'understanding' builds up a complex picture of the world from these elements alone. As an empiricist, Locke insists that all the materials of knowledge are contained in simple ideas and given in experience.² The understanding adds nothing: it only 'abstracts' from and abbreviates, orders and systematizes, the data of sense.

Locke's account of experience is embodied in his 'theory of ideas'. This is arguably his most important and enduring contribution to empiricist philosophy. For the theory of ideas and its descendants have provided the essential basis for empiricist epistemology ever since. According to this theory, the immediate objects of consciousness and knowledge are ideas. In experience and in knowledge, we are directly presented with *ideas and not things*. According to Locke, 'the mind, in all its thoughts and reasonings, hath no other immediate object but its own ideas, which it alone does or can contemplate' (*Essay*, IV.i.1). We are immediately aware of ideas not things, of subjective appearances not objective reality; we are aware of things only as phenomena and not as they are in themselves.

Locke's theory of ideas thus involves the rejection of the philosophy of direct realism. Instead, his realism takes a representative form. Although our ideas differ from reality, they can constitute knowledge of reality in so far as they reflect or, in Locke's language, 'resemble' the objects which give rise to them. Ideas of sensation have the character of subjective appearances and images, copying and picturing the material objects independent of consciousness from which they arise. In this way the mind, for Locke, is like a camera which, when acted upon by external objects, registers impressions and ideas that reflect and resemble those objects. 'For methinks the understanding is not much unlike a closet wholly shut from light, with only some little opening left to let in external visible resemblances or ideas of things without' (II.ix.17). The mind, again like a camera, is thus passive in the reception of experience, merely recording ideas and images impressed upon it by the senses: 'in the reception of simple ideas, the understanding is most of all passive' (II.i.25).

It should be noted that Locke makes an important distinction between 'primary' and 'secondary' qualities. The primary qualities are those which are 'utterly inseparable from the body, in what estate soever it be' (*Essay*, II.viii.9). The secondary qualities, by contrast, are 'nothing in the objects themselves, but powers to

² Notoriously, he is not always consistent on this point, as subsequent philosophers, from Berkeley onwards, have pointed out.

produce various sensations in us by their primary qualities' (II.viii.10). In the present context, at least, this distinction is best seen as a qualification to the reflection theory.³ For it implies that only the ideas of 'primary qualities' reflect objects. Thus, he writes, 'the primary qualities of bodies are resemblances of them, and their patterns do really exist in the bodies themselves; but the ideas produced in us by . . . secondary qualities have no resemblance of them at all. There is nothing like our ideas existing in the bodies themselves' (II.viii.15).

With this qualification, however, it is clear that Locke is putting forward a dualistic version of the reflection theory – a 'photographic' account of knowledge. This is an attractive and plausible theory of knowledge, and it has been an immensely influential one. Unfortunately, however, it is open to very serious objections. These were first presented by Berkeley, whose attack upon this philosophy is both simple and devastating. He starts from the same basic assumption as Locke, embodied in the theory of ideas: that ideas and not things are the immediate objects of consciousness. Berkeley then proceeds to show that this assumption is incompatible with Locke's realism and with the reflection theory. In other words, Berkeley turns Locke's theory of ideas against his realism.

If we are immediately aware only of our ideas, argues Berkeley, we can never have any basis for knowledge of the objective world independent of them. Experience gives us no access to the world as it is in itself: it informs us only of how the world appears to us.

As for our senses, by them we have the knowledge *only of our sensations*, ideas, or those things that are immediately perceived by sense, call them what you will: but they do not inform us that things exist without the mind, or unperceived, like those which are perceived. This the materialists [i.e. Locke] themselves acknowledge. (*Principles*, §18)

Nor can we form any rational inferences about the material world independent of consciousness on the basis of experience, since, according to Locke, there is no necessary connection between it and our experience. As Berkeley says, 'I do not see what reason can induce us to believe the existence of bodies without the mind, since the very patrons of matter themselves do not pretend there is any necessary connection between them and our ideas' (idem).

In other words, we immediately perceive 'only sensations', only

³ But see Bennett, *Locke, Berkeley, Hume*, chs 3–4, for an illuminating and important account of other issues involved in Locke's treatment of this distinction (notably, the concept of 'substance' and the mechanical view of the world).

appearances, never things-in-themselves. We can have no knowledge of the world of independent objects beyond our sensations from which, according to Locke and realism, they derive and which they resemble. And so, Berkeley concludes, realism and the reflection theory are untenable. We must reject the very idea of a material world independent of consciousness. There is nothing in the world but minds and their ideas: to be is to be perceived and to perceive (*esse est percipi et percipere*). Thus Berkeley arrives at pure subjective idealism: things are nothing in themselves, they are mere 'collections of ideas', 'constructions' of appearances.

How can Berkeley's arguments be refuted? How can such idealism be rejected? Here we come to the parting of the ways between Locke's dualism and the sort of realism I will be defending. For Berkeley's arguments really are valid and effective against Locke's dualist form of realism, which has no satisfactory philosophical response to them. The theory of ideas, the view that we are immediately aware of ideas *and not* of objects in themselves, creates an absolute and unbridgeable gulf between our experience and the material world. Our knowledge is confined to ideas – we are trapped within the realm of appearances and can never know anything beyond them. As Hegel drily remarks, 'the affliction of the reader can scarcely be blamed when he is expected to consider himself hemmed in by an impervious circle of purely subjective conceptions' (*Logic*, §131z).

Realism cannot be defended on the basis of such dualism. Berkeley is right about this. The realist view that we can have knowledge of the objective world independent of consciousness is, indeed, incompatible with the dualistic separation of subject from object implied by the theory of ideas. This is the dilemma facing Locke's realism. Berkeley's philosophy is also founded upon the theory of ideas; but his response to this dilemma is entirely different to Locke's. He discards the idea of a material reality independent of consciousness, and opts instead for a purely subjective idealism. These are absurd conclusions. People are driven to entertain them only because Berkeley's arguments appear unanswerable, and there seems to be no alternative. But realism can be defended, I will argue – there is an alternative. However, the important lesson to be learned from Berkeley's arguments is that a realist theory of knowledge can be developed only if the dualistic presuppositions of the theory of ideas are abandoned.

Lenin and his Critics

Realism in the form of the reflection theory is also an essential aspect of the dialectical approach in epistemology. Engels and Lenin both develop their accounts of knowledge upon this basis. Moreover, Hegel's approach to these questions is also usefully understood in these terms. This statement will, I am sure, seem strange and surprising to some readers, but I hope to illustrate its truth in the course of my argument. For the present, I will just observe that the crucial middle sections of his *Logic* are devoted to a discussion of what he terms 'the determinations of reflection', by which he means opposites such as appearance and reality, force and its expression, things and their properties, inner and outer, etc. As we shall see, the ideas he develops in the course of this discussion are essential for a satisfactory realist account of knowledge.

At the outset, however, it is crucial to see that the dialectical form of the reflection theory is a distinctive philosophy which does not simply repeat previous accounts. Failure to appreciate this has vitiated a great deal of the criticism which has been directed at work in the Marxist tradition. There has been an almost universal tendency to assimilate this work to other and more familiar approaches. Lenin, in particular, is quite regularly accused of naively and ignorantly reproducing Locke's theory of knowledge, and thereby laying himself open to the arguments by which Berkeley discredited and refuted it.⁴

In *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, it is true that Lenin presents a form of the reflection theory which is, in many respects, similar to Locke's. Like Locke, he tends to see the relationship between subject and object in mechanical terms, with the subject as a mere passive recipient of sensory data. Thus he talks of sensations as 'photographs', 'copies' and 'images' of reality. Moreover, Lenin's account of reflection is strongly empiricist in character, and suffers from the defects and one-sidedness which are characteristic of that tradition. I shall come on to these problems in the next chapter. However, it is important to see that there are some fundamental respects in which Lenin's approach differs from that of Locke. Lenin is a materialist, whereas Locke is a dualist whose realism takes a dualist form. Lenin has some sense of dialectic, Locke's view of the world is a purely mechanical one. These differences are crucial. Because of its dualism, Locke's theory is vulnerable to Berkeley's

⁴ See, for example, Acton, *The Illusion of the Epoch*, Anderson, 'Marxist Philosophy', etc. A quite different account, which I have found helpful in developing my ideas, is given by Lukács, 'Art and Objective Truth'.

attack, whereas a dialectical and materialist approach can provide the basis for a philosophical response to Berkeley.

In particular, although he is all too rarely given credit for it, Lenin's rejection of the dualism involved in Locke's epistemology is clear and decisive. He repeatedly makes the vital point that there is no gulf between subject and object. A satisfactory realist and materialist theory of knowledge, he insists, must reject any dualistic, absolute, distinction between appearance and reality, between things-for-us and things-in-themselves: 'there is definitely no difference in principle between the phenomenon and the thing-in-itself, and there can be no such difference' (p. 110). The theory of ideas, which is at the basis both of Locke's dualist realism and of Berkeley's idealism, has the effect of 'fencing off' the way things appear to us from the way they are in themselves. The material world is made into an unknowable 'beyond', unreachable by consciousness.

For every scientist who has not been led astray by professorial philosophy, as well as for every materialist, sensation is . . . the direct connection between consciousness and the external world: it is the transformation of the energy of external excitation into a state of consciousness. This transformation has been, and is, observed by each of us a million times on every hand. The sophism of idealist philosophy consists in the fact that it regards sensation as being, not the connection between consciousness and the external world, but a fence, a wall, separating consciousness from the external world – not an image of the external phenomenon corresponding to the sensation, but as the 'sole entity'. (*Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, p. 46)

In the theory of ideas, sensations, appearances, ideas are regarded as purely subjective entities, which cut us off from any possible contact with the objective world. Lenin, by contrast, insists that sensation is the contact and the connection of consciousness with the external world. Sensation, that is to say, is the subjective form of appearance of the thing-in-itself, the form in which objective reality is manifested to consciousness. The thing-in-itself is *transformed* in the process of sensation into the thing-for-us, into appearance. There is no barrier, no impassable divide, between the object and the subject here; there is rather a constant process of *transition* and of *transformation* of the one into the other. As Lenin says, 'in practice each one of us has observed time without number the simple and palpable transformation of the "thing-in-itself" into phenomenon, into the "thing-for-us". It is precisely this transformation that is cognition' (p. 132).

Locke's dualism, as we have seen, takes both an epistemological and also a metaphysical (or ontological) form. He draws an absolute and dualistic distinction both between appearances and reality, and also between what is mental and what is material. In Locke's thought, indeed, these two aspects tend to be confused and run together, through his identification of ideas regarded as sensations (a metaphysical concept) with ideas as appearances (an epistemological one). The same tendency is also apparent in Lenin, who is inclined to identify sensations with appearances. This is an aspect of his empiricism which I shall discuss more fully in due course. Materialism, however, involves the rejection of dualism in both these forms, and Lenin is well aware of this. Lenin thus insists not only that appearances must not be regarded as absolutely distinct from things-in-themselves; he equally makes the point that sensations must not be regarded as purely mental entities. Sensations, for Lenin, are not mere 'ideas', not mere states of consciousness; they are also physical in nature. Sensations are bodily processes of the brain and nervous system. 'Consciousness is an internal state of matter', as Lenin says, 'we think with the help of our brains' (p. 90).

Lenin is an uncompromising materialist, both in his epistemology and in his metaphysics. In this central respect, at least, his views are clearly opposed to those of Locke, and the charge that Lenin is simply repeating Locke, common as it is, is without foundation. But this point is not well understood, even by some of Lenin's would-be friends. In a recent book *Marxism and Materialism*, for example, David Ruben claims to be defending Lenin's views. Despite the book's title, however, it soon becomes clear that Ruben prefers the term 'realism' for the point of view that he is defending; and rightly so, since he makes it clear that he rejects materialism, properly so-called, as a 'reductive' approach. 'Marxist materialism, or realism', he writes, 'asserts the existence of *something* other than the mind and its contents, whereas reductive materialism claims that everything, including the mind and its contents, can be reduced to matter, or the physical' (p. 5). Here, as throughout the book, Ruben would like to call his own brand of realism a sort of materialism. However, it is important to be clear that there are various forms of realism, some quite different from materialism in the correct philosophical sense of the term. In particular, Ruben's realism is a form of dualism very similar to Locke's. Like Locke, Ruben believes in the existence of 'something' (presumably the material world) independent of consciousness. But genuine materialism, it must be stressed, is a stronger philosophy than this: it goes on to insist also that there is no consciousness independent of matter. All reality is material; there is

nothing in the world but matter in motion. Consciousness is matter organized and acting at its most complex and developed level. This is philosophical (or ontological) materialism; and it is quite explicitly rejected as 'reductive' by Ruben.

Moreover, Ruben is equally hostile to the materialist approach in epistemology. Here, too, he is a dualist; and his attempt to portray Lenin's philosophy in these terms inevitably leads to a distortion of it.⁵ He portrays the relation between appearance and reality as an external and contingent one. Thus, he writes, 'the relationship between a belief or a thought and the objects or real states of affairs which the beliefs are about is a contingent relationship' (p. 3). This is pure Locke. Once appearance and reality are separated in this fashion, and related only contingently to each other, an unbridgeable gap is created between them, and Berkeley's objections become unanswerable.

The lesson that materialists should learn from Berkeley is that the reflection theory is not defensible in its dualistic, Lockean, form. As Lenin says, there is no gulf or gap between appearance and reality; the relation between them is not a merely contingent one: they exist in unity. Ruben, however, has another way out. It is a mistake, he tells us, even to try to answer Berkeley. Materialism cannot ultimately be justified: 'there is no non-circular justification for belief in a material world', he says (p. 99). By this he means that it is impossible 'to justify the belief in a realm essentially independent of mind by reference to something else', such as sense-experience, which 'does not presuppose the existence of the mind-independent reality for which the justification is being sought' (p. 98).

b/

Ruben here poses the problem of justifying 'materialism' in terms that materialism rejects. These terms presuppose his own dualist outlook which, indeed, makes the problem insoluble. If consciousness is divorced from the material world in dualist fashion, then it is true that knowledge of it by consciousness becomes inexplicable and impossible. This is merely Berkeley's argument restated. But the problem does not arise in this form for materialism, since material-

⁵ This confusion of dualist realism with materialism is nothing peculiar to Ruben; it is a common error with a long history. For example, as Lenin points out, Lange's massive *History of Materialism* suffers from this defect. Because of it, Lange includes Kant in his history, on the strength of the fact that Kant, too, believed that there are things independent of consciousness (i.e. things-in-themselves), even if we can have no knowledge of them. Kant himself, of course, knew better, and described his philosophy as 'transcendental idealism' and as a merely 'empirical' form of realism. This does not qualify even as a form of realism, in the sense in which I am using the term. Colletti is another recent writer who confuses dualism with materialism. See his *Marxism and Hegel*, p. 104, and my comments in *Hegel, Marx and Dialectic*, pp. 84ff.

ism denies that consciousness is independent of matter. On the other hand, this problem, in this form, does arise for Ruben. Making a virtue of necessity, he says 'we eschew all attempts to justify, by non question begging arguments our belief in mind-independent objects. We merely begin with them' (p. 99). In short, mere dogmatic assertion is to replace rational and philosophical thought at this point.

This disastrous approach in philosophy has, unfortunately, had some influence in recent years, thanks mainly to the work of Althusser. According to Althusser, philosophy is mere 'class struggle in the field of theory'. It has no 'object' and no 'history'. Different philosophies are merely the ideological expressions of different class outlooks. Questions of truth and of rational justification do not arise – all that is involved in doing philosophy is commitment to an ideological and political line.⁶

It is true that political commitments receive expression in philosophical terms. In particular, philosophical materialism is one of the most basic aspects of the socialist outlook and attitude. However, the only effective and useful way of defending this philosophy is to show that it is a true and rationally defensible account of the world and of our knowledge of it. Mere dogmatic commitment, on the other hand – a blind and irrational adherence, even to the 'correct line' – is no help.

Ruben, at least, expresses the irrationalism and dogmatism of his position in a plain and straightforward fashion. The same cannot be said of many of the other writers who have been influenced by Althusser and his post-structuralist successors. They seem to revel in obscure and intimidating language. One is reminded of the fact how / that in Ancient China, a number of people always used to accompany the army on its campaigns, to bang gongs and cymbals and wave banners of ugly monsters at the enemy. The idea was that these unpleasant sights and sounds would frighten the enemy into submission. Some writers, it seems, have recently been trying to resurrect these primitive methods. By the use of ugly and heavy sounding jargon, they have been attempting to scare their opponents. But, just as in military affairs, so too in philosophy, it is the real forces brought to bear which are ultimately decisive. And while it may disconcert people, ugly jargon, dogmatically asserted, is ineffective as argument. Irrational noise-making is of no value, and the resort to it is a disastrous abdication from what philosophy can, in fact, contribute to the 'class struggle in theory' and to our understanding of the world. For philosophy can articulate the basic theoretical

⁶ These views are developed in Althusser's writings from the time of *Lenin and Philosophy* onwards, and particularly in the title work of that collection.

presuppositions of a political outlook, and give them rational justification and defence. In this way, philosophers can play a useful role and be of real service.

The Dialectic of Reality and Appearance

Realism, then, must reject the dualism which is involved in Locke's account of knowledge, and it must insist upon the unity of the subjective and the objective, of appearance and reality. The usual alternatives to dualism in the theory of knowledge, however, involve the reduction of one of these opposites to the other, and this is equally unsatisfactory. Such reductionism can take either an idealist or a materialist form. When consciousness is reduced to matter, the result is materialism of an abstract and mechanical sort. In the theory of knowledge this takes the form of direct realism, the view that reality is presented directly and immediately to us in appearances. Would that it were so! For, as Marx observes, 'all science would be superfluous if the outward appearance and essence of things directly coincided' (*Capital, III*, p. 817). The real nature of things would be immediately manifest, and no work of discovery or understanding would be required in order to gain knowledge. But things are not like that. Appearances cannot be reduced to reality; for there is a real and inescapable distinction here, which, even though it does not amount to an absolute gulf, must be recognized by any adequate theory of knowledge.

Berkeley's subjective idealism, by contrast, involves the reduction of reality to appearances. Objects are mere 'collections' of ideas, or, in more recent phenomenalist versions of this philosophy, 'constructions' of sense-data.⁷ One often meets the view that this philosophy is 'irrefutable'; but that is absurd. On the contrary, Berkeley's theory is perhaps the least adequate and least plausible philosophy ever to have been put forward, and attempts to develop it into something more sophisticated by subsequent phenomenalists have been no more successful. Reality can no more be reduced to appearances than vice versa. For a whole host of familiar and oft-rehearsed reasons, Berkeley's philosophy is an untenable one. It is based upon the theory of ideas, which is an unsatisfactory account of experience, as I have indicated already. If consistently developed, it leads to a denial of any knowledge of the objective world, of the past, and of the future; indeed, it leads to the denial of the possibility of any

⁷ For a clear and useful account of the sense-datum theory and phenomenism and their problems, see Ayer, *The Problem of Knowledge*, ch.3.

knowledge beyond the confines of our own immediate subjective impressions. It leads, in other words, to solipsism – to the view that only my consciousness and its present state exist. If ever there was a philosophy which has been refuted, this is it!

Dualism and reductionism in their various forms are the alternatives usually presented in epistemology. Either appearance and reality are absolutely and dualistically divided off from each other, or one is reduced to the other. Neither of these alternatives as such is acceptable, and dialectical philosophy, whether of a materialist or of a Hegelian idealist form, rejects both of them. To be sure, dialectic asserts the unity of appearance and reality; but when it talks of this unity it does not mean an abstract, lifeless and dead identity, which excludes all difference and contradiction. When it says that appearance and reality, the subjective and the objective, are opposites which exist in unity, it means that they are concrete, dialectically related opposites. That is their nature in fact; and, to allow for it in theory, we must reject the 'metaphysical either/or'⁸ embodied in the traditional alternatives of dualism and reductionism. Instead, we must recognize that appearance and reality, the subjective and the objective, are at once *both* opposed (i.e. different) *and also* united: they are opposites which exist in concrete unity. To quote Marx: 'thinking and being, to be sure are . . . *distinct* but at the same time in *unity* with one another' (*1844 Manuscripts*, p. 138).⁹

The idea that such opposites are contradictory and exist in unity is the central notion of dialectical thought; but these phrases, I know, will sound mysterious and paradoxical to many people. I must stress, therefore, that nothing mysterious or paradoxical is intended by them here. For their purpose is to describe and to emphasize that consciousness and knowledge are not simply static states, but rather active processes. Thought and reality, the subjective and the objective, are not immobile and lifeless – they are opposites which interact and interpenetrate, and which are constantly being transformed into each other in the course of practical activity and in the development of consciousness and knowledge. These opposites must be seen, not as entities which are *merely* different, but as the aspects or 'moments' of a single process. It is only in such dialectical terms that the facts of change and development can adequately be described and understood. This is the crucial point; and once it is grasped, the air of paradox and

⁸ A favourite phrase of Hegel's: see, e.g., *Logic*, §32z.

⁹ I attempt to explain these ideas more fully in my contribution to *Hegel, Marx and Dialectic*. See also chapter 3 below.

mystery which initially surrounds dialectical language begins to be dispelled.

In particular, it is important to see that knowledge is the process of the *transformation* of reality into thought. It is the *dynamic* and *dialectical* unity of these opposites, the process through which this unity is developed and realized. For, in knowledge, we apprehend the objective world in thought, and thereby transform reality into thought, into ideas, into consciousness. The opposite movement, from thought to reality, is exhibited in practical activity. In action, consciousness, intention and purpose are given a material form – they are *realized* and *embodied in things*. In this way, the interpenetration of thought and reality is a familiar and everyday phenomenon, which may be observed even at the level of animal life. As Hegel so nicely puts it, ‘of a metaphysics prevalent today which maintains that we cannot know things because they are absolutely shut to us, it might be said that not even the animals are so stupid as these metaphysicians; for they go after things, seize them and consume them’ (*Philosophy of Nature*, §246z).

As Hegel here suggests, practical activity is the most fundamental and clearly evident manifestation of the unity of consciousness and matter, and the basis upon which all subsequent developments of this unity rest. ‘We have all reason to rejoice that the things which environ us are not steadfast and independent existences; since in that case we should soon perish from hunger both bodily and mental (*Logic*, §131z). At the most fundamental level, in eating and drinking we appropriate and incorporate the material world, and thereby give substance and sustenance to our brain and senses. In perceiving and coming to know the world, we appropriate the objective world and transform it into thought, and thereby give substance and sustenance to our consciousness and to our subjective being. In practical activity, on the other hand, we translate our subjectivity – our ideas, purposes and intentions – into reality: we thereby realize it and embody it in things. Here, in all our awareness and in our every action, we have the interaction and interpenetration – the concrete and dialectical unity – of consciousness and matter.

Moreover, for the materialist at least, our relationship to the material and objective world is first of all and primarily a practical and material one. Conscious and articulate thought and knowledge develop only on this basis, as an extension of these essentially practical relations. These are some of the ideas I shall be developing

in the following chapters. It is also what Marx is saying when he writes,

with the schoolmaster-professor the relations of man to nature are not *practical* from the outset, that is, relations established by action; rather the are *theoretical* relations. . . . But on no account do men begin by ‘standing in that theoretical relation to the *things of the external world*'. They begin, like every animal, by *eating, drinking, etc.*, hence not by ‘standing’ in a relation, but by *relating themselves actively*, taking hold of certain things in the external world through action, and thus satisfying their needs. (Therefore they begin with production). Through the repetition of this process, the property of those things, their property ‘to satisfy needs’, is impressed upon their brains; men, like animals, also learn to distinguish ‘theoretically’ from all other things the external things which serve the satisfaction of their needs. At a certain stage of this evolution, after their needs, and the activities by which they are satisfied, have, in the meantime, increased and developed further, they will christen these things linguistically as a whole class, distinguished empirically from the rest of the external world. (‘Notes on Wägner’, p. 190)

2 The Rationalist Argument

Kant vs Realism

The criticisms of realism that I have been considering so far are those that have been raised within the empiricist tradition. They are generated by the empiricist principle that all knowledge derives from experience, and by the account of experience contained in the theory of ideas. Once it is assumed that through experience we are aware of ideas only, and not things, knowledge of the external world becomes inexplicable and impossible. Berkeley is right about this. However, this need not be assumed. It is possible to develop a dialectical account of knowledge – a dialectical account of the relationship between appearance and reality, between subject and object – which shows the way in which realism can be defended against Berkeley's attack.

These Berkeleyan arguments are not the only difficulties which realism must face, however. There are other criticisms that present even greater problems for this theory (at least in its traditional forms), which have been raised by the rationalist philosophers, and particularly by Kant. Kant's ideas have been enjoying an enormous vogue and influence. They are at the basis of much of the current opposition to realism. For themes drawn from Kant are the underlying inspiration of a great deal of the relativism and scepticism which are now so fashionable. I shall criticize these ideas at length later in this book. At present, however, my purpose is a more positive one. For it is also important to see that these rationalist arguments add a new dimension to our understanding of knowledge. They contribute insights and ideas which must be absorbed and incorporated into any adequate account of knowledge.

The fundamental principle of the rationalist approach is that

reason plays a primary and essential role in the process of knowledge. Not only experience, but thought and theoretical understanding are necessary for knowledge. These ideas lead to the criticism and rejection of empiricism for the one-sided emphasis that it places upon the contribution of experience. Mere immediate sensation, while it may be necessary for knowledge, does not in itself constitute knowledge. The senses by themselves, in Kant's words, give us a mere 'manifold' of representations – a chaotic collection, an unrelated series, of impressions. Knowledge begins only when this manifold is given form and order, only when it is brought under concepts and interpreted. This is the work of thought and reason. As Descartes says, 'neither our imagination nor our senses can ever assure us of anything at all, except with the aid of our understanding' (*Philosophical Writings*, p. 35).

These are crucially important themes in the theory of knowledge. Especially in Kant's work they result in a powerful critique of the idea that knowledge is something which derives purely from the senses, either directly or through the accumulation of fragmentary and isolated 'simple ideas', 'impressions' or 'sense-data'. We must give form and meaning to our experience – we must unify and 'synthesize' it – and unless and until we do so, it does not constitute knowledge for us.

Moreover, reason is an *active* faculty, according to these thinkers; and knowledge essentially involves creative and constructive activity on the part of the rational subject. It is in these terms that the rationalist philosophers criticize the passive and mechanical picture that empiricism gives of experience and of knowledge. For, as we have seen, Locke and the classical empiricist writers tend to regard experience and knowledge in 'photographic' terms, as the mere reflection and registration of what is impressed upon the senses.

These mechanical and photographic metaphors are entirely inadequate to enable us to comprehend the relation of knowledge to its object. A photograph records only the outward and immediately given appearances of particular things. The senses, likewise, give us awareness only of outward appearances. There is much in human knowledge, however, which is not thus directly manifest. Much in our knowledge is not given in sensation and cannot be captured in a photograph. It requires the use of reason. In Hegel's words,

The reality in object, circumstance or event, the intrinsic worth or essence, the thing on which everything depends, is not a self-evident datum of consciousness, or coincident with the first appearance and

impression of the object. . . . On the contrary, reflection [i.e. thought] is required in order to discover the real constitution of the object. (*Logic*, §21)

The most important source of these ideas in modern philosophy is Kant.¹ In particular, as Kant stresses, the elements of universality and necessity are not given simply through sense experience. In the first place, as regards universals, it is clear that they are not manifest to experience. The senses present us only with a diversity, a 'manifold', of different appearances. That we come to interpret this varied series of appearances as indicative of order and unity in the world is the work of thought, which we bring to bear on our experience. Again Hegel puts this well. 'Nature shows us a countless number of individual forms and phenomena. Into this variety we feel a need of introducing unity: we compare, consequently, and try to find the universal in each single case. Individuals are born and perish, the species abides and recurs in them all, and its existence is only visible to reflection' (i.e. thought again) (*Logic*, §21z).

Likewise, necessity and law are not given immediately in experience. Our experience, rather, presents us with an apparently unrelated succession of distinct events. When we observe the planets, for example, we see them 'now here, now there'. The necessary connections between these appearances, the laws and principles governing the movements of the planets, are not given to experience alone, but can be discovered only by thought. 'The universal does not exist externally to the outward eye as a universal. The kind as kind cannot be perceived: the laws of the celestial motions are not written on the sky. The universal is neither seen nor heard, its existence is only for the mind' (idem).

Universality and necessity are not features of the outward appearance of things. They are not given directly in experience. These aspects of our knowledge cannot be accounted for in terms of the reproduction in consciousness, in a photographic fashion, of what is immediately given to the senses. Nor can we say, with Locke, that universality and necessity can be 'abstracted' from appearances. For, on his own admission, experience presents us only with particulars. No matter how extensive it is, it can never inform us of what is universally or necessarily the case. Knowledge of what is universal or necessary clearly goes beyond what can be given in any possible

¹ Nevertheless, I will present these ideas mainly through Hegel's account, because this is often clearer than Kant's; and because it leads on more easily to the next stage of my argument, which deals with Hegel's criticisms of Kant. For Kant's own presentation of these ideas see his *Prolegomena* and *Critique of Pure Reason*.

finite set of particular experiences, and cannot therefore be 'abstracted' from it.

Our knowledge goes beyond what is directly given in experience; and Kant, who has been the most important proponent of this point in modern philosophy, argues that this 'going beyond' is the work of thought. The elements of universality and necessity are, in Kant's language, '*a priori*'. They are not given to the senses, but are categories brought to and imposed upon experience by the mind. That is to say, our minds, according to Kant, are *active* in knowledge. We actively interpret and give form and order to the data provided by our senses: we see it in terms of the 'categories'.²

These ideas present the gravest difficulties for any realist theory of knowledge which is based on the idea of reflection. For if, as Kant insists, we are active in knowledge – if we interpret and order the given sensory material and impose categories upon it – then, in so doing, we must necessarily alter what is given and so 'produce' or 'create' something new. In the process, we construct an interpretation, a world-view, an 'object of knowledge', which, since it is in part our creation, must necessarily differ from the thing as it is in itself. In this way, as Hegel says, the process of knowledge seems to 'bring about the very opposite of its own end' and to construct an 'object of knowledge' that is discrepant from the thing-in-itself, which it was the aim of knowledge to grasp (*Phenomenology of Mind*, p. 131). A gulf is thus created between the thing-in-itself, the 'real object', on the one hand, and the thing as it is grasped and known by us, the 'object of knowledge', on the other.³ Our knowledge, Kant therefore argues, is necessarily confined to appearances, and we can never gain knowledge of things-in-themselves.

Hegel's Critique of Kant

These Kantian arguments have exerted an enormous influence on modern philosophy – and rightly so, since they bring into focus the active role of the subject in knowledge, and show the empiricist picture to be untenable. In the light of these ideas, we must certainly recognize the inadequacy of the sort of reflective realism propounded by Locke and Lenin, since it involves a passive and mechanical account of experience and knowledge. Many philosophers

² Kant's categories are a set of twelve fundamental concepts which, he believed, we must necessarily use in order to interpret and order the data of sense.

³ The useful phrases, 'real object' and 'object of knowledge' are Althusser's. See Althusser and Balibar, *Reading Capital*, part I.

would go further than this, however, and argue that an appreciation of these points must inevitably lead to the complete rejection of realism and the reflection theory. This is certainly Kant's view. The world with which we are presented in knowledge is a creation and a product of the way in which we interpret our experience. As such, it differs from the world as it is in itself. Our knowledge, he therefore argues, is confined to appearances and can never grasp the thing-in-itself.

And yet, although Kant thinks that we can never know the nature of things-in-themselves, he nevertheless insists that there are such things. For Kant, it must be emphasized, is a dualist. He recognizes the separate and independent existence both of objective things-in-themselves and also of subjective appearances, 'representations', 'phenomena'. Consequently, Kant's philosophy raises many of the problems that are already familiar from our discussion of Locke. For Kant's philosophy, like Locke's, also involves an unbridgeable division – an absolute gulf – between appearances and things-in-themselves; with things-in-themselves placed irretrievably beyond the grasp of our knowledge. Unlike Locke, however, Kant is perfectly conscious of this feature of his philosophy. He positively proclaims the unknowability of the thing-in-itself. The objective world exists, he maintains, and yet it must remain forever beyond the grasp of knowledge.

In this way, Kant seems to emphasize the paradoxes and problems of dualism, and to raise the tensions and contradictions in this position to their highest pitch of intensity. Few people have been satisfied with the result. Criticism has focused particularly on Kant's account of the thing-in-itself. As Hegel points out, however, there are two fundamentally different ways of reacting to this notion. 'People in the present day', he writes, 'have got over Kant and his philosophy: everyone wants to go further. But there are two ways of going further – a [way] backward and a [way] forward' (*Logic*, §41z). To respond to the Kantian philosophy by denying the thing-in-itself, and thus eliminating the objective, material world, is to retreat back to subjective idealism. In order to go forward towards an objective and realist theory of knowledge, on the other hand, it is necessary to recognize that there are things-in-themselves. There is an objective, material world which is not forever cut off from us but which, on the contrary, is knowable by consciousness.

It is worth noting that Lenin describes the different reactions to Kant's philosophy in very similar terms, when he distinguishes criticisms of it 'from the left' and 'from the right'. Criticisms 'from the left' lead forward to a realist and materialist outlook; whereas

those 'from the right' deny the objective world and lead back to Berkeley's idealism.

The materialists blamed Kant for his idealism, rejected the idealist features of his system, demonstrated the knowability, the this-sidedness of the thing-in-itself, the absence of a fundamental difference between the thing-in-itself and the phenomenon. . . . The agnostics and idealists blamed Kant for his assumption of the thing-in-itself as a concession to materialism. (*Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, p. 232)

Lenin is clear about the basic issues raised by Kant's philosophy; and he is aware, at least in a general way, of the terms in which the realist and materialist must respond to it. However, in *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, at least, he does not develop this response in any more than the occasional fragmentary remark and insight. As I have already suggested, this is mainly because his account of knowledge in that work is a strongly empiricist one. He tends to identify knowledge with experience, and to portray this in purely passive and mechanical, photographic terms. As a result, he never adequately acknowledges the active role of the subject in knowledge, and he does not properly engage with the problems for realism raised by Kant's philosophy.⁴

The Kantian view, as we have seen, is that a recognition of the active role of thought in knowledge leads inevitably to the rejection of realism. Empiricism has no answer to this argument; and it is frequently cited as the decisive refutation of realism. It can be answered, however, and that is what I now want to show. Due recognition can be given to the active role of the subject in knowledge, without abandoning realism or the reflection theory in epistemology. Indeed, Lenin later came to understand how this could be done, after writing *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, as a result of reading Hegel's *Logic*. It is not surprising that Hegel should have brought this home to him, for Hegel makes this point with unparalleled clarity and force in his critique of Kant.

Hegel accepts Kant's argument that the activity of the subject – and, in particular, the theoretical interpretation and transformation of the materials of experience – plays an essential role in the process of knowledge. But he rejects the Kantian idea that thought and interpretation are purely *subjective* forms that we impose on our knowledge and which take us away from the object in itself. That is

⁴ Cf. Marx's criticism of 'all hitherto existing materialism' that 'the *active* side, in contradistinction to materialism, was developed by idealism' ('Theses on Feuerbach', I).

to say, he rejects the Kantian idea that our thought, our interpretation, our theory, acts as a barrier between us and the objective world. On the contrary, he insists, thought and interpretation are our essential means of grasping reality and coming to know it. Specifically in relation to Kant's account of the role of the categories, Hegel makes this point in the following terms.

To regard the categories as subjective only, i.e. as part of ourselves, must seem very odd to the natural mind. . . . It is quite true that the categories are not contained in the sensation as it is given to us. When, for instance, we look at a piece of sugar, we find it hard, white, sweet, etc. All these properties we say are united in one object. Now it is this unity that is not found in the sensation. The same thing happens if we conceive two events to stand in the relation of cause and effect. The senses only inform us of the two several occurrences which follow each other in time. But that the one is cause, the other effect – in other words, the causal nexus between the two – is not perceived by sense; it is evident only to thought. Still, though the categories such as unity, or cause and effect, are strictly the property of thought, it by no means follows that they must be ours merely and not also characteristic of the objects. Kant however confines them to the subject-mind. (*Logic*, §42z)

In other words, Kant regards the contribution of thought as something purely mental and subjective. Our categories and concepts become a barrier between us and reality as it is in itself. In this way, Kant's dualism, like Locke's, portrays the subject as separated and cut off from the objective world by an absolute divide. It is impossible to understand knowledge in these terms. For the contribution of thought is not merely subjective. Thought and theory do not cut us off from the objective material world. On the contrary, it is through the use of reason that we attain a better and more adequate understanding of reality. This is Hegel's essential point; and he makes it, in general terms, as follows.

Thoughts, according to Kant, although universal and necessary categories, are *only our thoughts* – separated by an impassable gulf from the thing, as it exists apart from our knowledge. But the true objectivity of thinking means that the thoughts, far from being merely ours, must at the same time be the real essence of the things and of whatever is an object for us. (*Logic*, §41z)

These Hegelian arguments are of great importance for the development of a satisfactory account of knowledge. Lenin came to appreciate this, and he expresses the point with his characteristic

force and clarity. 'Essentially, Hegel is completely right as opposed to Kant. Thought proceeding from the concrete to the abstract – provided that it is *correct* . . . – does not get *away from* the truth but comes closer to it. . . . All scientific (correct, serious, not absurd) abstractions reflect nature more deeply, truly, *completely*' (*Philosophical Notebooks*, p. 171). The mind is certainly active in the process of knowledge, interpreting experience and forming theories. Lenin, however, makes the essential point here, in his *Notebooks*, when he stresses that thought does not thereby, as at first appears, cut us off from the thing-in-itself. Rather, it helps us to grasp and to understand reality more fully and more completely. The 'object of knowledge' that we construct theoretically with the aid of thought is not, or ought not to be,⁵ entirely discrepant from the real object, from the object as it is in itself. On the contrary, we seek, with the aid of theoretical understanding, to reflect the nature of things-in-themselves 'more deeply, truly, completely'.

Thought is the means by which we can penetrate beyond immediate appearances and the given data of the senses, and grasp the essential and underlying reality of things. Once this is understood, it is possible to acknowledge the Kantian and rationalist insight that thought contributes actively to knowledge, and yet resist the idealist implications that Kant, and so many other philosophers, have sought to draw from it. Indeed, it is possible to use Kant's important insight to deepen and strengthen the reflection theory, and the realist account of knowledge.

Natural Necessities and Kinds

The sort of realism I have just outlined, and which I will be defending in what follows, involves the view that not only our sensations, but also our concepts and categories, reflect objective features of the world. The significance of these ideas is profound and far-reaching. To say that the interpretations and theories that make up our knowledge can provide a correct reflection of the objective world, is to say something with important implications about the nature of that world. For if scientific theory reflects reality, then reality must be as described in theory. In particular, the universality and necessity which are a part of our account of the world must really be in the world, as inherent features of things-in-themselves. The division of the world into different kinds and species, the

⁵ This ambiguity will be discussed and removed in the arguments that follow.

necessary and law-like behaviour of things, must be features of reality in itself, and not the mere impositions of our thought. In other words, there are 'natural kinds' and 'natural necessities'.

There is nothing incompatible with realism in these views. On the contrary, they are a necessary part of a satisfactory realist account of knowledge. However, these ideas do involve questioning two widely influential opposed views on these issues. First of all, as we have just seen, they imply the rejection of the Kantian idea that our interpretations and categories are merely subjective forms which *we* impose on the given data, *our* 'way of seeing things' which, while they may apply correctly to the way things appear to us, do not reflect the nature of things-in-themselves.

Secondly, these ideas lead also to a rejection of the empiricist account of the role of universals and necessity in knowledge. For, according to the empiricist view, all knowledge is based on and derived from experience, which comes to us as a stream of separate, distinct, isolated and unrelated 'ideas' or 'sense-data'. Universality and necessity are not given in experience. In so far as our knowledge of things involves the ideas of kinds and necessary connections, it is a creation of the mind (or, in the language of the classical empiricists, the 'understanding'). Locke puts it well. 'It is plain', he writes, 'that *general* and *universal* belong not to the real existence of things; but are the inventions and creatures of the understanding made for its own use. . . . Universality belongs not to things themselves which are all of them particular in their existence' (*Essay*, III.iii.11). Thus, for Locke, there are no natural kinds or natural necessities.⁶ Universality and necessity are mere 'inventions and creatures' of the mind; legitimate only in so far as they order, systematize, abbreviate and make more manageable, the data of sense; but illegitimate if they take our beliefs beyond the confines of experience. In the language of the philosophy of science, this amounts to the doctrine that 'theoretical terms' must always be reducible to 'observational terms'.

Hume's account of causality makes a parallel point about the idea of natural necessity. Hume argues that the idea of a necessary

⁶ I am simplifying Locke's position here; and it should be noted that it is more complex and contradictory on these questions than I suggest. See, for instance, his talk, elsewhere in the *Essay*, of 'real essences', which are supposed to be the defining characteristics of natural kinds. His discussion of causality in terms of 'powers' also suggests a more realistic picture of causal necessity than is to be found in the later, more idealistic, empiricists, like Berkeley and Hume. These realist aspects of Locke's thought have been the subject of renewed interest as a result of the revival of realism in recent analytical philosophy. See, for example, Harré and Madden, *Causal Powers*, and Mackie, *Problems from Locke*.

connection between events is never given in experience. The senses present us only with a succession of discrete and particular occurrences. The idea of causal necessity in nature is an illusion, a creation of the mind under the impact of 'custom and habit'.

Necessity is something, that exists in the mind, not in objects; nor is it possible for us ever to form the most distant idea of it, consider'd as a quality in bodies. . . . Necessity is nothing but that determination of the thought to pass from causes to effects and from effects to causes, according to their experienc'd union. (*Treatise*, I.iii.14)

The account of knowledge that I am outlining involves the rejection of these views. Universality and necessity are not the merely subjective creations of our minds. They have an objective being: they are the inherent characteristics of things-in-themselves, which exist objectively and independently of our thought. The scientific account of reality reflects its inward and essential nature. The objective world is not a Kantian ungraspable 'thing-in-itself' beyond our knowledge; nor is it an atomized and fragmented series of facts in merely external and contingent relation, as the empiricist account suggests. The objective world is orderly, coherent, rational and law-like in its behaviour: such is the world revealed by scientific knowledge. The kinds and laws discovered by the scientist are not mere subjective interpretations imposed by thought on the world. The realistic and scientific attitude, on the contrary, is that the theories and laws of the sciences reflect the true nature of objective reality itself.

For example, the biological division of the world of living things into genera and species is not a merely subjective process: it is not simply a matter of imposing human interpretations, the biologist's 'way of seeing things', on the world. The distinctions between species are not our creations in that sense – they are drawn from nature and they reflect nature. They are the attempt to represent and describe, in theoretical terms, the real distinctions and differences in the biological realm which have emerged with evolutionary development. Moreover, it is evident that it is not only the biologist who distinguishes the different species one from another. To borrow Hegel's mode of expression, one might say that even the animals know of such distinctions and are wiser than these subjective philosophers; for the different species distinguish *themselves* from their rivals ('by tooth and claw', as Hegel says), and do not seek to mate except with members of their own species.

The *differentiae* enable cognition to distinguish one thing from another; but, on the other hand, it is not the unessential aspects of things that has to be known, but that characteristic whereby the things themselves *break loose* from the general continuity of being as such, *separate themselves* from others, and are explicitly *for themselves*. *Differentiae* are supposed, not merely to have an essential connection with cognition; but also to accord with the essential characteristics of things, and our artificial system is supposed to accord with Nature's own system and to express only this. (*Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 149)

The distinctions between species are, in other words, real distinctions which have emerged in the course of evolution; and the task of biology is to describe and comprehend these distinctions in the most adequate and accurate forms.

As regards necessity in nature, similar remarks apply. Realism rejects the view that the laws of nature are mere subjective patterns which the scientist either imposes upon, or sees in, nature. Scientific theory, when it is correct, reflects and describes forces and tendencies which really are at work in the world. Lenin is particularly clear on this point, even in *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*.⁷ 'The recognition of necessity in nature and the derivation from it of necessity in thought is materialism' (p. 192), he says; and also, 'the idea that knowledge can "create" universal forms, replace the primeval chaos by order, etc., is the idea of idealist philosophy. The world is matter moving in conformity to law, and our knowledge, being the highest product of nature, is in a position only to reflect this conformity to law' (p. 195). In short, the realist and materialist view is that there are natural kinds and laws really operative in nature. Contrary as such ideas may be to some deeply ingrained philosophical assumptions, these views are common within the sciences, where, as Hegel says,

objective reality is attributed to laws, forces are immanent, and matter is [regarded as] the true nature of the thing itself. . . . Genera, too . . . are not just a grouping of similarities, an abstraction made by us; they not only have common features but they are the object's own inner essence. . . . Physics looks upon these universals as its triumph. (*Philosophy of Nature*, §246z)

⁷ Ruben gives a good summary of Lenin's realism about causal necessity in *Marxism and Materialism*, pp. 172ff.

'Structuralist' Realism

Only a few years ago these views would probably have seemed outlandish and extravagant to most philosophers. Recently, however, there has been a widespread renewal of interest in the notions of natural kinds and natural necessity. In large measure, this has been due to the important work of Kripke and Putnam. Both writers approach these issues in terms of the philosophy of language. They are primarily concerned with logical questions relating to the meaning and reference of names and other words. The result has been that the epistemological basis of the sort of realism they are defending, and the larger metaphysical issues involved in it, have been somewhat neglected in this work, and in the analytical tradition in general. As far as the theory of knowledge goes, there has been an unfortunate tendency to rely on appeals to a simple and unexamined form of direct realism.⁸

Within the continental and rationalist tradition there has also been a revival of interest in the ideas of natural kinds and natural necessity; but this has arisen against a background of different interests and concerns. Attention to these ideas has been stimulated particularly by the work of what may be termed various 'structuralist realists'. Again Althusser is the main inspiration; but Godelier and Bhaskar will serve as my examples.⁹ Both insist that universality and necessity have objective existence, embodied in real 'structures' (Godelier) or 'mechanisms' (Bhaskar). However, these structures or mechanisms are not directly present to the senses. In contrast to the views of most analytical philosophers, what particularly characterizes such structuralism is its extreme hostility to empiricism and to the idea that experience can be a source of knowledge. The senses, these writers argue, give us knowledge only of the world of appearances, the empirical world; but this must be sharply distinguished from the level of 'reality' at which structures and mechanisms operate.

Bhaskar, for example, talks of structures and mechanisms as 'transcendent' and as 'transfactual' entities, and repeatedly emphasizes their independence from the empirical world, the world of

⁸ See, in particular, Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*, and Putnam, 'The Meaning of "Meaning"' and 'Explanation and Reference'. I discuss this work further and expand upon these remarks in chapter 7 below.

⁹ In particular, I shall refer to Bhaskar, *A Realist Theory of Science*, and Godelier, 'Structure and Contradiction in Capital'. But see also Althusser and Balibar, *Reading Capital*, part I.

experience. Godelier, likewise, puts all the stress in his account on the distinction and the separation of the structural level from the world of appearances. The appearances that we apprehend with our senses, he insists, *conceal* these real structures; and so scientific theory must reject and put aside these sensory appearances in order to grasp reality.

The scientific conception of social reality does not 'arise by abstraction' from the spontaneous or reflected conceptions of individuals. On the contrary, it must destroy the obviousness of these conceptions in order to *bring out* the hidden internal logic of social life. Therefore . . . the model constructed by science corresponds to a reality concealed beneath visible reality. ('Structure and Contradiction', p. 337)

Despite the constant claim that structuralism is something entirely new in philosophy, the continuity of such ideas with the themes of classical rationalism from Plato onwards is evident. It is not surprising, therefore, that this work shows the characteristic strengths and weaknesses of this tradition.

This structuralist realism clearly shares some common ground with the sort of realism that I have been defending. In particular, as I have stressed, it also recognizes the existence of natural necessities and natural kinds. Moreover, as this philosophy insists, these aspects of reality are not immediately and directly manifest in appearances. Reality differs from immediate appearance. In this sense, we may indeed say that appearances 'conceal' reality, and that knowledge involves the active overcoming of appearances, and a movement beyond them. These are important aspects of knowledge; and it is the contribution of the rationalist approach to stress them.

However, it characteristically does so in a one-sided and exclusive manner. Its rallying cry is opposition to 'empiricism'. Under this banner experience is rejected, as being a source only of deceptive and false appearances. Appearances are thus portrayed as *merely* concealing a reality which is hidden behind them, and which is accessible *only* to thought. In this way, rationalism in general, and structuralism in particular, tends to view knowledge as a product purely of the subject, not derived from, or dependent on, contact with the object through experience. But once knowledge has been severed from its anchorage to reality through experience, what is to prevent us from dreaming up all sorts of wonderful theories – admirable, maybe, for their coherence and consistency – but bearing no relation to the actual nature of the real world?

In short, the effect of these views is to divorce and divide reality

from its empirical appearances. Reality is put irrevocably beyond appearances, and a dualistic gulf is created between them. Such structuralist and rationalist realism thus shares with the Lockean, empiricist sort of realism considered earlier, a dualistic basis. And, as I have argued, dualism, although it acknowledges the existence of the material world independent of consciousness, cannot explain our knowledge of it. Once an absolute distinction is presupposed between appearance and reality, between phenomena and things-in-themselves, there is no way in which we can gain knowledge of reality starting out from appearances. Start out from appearances we must, however, for this is how reality presents itself to us. It is only because reality does manifest itself to us, and reveal itself as appearance that we can gain knowledge of it. If appearances did, indeed, *merely* conceal reality, if they were *merely* different from reality, and did not *also* reveal it, we could have no access to reality, and would have no means of knowing it.

It is impossible to develop a satisfactory theory of knowledge on the basis of such dualistic assumptions. Rather, it is essential to recognize the *dialectical* relation of appearance and reality. Appearances *both* conceal *and* reveal reality. Only by recognizing *both* of these aspects can we properly understand the relation between these opposites. They are not merely identical; and yet, equally, there is no absolute gulf between them: they interpenetrate and pass into each other, they exist in unity.

3 The Unity of Appearance and Reality

Identity and Difference

My argument so far has been a mainly negative and critical one. I have been explaining the dialectical approach to knowledge by contrast with empiricist and rationalist alternatives. In order to develop a satisfactory realist account of knowledge, I have argued, we must reject these alternatives and maintain instead that subject and object, appearance and reality, are opposites which exist in unity. These ideas now need to be spelled out and their implications explained in more positive terms.

Such explanation is particularly necessary in this area. Dialectic never has been a widely known or well understood method in philosophy; and the fact that Hegel and Marx have recently become fashionable intellectual figures has done little to alter the situation. Concepts and phrases drawn from their work, like the 'unity of opposites' and 'contradiction', are now quite freely bandied about. But most often such phrases seem to be no more than a set of incantations, by means of which philosophical problems are evaded and ignored. It must be stressed, therefore, that in the hands of Hegel and Marx at least, dialectic is no mere magic formula. On the contrary, it is a fully developed, systematically worked out philosophical theory and view of the world, which has a significant contribution to make to our understanding of knowledge.

The philosophy of dialectic receives its profoundest development and expression in Hegel; and I shall rely particularly heavily on his work in the present chapter. For this reason, and also because of the abstract nature of the issues involved, it is probably the most difficult chapter of the book. Unfortunately, however, this ground is unavoidable if we are to form a clear and accurate picture of the

dialectical method and develop a realist theory of knowledge upon the basis of it.

Central to this theory is the idea that subject and object are united in knowledge. Although the language here may be Hegelian and alien (there is a reason for using it as we shall see), the idea involved is not. In particular, it is important to see that the unity of subject and object is also a basic tenet of materialism. For it is the materialist view that consciousness, appearances – subjectivity in general – cannot exist independently of objective, material things, things-in-themselves. The converse, however, does not hold. Matter can and does exist independently of consciousness. This view involves no denial of their unity. For these opposites, according to materialism, are united only in certain specific conditions. Not all forms of matter involve or presuppose consciousness; but matter organized and acting in the appropriate manner necessarily does so. For example, a stone is not conscious, whereas a functioning and living human or animal organism is. The difference between them consists in the matter that makes them up, the way it is organized and how it functions in each case. There is no need to posit an immaterial mind, or transcendent powers of consciousness or reason, in order to explain such differences. Indeed, if the attempt is made to do so, the facts of biological evolution become mysterious and inexplicable. Matter, structured and active in a certain way, simply is consciousness. Consciousness is nothing apart. This is materialism.

Because it asserts the unity of mind and matter, materialism has also come to be known as the 'identity theory'. A physicalist and mechanistic sort of materialism has gone under this title and been influential in recent years, due particularly to the work of Armstrong and Smart.¹ The *dialectical* approach, however, leads to a form of materialism quite distinct from this sort of 'identity theory'. For the identity theory, at least as developed by these writers, is based upon the formal and abstract notion of identity familiar from traditional logic, and involves the *reduction* of the mental to the physical. In epistemology the identity theory leads to the philosophy of direct realism, which involves the reduction of appearances to reality. Dialectical philosophy, by contrast, is based upon the idea of the concrete unity of opposites and is not reductionist in its approach.

According to the traditional and formal account, identity absolutely excludes difference. If a thing alters, even in the smallest detail, it is no longer the same: its identity has changed. Locke's

¹ See, for example, Armstrong, *A Materialist Theory of the Mind*, and the papers by Smart and others in Borst (ed.) *The Mind-Brain Identity Theory*.

account of the identity 'of bodies' may serve as an example.² 'If two or more atoms', he writes, 'be joined together into the same mass . . . whilst they exist united together, the mass, consisting of the same atoms, must be the same mass, the same body . . . but if one of these atoms be taken away, or one new one added, it is no longer the same mass, or the same body' (*Essay*, II.xxvii.3).

At first the idea that identity excludes difference and change in this way seems self-evident. However, only a little reflection is needed in order to realize that this account of identity is quite incompatible with common sense and everyday experience. For these inform us that things can often alter and change, in some respects and up to a certain point, while *retaining* their identities. The pen and paper with which I am now writing may serve as an illustration. As I write, the paper is being changed. It is being pressed and scratched; some of it is being rubbed off and is collecting gradually at the tip of the pen nib. At the same time, minute amounts of the nib are being worn away and deposited, with the ink, on the paper. Thus the pen gradually 'wears in' to my writing and will eventually wear out. And yet, before that point is reached, the paper and the pen both *retain* their identities through this process of change. It is the *same* piece of paper, the *same* pen nib which endure throughout my writing.

This point may be generalized. All things are in a constant process of change and development; and, yet, up to a point and within limits, things *keep* their identities through their changes.³ In such cases, that is to say, the thing – the *same* thing – which is present at the beginning of the process and is subject to change, is there at the end, developed and altered. To insist that identity excludes difference is, quite simply, to rule out the very possibility that a thing can change and develop while retaining its identity, and to fly in the face of common sense.

As we have seen, the idea of such a concrete and non-reductive unity of opposites, which includes difference, is necessary if we are to

² This account of identity, in which identity absolutely excludes difference, is given by Locke only of the identity of inorganic objects. The accounts which he gives of the identity of organisms and of personal identity are quite different. They show a much better appreciation of the concrete character of identity, and are much closer in this respect to the dialectical view that I am about to outline. Hume, on the other hand, generalizes and universalizes the abstract and formal account of identity that Locke restricts to 'bodies'. See Hume, *Treatise*, I.iv.6, which I have discussed in *Hegel, Marx and Dialectic*, pp. 73ff.

³ As Hegel observes, everything concrete has its limit and its 'measure'. Beyond this limit, quantitative changes give rise to qualitative ones, and the thing is transformed (*Logic*, §§107ff on 'Measure'). See also Engels' account of the 'law of the transformation of quantity into quality', *Anti-Dühring*, part I ch.12, and chapter 10 below.

understand the relation of appearance and reality, and of subject and object, in knowledge. For we are forced to the conclusion that appearances both reveal and conceal reality. These opposites are united and yet, at the same time, distinct. It is essential to recognize both of these conflicting aspects if we are to produce a satisfactory account of knowledge.

On the other hand, the traditional, formal logical categories of identity and difference are entirely inadequate to describe the relation between the subjective and the objective as it exists in the real world. This relation is neither a mere formal identity, such as is described by the 'identity theory'; nor is it a merely external and contingent relation of absolutely distinct and different things, as dualism suggests. On the contrary, the real subjectivity of real people is in living and active union with the objective world. In concrete reality, these opposites interact and interpenetrate – they are constantly being transformed into each other. Such opposites are *dynamically* related. They are aspects, or 'moments' in Hegel's language, of the processes of change and development involved in action and in knowledge. This is the crucial insight of dialectic; and it is only in this context that one can properly understand the dialectical idea that such opposites are both distinct and yet united. On the other hand, this idea of a concrete unity which includes difference is destined to remain obscure and incomprehensible as long as one clings to the common metaphysical habit of abstracting each opposite from its relationships and interactions, and viewing it as isolated and separate.

The Thing-in-Itself

These abstract and logical points bear on the epistemological issues that I have been discussing. I have insisted on the realist view that there is an objective, material world, and that it is knowable by consciousness. Or, in the language of classical German philosophy, reality has a being-in-itself, an objective being, independent of consciousness, which is at the same time graspable by consciousness. Things-in-themselves can be transformed into things-for-us. This, at least, is the basic tenet of realism in the theory of knowledge. In cognition the objective becomes subjective; knowledge is the unity of these opposites.

To understand these ideas it is essential to see that although material things have a being-in-themselves, that is not the end of the matter. Things do not *remain* merely in-themselves. Objective things are always in a process of inner change and development, they are

never entirely lifeless and inert. All things are infected with inner tensions and conflicts, all things are contradictory. This is the fundamental principle of dialectical thought.

Things have a being-in-themselves; but they do not stay shut up in-themselves. They impinge upon and interact with other things. As well as having a being-in-themselves, they also have a being-for-others, an aspect of their being which is constituted through their relationship to other things. When they act upon and relate to consciousness, this takes the form of a being-for-us or appearance. Things known, that is to say, have both a being-in-themselves and a being-for-us. Moreover, these opposite aspects are distinguishable and yet also united, for they are distinct aspects of the same thing.⁴ Reality and appearance are opposites which exist in necessary relation and in concrete unity.

These points have important implications for our views of reality, appearance and the relation between them, which now need to be spelled out. To do so, I shall focus on each aspect in turn. First, then, as regards reality, the main implication of the points that I have been making is that objective things – things-in-themselves – are not isolated and inert; they do not stay closed off, shut up in themselves, removed from their relations. In particular, in their relation to consciousness, things do not, as Hegel puts it, ‘linger beyond or behind appearances’ (*Logic*, §131z). On the contrary, the thing-in-itself ‘shines forth’ and manifests itself as appearance. If reality did not manifest itself in experience it would be inaccessible to consciousness. This is the picture of the relationship between appearance and reality presented by dualism; and, as we have seen, it is an untenable one. Far from providing a basis for a theory of knowledge, it makes it impossible to understand how we could ever come to know the world.

Hegel discusses the relationship of reality and appearance under the heading of ‘essence’ and appearance.⁵ He expresses the point that I have just been making as follows. ‘The essence must appear or shine forth. . . . To show or shine is the characteristic by which essence is distinguished . . . and it is this show which . . . is appearance. Essence accordingly is not something beyond or behind appearance’ (*Logic*, §131). Dualism is blind to this point, as is clear

⁴ Cf. Lenin, ‘Nature is both concrete and abstract, both phenomenon and essence, both moment and relation’ (*Philosophical Notebooks*, p. 208).

⁵ Indeed, the whole central section of Hegel’s *Logic*, ‘The Doctrine of Essence’, is devoted to a discussion of the issues involved in the relationship between reality and appearance, and similar relationships. His discussion of the concept of ‘being-in-itself’ and of ‘being-for-others’, in the section of the *Logic* on ‘Determinate Being’, is also relevant.

from Kant’s account of the thing-in-itself. Kant regards objective things – things-in-themselves – in a static fashion. They have a being only in-themselves and not also for-us. The thing-in-itself is thus confined within itself; it remains forever behind appearances and does not manifest itself in them. Kant, that is to say, severs the essential connection between a thing’s being-in-itself and its being-for-us. For Hegel, by contrast, the thing-in-itself does not stay within itself – it ‘shines forth’ and reveals itself in its appearances. In this way Hegel sees appearance – being-for-us – as a reflection of being-in-itself. For Hegel rejects the view that things-in-themselves are inert and lifeless. On the contrary, they pass into their relations, and manifest themselves in their appearances.

It is worth noting that this account implies the rejection of one of the fundamental tenets of non-dialectical thought – the so-called doctrine of external relations. For it is a common view in traditional philosophy that the relations of a thing form no part of its intrinsic nature. Things, it is held, can be defined quite independently of their relations, and are supposed to be quite indifferent to their context. The relations of a thing, in other words, are regarded as external to its nature. Locke puts this view in clear terms when he says that relation ‘is not contained in the real existence of things, but [is] something extraneous and superinduced’ (*Essay*, II.xxv.8).

Dialectic rejects this view. Things and their relations, things-in-themselves and things-for-others, are more closely and intimately connected than Locke’s view suggests. Things pass into their relations: they are manifested and revealed in their relations. Indeed, the properties of a thing are grounded upon its relations, and cannot be distinguished entirely from these.⁶ As Hegel says,

All things are originally in-themselves, but that is not the end of the matter. As the germ, being the plant in-itself, means self-development, so the thing in general passes beyond its in-itself (the abstract reflection on self) to manifest itself further as a reflection on other things. It is in this sense that it has properties. (*Logic*, §124z)

In other words, all properties are based on relations; and things reveal the particular properties they have only through the ways in which they relate themselves to other things.⁷

⁶ Full-blooded Hegelianism, it should be noted, involves the stronger view that all relations are internal. I am not defending this view here.

⁷ The essential point is summed up in Spinoza’s dictum *omnis determinatio est negatio* (all determination is negation). The implication of this is that what is determinate exists in relationship, since its determinateness is based upon its relation (negation) to what it is not, to what is other than it. See Hegel, *Logic*, §§89ff on ‘Determinate Being’.

In particular, a thing can be known only because it enters into relation with consciousness. The concept of a mere thing detached from all its relations, which Locke's doctrine implies, is the concept of the Kantian thing-in-itself. This idea is an empty abstraction, a metaphysical myth. Such a thing-in-itself, removed from all its relations, is absolutely and in principle unknowable – because it is nothing determinate.

Things are called 'in-themselves' in so far as abstraction is made from all being-for-other, which means simply, in so far as they are thought devoid of all determination, as nothings. In this sense, it is of course impossible to know *what* the thing-in-itself is. For the question: *what?* demands that *determinations* be assigned. . . . What is *in* these things-in-themselves, therefore, we know quite well; they are as such nothing but truthless, empty abstractions. (*Science of Logic*, p. 121)

Hegel employs an illuminating analogy in his discussion of these matters in the *Phenomenology*. He explains the relation of the thing-in-itself to its appearances in perception by comparing it with the relation between a force and its expression. Just as a force is manifested in its effects, so reality is manifested and revealed in its appearances. A significant feature of this analogy is that it brings out the dynamic nature of the relationship. Just as force expresses itself, so reality appears and 'shines forth'. It is true that a force must be distinguished from its expressions; and that it thus has a being and an identity in-itself, apart from its expression. Yet a force is something dynamic. Action is part of its nature. It does not remain merely within itself – it manifests and reveals itself in its effects. In this way, force is both distinct from, and yet also united with, its expression. According to Hegel, the relation between reality and appearance, object and subject, must be understood in similar terms. For in the case of knowledge, likewise, 'the two sides, the percipient and what is perceived, are indistinguishably one in the apprehension of the True, and yet each side is at the same time equally reflected into itself, or has a being of its own' (*Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 82).

Force, as Hegel emphasizes, is necessarily active and dynamic: 'it is the very essence of force to manifest itself' (*Logic*, §136z). Similarly, reality must *necessarily* manifest itself and 'shine forth'. The inner being of things is *necessarily* revealed outwardly, in their relations to other things. It is in the very nature of things-in-themselves to reveal themselves as appearances – though, of course, they will appear to consciousness only if a conscious being is present to which they may appear.

What something is . . . it is wholly in its externality. . . . Its appearance is not only reflection-into-another but reflection-into-self, and its externality is . . . the expression or utterance of what it is in-itself; and since its content and form are thus utterly identical, it is, in and for itself, nothing but this, *to express or manifest itself*. It is the manifesting of its essence in such a manner that this essence consists simply and solely in being that which manifests itself. (*Science of Logic*, p. 528)

Hegel makes this point in graphic theological terms when he says, 'all that God is he imparts and reveals' (*Logic*, §140z). Reality, in other words, manifests itself and is knowable by us. No part of it is condemned to remain wholly behind appearances, beyond the reach of consciousness. Lenin says the same thing, in non-theological terms, when he writes,

there is definitely no difference in principle between the phenomenon and the thing-in-itself, and there can be no such difference. The only difference is between what is known and what is not yet known. And philosophical inventions of fixed boundaries between the one and the other, inventions to the effect that the thing-in-itself is 'beyond' phenomena (Kant), or that we can and must fence ourselves off by some philosophical partition from the problem of a world in which one part or another is still unknown but which exists outside us (Hume) – all this is the sheerest nonsense, *Schrulle* [whim], crotchet, invention. (*Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, p. 110)

To repeat, however, this is not to say that reality is of necessity *actually* present to consciousness, *actually* known. Clearly, there was a time when neither consciousness nor knowledge existed; and much of reality still remains unknown. The point I am making is rather that all of reality is at least *potentially* and *in principle* accessible to consciousness. No part of it is in principle unknowable – forever and necessarily walled off from consciousness in the Kantian fashion, behind a 'veil of appearances'.

The Nature of Appearance

So far I have been focusing mainly upon the dialectical account of the object, of the thing-in-itself. Corresponding points, however, can be made on 'the other side', about the nature of appearances and subjectivity. And the most important implication of these ideas in this respect is that there are no *mere* appearances. 'Appearance is not to be confused with a mere show', says Hegel.⁸ For appearances

⁸ Hegel's word for *mere* appearance is '*schein*' (literally, a shining); whereas he refers to appearances proper (concrete appearances) as '*erschein*' (literally, a forth-shining).

must not be regarded as *mere* appearances, as mere illusions, cut off from the reality of things-in-themselves. This is the error of dualism, the error at the root of the theory of ideas and of Kant's philosophy. It is in these terms that Hegel criticizes Kant when he says of him that 'he attached to appearance a subjective meaning only, and put the abstract essence immovably outside it as the thing-in-itself beyond the reach of cognition' (*Logic*, §131z).

Lenin also comes to realize the importance of this Hegelian theme. In his *Philosophical Notebooks*, for example, commenting on a passage from Hegel's *Logic*, he remarks, 'appearance (*schein*) also is objective, for it contains *one of the aspects* of the *objective* world. Not only *wesen* (essence) but *schein* (appearance), too, is objective. There is a difference between the subjective and the objective, *but it, too, has its limits*' (p. 198).

Reality 'shines forth' and is manifest in appearance. And, because this is so, appearances are not 'mere' appearances, they are never the 'sole entity' as Lenin puts it. Appearances are essentially related to an object, to reality: they *reveal* (as well as conceal) the reality which underlies them and which is manifest in them. Appearances are appearances *of this reality*. Reality is not a mere 'beyond' to them. On the contrary, its content is entirely given in appearances (though not, of course, given immediately).

At first we may take the appearances which things present for their reality. But gradually, through the process of knowledge, we discover new things about the object which were not immediately apparent. We learn to distinguish the initial appearances from the reality which underlies them. In so doing, however, we come to understand these appearances, not as mere appearances, not as the 'sole entity', but as appearances which manifest the reality which underlies them and which is reflected and revealed in them. We then apprehend these appearances as the appearances *of this reality*. That is to say, we come to understand our subjective experience as a reflection of the reality of the objective world.

An object, a penny for example, will appear round when looked at face on, oval when it is observed from an oblique angle, and flat when only its side is presented to view. However, when we come to understand these diverse appearances, as we rapidly do, we see them all as appearances *of a round metallic disk*. Moreover, we realize that these are the ways in which such an object must appear from these different perspectives. These are the appearances which it objectively presents to these various points of view. In other words, we recognize these appearances as all appearances *of the same object*. The different appearances are all appearances of the one object, which is revealed in them.

There are no *mere* appearances. Appearances always and necessarily have the form of appearances *of* an object. This is the dialectical view. Moreover, the materialist version of these ideas involves the further view that the object of consciousness is always a real, a material object. Consciousness is always a reflection of the objective, material world. Moreover, the relationship between subjective appearances and objective reality is a necessary and not a contingent one. Reality must necessarily appear (in the sense explained above); and appearances are never *purely* subjective forms. They are always and necessarily objective appearances – appearances *of* a reality, which they reflect and reveal.

I should stress that when I say that the connection between appearance and reality is a 'necessary' one, I do not mean either that it is known immediately or that it is known *a priori*. It is important to distinguish here between the *metaphysical* ideas of a necessary connection, and the *epistemological* ideas of what is known *a priori*, or what is given immediately in experience.⁹ Knowledge is not something given immediately; it is the result of a process. This process must begin with appearances. However, appearances do not present reality to us *directly*; they are not given immediately *as* the appearances of a distinct reality, they do not come ready-interpreted. They require interpretation by us in order to yield knowledge. Furthermore, the correct method of interpretation cannot be known with absolute certainty in advance, *a priori*. There is always the possibility of error.

The penny may again serve as an example. Let us say that it is presenting an oval appearance to us. It is clear that there is nothing given in this appearance, as such, which immediately and directly reveals it as the appearance of something round. This appearance, like all others, needs to be interpreted as the appearance of a round coin. The reality revealed by the appearance cannot be directly and immediately read off from it; nor are there any *a priori* principles which inform us that such appearances must be indicative of such realities. An oval appearance, after all, may be presented by something round, or by something oval, or, in specific conditions, by things of other shapes. Appearances always need interpreting and there is always a possibility of error.

Nonetheless reality *must* appear. Appearances are *necessarily* appearances of an object, of reality. These are the views I have been putting forward. They are, in fact, the *logical* expression of the dialectical rejection of dualism. As we saw when discussing Locke's

⁹ See Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*, pp. 34ff, where this distinction is drawn with great clarity.

ideas (in chapter 1), the dualist view is that consciousness and reality are separate and distinct realms, which may or may not correspond. Kant's philosophy is founded upon a similar divorce of phenomena from things-in-themselves. Indeed, it is characteristic of dualism to portray the relation between appearance and reality as a merely external and contingent one. This is the logical expression of dualism. A consistent and fully worked out realist account of knowledge must challenge these dualist ideas. For as soon as it is granted that the relationship between appearance and reality is only a contingent one, there can be no answer to the Berkeleyan and Kantian objections to realism. Experience may reflect and reveal reality, or it may not; but whether or not it does we can never know. This is the constant refrain of the critics of realism. For experience and knowledge, on this account, have no essential connection with the objective world; they have been separated from the material world and made into something purely mental and subjective. Appearances become *mere* appearances, and reality becomes a pure thing-in-itself, unknowable by consciousness.

Dialectic, as I have stressed, rejects this view. By contrast, it insists upon the necessary connection and concrete unity of the subjective and the objective. In Hegel's words, 'exterior is the same content as interior. What is inwardly is also found outwardly, and vice versa. The appearance shows nothing that is not in the essence, and in the essence there is nothing but what is manifested' (*Logic*, §139). Moreover, the dialectical theory of knowledge also rejects the Kantian view that, in the process of knowledge, thought creates an 'object of knowledge', which may or may not reflect objective reality, but whose relation to things-in-themselves remains essentially unknowable. The view that I have been presenting, by contrast, implies that the 'object' created by thought in the process of knowledge *necessarily* in some degree reflects the nature of the thing-in-itself. The patterns and categories of our thought, by means of which we attempt to understand the world, are never purely subjective; they always, in some measure, reflect objective reality. Thought, theory, 'ways of seeing things' – indeed, reason itself – as well as mere sensory awareness, are all reflections of reality.

Again, the relationship here is a *necessary* one. Our thought is always and necessarily a reflection of reality. False and mistaken ideas, as well as true ones, therefore, reflect reality. There are no mere appearances, no pure illusions, no sheer errors. All ideas that are actually entertained – even the most apparently false and erroneous of them – reflect reality in some fashion and contain some measure of truth. These are the conclusions towards which these

ideas point. As we shall see, they are principles of the first importance for the understanding of knowledge.

These conclusions will, I know, seem implausible and untenable ones to many people. A whole host of objections and counterinstances will, no doubt, have been occurring to even the most sympathetic reader in the course of the last few pages. Surely, one wants to say, true ideas reflect reality, whereas mistaken and false ideas fail to do so, and it is precisely the lack of reflection which makes them false? The dialectical view, as I have presented it, seems tantamount to saying that *all* ideas are true, which would be absurd. Moreover, it is all very well to assert that appearances reflect reality, it will be said, but how can we know that this is so?

If realism is to be defended, these questions must be answered. It would, indeed, be absurd to suggest that all ideas are true; but that is not what the dialectical approach, in fact, implies. Quite the contrary, as I will argue in the next part of this book, it provides the basis for an illuminating and important account of the nature of false ideas and of errors. Furthermore, the question of how we can know that our ideas reflect reality is a basic question in epistemology, and it must certainly be answered. Accordingly, I will go on to show how the dialectical method can deal with this problem and how it accounts for knowledge and for truth.

Hegel and Materialism

Before moving on, however, there is one point that needs some more clarification. In the foregoing discussion, I have appealed frequently both to Hegel's ideas and to those of materialists, like Lenin. Indeed, I have made such free passage between these opposed philosophies that I may have aroused the suspicion that I am implicitly identifying and equating them. Idealist Hegelian metaphysics, it may be thought, is being passed off as 'materialism'.

I have, indeed, appealed both to the Hegelian philosophy and to materialism in my account, but it has not at all been my intention to suggest that these outlooks are equivalent. They are, on the contrary, absolutely and irreconcilably opposed. Nevertheless, they do share this much in common: both Hegelian idealist and materialist dialectical philosophy are agreed in asserting the concrete unity of the subjective and the objective, of consciousness and matter, of appearance and reality. They are united in rejecting dualism. Both, moreover, equally reject the usual reductionist alternative. For in asserting the *concrete* and *dialectical* unity of these opposites, they

are rejecting the view that these opposites can be immediately identified and that either can be reduced to the other. That is to say, both forms of dialectic reject Berkeley's subjective idealism, with its reduction of objective reality to 'ideas'; and equally they both reject the metaphysical materialism of the 'identity theory' and direct realism, which reduces the mind to the purely mechanical level, and attempts to read off appearances directly from reality. Moreover, as I have stressed, there are very important realist themes in Hegel's philosophy, particularly in his critique of Kant.

On these issues both idealist and materialist dialectic are agreed. It is upon these aspects of the matter that my attention has been concentrated in the present chapter. Beyond them, however, the ways of Hegel and of materialism diverge radically. For, according to materialism, the objective and the material are primary. Ultimately there is nothing in the world but matter in motion. Consciousness and mental phenomena arise only out of the material world, as modifications of it. Idealism in general, and Hegel's idealism in particular, is the exact opposite of this. According to Hegel the material world is ultimately a product, a creation of spirit. Nature, for him, is the 'self-externalization', the 'alienation', of mind.

Thus, although both Hegel and materialism argue for the unity of appearance and reality, ultimately they mean very different things by this assertion. And so, despite the fact that I have relied heavily upon Hegel's ideas and even upon Hegel's words in my attempt to develop a realist and materialist account of knowledge, I am very far from wishing to suggest that the Hegelian and the materialist views entirely coincide in this area. On the contrary, the differences in outlook between these approaches are total, absolute and ineradicable. Nevertheless, the 'intelligent materialist' has much to learn from Hegel,¹⁰ and the undoubted fact of his idealism should not be allowed too obscure this. After all, Marx went out of his way in a very prominent place to 'openly avow' himself 'the pupil of that mighty thinker'; and nobody has insisted on the need for materialists to digest the lessons of Hegel more strongly than Lenin, that most down-to-earth, concrete and practical of thinkers. He even went so far as to suggest that philosophers who wished to go 'under the banner of Marxism' should proclaim themselves the 'materialist friends of the Hegelian dialectic'.¹¹

¹⁰ The phrase is Lenin's: 'intelligent idealism' (i.e. Hegel's), he says, 'is closer to intelligent materialism than stupid materialism' (*Philosophical Notebooks*, p. 276).

¹¹ The references are to Marx, *Capital*, I, pp. 19–20, and to Lenin, 'On the Significance of Militant Materialism', p. 604.

As always with Hegel, what is necessary is to distinguish what is 'living' from what is 'dead' in his thought; and to extract the 'rational kernel' from the 'mystical shell'.¹² It is in this spirit that I have been relying on Hegel so far. However, what is dead in Hegel's philosophy – his extravagant metaphysical idealism, which amounts, in effect, to a sort of pantheism, and so on – all this is so well known, so frequently criticized and condemned (often as though there was nothing else to him), that I have felt little need to dwell on this side of his thinking. Rather, my purpose has been to try to explain and illuminate the less well known aspect: the side of his thought which is still living and which still has something to teach us on these age-old topics.

¹² The phrases are from Croce, *What is Living and What is Dead in the Philosophy of Hegel*, and from Marx, *Capital*, I, p. 20. Marx's image here is, in fact, also used by Hegel in a passage that bears on the topics I have been discussing. 'To think the phenomenal world . . . means to recast its form, and transmute it into a universal. And thus the action of thought has also a negative effect upon its basis: and the matter of sensation, when it receives the stamp of universality, at once loses its first and phenomenal shape. By the removal and negation of the shell, the kernel within the sense-percept is brought to light' (*Logic*, §50).

Part II

Illusion, Dream and Reality

4 The Problems of Illusion and Hallucination

The Argument from Illusion

So far, my aim has been to defend realism against traditional empiricist and rationalist criticisms. I have argued that in order to be proof against these criticisms, realism must be developed in a materialistic and dialectical way. In the last chapter, I outlined in abstract and general terms the major features of the account that such a theory of knowledge gives of appearance and reality and of the relations between them.

It must seem odd that, having set out to defend a position as plain and commonsensical as realism, I have ended up in such metaphysical and alien territory. I can point out only that the issues that I have been discussing are those which are traditional in the theory of knowledge of whatever school, and that it is necessary to engage in this debate if the traditional anti-realist arguments are to be effectively answered. The issues of the relation of subject and object, and of appearance and reality have been central topics in epistemology, and discussion of them is inevitable if one is to work out one's views in this area. No doubt some of the Hegelian language that I have used and, more particularly, the dialectical approach that I am developing, will be unfamiliar and need more explanation. I will seek to provide that in the chapters that follow.

However, Hegel's world is nothing like as strange and alien as the territory into which we are led by the traditional debates in epistemology. This is a land of illusions, of hallucinations, of dreams, and of fantastic tales of evil demons and mad scientists intent on deceiving us. We shall follow traditional philosophy into this weird world, because these examples are put forward and used as objections to the realist outlook. Illusions, dreams and hallucinations raise the problem of subjectivity. They all involve cases where our experience

has the appearance, at least, of being *purely* subjective, and unrelated to objective reality.

This part of the book is devoted to a consideration of such examples. I shall focus on two cases in particular: dreams and ideological illusions. All forms of realism face problems in relation to these cases; and, accordingly, they have been prominent in anti-realist argument. The sort of realism that I have been defending at first seems particularly vulnerable to them. How can one possibly give an account of dreams or hallucinations or ideological illusions on the basis of the view that all ideas reflect reality? Surely these are cases in which appearances are false and reflect reality? ~~Surely these are cases in which appearances are false and fail to reflect reality?~~

I must now respond to such objections, and show how even dreams and illusions can be seen as reflections of reality, and understood in realist terms. In so doing, I will also be able to illustrate and spell out in detail, in a couple of specific cases, the views that I have so far been presenting in general and philosophical terms.

Before coming on to the more exotic cases of dreams and ideologies, however, it should be noted that even the most mundane and ordinary examples of cognition can be used to raise sceptical doubts about realism. Indeed, such examples have been the stock-in-trade of philosophical discussion in this area since the time of Socrates; and so it is appropriate to begin with them.

In particular, it has long been argued that the most common facts about discrepancies between appearance and reality provide support for the rejection of realism and for the adoption of the theory of ideas.¹ The classic argument to this effect has become known as the 'argument from illusion'. It is not easy to set out this argument in a cogent and convincing form;² but perhaps one should not set too much store by any one particular formulation of it. For the 'argument from illusion' is not, in fact, a single, specific argument. Rather it is a whole series of arguments, based upon a number of related instances where appearances and reality diverge. The argument may thus be rejected in one form, only to reappear in another. In any case, the ideas involved in it have exercised a continuing and profound influence upon the whole history of Western philosophy.

The argument from illusion does not deal with cases of illusion in the usual sense of the term. No mistake or misjudgement need be involved. Rather, the argument appeals to cases where there is a

¹ That is, the view that the immediate objects of perception are ideas and not things, see chapter 1 above.

² See the attempt by Ayer, *The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge*, ch.1.

discrepancy between appearances and reality. These, it is argued, present insuperable difficulties for realism. It is indeed true that such cases present problems for direct realism, which involves the view that things appear as they really are, and which thus refuses to admit the distinction between appearance and reality. However, these cases also raise issues which must be dealt with by a dialectical and reflective realism of the sort that I am putting forward.

The aim of the argument from illusion is to establish the main premise of the theory of ideas: that the immediate object of perception is always something subjective – an idea, a sense-datum, an impression – and not a physical object. It seeks to show this by appeal to quite familiar and ordinary facts about our perception of the visual world. Common examples include the penny which appears oval when viewed from an oblique angle, and the stick which looks bent when it is half-immersed in water. Hume talks of tables. 'The table, which we see, seems to diminish, as we remove farther from it: but the real table, which exists independently of us, suffers no alteration.' The conclusion which he draws from this is that 'it was, therefore, nothing but its image which was present to the mind' (*Enquiries*, p. 152).

The argument, as Hume presents it, needs some filling out. Hume starts from the simple observation that things appear differently when perceived from different positions or under different conditions of observation. And yet, he argues, a thing at a particular time has only one true set of objective properties which exist independently of how they are observed. In this way, the argument brings to our attention the distinction between appearance and reality. It is then assumed that what we perceive immediately or directly appears as it is. So when things appear other than as they are, we are directly perceiving something other than the object itself: in Hume's language, an 'impression' or 'image'; in Locke's, an 'idea'; and in the terminology of modern phenomenism, a 'sense-datum'. So, it is argued, sometimes at least, we do not directly perceive objects. Finally, it is claimed that there is no intrinsic difference between our perceptual experience when appearances correctly reflect reality and when they differ; and so there are no grounds for saying that we *ever* perceive reality directly.

In this way, the argument from illusion appeals to the facts of perception in order to support the basic claim of the theory of ideas: that we directly perceive 'ideas' and not objects. As I argued in chapter 1, the effect of this theory is to make ideas and experience in general into a barrier which walls us off from the world. A viable realism, by contrast, must involve the view that perception is the

connection of consciousness with reality, and so it must resist the argument from illusion.

The argument from illusion is, indeed, eminently resistible. In all its versions, it simply presupposes the very proposition that it is supposed to be proving. It simply assumes that when there is a discrepancy between appearance and reality, what we are directly perceiving is not reality but a merely an appearance: something purely subjective and mental; an idea, an impression. This does not follow. Numerous writers from the realist camp have made this point. John Anderson's statement of it may be taken as representative.

Unless we think of a physical object as something which has to be known in its 'whole nature', there is no reason why it should not have different appearances, i.e. why different characteristics of it should not be observable from different standpoints. And it cannot be denied that when we do know a physical object, we know a variety of distinct things about it. ('The Knower and the Known', p. 34)

That things further away present a smaller appearance and, in the relevant sense, look smaller is a perfectly objective and material fact about the object in its relation to that particular position. That is the way the table would appear (in the relevant sense of 'appear') to anyone with normal vision observing it from that spot. It is also the way its image would register on a camera film, and so on and so forth. There is no good reason here for regarding the appearances presented in perception as purely mental phenomena involving only subjective images, ideas or sense-data.

Evil Spirits and Brains in Vats

I have dealt with the argument from illusion in a brief and summary manner because it has few contemporary adherents and little present influence.³ However, this argument is usually combined with an appeal to cases of dreaming and hallucination. These phenomena present far greater difficulties for the realist position and demand fuller treatment.

Dreams and other outright hallucinations pose problems for realism because they appear to be instances where our experience is

³ Even Ayer has effectively ceased to defend the argument from illusion, see, e.g., *The Central Questions of Philosophy*, ch. IV.B. For a fuller critical treatment of the argument from illusion and of the issues it raises from a realist perspective, see Anderson, 'The Knower and the Known' and Armstrong, *Perception and the Physical World*.

entirely subjective and mistaken, in the sense that it seems to fail to reflect objective reality. Indeed, dreams have played a central role in the traditional philosophical discussion of realism and of the relation between appearance and reality for just this reason.

Descartes, for example, cites dreaming at the outset of his *Meditations* in order to cast doubt upon the veracity of the senses. However, as he acknowledges, the elements that go to make up our dreams – the people and objects, the colours and shapes of which they are composed – are recognizably drawn from our waking experience of the world. This fact may seem still to allow some toehold to remain for the theory that there is a necessary connection between the character of the objective world and the contents of subjective experience. Descartes, however, is a dualist and a proponent of the theory of ideas, and he is intent on denying even this. He wants to establish that subject and object are absolutely distinct and separate. He wishes to show that there is no necessary connection between our subjective experience and the objective world; that we have immediate and indubitable consciousness only of ideas and not of objects. Descartes presents these arguments in an imaginary and dramatic form. 'Suppose', he writes, 'that there is an evil spirit who is supremely powerful and intelligent, and does his utmost to deceive me. I will suppose that the sky, air, earth, colours, shapes, sounds and all external objects are mere delusive dreams, by means of which he lays snares for my credulity' (*Philosophical Writings*, p. 65). If this is indeed a possibility, then it seems that our entire experience could be a false and hallucinatory vision which in no way corresponds to objective reality.

Putnam has recently put forward what is in effect a modern version of the same argument. It involves a science-fiction fantasy which runs as follows.

A human being . . . has been subjected to an operation by an evil scientist. The person's brain . . . has been removed from the body and placed in a vat of nutrients which keeps the brain alive. The nerve endings have been connected to a super-scientific computer which causes the person whose brain it is to have the illusion that everything is perfectly normal. There seem to be people, objects, the sky, etc.; but really all the person . . . is experiencing is the result of electronic impulses travelling from the computer to the nerve endings. The computer is so clever that if the person tries to raise his hand, the feedback from the computer will cause him to 'see' and 'feel' the hand being raised. (*Reason, Truth and History*, pp. 5-6)

The conclusion that Putnam wishes to establish with this example is

the same as that of Descartes. We are immediately aware only of our subjective experience, but not of the objective world we take it to reflect. It is possible, at least in principle, therefore, that our subjective experience may be entirely illusory and completely discrepant from reality.

These fantasies seem so extravagant and they seem to lead to the possibility of such a total scepticism about our knowledge of the world, that one's first response may well be to try to dismiss them and to rule out their very possibility *a priori*. In effect, this is what both Descartes and Putnam seek to do. There is no need to do this, however; nor any valid basis upon which it can be done. For an element in any satisfactory realist theory must be a recognition of the *fallibility* of our knowledge and beliefs. Our knowledge is not perfect: it cannot be absolutely guaranteed; there is always the possibility of error. As I shall argue below, there are no absolute foundations for knowledge, whether in a supposed bedrock of immediately given data or in reason operating *a priori*. However, accepting the fallibility of our knowledge need not be fatal to realism. On the contrary, a closer investigation of cases of error, illusion and dream can help to strengthen the realist case.

First of all, as to Descartes' story, it must be noted that it has a crucial unclarity in it. Descartes' evil spirit, we are told, is 'deceiving' us. But how? In order to be deceived we must be perceiving the spirit or, at least, we must be subject to influence by it. And then the question is: what is the mechanism of this influence?

Putnam's example has the advantage of making this mechanism clear – it is a causal one. For Putnam's story is entirely premised upon a *materialist* account of the mind. From this Putnam tries to draw the dualist conclusions that the object of experience is not reality in-itself, and that our experience may entirely fail to reflect reality. These do not follow. All that his example shows is that we might conceivably be radically mistaken in our beliefs about the world and in the interpretation of our experience. It shows that we might be led to abandon our present interpretation in favour of a fundamentally different one; but it does not show that our beliefs about the world could be revealed as absolutely false and without any element of truth in them. It does not show that our beliefs could be *purely* subjective illusion and hallucination, because, even in the extreme case suggested, our beliefs would reflect the pattern of electronic impulses fed to us via the computer by the evil scientist. Beyond those, they would reflect the intentions of the scientist and whatever aspects of his reality these intentions, in their turn, reflect

(for as we shall see in the coming chapters, intentions, too, reflect reality).

This may look to be a very minimal sort of realism to be driven back to. Nonetheless it is crucially distinct from dualism and idealism, and sufficient to refute them. The vital point to see here is that such stories cannot and do not provide any grounds for doubting the existence of things-in-themselves, for the simple reason that such stories *presuppose* a particular account of the nature of things-in-themselves in their telling. Admittedly, this is a very different account from the one we normally presume – but it is still an account of objective reality.

Plato's allegory of the prisoners in the cave makes the real process of knowledge clear, and it is far more illuminating than the sceptically intended examples so far considered. Plato asks us to imagine a prisoner in a cave, bound so that he cannot move his head (*Republic*, Book VII, pp. 514A–21B). The prisoner can see only the shadows cast on the wall in front of him by figures moving around a fire behind his back. He can see only the play of shadows before him, and he naturally takes this for reality. But then he is unbound. He turns around and looks at the fire directly. At first it blinds him. When he gets used to the glare of its light, however, he comes to appreciate the situation in which he was captive. He can now see that his previous 'world' was an illusory one, made of mere shadows. The point to note here is that he acquires this new understanding only by *extending* his knowledge of the world and gaining a more comprehensive vision of reality. Indeed, as Plato's argument shows, only an extension of our knowledge of reality can lead us to the belief that our previous view of reality was faulty.⁴

The only way in which we can ever be convinced that our present beliefs are illusory and that we have been systematically deceived, is by discovering *more about the nature of objective reality*. We would even have continued to take our dreams for realities had we never discovered that the objective world refutes them. It is only by coming to a better understanding of reality that we come to the conclusion that some of our ideas are false. In doing so, furthermore, we often come to grasp why we were subject to them and how we were deceived by them. Again, however, this presupposes realism – it

⁴ This important point is more familiar in the philosophy of science, where it is evident (at least since Kuhn) that a scientific theory is rejected and relinquished only when it can be replaced by a more satisfactory alternative. See Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, ch.8. See also chapters 7–9 below, and my 'Contradiction and Dialectic in the Development of Science' for further discussion.

presupposes that we not only have a knowledge of reality, but that we can extend and develop it. So we could come to the belief that we were 'brains in a vat' or that we were being deceived by an evil spirit only by *extending* our present knowledge of reality. These discoveries, in other words, never could bring us to abandon our belief that there is an objective world of which we can have knowledge.

Putnam has another line of argument against realism. The realist, he claims, maintains that truth is 'radically non-epistemic'. By this he means that reality exists independently of our knowledge of it. Because reality is independent of our beliefs, Putnam argues, the realist must allow that we could be 'brains in a vat', even where all our experience and knowledge tell us that this is not the case. For realism involves the view that 'the theory that is ideal from the point of view of operational utility, inner beauty and elegance, "plausibility", "simplicity", "conservatism", etc., *might be false*. "Verified" (in any operational sense) does not imply "true", on the metaphysical realist picture, even in the ideal limit' ('Realism and Reason', p. 125). According to Putnam, this is an 'unintelligible' position. 'Reality' can refer only to what can be given through some actual or possible experience, verified. Our talk of objects is only a shorthand way of talking of experience and the way in which we order and interpret it. Beyond that, talk of 'things-in-themselves' is unmeaning.

Realism does, indeed, involve a 'radically non-epistemic' account of reality. Reality is something in-itself, which exists independent of consciousness, and whether or not we have knowledge of it. But for non-dualistic realism, at least, consciousness cannot exist independently of reality. For such realism refuses to give a non-materialist, purely subjective account of experience, verification and knowledge. Our experience necessarily reflects reality. We may, of course, misinterpret and mistake our experience, but not absolutely so; it must always contain some content of truth. So 'verified' implies some content of truth acquired; and, in particular at 'the ideal limit' as Putnam puts it – that is, with infinite experience and thought – truth and reality will coincide. To think otherwise is dualism. For thus is severed the essential connection between subject and object: experience is made into something purely subjective, and reality is put unknowably beyond it.

Such a view is implicit in Putnam's arguments. His case against realism presupposes, in fact, a 'radically non-epistemic' account of *experience* and *knowledge*. A dualist realism, like Locke's, which is founded on the theory of ideas and which shares this view, would be

open to Putnam's objections. But, as I have already argued, realism need not and must not be given a dualist form.

The picture that Putnam's argument presupposes is clear to see in a similar argument from Berkeley. 'Suppose', he says,

what no one can deny possible, an intelligence, without the help of external bodies, to be affected with the same train of sensations that you are, imprinted in the same order and with like vividness in the mind. I ask, whether that intelligence hath not all the reason to believe the existence of corporeal substances, that you can possibly have for believing the same thing? (*Principles*, §20)

What Berkeley here says 'no one can deny' – that we could be conscious in just the way we are 'without the help of external bodies' – is precisely what materialism and non-dualist realism do deny, as I have argued. And once that is denied, this line of argument against realism cannot get started. 'All that God is He imparts and reveals', was Hegel's slogan. A materialist adaptation of this, 'all that reality is it imparts and reveals', is the watchword of the sort of realism that I am defending; and this equally implies the rejection of the absolute divorce of experience from reality that Putnam's argument involves.

Putnam's aim is to rule out *a priori* the very possibility of our being 'brains in a vat' (*Reason, Truth and History*, chs 1–2). Comforting as it would be to be able to do this, it is not possible. For our knowledge is never absolutely certain, never incorrigible or perfect; it is intrinsically fallible.⁵ There are no certain and unshakable foundations, such as those which Descartes was seeking and thought that he had found in the *cogito* and with the deductive method. It must be admitted, in other words, that it is at least in principle possible that we could come to be convinced that we are mere 'brains in a vat' or that we are being systematically deceived by an evil spirit.

But this is not a damaging admission to make. If someone had come along to Plato's prisoner chained in captivity, and said to him, 'is it not possible (at least in principle) that the world you see is nothing but the play of shadows? There is a more substantial reality of which you are wholly ignorant and unsuspecting', the prisoner would surely have had to acknowledge the possibility of this; at least if he was maintaining the sort of realism that I am advocating, and not, like Descartes and Putnam, trying to rule out such a possibility *a priori*. And he would have been correct to do so, for we cannot rule out the possibility of error, even of radical error, in our beliefs.

⁵ I shall argue for this more fully later in Part III.

If we cannot rule out this possibility on purely logical grounds, however, equally there are no grounds for believing it, logical or otherwise. It is sad that I should find myself arguing from a realist perspective against Putnam; for his earlier work constitutes the most powerful recent defence of realism, and an important contribution to the development of this philosophy.⁶ In particular, in his paper 'The Analytic and the Synthetic', he presents an important and telling realist response to the sort of sceptical arguments that I have been considering (and that Putnam himself presents in his later work, as we have seen). The hypotheses that we might be deceived by an evil spirit, or that we might be brains in a vat, Putnam shows, have a peculiar logical character, which does not fit happily into the slots of 'analytic' and 'synthetic' provided by traditional logic and theory of knowledge.

First of all, such views are empirically false. But unlike more specific and limited empirical statements, they are not refutable by any *isolated* experiences or experiments. They do not fit the usual picture of an 'empirical' statement. On the other hand, they are not mere tautologies like 'all bachelors are unmarried'. It is not merely that we have no evidence to support the idea that we are brains in a vat. The sort of evidence that would be needed is the sort that would require a total change in our whole view of the world. Unlike with more limited empirical statements,

no isolated experiment . . . can overthrow them. On the other hand, most of these principles can be overthrown if there is good reason for overthrowing them, and such a good reason would have to consist in the presentation of a whole rival theory embodying the denials of these principles, plus evidence of the success of such a rival theory. ('The Analytic and the Synthetic', p. 48)

Direct Realism

The phenomena of dreams and hallucinations present problems not only for the dualist approach, but also for direct realism. For direct realism involves the view that in experience we are directly and immediately presented with objective reality. In experience, that is to say, we are immediately aware of reality *as it is*, and, as Lovejoy puts it, 'there is no distinction between seeming and being' (*The Revolt Against Dualism*, p. 65). This approach seems ill-equipped to

⁶ That is, his work before *Meaning and the Moral Sciences* (1978), which marks the beginning of his departure from realism.

deal with dreams and hallucinations, where there appears to be a radical divergence between appearance and reality. Nonetheless, direct realists have made various efforts to cope with these problems. I shall briefly review and criticize two of these.

The crudest and least satisfactory approach is that adopted by Armstrong. He is a metaphysical materialist, an adherent of the mind-brain identity theory; and his epistemology constitutes the simplest form of direct realism. The problems with this position come out very clearly in his account of dreams and hallucinations. For, in his attempt to reject dualism and the theory of ideas, Armstrong is led to deny that dreams and hallucinations involve any visual experience at all. He tries to analyse these phenomena entirely in terms of false belief.

When we have a hallucination as of a cat on the mat, we not only acquire a false belief about the physical world (*viz.* that there is a cat on the mat), but we also acquire the belief that *we are now seeing the cat*.⁷ The occurrence of these two false beliefs *constitutes* sensory illusion, that is all that sensory illusion *is*. In sensory illusion there is no 'perception' of a quasi-object. (*Perception and the Physical World*, pp. 82–3)

Dreams are hallucinations which occur, or which appear to occur, during sleep; and Armstrong offers a similar account of these.

Dreaming is simply total hallucination occurring during sleep. . . . During sleep, certain mental processes occur. These are describable in the first place as illusory perceptions of things of a certain sort. These illusory perceptions can be further elucidated as the acquirings of various false beliefs about the nature of our current situation and environment. (*A Materialist Theory of the Mind*, p. 304)

One is reminded here of Malcolm's attempt to analyse dreaming in purely behaviourist terms, as the disposition to make false statements upon waking from sleep (Malcolm, *Dreaming*). The objection to both accounts is the same; and Armstrong himself anticipates it. 'When we are subject to sensory illusion . . . there is an object in my visual field which no attempted analysis of sensory illusion in terms of false belief can possibly conjure away' (*Perception and the Physical World*, p. 83). That is precisely the problem with

⁷ At this point, Armstrong adds the following note: 'Notice that the word "see" here is used in its normal sense, the sense which implies the physical existence of the thing seen'.

Armstrong's account. Although false beliefs and false statements are, no doubt, involved in dreams and hallucinations, they are not the only things involved. An essential aspect of these phenomena is sensory experience, which both Armstrong's and Malcolm's accounts are intent upon denying. Armstrong is fully aware of this objection. However, instead of answering it, he merely reiterates his account.

This objection is very natural, but completely mistaken. . . . What we are asserting is just what this objection says it is incredible to assert, *viz.* that when (or in so far as) we suffer from sensory illusion there is no object at all, physical or non-physical, which we are perceiving in any possible sense of the word 'perceiving'. There is simply the (completely) false belief that ordinary perceiving is taking place. (*idem*)

To these assertions I will respond with other opposed assertions. Armstrong's account is, indeed, incredible. It is necessitated only by the inadequacy of the sort of direct realism that he is trying to defend. The inability of direct realism to account for dreams and hallucinations is the refutation of it. For if the connection between consciousness and reality is a *merely* immediate one, then how they can be discrepant, and how false ideas can arise, becomes a mystery. At this point, dualism looks an attractive alternative. However, as we have seen, dualism is unable to bridge the gulf it creates between consciousness and reality, and account for true ideas and for knowledge. Traditional philosophies tend to oscillate between these two equally unsatisfactory poles.⁸

In the next chapter I will argue that it is possible to give a more satisfactory realist account of dreams, which involves no such desperate expedients. Before going on to this, however, I will briefly discuss another almost equally implausible line of thought, to which some realistically-minded philosophers have resorted, in their effort to give a realist account of dreams and hallucinations.

I have in mind the view that in dreams and in hallucinations we are aware of a 'world of dreams' or a 'hallucinatory world'. This account may also be applied to other forms of experience and thought. Thus in imagination, it is sometimes said, we experience an 'imaginary world'; in hypothetical thought we are dealing with 'possible worlds'; through the use of hallucinogenic drugs we make contact with 'alternative realities', and so on and so forth. This is yet another way of trying to maintain the direct unity of subject and

⁸ This is a point that Hegel makes, see *Phenomenology of Spirit*, pp. 77ff.

object in the face of dreams, hallucinations and other apparently false forms of subjective experience.

Perhaps the most plausible sphere of application for such an account is not in relation to dreams and hallucinations, but rather in the sphere of art and imaginative fiction. The most interesting and persuasive attempt that I know to develop this sort of account is that given by Bradley in his article on 'Floating Ideas and the Imaginary' (*Essays on Truth and Reality*, ch. 3).

It may come as a surprise to find a Hegelian writer like Bradley being mentioned in the context of a discussion of realism; but it should not do so. For, like Hegel, Bradley is very strongly realist in his philosophy, and this despite his ultimate idealism. A central idea of Bradley's philosophy, which he stresses throughout his work, is that 'every idea essentially qualifies reality' (*ibid*, p. 28). By this, Bradley appears at least initially to mean essentially the same thing as I have when I have insisted that there are no *mere* appearances, and that all ideas in some respect and in some degree reflect reality. An important part of his work is devoted to justifying this claim in relation to the problematic cases, such as those of hypothetical and negative judgements, empty terms, and also 'the imaginary'.⁹ Bradley is expressing the same view when he denies that there are any ideas which 'float'. All ideas, he insists, are attached to or anchored in reality in some way or other. 'Every idea', he argues, 'must attach itself as an adjective to the real, and hence in the end there will be no such thing as an idea which merely floats' (p. 29).

Sympathetic as I am to these views, it is impossible to be satisfied with the way in which Bradley tries to defend them in relation to the imagination and to dreams and hallucinations. These are all cases where our ideas seem not to 'qualify the real', and where our experience seems to 'float' free of any anchorage in reality. Bradley's reply to this line of objection is that it involves false assumptions about the nature of 'reality' and 'as to the limits of the real world'. We must not think of the world as confined to the 'world of fact'. On the contrary, there are many 'worlds', he argues: worlds of madness, of dreams, of art and of literature – all of which go to make up in the end 'Absolute Reality'.

The case that Bradley is trying to make is most plausible, I think, in relation to the sort of 'imaginary world' involved in narrative fiction. We talk, for example, of 'Shakespeare's world' or of the

⁹ This is one of the major themes in Bradley's *Principles of Logic*. A clear and useful account of some of the main ideas in this forbidding work is given in Manser, *Bradley's Logic*. See also, Bosanquet, *Logic*, and Cunningham, *Thought and Reality in Hegel's System*.

'world' of a novel. 'The imaginary, we all say, has its own laws, and, if so, we must go on to add, it has its own truth and its own life, and its ideas, floating in reference to common fact, are hence attached to this its own world of reality' (*Essays on Truth and Reality*, p. 35).

This solution is too easy. One feels that the metaphor of the novelist's 'world' is being taken too literally. The consequences are unacceptable, for 'worlds' are thus multiplied without end, and the term 'reality' is robbed of all specific meaning. Anything which is felt, conceived, or thought about becomes a part of 'reality', an aspect of some imaginary 'world'. This can be seen in the following passage. 'In the end and taken absolutely . . . there can be no mere idea. Reality is always before us, and every idea in some sense qualifies the real. . . . Flotation means attachment to another soil, a realm other than that sphere which for any purpose we take here as solid ground and as fact' (p. 35).

For the materialist there is no 'other soil' than that of the one objective, material world. According to Bradley, however, there are many realities; and the only feature which then distinguishes the '*real* reality'¹⁰ is the 'greater order and system' (p. 48n) among certain groups of experiences.¹¹ We have arrived, in other words, at a form of idealism in which reality is nothing independent of consciousness, and is constituted simply by the order and coherence of experience. In this way, the whole force of the term 'reality' is sacrificed and lost.¹² As Lovejoy drily remarks, this position would seem to imply that, 'the consumption of . . . alcohol . . . [is] a means of becoming acquainted with a class of "real" . . . objects which are unhappily hidden from the more abstemious' (*The Revolt Against Dualism*, p. 94).

In this chapter I have argued that illusions, dreams and hallucinations pose particular difficulties for the traditional realist picture of knowledge. Neither Armstrong's account nor Bradley's is satisfactory. Bradley's position, like Armstrong's, is motivated by the desire to see consciousness as an immediate and direct acquaintance with reality. Illusions, dreams and hallucinations, however, are forms of consciousness in which precisely this condition does not obtain. For this reason, these phenomena have always presented problems for direct realism; and they do so for both Armstrong and Bradley.

¹⁰ The phrase is Bosanquet's. See his *Knowledge and Reality*, p. 144, which contains a discussion of these issues which is considerably more sober than Bradley's.

¹¹ This is, of course, the coherence theory of truth, which I discuss below, chapter 10.

¹² Such idealism is also fully apparent in the idea of 'alternative realities' made fashionable some years ago by Carlos Casteneda in connection with experiences under the influence of hallucinogenic drugs, and by the metaphor of a realm of 'inner space' which is also familiar in this connection. See, e.g., Casteneda, *A Separate Reality*.

Nevertheless, Lovejoy scores too easily a point with his facile mention of drunkenness. If only one was transported into another world, dulled. However, the exercise of the imagination, even as a result of the action of certain drugs, has a better and more serious claim to the role of expanding awareness and opening the 'the doors of perception';¹³ and Bradley's ideas should not be dismissed out of hand. Anyone who has been caught up and moved by a work of art, or who has experienced the profound effects of a hallucinogenic drug taken in suitable conditions, is bound to be dissatisfied with Armstrong's blindness to imaginative and hallucinatory experience, and equally with Lovejoy's facetious dismissal of it; and correspondingly sympathetic to Bradley's view that there is, in some way, a truth in these forms of consciousness. Bradley, it is true, develops this idea in an unacceptably idealistic manner. But it can also be defended in a realist and materialist fashion; and that is what I shall go on to do in the next chapter.

*world by
drink ! The
experience
is more usually
of this.*

¹³ See, e.g. Huxley, *The Doors of Perception*, for an eloquent statement of this claim; although here, too, the idea of 'alternative realities' is present, even if only implicitly. The title phrase is from Blake: 'if the doors of perception were cleansed, everything will appear to man as it is. infinite'.

5 Freud and Dreams

Philosophy and Dreaming

Illusions, dreams and hallucinations have traditionally occupied a central place in philosophical discussion. It is a source of puzzlement to non-philosophers, however, that this discussion often revolves around fantastic and absurd examples, such as Descartes' idea that there is an 'evil spirit' deceiving us, or Putnam's supposition that we might be mere 'brains in a vat'. For the non-philosopher – rightly, I think – tends to take a more realistic view of the purpose of thought, and to suppose that the aim of philosophy should be to illuminate and understand the nature of things as they actually are.

A different view of the purpose of philosophy has, however, prevailed among English-speaking philosophers in recent years. Philosophy, it has been argued, is a purely *conceptual* study, quite separate and distinct from the investigation of empirical reality undertaken in the sciences. Warnock, for example, puts this view clearly when he writes, 'philosophy is the study of the concepts we employ, and not of the facts, phenomena, cases or events to which these concepts might be or are applied' (*English Philosophy Since 1900*, p. 167).

On this account, philosophy is concerned exclusively with the ways in which we think about the world: with the concepts we use, and with the logical relations between them. It focuses on questions of logical possibility and logical necessity, rather than on questions of what is contingent and actual. The fantastic examples considered in the last chapter conform to this pattern. They present what are claimed to be logical possibilities (given a certain view of the relation of consciousness to reality).

Exploration of the logical implications of different concepts and ways of thinking about the world is, undoubtedly, an important part of the work of philosophy. However, philosophy can and must aspire

to do more than this. It must seek to show, not only that our way of seeing things is a coherent and a possible one, but also that it is a *true* and *adequate* reflection of *reality*. This, at least, is the realist view of the nature of philosophy. It is also Hegel's view. The content of philosophy, he repeatedly insists, 'is no other than *actuality*' (*Logic*, §6).

On the other hand, the view that philosophy deals with purely conceptual questions, as distinct from and as opposed to empirical ones, is a dualist one. Such dualism embodies a rigid and absolute distinction between thought (concepts) and reality, of the sort that I have already criticized and rejected. It is not possible absolutely to separate and distinguish thought from its object, conceptual from empirical matters, or philosophy from the sciences. For as scientific understanding of the empirical world advances, so too our concepts develop and change; and what is or is not regarded as 'logically' possible or necessary changes with them. The less one knows about a particular thing, the more seems possible for it. If I am very ignorant, for example, I may imagine that rose bushes can sprout from acorns; but only a little knowledge of plant life is needed to convince me that this is not a real possibility. In general, the more we discover and understand of the laws and principles governing things, the less seems arbitrary, accidental and contingent in their behaviour. For, as Hegel says, the effect of knowledge is 'to banish indifference and to ascertain the necessity of things' (*Logic*, §119z). Conversely, 'the less education a man has, or, in other words, the less he knows of the specific connections of the objects to which he directs his observation, the greater is his tendency to launch out into all sorts of empty possibilities' (*ibid.*, §143z).

It is sure to be objected at this point that, along with Hegel, I am here confusing the notions of empirical and logical possibility. But just as the idea of a rigid antithesis between conceptual and empirical questions must be rejected, so too must that of an absolute opposition between these two kinds of possibility and necessity. Indeed, as I have already insisted, there are natural (i.e. empirical) necessities; and these necessities are of the fullest, logical, kind (even though they are not knowable *a priori*).¹ In short, as our knowledge develops, so too do our concepts, and likewise our ideas of what is possible and what is necessary.

This is evident in the case of our understanding of illusions, dreams and hallucinations. At first, in infancy, we are inclined, it seems, to regard hallucinatory experience as on a par with other

¹ Kripke makes this point particularly forcefully in *Naming and Necessity*; and I discuss it further in *Hegel, Marx and Dialectic*, ch.1.

sorts of experience, and as equally a reflection of reality. For example, very young children tend to report their dreams as if they were the experiences of actual events. (Freud, *Interpretation of Dreams*, pp. 127ff). However, we soon learn to distinguish dreams from waking experience, and to regard our dreams as false and illusory visions which fail to reflect reality. Indeed, in later life at least, our dreams are usually incomprehensible to us. They seem to be arbitrary and alien mental creations, with no apparent relation to waking experience or events.

It is this view of dreams which underlies the Cartesian and dualist account of them which I discussed in the last chapter. As we saw there, illusions, dreams and hallucinations have always presented problems for realism. Many of the traditional realist attempts to account for them, like those of Armstrong and Bradley, are neither convincing nor satisfactory. Indeed, the problems for realism in this area have seemed to be the strongest argument in favour of the theory of ideas and for dualism or idealism in the theory of knowledge. For the Cartesian view that dreams and hallucinations are mere error and illusion corresponds precisely to the way in which they normally appear to us in adult life.

Nevertheless, I now want to argue that this account is a superficial and unsatisfactory one, and that it has been revealed as such by modern developments in psychology and social science. In particular, in this chapter I shall consider Freud's account of dreams and hallucinations, and in the next I will discuss Marx's theory of ideology and false consciousness. Psychoanalysis and Marxism have had a revolutionary impact upon modern thought, and nowhere more so than in their approaches to the various forms of illusory and false consciousness. Although these two theories are undoubtedly incompatible and opposed to each other in some fundamental respects, I shall argue that they nonetheless share in common the principle that all ideas – even the most apparently senseless and arbitrary ones – reflect reality and have a measure of truth to them.

In a well-known passage, Locke describes his work as like that of an 'underlabourer', coming after scientists such as 'the great Huyghens and the incomparable Mr Newton ... clearing the ground a little, and removing some of the rubbish, that lies in the way to knowledge' (*Essay*, pp. 6–7). Following after Freud and Marx, my arguments in these chapters will have something of the same character. For psychoanalysis and Marxism have introduced into modern thought ideas which are of enormous significance for the theory of knowledge. My aim in what follows will be to spell out some of these ideas and their epistemological implications.

Properly understood, these theories, I shall argue, vindicate the realist conviction that, in Bradley's words, 'every idea essentially qualifies reality' and that there are no ideas which merely 'float' (*Essays on Truth and Reality*, p. 28); and they thus provide the basis upon which realism can be developed and defended against dualism and idealism.

Freud on Dreams

I have been putting forward the principle that there is a truth in all forms of consciousness – in the creations of the imagination, in dreams and in delusions. This principle receives the most striking confirmation in Freud's work. For it was Freud's great achievement to have discovered and, in a large number of cases, to have demonstrated, that dreams (and other sorts of delusions, fantasies and apparently irrational and illusory forms of consciousness) can be *interpreted*. They have a *meaning*. Dreams, says Freud, 'are not meaningless, they are not absurd. . . . On the contrary, they are psychical phenomena of complete validity . . . they can be inserted into the chain of our mental acts' (*Interpretation of Dreams*, p. 122).

The outlines of Freud's account of dreams are well known. Dreams, he maintains, have the form of 'wish-fulfilments'. Interpreting a dream and coming to see how it 'fits into the chain of our mental acts as a link having a validity and importance equal to the rest' (p. 96), thus involves discovering the wish that is expressed in it. In some cases this is evident, as with young children's dreams, and also occasionally with those of adults. One of the many examples that Freud cites concerns a boy of 22 months called Hermann, who 'was told to hand over a basket of cherries to someone as a birthday present. He was obviously very unwilling to do it, although he was promised that he should have a few of them for himself. Next morning he reported having dreamt: "Hermann eaten all the chewwies!"' (*Introductory Lectures*, p. 158). Summarizing his conclusions, Freud writes,

Children's dreams are not senseless. They are *intelligible, completely valid mental acts* . . . A child's dream is a reaction to an experience of the previous day, which has left behind it a regret, a longing, a wish that has not been dealt with. The dream produces a direct, undisguised fulfilment of that wish. (p. 159, Freud's emphasis)

The dreams of adults, according to Freud, have the same wish-fulfilling form as those of children, but this is not immediately

apparent. For adult dreams usually appear incoherent, senseless, arbitrary and alien to the thoughts and wishes of the dreamer. Such dreams, Freud maintains, have been subject to 'distortion'. The wishes they express have been repressed and are unconscious ones. In such dreams, the 'manifest content' – the dream as it appears to the consciousness of the dreamer² – must be distinguished from the 'latent content' – the thoughts and wishes concealed (and yet expressed) in it. The process through which the latent and unconscious wishes are manifested and expressed in the dream, Freud calls the 'dream-work'. Interpretation works in precisely the opposite direction: it seeks to reveal and to express what is latent and hidden in the manifest dream.

I have talked of unconscious wishes as being 'manifested' and 'expressed' in the dream as a result of the action of the dream-work. It must be noted, however, that this process is a complex one, involving the mechanisms of condensation, displacement, visual representation and symbolization. 'The relation between the manifest and latent elements is no simple one', says Freud, 'it is far from being the case that one manifest element always takes the place of one latent one. It is rather that there is a group-relation between the two layers, within which one manifest element can replace several latent ones or one latent element can be replaced by several manifest ones' (*Introductory Lectures*, p. 156).

Nevertheless, the disparity between the manifest and latent contents must not be stressed in a one-sided or exclusive fashion. This is an elementary and basic point; but it needs stressing in the context of the currently fashionable denial of it by Lacan and his followers. A smokescreen of trendy talk about the 'signifier' and the 'signified' cannot disguise the fact that these writers tend to separate and oppose these elements in an absolute and dualistic fashion. Yet if the manifest and latent contents were *merely* different, it would be quite impossible to interpret dreams, and quite mysterious how the manifest dream could be a symptom and an expression of unconscious wishes.

In short, the manifest dream is an expression and a reflection of its latent content; it is the representation of a wish. Or rather, more accurately, one should say that the dream is the expression and the manifestation of a *compromise* between the unconscious wish expressed in it, on the one hand, and the forces of repression and censorship

² That is, the dream as it appears to the waking consciousness and memory of the dreamer. Of course, Freud recognizes that in the process of recalling and recounting the dream 'secondary revision' may occur. See *Interpretation of Dreams*, pp. 488ff.

also operating within the dreamer's psyche, on the other. This, in brief outline, is Freud's account of dreams. Its relevance to the sort of realism that I have been defending is as follows.

In the first place, Freud's account of dreams involves the rejection of the Cartesian and dualist view of them. A dream is not a mere subjective delusion; it is not a purely false, arbitrary or meaningless mental phenomenon. Of course, it is true that these are the manifest appearances that many adult dreams initially present. However, Freud's great achievement was to show that it is wrong to take these direct and immediate appearances for reality. They must rather be understood as the manifestations of a hidden, and previously unknown, unconscious psychological realm. When dreams are understood in these terms, the incoherent and meaningless appearance they initially present is dispelled. Dreams are seen to be 'psychical phenomena' which can be comprehended in psychological terms, as the reflections and expressions of *real*, though often unconscious, wishes, desires, feelings and thoughts, in response to real events (usually of the previous day). We can thus *learn* from our dreams about wishes, feelings and thoughts which we really, though unknowingly, have. Indeed, Freud calls dreams 'the royal road' to the unconscious (*Interpretation of Dreams*, p. 608); and they play an important role in psychoanalytic therapy on this basis.

Dreams thus reflect and express the unconscious. But they do so in a disguised and distorted form. Their meaning is not directly and immediately apparent: they *need* to be interpreted. As well as *revealing* the unconscious, in other words, dreams also *conceal* it. This concealment, moreover, is an *active* affair: the product of repression. Coming to understand one's dreams, therefore, requires not only the right use of the intellect, but also an active effort and exertion to overcome the resistance which is experienced to making conscious the unconscious, and which is the outward and manifest counterpart to repression.

In sum, a dream is a distorted reflection of the contradictory feelings and thoughts at work in the dreamer's psyche; the very distortions of which, as signs of repression, reveal facts about the dreamer's (unconscious) wishes and desires.

Bodily Sensations

According to the realist principle that I have been defending, all ideas reflect objective reality. This is true, I have just argued, for

dreams. It is also true, I now want to show, for other apparently inner and subjective states of consciousness. I shall take the case of pain, because, following Wittgenstein, it has become a central one in recent analytical philosophy.

Indeed, the statement 'I have a pain' has come to be regarded as the paradigm case of a report of a state of subjective consciousness. Moreover, there has been a strong tendency to regard such sensation reports in a dualist fashion as incorrigible statements of purely inner mental states, which have no necessary connection with, or correspondence to, anything material or objective. Since this clearly conflicts with the sort of realism that I have been defending, it will be useful to indicate how such realism would deal with the phenomena of pain and other bodily sensations. At first this may seem to lead right away from the Freudian themes that I have been discussing, but in the end it will not do so.

The dualist view, that pain is a purely subjective and mental phenomenon, will not bear examination. In very many cases, at least – and, with young children and animals, in all cases – pain quite clearly reflects the reality of the state of the body. It serves to inform us of physical injury, damage or malfunction. On this basis, it plays a crucial role in medical diagnosis. A realist account of pain and other bodily sensations in these terms is developed by Armstrong. He analyses bodily sensation as a form of perception analogous to visual perception, through which we become aware of our bodily state. 'By bodily perception we gain information about the current state of one particular material object: our own body' (*A Materialist Theory of the Mind*, p. 307).

Our bodies, furthermore, are linked to the outer world. Bodily injury is frequently the effect of external events. Thus pain is also an important means by which the organism feeling it comes to know about, and react to, features of the external world. This is shown graphically by the fact that an absence of the sense of pain can create serious problems in practical life. Such cases rarely occur naturally,³ but they do so among those whose spinal columns have been injured or severed. Because of the absence of feeling in their bodies and limbs, such people can suffer very severe injury, by burning for example, without being aware of it. Paradoxical as it may seem, they can suffer greatly from their inability to feel pain, and must sometimes long for a sensitivity to it.

³ Long ago, I remember reading of one such case, but I have been unable to trace a reference to it.

However, it is sure to be objected that such examples are quite insufficient to establish the general realist account of pain. Pain, it will be said, is a subjective, inner, mental state, known incorrigibly to the person suffering it. In many cases, it will readily be admitted, it reflects the reality of its subject's bodily state; but *in principle* it is always possible that it may not do so. For it is *logically* possible that a person should feel a pain for which there is no corresponding bodily condition.⁴

I have already insisted that philosophy should not be concerned with what is merely 'logically' or 'in principle' possible. Rather, it must concentrate on what is actual and *really* possible, in the light of current knowledge. In the case of pain, however, there is no need to appeal to mere logical possibilities; for there are many actual cases of pain and other bodily sensations for which no physical causes are evident.

Descartes gives a much quoted example. 'What experience can be more intimate than pain?' he asks. 'Yet I have heard sometimes, from people who had had a leg or arm cut off, that they still seemed now and then to feel pain in the part of the body that they lacked' (*Philosophical Writings*, p. 113). Descartes regards such 'phantom limb' experiences as purely illusory and false. So, too, does Armstrong. In such cases, he writes, 'I really do have a certain perception, but it is a perception to which nothing in the physical world corresponds. This is a hallucinatory bodily perception, accompanied by the knowledge that it is hallucinatory' (*A Materialist Theory of the Mind*, p. 310).

This is not a satisfactory account of such experiences. The fact that they are so regularly and consistently reported by those who have lost limbs, strongly suggests that they are caused by, and reflect, objective features of the bodily system, even if the particular features in question have not yet been identified or understood. Just as pain is seen by Armstrong in realist terms, so too one should see 'phantom limb' experiences.

However, there are other cases of pain without apparent physical basis, which are more puzzling for the realist. Such pains are, in fact, a very common phenomenon, as family doctors will testify. For a significant number of the patients seen by general practitioners are people who have complaints which have no discoverable physical

⁴ The objections to the materialist mind–body identity theory standardly take this form. See, e.g., the articles in Borst (ed.) *The Mind-Brain Identity Theory*.

basis or cause.⁵ Freud's earliest work in psychology was concerned with such complaints, which were then diagnosed as 'hysterical' ones.⁶ The attitude to them suggested by dualism and direct realism is that they are purely subjective or even illusory ones. The same attitude is not infrequent in the medical profession.

Freud's approach, however, was different. Gradually and by stages, he came to understand that neurotic symptoms arise from conflicts between a person's selfish and pleasure-seeking desires and opposing repressive forces within the personality, particularly the dictates of morality and conscience. The idea of a conflict between desire and morality was, of course, a familiar one before Freud. What Freud showed is that when such a conflict becomes too intense and anxiety-provoking, the desire is repressed – it is put out of mind and inhibited from outward expression. The repression of the desire does not eradicate it, however. It continues 'to press for satisfaction', which it achieves in thought in the form of fantasy and in action in the form of neurotic symptoms. Neurosis is 'the return of the repressed' (*Moses and Monotheism*, §II.vii).

Neurotic symptoms, that is to say, 'have a sense and are related to the patient's experiences' (*Introductory Lectures*, p. 296). Indeed, according to Freud, they have precisely the same form, exactly the same structure, as dreams. The realist account of dreams that I have just given applies equally to them. Just like dreams, neurotic symptoms have a *meaning*, they can be *interpreted*. They are not mere arbitrary or subjective occurrences. On the contrary, they have the form of *actions* which express and reflect real (though, of course, unconscious) feelings and forces at work in the person.

Psychical and Material Reality

It may seem that the sort of 'realism' that I have just been attributing to Freud is very significantly different from the realism for which I have argued in previous chapters. For realism, I have insisted,

⁵ The estimation of this number is difficult due to the uncertainty of the diagnostic criteria and procedures in this area. Studies of this specific question, moreover, have not, to my knowledge, been undertaken. However, studies abound which attempt to assess the proportion of patients who present themselves to their doctors with psychological conditions of all kinds (the commonest being depression). On the basis of 'Present State Examination', for example, estimates vary from 9 per cent to 24 per cent. See Goldberg and Huxley, *Mental Illness in the Community*, ch.2, for a useful summary of the results of such studies. (I am indebted to David Morgan for this reference and for help in understanding these issues.)

⁶ Hysteria has now largely passed out of fashion as a diagnostic category.

involves the view that consciousness is a reflection of *objective, material reality*. The 'reality' that Freud shows to be reflected in dreams and neurotic symptoms, by contrast, is a merely 'psychical reality': a subjective reality of wishes, feelings and thoughts, sharply distinguished by him from material reality. 'Fantasies', he writes, 'possess *psychical reality* as contrasted with *material reality*; and we gradually learn to understand that *in the world of the neuroses it is psychical reality which is of the decisive kind*' (*Introductory Lectures*, p. 415, Freud's emphasis).

On the basis of this distinction, Freud is widely interpreted as having rejected realism; but, in fact, he did not do so. In order to see this it is necessary to have some idea of the development of Freud's theory. For his repudiation of 'material reality' as the decisive factor in neurosis has its origins in one of the crucial moments in the development of psychoanalysis.

Freud's earliest psychological investigations into hysteria had led him to the view that, at the root of hysterical symptoms, there lay hidden the memories of painful and traumatic events, which had occurred in early life. These memories had been repressed from consciousness, but they returned and manifested themselves in the form of symptoms: 'hysterics suffer mainly from reminiscences' (*Studies on Hysteria*, p. 58). As is well-known, his work increasingly led him to the conclusion that the traumatic events in question were seductions in childhood by an adult, usually a parent or nursemaid. However, doubts began to accumulate in Freud's mind concerning the reality of these scenes; and, in 1897, he was obliged to abandon the seduction theory of neurosis and set his thoughts upon a radically different path.

The supposed seductions were fantasies. It is sometimes urged that Freud should simply have abandoned his attempt to understand the neuroses as 'refuted' at this point (Cioffi, 'Freud and the Idea of a Pseudoscience'). Fortunately, Freud was a serious scientist, concerned to investigate and to understand the phenomenon of neurosis, and he had nothing to do with such absurdities. The conclusion he drew was rather as follows. 'If hysterics trace back their symptoms to fictitious traumas, this new fact signifies that they create such scenes in fantasy, and psychical reality requires to be taken into account alongside actual reality' ('On the History of the Psychoanalytic Movement', pp. 299–300). From this point onwards, the role of unconscious fantasy assumes a central place in Freud's thought. 'Psychical reality' replaces material reality as the decisive factor in neurosis.

At first sight it does, indeed, appear that Freud entirely rejects

realism with this distinction. It seems that he embraces a purely subjective and 'phenomenological' form of psychology. According to such psychology, it is not the actual – objective and material – circumstances in which a person finds himself that determine his behaviour, but rather it is the way in which he *experiences* things – his subjective consciousness – that is decisive. In recent analytical philosophy, a version of this view has come to be called 'methodological solipsism'. In Putnam's words, this involves 'the assumption that no psychological state, properly so called, presupposes the existence of any individual other than the subject to whom the state is ascribed' ('The Meaning of "Meaning"', p. 220).

Clearly this approach is neither a realistic nor a materialistic one. At the very least it involves putting aside (or, as the followers of Husserl would have it, putting 'in brackets') any assumptions about the nature and influence of the objective, material world; and it leads on easily to a rejection of the belief in an external world altogether. Freud's insistence on the role of psychical reality is often assimilated to such views, by both his critics and supporters alike. For example, the Marxist writer F. H. Bartlett criticizes Freud for abandoning any sort of materialism in 1897. The rejection of the seduction theory, he writes,

marked the final repudiation of actual life experience and the transition to unabashed idealism. . . . When Freud said, in effect, that it makes no difference whether the cause is a memory or a fantasy, the last shred of materialism disappeared. It was the final repudiation of his original principle that real life traumas cause disturbances in consciousness. ('The Concept of "Repression"', pp. 337–8)⁷

At first glance, Freud's words seem to lend themselves quite readily to this interpretation. However, the significance of psychoanalysis is not ultimately comprehensible in these terms. To appreciate this, it is necessary to see how Freud responded when he was forced to conclude that his patients' ideas of seduction were mere fantasies.

Fantasies or not, Freud had discovered that such ideas were actually present in his patients' minds: they *believed* (albeit unconsciously) that they had been seduced, and this exercised a determining influence on their actions. Had Freud's approach been a merely subjective and phenomenological one, he would simply have appealed to this fact in order to explain their behaviour, and he would not have been concerned about the truth or falsity of these

⁷ See Malcolm, *Psychoanalysis: The Impossible Profession* and *In the Freud Archives* for interesting accounts of more recent criticisms along these lines.

fantasies. Fortunately, however, thanks to the basic realism of his approach, his scientific curiosity was greater than that; and he was led to ask the question: if these seductions had not occurred, why had his patients formed the fantasy of them? This is the question which occurs quite naturally to anyone adopting a realist attitude towards mental life; and it is a question which was crucial to the subsequent development of psychoanalysis and to the important discoveries which emerged with the rejection of the seduction theory. The most serious indictment of the phenomenological approach in psychology is that it may have the effect of actively discouraging this line of questioning, as it would have done had Freud adopted it in 1897.

However, he did not do so. On the contrary, he was most certainly concerned by the discovery that these ideas of seduction had turned out to be false. He could no longer regard them, in straightforwardly realistic terms, as memories of actual events. An alternative explanation was required. This explanation Freud developed in the shape of the theories of infantile sexuality and the Oedipus Complex. 'I . . . came to understand that hysterical symptoms are derived from fantasies and not from real occurrences. It was only later that I was able to recognize in this fantasy of being seduced . . . the expression of the typical Oedipus Complex' (*New Introductory Lectures*, p. 154). Moreover, 'from behind the fantasies, the whole range of the child's sexual life came to light' ('On the History of the Psychoanalytic Movement', p. 300).

In other words, Freud did not simply abandon the seduction theory as 'refuted'. Rather, he replaced it with a more satisfactory theory. In particular, he was led to reject the idea that sexuality is something which is imposed upon the innocent child by an adult from outside. The child is already a sexual being.⁸ Given this fact, it becomes clear that the fantasies of seduction are not purely arbitrary and illusory ideas. On the contrary, they express and reflect the sexual feelings and reactions of the child. They reflect and represent real and objective forces at work in the person – biologically and materially-based drives and instincts, as Freud stresses – which exert themselves in the person's life, whether or not he is conscious of them, and whether or not he wills them. In Freud's words, such fantasies are 'the psychical expression' of instinct.⁹

⁸ This point is well made by Laplanche and Pontalis in *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, p. 407 and elsewhere.

⁹ See Isaacs, 'The Nature and Function of Phantasy', for an account of Freud's theory which stresses this aspect of it. The quoted phrase is from Freud, *New Introductory Lectures*, p. 106.

Following Lacan, Laplanche and Pontalis have also emphasized the objective character of fantasy. They insist, as I too have done, that Freud's notion of psychical reality must not be identified simply with what is subjective and mental. For the term, they stress, implies 'a consistency and resistance comparable to those displayed by material reality' (*The Language of Psychoanalysis*, p. 363). But when it comes to explaining the basis of this 'consistency and resistance', their account is quite unsatisfactory. For they insist on imposing upon Freud fashionable 'structuralist' ideas, whose idealism and hostility to 'biological realism' are entirely alien to Freud's whole outlook and approach ('Fantasy and the Origins of Sexuality', p. 7).

Their basic argument is that psychical reality has an objective quality because it is 'structured'. 'The status of fantasy cannot be found within the framework of the opposition reality-illusion (imaginary). The notion of *psychical reality* introduces a third category, that of structure' (p. 17). Stripped of its jargon, this is an old and familiar view. For Kant, too, regarded reality as merely a coherent and consistent arrangement (or 'structure' if you prefer) of subjective ideas. He called this view 'empirical realism'. Properly speaking, however, it is not a form of realism at all. Rather, as I have argued, it is a classic and traditional form of dualism or idealism.

It is not possible to gain a proper understanding of Freud's theories within this framework. The psychical reality revealed in dreams and fantasies is real, not simply because it is 'structured', but because it represents and reflects objective features of our psychological life. From the analysis of dreams and symptoms we learn not only of the structure of our ideas, but of forces really at work within us, shaping and influencing our lives independently of our consciousness or will. Freud, moreover, was convinced that these forces ultimately had an instinctual – a biological and material – basis.

I have been discussing the nature of the psychical reality revealed by the psychoanalytic interpretation of dreams and neurotic symptoms. This question, however, is often confused with another. For psychoanalysis is frequently and, in my view, rightly criticized for the excessive emphasis it has tended to place upon the influence of inner drives, as contrasted with external factors, in the development of the personality. As psychoanalysis has developed, the roots and causes of neurosis have increasingly been collapsed back into the individual; and the external, interpersonal and social environment has faded almost into oblivion as a determinant of psychological life.¹⁰

Psychoanalysis, I believe, can legitimately be criticized in this respect, but it would take me out of my way to do so here. For my purpose has been to show the way in which Freud's theory confirms and vindicates realism on the ground which has traditionally been the most difficult for it, and hence to bring out something of the epistemological significance of his thought.

Reason and Emotion

Freud is quite rightly credited with having drawn attention to the ubiquitous influence of unconscious and irrational forces in human life. However, it is important to see that he is anything but an irrationalist in the account he gives of these phenomena. Even though dreams, fantasies and neurotic symptoms initially seem to be arbitrary and senseless phenomena, they have a meaning, Freud shows: they can be interpreted, they happen for a reason. Underlying these phenomena can be found unconscious beliefs and unconscious desires, in terms of which they can be explained and shown to fit into the course of the person's experience and life in a psychologically intelligible manner.

In this way, Freud's psychology seems to conform to the schema proposed by Davidson, which has recently been so influential in analytical philosophy. According to Davidson, to explain an action is to cite beliefs and desires of the agent which make the action an intelligible one. ('Actions, Reasons and Causes'). Implicit in what I have been saying, however, is the important point that there are significant constraints upon the sorts of beliefs and desires that can function in psychoanalytic explanations. Not just *any* beliefs and *any* desires which serve to rationalize the action will do: the beliefs and desires must themselves be intelligible ones. And the principle of intelligibility involved here is the realist one – they must reflect reality.

Take, for example, the ideas of infantile seduction that Freud discovered to be at the basis of hysterical disturbances. At first

¹⁰ Laplanche and Pontalis make an interesting observation upon this point. They remark as follows on Freud's reluctance to accept this conclusion, towards which his theory seemed to be pointing. 'Freud could never resign himself to treating fantasy as the pure and simple outgrowth of the spontaneous sexual life of the child. He is forever searching, behind the fantasy, for whatever has founded it in its reality. . . . Indeed the first schema presented by Freud, with his theory of seduction, seems to us to epitomize this particular dimension of his thought: quite obviously, the first stage – the stage of the scene of seduction – simply must be founded in something more real than the subject's imaginings alone' (*The Language of Psychoanalysis*, pp. 406–7).

Freud regarded these beliefs as memories. As such, they would be readily intelligible in realist terms, as the reflections of real past events. When, instead, these beliefs were proved to be fantasies, Freud, as we have seen, was not prepared to leave things there. On the contrary, he sought an alternative basis for their intelligibility; and this he found in the phenomena of infantile sexuality and the Oedipus Complex. For psychoanalysis, I have argued, is not a merely subjective or phenomenological form of psychology.

The thesis that consciousness reflects reality applies also to desires, wishes and feelings; and a similar point can be made about them. To see this, however, it is necessary to reject a set of ancient and widely held views. For the idea that our desires and feelings are purely subjective and arbitrary in character is one that goes back at least to Plato's *Philebus*, where it is discussed and criticized at length. This view has also been central to the psychology of the empiricists, which is commonly based upon a sharp and dualistic distinction between the roles of reason and emotion in human life. According to Hume, for example, 'our passions, volitions and actions . . . being original facts and realities, compleat in themselves . . . imply no reference to other passions, volitions or actions. 'Tis impossible, therefore, they can be pronounced true or false, and be either contrary or conformable to reason' (*Treatise*, III.i.1). Likewise, Ayer writes that the expressions of emotion 'have no objective validity whatsoever' and 'do not come under the category of truth and falsehood' (*Language, Truth and Logic*, p. 108).

Widespread and well-entrenched as these views may be, they must be rejected. For it is simply not the case that our feelings are 'compleat in themselves' and imply no reference beyond themselves. Just as thoughts refer to objects, so too do feelings. As Macmurray says, 'why should feelings be in any different case? . . . They also refer to things outside us. If I am angry I am angry at something or somebody, though I may not always be able to say precisely what it is' (*Reason and Emotion*, pp. 24–5). Furthermore, just as thought is judged false if it fails to reflect appropriately the reality to which it refers, so too feelings can be regarded as false or irrational if they are inappropriate to their objects. If I am terrified of the dark, for example, or if I have a reaction of extreme revulsion at the sight of a spider, my responses may well be regarded as 'irrational' ones. Similarly, my desires and wishes may be regarded as 'false', and so too can my emotional responses: not in the sense that they are not really desired or felt, but in the sense that what I desire or feel is unintelligible or inappropriate in the situation.

It is a basic and crucially significant principle of psychoanalysis

that those of our desires and feelings which seem inappropriate and irrational only appear to be so. A fuller and deeper understanding of psychology shows that even the craziest-seeming and most apparently irrational of human reactions are intelligible and appropriate responses to the situations which give rise to them.

But what is to count as an intelligible and appropriate response? This raises difficult and contentious issues; especially in the light of the fact that one of Freud's most notable achievements has been to alter radically our ideas of people's most basic motivations. In particular, the idea of infantile sexuality is one that many people find implausible and even unintelligible. Here I will confine myself to the observation that Freud seeks always to show that the motivation of an action is the product of a limited number of drives or instincts (among which sexuality, in Freud's wide sense of the term, looms large). He seeks to show, in other words, that our motives and desires are intelligible in so far as they are universally shared aspects of what Freud regards as a nature common to all human beings.

Freud's instinct theory is, of course, one of the most controversial and widely disputed areas of psychoanalytic thought. Although I am in sympathy with some of these criticisms, I do not intend to pursue them here. My purpose in mentioning these matters is neither to endorse nor to criticize Freud's picture of human nature. Rather, I have been trying only to bring out a feature of Freud's approach which has important implications for the epistemological themes that I am discussing. For I have been arguing that psychoanalysis involves the view that explaining an action or other psychological event must involve more than merely citing a set of beliefs and desires which would make sense of it. The explanation must also, if need be, show how these beliefs and desires are themselves intelligible and explicable in the situation.¹¹

This is the realist approach in psychology. Freud describes it with great clarity in an early paper, 'The Aetiology of Hysteria' (1896). He is discussing the fact that the reactions of hysterics often appear to be 'abnormal and exaggerated'. The medical psychiatry of his time took these appearances for reality, and postulated a biologically-based 'general abnormal sensibility to stimulation' in the hysteric to explain them (for which there was, and is, no independent evidence).¹² As Freud observes, psychoanalysis has a different

¹¹ See Sachs, 'On Freud's Doctrine of Emotions' for a good account of Freud's views on the emotions in these terms.

¹² 'The physiological basis of hysteria is still very obscure' (Mayer-Gross *et al.*, *Clinical Psychiatry*, p. 133). Nevertheless, these attitudes persist to a considerable extent, even if the terms in which they are expressed have changed.

approach, according to which

the reaction of hysterics only appears exaggerated; it is bound to appear so to us, because we know only a small part of the motive forces behind it. In reality, this reaction is proportionate to the exciting stimulus, and therefore normal and psychologically intelligible. We immediately perceive this when analysis has added to the manifest causes of which the patient is conscious, those other causes which have contributed to the result, though the patient knows nothing about them and is therefore unable to tell us anything. ('The Aetiology of Hysteria', p. 214)

The principle that Freud here outlines for the explanation of abnormal behaviour was to be a guiding principle of his work, in all its different areas, for the remainder of his life; not because he adhered to it in a rigid and dogmatic fashion, but rather because it was repeatedly and continually confirmed by his subsequent investigations.

Everything that happens in psychological life happens for a reason and has an intelligible cause. Even the most apparently arbitrary, insignificant, irrational, meaningless, abnormal and crazy ideas, thoughts, feelings and actions, can be shown to have a valid and explicable place in our psychology. To anticipate an issue to which I shall be returning, what is this but Hegel's notorious principle that 'what is actual is rational', applied to psychological life? Moreover, a purely subjective or phenomenological account will not do here. On the contrary, a realist one is needed, which recognizes that even the most aberrant forms of consciousness ultimately reflect objective reality. These, I have argued, are the conclusions towards which Freud's theory points.

6 Relativism and the Concept of Ideology

Knowledge and Society

In the previous two chapters, I have been considering a variety of phenomena – illusions, dreams, subjective feelings and emotions – which share in common the fact that they appear to present problems for the realist perspective. For they all seem to be cases where there is a discrepancy between consciousness and reality, cases in which a subjective state fails to reflect the objective world. Such cases have played a central role in traditional theory of knowledge as we have inherited it from the classical seventeenth- and eighteenth-century philosophers. However, contemporary epistemology has increasingly come to be dominated by a new and different set of ideas and problems. These issues arise out of a recognition of the *social* and *historical* character of consciousness and knowledge.

The awareness that consciousness is a social phenomenon is a characteristic and central feature of modern thought.¹ When one now looks back at the philosophy of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-centuries, one is struck by the way in which it regards human consciousness and activity in entirely individualistic terms. The mind and its contents are portrayed as an essentially private, subjective and inner, personal realm, related only accidentally and contingently to the 'external' world of other minds and material things. The epistemological problems which are central to this tradition – the problems that I have been discussing – reflect this individualism: they concern the relation of such an isolated individual subject to the 'external' world.

¹ Plato and other ancient philosophers were well aware of the social and historical character of consciousness and thought. In view of this, it would perhaps be better to say that individualism and the denial of the social nature of consciousness are particular and characteristic features of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century thought.

I have relied heavily on Freud in developing a realist response to the idealist and dualist arguments which arise from this tradition. Freud is rightly regarded as one of the decisive influences on modern thought, and as one of the most important sources of criticism of the Cartesian tradition of thinking about the mind. However, it is worth noting that psychoanalysis shares with this tradition a strongly individualistic basis. Freud has often been criticized for his persistent failure to acknowledge adequately the social character of human nature and human consciousness. These criticisms are, in my view, justified; and I do not wish to leave the impression that I am an uncritical and dogmatic supporter of all aspects of his views. For it seems to me that any fully adequate account of our psychological life (including our dreams), would have to give much greater attention to its social character and determinants, than Freud does.

Gradually during this century, and rapidly during the last twenty years, however, an acknowledgement of the social character of human thought and activity has been assuming a central place in philosophical discussion. It is perhaps not at once apparent that this is so; for the most immediately striking feature of contemporary philosophy is its concern – one might almost say, its obsession – with questions of language. Discussion of the nature of meaning, the relation of language to the world, etc., have been at the centre both of recent English-language philosophy, and also of Continental, especially structuralist and post-structuralist, thought. Language, it is agreed on all sides, is the very form of thought, the form of consciousness, the form even of the self. However, it is important to see that a major part of the significance of this focus on language is that it provides an alternative to the Cartesian and traditional, subjective, and individualistic account of the mind. For language is something essentially *social, public* and *objective*; and an account of thought in these terms provides a social and objective account of the mind and of consciousness.

The idea that consciousness is a social phenomenon is, thus, an integral part of contemporary philosophical thought. It is an essential feature both of the analytic tradition and of structuralism.² However, it would be a mistake to think that this idea originates in either of these traditions. In its modern form, this idea derives neither from Wittgenstein nor from de Saussure, but rather from Hegel and Marx. It is to Hegel that the credit must go for first seeing all things human in social and historical terms.

² Even though it is a feature which has yet to be accommodated with other aspects of these traditions, as we shall presently see.

It is now more than one hundred and fifty years since Hegel's death, and one hundred years since Marx died. The social sciences securely occupy a central place in modern thought. It is only recently, however, that the ideas and issues posed by Hegel, Marx and the social sciences have assumed a central place in philosophical discussion. Indeed, as Hegel says, 'the owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the falling of the dusk' (*Philosophy of Right*, p. 13). But spread its wings at last it has.

The result is a renewed challenge to realism and to the belief in the possibility of objective and scientific knowledge, a resurgence of scepticism, and a profound crisis for the traditional approach to epistemology. For a recognition of the social and historical character of knowledge seems to undermine the traditional basis of the theory of knowledge. The conclusion that it seems to imply is that our beliefs about the world can have no valid claim to absolute, objective or scientific status. Our beliefs can be no more than the way in which *we*, in *our* particular society, in *this* historical period, see the world. Our knowledge, including our very standards of truth, objectivity and rationality, seems merely relative to the particular context in which it is formed.

The traditional argument from illusion, discussed in chapter 4, concerns the fact that the way reality appears varies with different *individual* perspectives and conditions of observation. The case for relativism commonly begins with an anthropological or historical version of this argument. Attention is drawn to the fact that beliefs about the world, and even standards of truth and rationality, differ from culture to culture, and from one historical epoch to another. For example, we, in this country, now, see the natural world in terms which have been shaped and formed by developments in science and industry during the last three hundred years. We have a very different view of the natural world from that of our European forebears at the end of the middle ages; and it is different again from the way in which the world is seen by members of communities which have remained relatively untouched by modern industry.

By themselves these simple observations are not sufficient either to disturb the traditional approach in the theory of knowledge or to establish relativism as an alternative. It is no new insight that different people, in different societies, in different historical periods, see the world differently. The fact that beliefs about the world are influenced by socially acquired attitudes and assumptions has long been recognized in epistemology. However, such social influences have traditionally been regarded as exercising a *distorting* effect upon knowledge. Genuine knowledge must be objective, it must reflect the

object. The influences and assumptions due merely to particular social perspectives must be eliminated.

Traditional epistemology aims to achieve just this. It seeks to specify the method by which genuine knowledge, free from the distorting influences of subjective and partial perspectives, can be achieved. It tries to do this, moreover, by discovering foundations for knowledge which are unshakeably secure and universally valid. In this way, it hopes to reject both scepticism and relativism. Indeed, traditional epistemology is often presented as having as its primary purpose the refutation of scepticism and the provision of a guaranteed method by which knowledge can be attained.

Modern relativism involves a rejection of this traditional epistemological project. It starts from the observation of the social variation of beliefs. An essential further aspect of it, however, is a conviction of the futility of seeking for foundations for knowledge, either in experience or in reason. There is no certain basis, no infallible method, which can justify or guarantee what we regard as 'knowledge' against other, opposed but coherent, beliefs. There is no way of ensuring that any particular way of seeing the world is 'better', 'truer', more 'scientific', 'objective' or 'rational' than any other. Knowledge has no indubitable and universal foundations: it is *merely* the product of the social conditions from which it arises. Different social conditions produce different beliefs; and all that we can say is that they are different. They are, in Kuhn's terms, 'incommensurable'.

The Problem of Foundations

As we have already seen, there are two basic ways in which traditional epistemology has tried to found and to justify knowledge: empiricism and rationalism. Relativism rejects both. Empiricism involves the view that knowledge is derived from and based upon experience; and it is this grounding in experience which guarantees its truth and objectivity. However, there are many different sorts of things that people claim to experience: not only the common objects of everyday life, but also, at times, people say that they have experienced such things as God, the unity of creation, and suchlike. Not all of these qualify as valid bases for knowledge. Starting with Locke, the classical empiricists sought to analyse experience, and to distinguish within it two elements: (1) what is given immediately through the senses, and (2) what is contributed by interpretation, inference, habit and thought. They distinguished, that is to say, between the 'given' and the 'constructed'.

This distinction is well illustrated by Berkeley.

When you behold [a] picture of Julius Caesar, do you see with your eyes any more than some colours and figures, with a certain symmetry and composition of the whole? . . . And would not a man, who had never known anything of Julius Caesar, see as much? . . . Whence comes it then that your thoughts are directed to the Roman emperor and his are not? This cannot proceed from the sensations or ideas of sense by you then perceived . . . it should seem therefore to proceed from reason and memory. (*First Dialogue*, p. 236)

According to Berkeley, provided that we have a well-functioning sense of sight, we all will be presented with the same sensory data when we look at the same picture. But what we make of that picture – whether or not we interpret it as a portrait of Julius Caesar – depends upon 'reason and memory'. Only what is directly and immediately given to the senses is allowed to qualify as genuine experience (experience 'in the strict sense' as Berkeley puts it).

By confining our attention to what is directly given in experience and excluding what is constructed by 'reason and memory', the empiricists claimed to have provided a method for achieving objective knowledge. Furthermore, the empiricists believed that there could be no doubt or mistake about the data given immediately to the senses. It thus provided a certain and secure basis for knowledge.

The idea that immediate experience alone can provide a guarantee of the objectivity of knowledge is a very attractive one; but, unfortunately, the objections to it are overwhelming. These derive ultimately from Kant, and have become so much a part of the accepted outlook of modern philosophy that I shall deal only briefly with them here.³ Kant insists that what is given immediately to the senses is not yet data for us, not yet experience, still less knowledge. We must interpret and make sense of what is given. Kant sums this up in his famous slogan, 'thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind' (*Critique of Pure Reason*, A51 = B75).

That is to say, we are not merely the passive recipients of given data. We act upon the materials provided by the senses – we organize, interpret, shape and form our experience and our knowledge. And because this interpretive activity is something that we bring to experience it is, in this sense, Kant argued, *a priori*. The concepts we use to organize and make sense of our sensory data are

³ However, I deal with these questions more fully in the next two chapters.

not derived from experience. On the contrary, they are *imposed* by us on it. In acting thus upon our experience, as we saw in chapter 2, we thereby alter it and create something 'new'. We construct an 'object of knowledge', which, since it is in part our creation, must differ from the object as it is in itself.

The gulf that is thus opened up, between the thing-in-itself and our knowledge, would seem to invite the sceptical conclusion that all our knowledge is a purely subjective and arbitrary creation. But Kant, at least, did not draw this conclusion. He believed that certain of the concepts and principles by which we organize and interpret experience, are *universal* and *necessary* forms of human thought. These he called the 'forms of sensibility' (space and time) and the 'categories'. These forms and categories are thus regarded by Kant as *a priori*, not only in the sense that they are prior to and independent of experience, but also in the sense that they are universal and necessary principles of thought. We must and do use these categories in all our experience and knowledge of the world; for they are, Kant thought, the immutable and inescapable principles of human reason and of human thought.

In this way, Kant seeks to provide a justification and foundation for knowledge. This foundation is a rational and *a priori* one. In so far as we seek to have experience and knowledge, we must do so according to the forms of the categories. Kant thus argued, for example, that the basic laws of arithmetic, the principles of Euclidean geometry and Newton's Laws of Motion were *a priori* and necessary principles of thought, because founded on the categories. His view was that any attempt to think about the geometric properties of the world must be Euclidean in character, and any natural science must necessarily be Newtonian and causal (i.e. mechanical) in form.

History, unfortunately, has dealt this aspect of Kant's philosophy a series of devastating blows. Developments in mathematics and science during the last two hundred years have refuted the central pillars of Kant's argument. Kant's idea that Euclidean geometry is the sole and necessary mathematical account of space has been refuted. Alternative, non-Euclidean geometries have been developed; and, indeed, these provide the basis for what is regarded by contemporary physicists as the most accurate account of the actual nature of space. Newton's laws, too, have been overthrown and superseded by relativity theory. What Kant regarded as the central examples of universal and necessary principles of human thought have been revealed as merely relative – as nothing but

particular and historically limited stages in the development of scientific and mathematical theory.

These dramatic historical refutations are damaging enough to Kant's attempt to give rational foundations to knowledge and to argue that the categories are necessary and universal forms of thought. However, in recent years, they have been backed up and supplemented by more general and philosophical lines of argument, which call into question the very notion of universal and necessary forms of thought.

Quine's arguments to this effect have been particularly influential. He agrees with Kant that the data of sense must be interpreted and fitted into a structure of thought. However, he insists that there are no universal and necessary forms that this structure must take: there are no logically necessary truths.

The totality of our so-called knowledge or beliefs, from the most casual matters of geography and history to the profoundest laws of atomic physics or even of pure mathematics and logic, is a man-made fabric which impinges on experience only along the edges. . . . It is . . . folly to seek a boundary between synthetic statements, which hold contingently on experience, and analytic statements, which hold come what may. Any statement can be held true come what may, if we make drastic enough adjustments elsewhere in the system. . . . Conversely, by the same token, no statement is immune to revision. ('Two Dogmas of Empiricism', pp. 42–3)

In this manner, even the necessity of the basic laws of arithmetic may be questioned. An important aspect of Wittgenstein's later work is his attempt to do just this. He argues, for example, that there is no ineluctable, logical necessity in the simple number series. He gives the following illustration to make his point. We are teaching a person his numbers, and at an order of the form ' $+n$ ' he is to write down a series starting with 0 and formed by adding n . 'Let us suppose', says Wittgenstein, that 'we have done exercises and given him tests up to 1000. Now we get the pupil to continue a series (say $+2$) beyond 1000 – and he writes 1000, 1004, 1008, 1012' (*Philosophical Investigations*, §185). We complain that he has failed to follow our instructions; but he insists that he *has* done so. 'How is it decided what is the right step to take at any particular stage?' asks Wittgenstein. It may seem that the rule we have given $(+2)$ uniquely specifies and, indeed, compels the next step. Wittgenstein, however, argues that this is not so; for it depends upon how the rule is interpreted, and different interpretations are possible.

It is no doubt true that hardly anybody would in fact behave like the pupil in Wittgenstein's example. Wittgenstein does not dispute this. He is arguing, rather, that there is no 'compulsion' or 'necessity' in arithmetic or in logic which forces us to arrive at a particular result. There are no ineluctable, logical necessities of this kind.⁴ 'It would almost be more correct to say, not that an intuition was needed at every stage, but that a new decision was needed at every stage' (§186). Of course, in saying this, Wittgenstein does not mean that the arithmetical operation of addition is an arbitrary, individual or subjective matter. On the contrary, the decision that is required for addition is a *social* one.

We should presumably not call it 'counting' if everyone said the numbers one after the other *anyhow*; but of course it is not simply a question of a name. For what we call 'counting' is an important part of our life's activities. . . . Counting (and that means: counting like *this*) is a technique that is employed daily in the most various operations of our lives . . . it is used. (*Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, §I.4)

Following a rule, says Wittgenstein, is a 'custom', an 'institution' (*Philosophical Investigations*, §199).

The Challenge of Relativism

Kant's attempt to vindicate knowledge on the basis of universal and necessary forms of thought is thus faced with insuperable problems. The history of the sciences and mathematics since Kant's day has refuted his major examples, and the philosophical arguments just outlined add a further dimension of difficulties. The Kantian idea that the categories are necessary and universal forms of thought must be abandoned, and the social and historical, the relative and changeable, character of our concepts and theories must be acknowledged.

The social and historical nature of consciousness is, indeed, an evident and undeniable fact. The social sciences have achieved an ineradicable and increasingly central place in contemporary thought; and the individualism and epistemological absolutism of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is no longer a tenable outlook. But in saying this, I do not mean to suggest that traditional

⁴ Cf. similar arguments by Wittgenstein in *The Blue and Brown Books*, pp. 141ff; and *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, §§I.1ff. See also the account of these arguments in Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*.

epistemology has no current support, or that the social and historical nature of thought is universally acknowledged. On the contrary, there is great resistance to these ideas, for fear that they will inevitably lead to an extreme relativism in the theory of knowledge, involving the denial of the objectivity and truth of knowledge.

It is true, indeed, that a recognition of the social dimension of thought is quite standardly taken to imply relativism in the theory of knowledge. Moreover, such relativism has been a highly fashionable and influential position in recent years, both on the Continent and in the English-speaking world. If the recognition of the social nature of thought has dealt a death-blow to Kant's philosophy as an attempt to give knowledge absolute and *a priori* foundations in a rationalist fashion, the Kantian outlook has thereby equally been given a whole new lease of life, in the form of the many varieties of social relativism. For most recent versions of relativism are basically Kantian in approach, whether explicitly or implicitly so. They accept the basic principles of Kant's theory of knowledge, except upon a single point. There is widespread agreement with Kant in his view that, in the process of knowledge, we impose categories and interpretations upon the unformed materials provided by the senses. However, it is equally widely argued that these categories and interpretations are not, as Kant thought, universal and necessary features of thought; but rather socially and historically created and determined, socially and historically relative. There are no universal, absolute and trans-historical criteria of objectivity, rationality or truth. When we judge a theory to be rational or irrational, scientific or unscientific, the standards we employ are inescapably relative. These standards are the product of a particular society – an aspect of its 'conceptual scheme' or 'grid', its 'world-view', its 'ideology', its 'discourse', its 'paradigm', etc. The judgements that are made on their basis are therefore valid only within that context. Truth, objectivity, rationality have no universal and absolute significance: they are purely relative. 'Truth' means nothing more than 'accepted within a particular social framework of thought'. It is a judgement which is unavoidably relative to a particular framework, and which has no universal significance.

The implication of such relativism is that, from within any particular 'world-view', it is impossible to judge the truth, rationality or objectivity of another. For these judgements are relative to a particular world-view and valid only within it. Different world-views are 'incommensurable'. They are *merely* different, and cannot be compared in respect of their truth, rationality or objectivity. We cannot say that our current scientific understanding of the world is superior

in these respects to other ways of seeing the world, even as compared to primitive, mystical or magical outlooks. For our very standards of truth, objectivity and rationality are merely a product of our particular world-view – of the system of categories and concepts that we use – and have meaning and validity only within that context.

Such relativism, I have indicated, is basically a sociological and historical version of Kant's epistemology; and all the familiar anti-realist, dualist, and idealist themes of Kant's philosophy re-assert themselves in this new context. For our beliefs and ideas about the world, according to the Kantian account of knowledge, are not a reflection of objective conditions. We are active in knowledge – we impose categories and concepts, an interpretation, a world-view, on our experience. But in so doing, as I have pointed out, we alter and change what is given to the senses. Hence the world we know is, in part at least, *our creation, our construction*. It is an 'object of knowledge', a construction of appearances, which differs necessarily from the way things are in themselves.

Such views, as I argued in chapter 2, involve the denial of realism and the possibility of knowledge of the objective world. Our knowledge is confined to appearances, to phenomena. We can never have knowledge of the world as it is in itself. This is the basic conclusion of Kant's epistemology; and it embodies what Engels usefully calls a sort of 'agnosticism'. For it is important to see that Kant is a *dualist* in his metaphysics. He believes in the existence *both* of subjective appearances *and* of things-in-themselves, even though he insists that we can know nothing of these things-in-themselves and must remain 'agnostic' about them. More cautious versions of neo-Kantian relativism tend to be similarly agnostic. Kuhn, for example, in his more restrained moments at least, does not deny the existence of an objective, material world, which has certain properties and features in itself and independently of how it is grasped by scientific theory. Althusser, likewise, does not deny the existence of 'real objects', although he does insist that the 'object of knowledge' is different and distinct.

Such 'agnosticism' was Kant's position, and is still an influential position in the theory of knowledge. But it is neither a satisfactory nor a stable position. For, in it, the thing-in-itself is an idle and empty notion – something entirely abstract, indeterminate and unknowable: a seemingly pointless vestige of, and sop to, realism and materialism; a veritable nothing about which nothing can be said. The temptation to eliminate it, and thus move backward from agnosticism and dualism to out-and-out idealism is a strong one; and this is a path well-trodden by contemporary philosophers. The

'object of knowledge' then becomes the only object, the phenomenal world the only world. The world, that is to say, becomes a construct, a creation, of our interpretation, our conceptual scheme, our discourse, our way of seeing things. Holders of different interpretations, different conceptual schemes, can no longer be said simply to interpret the same world differently: they inhabit 'different worlds'.

Kuhn, in his less restrained moments, puts forward this view. 'After Copernicus', he writes, 'astronomers lived in a different world' (*The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, p. 117), since 'the proponents of competing paradigms practice their trades in different worlds' (p. 150). Admittedly, Kuhn voices such views only in halting and hesitating terms, and he has tried to dissociate himself from the more extravagant implications they carry.⁵

However, other subsequent writers have taken up these themes and proclaimed them in no uncertain terms. Derrida is a currently fashionable example, and an extreme exponent of such views. In the manner of so much recent French thought, he looks upon beliefs, ideas and world-views in purely linguistic terms, as a 'text'. The idea of foundations for knowledge is scornfully dismissed as involving 'the metaphysics of presence'. The 'text' has no fixed and specific meaning, no determinate content: as Eagleton says, 'we are plunged into an abyss in which nothing is certain except "undecidability"' ('Wittgenstein's Friends', p. 68). As with Kuhn, our 'world' is regarded as a mere social construct, a mere product of 'discourse'. Moreover, Derrida's attitude towards the idea of an objective world, independent of consciousness, is anything but agnostic. 'There is nothing outside the text', he declares; there are no things-in-themselves, there is no material reality outside thought. In Eagleton's words 'difference and identity are equally effects of discourse. . . . The question of what counts as difference or identity is a social question to be contended over within discourse and forms of life, not a problem resolvable by "experience"' (*ibid*, pp. 66–7).

Rorty is another such idealist, although he is less bold and flamboyant in the way in which he puts his views forward. In an article appropriately entitled 'The World Well Lost', he argues not only that things-in-themselves, the objective world independent of consciousness, is unknowable, but that we should give up the very idea of such a world. In the Kantian manner, he maintains that the idea of an objective reality independent of consciousness is a 'vacuous' notion. He then goes on to argue that we must 'remove altogether the "realistic" temptation to use the word "world" in

⁵ See his 'Postscript' to the second edition of *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*; and also some of the essays in *The Essential Tension*.

[this] vacuous sense' (p. 15). In other words, the existence of objective reality is denied. There is nothing apart from the way in which we perceive and construct the world in thought.

Where these ideas ultimately lead becomes apparent in his widely read recent book, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. This is a sustained attack upon realism and the reflection theory of knowledge, which ends with a statement of extreme relativism. Rorty considers the argument between Galileo and his Inquisitor, Cardinal Bellarmine. Bellarmine's objections to Galileo's account of the heavens were based upon Scripture. According to Rorty, such objections cannot be dismissed as 'irrelevant', 'illogical' or as 'unscientific' in any objective sense. What is regarded as 'relevant' is entirely relative to the conceptual scheme or intellectual 'grid' that we are using.⁶ 'Galileo', says Rorty, 'so to speak, won the argument' (p. 331), in that the scientific rather than the theological approach to astronomy is the one that has largely prevailed. Nevertheless, we cannot say that Galileo's approach was any 'truer' or 'more rational' or 'more objective' than Bellarmine's.

The essential elements of the contemporary relativist position are contained here. In particular, these are radical and iconoclastic views, which question and undermine some of the central values and assumptions of the tradition of scientific thought. The ideas of reason and of scientific objectivity, which Galileo is commonly supposed to have championed against the dogmatic authoritarianism of the Inquisition, are reduced to mere artefacts of Galileo's ideology and conceptual scheme. They are merely 'socially constructed'; and so, in Derrida's words, they can be 'deconstructed' – criticized and revealed as lacking any ultimate basis; exposed as merely arbitrary, conventional and relative.

In this way, relativism has been used as the basis for a sweeping and radical-seeming critique of established ideas and attitudes. As such it has been an extremely influential philosophy. It is difficult to think of an area of thought which has remained untouched by it in the last few years. In science, morality, politics, art, literature, history, and philosophy the traditionally-accepted assumptions and methods have been 'deconstructed' – undermined, revealed as baseless, as merely 'ideological' and relative.⁷

⁶ The term 'intellectual grid' is borrowed by Rorty from Foucault, *The Order of Things*.
⁷ For example, in relation to science, see Feyerabend, *Against Method*; in relation to politics, morality and history, see Foucault's work, especially *Madness and Civilization*, *The Order of Things*, and *The History of Sexuality*; in literature, see Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, and Eagleton, *Literary Theory*; in philosophy, see Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*.

This is strong stuff; and relativists have grown increasingly bold in bringing out its full sceptical implications. Kuhn's hesitant and anxious comparisons of scientific change with the process of religious conversion, have been superseded by Rorty's confident assertion that there is nothing to choose, as regards rationality, between Galileo and the Inquisition, and by the revelling in uncertainty and paradox of Derrida and the post-structuralists. Indeed, the desire to scandalize and shock has become an important ingredient in the appeal of these ideas, as Rorty acknowledges when he talks of their 'deliciously naughty thrill'.⁸

Marx on Ideology

To the realistically-minded it may well seem that such views are nothing but a wilful celebration of scepticism and paradox; and, as such, that they are not intended to be taken seriously, even by their proponents. However, they cannot be dismissed so easily. For there is an important kernel of truth in the relativist position, which must be acknowledged and incorporated into any satisfactory account of knowledge. In particular, the relativist critique of traditional foundational epistemology is a compelling one. This aspect of the relativist approach is often summed up by describing it as an 'anti-epistemological' one. Our knowledge, it is argued, cannot be guaranteed against sceptical attack on the basis of absolute and indubitable foundations: the project of epistemology as traditionally conceived must be abandoned.

Once this much of the relativist case is conceded, however, it looks as though realism can no longer be defended. If knowledge is, indeed, a social and historical product, and if the traditional idea of foundations is rejected, then how is it possible to justify the claim that we can have knowledge of the objective world? This is the epistemological challenge that relativism poses. It is a serious and a significant challenge, which cannot simply be brushed aside. I shall respond to it, and discuss the issues it raises, in Part III of this book.

Before doing so, however, it is necessary to show how the sort of realism I have been developing can deal with the historical and social dimension of knowledge. For it is important to see that the recognition of the social character of thought is not the sole prerogative of relativism, and that a social perspective does not have to lead

⁸ 'Is There a Problem about Fictional Discourse?' p. 136. Cf. Davidson's reference to relativism as a 'heady and exotic doctrine' ('On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme', p. 5). Eagleton, too, notes the 'scandalizing' effect of the ideas (*Literary Theory*, p. 108).

to sceptical conclusions. Quite the contrary. The social aspect of knowledge is fully and adequately comprehensible *only* in realist terms – the relativist account is quite unsatisfactory for this task.

As we have seen, according to relativism we must reject the ‘epistemological’ approach. Instead of seeking to justify our beliefs in epistemological terms, we should adopt an objective and scientific – a social-scientific – attitude towards the products of consciousness. We should regard knowledge, in Hegel’s words, as a ‘phenomenon’ (*Phenomenology of Mind*, p. 135); and, specifically, as a social and historical phenomenon: as the product and outcome of particular social and historical conditions. We should regard ideas as *ideologies*.

The authority and backing of Hegel, Marx and Freud – either severally or jointly – is often claimed for these ideas. These thinkers are portrayed as ‘masters of suspicion’,⁹ whose primary achievement has been the negative and sceptical one of questioning and casting doubt upon established ideas and attitudes.

There is, of course, truth in the view that the ideas of these thinkers are radical and iconoclastic in their implications. Freud does expose the unconsciousness and irrationality at the basis of human life; and he thereby undermines the Cartesian idea of the purely self-conscious and rational subject. Hegel and Marx reveal the historical and ideological – the partial, limited and relative – character of our beliefs and ideas, of our science and knowledge. Moreover, the ideas of these writers are, indeed, in conflict with the traditional epistemological idea of absolute foundations, and they lead inevitably to a questioning of it.

This is the negative side of these ideas. But, although it is undoubtedly a real aspect of them, it is not the only aspect. The characteristic fault of relativism, however, is to see *only* this negative side. I have shown already that it is superficial and unsatisfactory to see Freud’s work solely in this negative light. The same is true for Hegel and Marx. Neither Hegel, nor Marx, nor Freud were mere sceptics or relativists in their outlooks. Quite the contrary, all three were strong realists. Each believed not only that it is *possible* to have knowledge of the objective, material world, but also that his own work had substantially contributed to such knowledge. It is only in these realist terms that the significance of their work can properly be understood.

To make these points I shall consider the Marxist concept of ideology. It is true, certainly, that to view a set of ideas as ideological

⁹ Descombes’ phrase, quoted by Callinicos, *Is There a Future for Marxism?* p. 31.

is to undermine any claim that may be made for their absolute objectivity, rationality, certainty or truth. It is to view these ideas as socially constructed, historically produced. Moreover, this may well be an illuminating and important point to make. Eagleton, for example, criticizes the traditional idea of literature in these terms when he writes,

Literature, in the sense of a set of works of assured and unalterable value, distinguished by certain shared inherent properties, does not exist. . . . The so-called ‘literary canon’, the unquestioned ‘great tradition’ of the ‘national literature’, has to be recognized as a *construct*, fashioned by particular people for particular reasons at a certain time. (*Literary Theory*, p. 11)

However, this is a merely negative and critical result, and it is vital to see that more is involved in the concept of ideology than this.¹⁰ Although a dense jungle of controversy has now grown up around Marx’s writings on this topic, there has been widespread agreement upon this point at least. Whatever Marx may have meant by ‘ideology’, he did not regard it as mere illusion, sheer error or pure ‘false consciousness’.

This is evident in Marx’s attitude towards religion. Marx was, of course, a materialist and an atheist; and I do not need to emphasize that he was an uncompromising critic of religion. Nevertheless, his account of religion is significantly different from that of earlier materialists and atheists.

The eighteenth century materialist philosophers had criticized religious ideas as false and illusory ones, bred of ignorance and fear of the unknown, and fostered by rulers and priests in order to reconcile people to the established order.¹¹ These views are still current, moreover. According to Ayer, for example, ‘no sentence which purports to describe the nature of a transcendent god can possess any literal significance. . . . All utterances about the nature of God are nonsensical’ (*Language, Truth and Logic*, p. 115). On such a view, religion is a pure illusion, the result of mere ignorance or error. There is a useful parallel here with the way dreams were regarded before Freud; for, as Althusser observes,

¹⁰ I do not wish to suggest that Eagleton is unaware of this.

¹¹ Indeed, Hobbes, in the seventeenth century, had already developed these criticisms of religion, although he had applied them only to ‘heathen’ creeds (*Leviathan*, Part I, ch. 12).

ideology is . . . thought as an imaginary construction whose status is exactly like the theoretical status of the dream among writers before Freud. For these writers . . . the dream was the imaginary, it was empty, null and arbitrarily 'stuck together' once the eyes had closed, from the residues of the only full and positive reality, the reality of the day. ('Ideological State Apparatuses', pp. 150–1)

Feuerbach's account of religion represents a significant advance on such views, and it was to influence Marx profoundly. Feuerbach, too, likens religious experience to dream, and not merely in order to dismiss it as nonsensical.¹²

Religion is the dream of the human mind. But even in dreams we do not find ourselves in emptiness or in heaven, but on earth, in the realm of reality. . . . Hence I do nothing more to religion. . . . than to open its eyes, or rather turn its gaze from the internal to the external, i.e. I change the object as it is in the imagination into the object as it is in reality. (*Essence of Christianity*, p. xxxix)

The idea of God, according to Feuerbach, reflects the aspirations and wishes of mankind in a projected and alienated form. 'Man . . . projects his being into objectivity, and then again makes himself an object to this projected image of himself thus converted into a subject' (pp. 29–30). The qualities which people attribute to God – love, goodness, justice, etc. – are in fact human qualities objectified: 'religion is . . . nothing else than the consciousness which man has of his own . . . nature' (p. 2).

Thus religious ideas are distorted and illusory ones, but not purely so, as Feuerbach stresses.

I by no means say: God is nothing, the Trinity is nothing, the Word of God is nothing, etc. I only show that they are not *that* which the illusions of theology make them. . . . The reproaches that according to my book religion is an absurdity, a nullity, a pure illusion, would be well founded only if, according to it, that into which I resolve religion . . . namely *man – anthropology*, were an absurdity, a nullity, a pure illusion. (p. xxxviii)

These ideas had a deep effect upon the young Marx. It is particularly apparent in the famous discussion of religion in his 'Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law, Introduction' of

¹² The parallels between Feuerbach's account of religion and Freud's account of dreams are, indeed, striking; even if they do not go very far. 'The basic dogmas of Christianity are the fulfilled wishes of mankind', says Feuerbach (quoted by McLellan, *The Young Hegelians*, p. 89).

1844. Like Feuerbach, Marx starts from the premise that 'man makes religion, religion does not make man'. Again like Feuerbach, he sees religious ideas as fantastic and illusory ones, 'the opium of the people'; and yet they also reflect and express a real content, 'Religious distress is at the same time the expression of real distress and the protest against real distress. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of a spiritless situation' (p. 175, Marx's emphasis).

In this way, the young Marx took over Feuerbach's approach; but he was soon to feel its limitations, and to take a decisive step beyond it in his understanding of ideology. This is heralded in the 'Theses on Feuerbach'. For Feuerbach and earlier materialists had left unanswered a crucial question: why do people perceive their situation in alienated and distorted terms? Feuerbach does not explicitly confront this problem; but the answer implied in his work is that the distortions of the religious consciousness have internal and subjective roots, which can be tackled and overcome by a purely intellectual process of philosophical argument and 'criticism'.

Marx's approach is different. In his later works he not only *interprets* and makes sense of the *content* of alienated kinds of consciousness; also and additionally, he *explains* their alien and distorted *form* and accounts for their genesis.¹³ Marx describes this approach, and distinguishes it from Feuerbach's, in brilliantly concise and clear forms, as follows.

Feuerbach starts out from the fact of religious self-alienation, the duplication of the world into a religious, imaginary world and a real one. His work consists in the dissolution of the religious world into its secular basis. He overlooks the fact that after completing this work the chief thing still remains to be done. For the fact that the secular foundation detaches itself from itself and establishes itself in the clouds as an independent realm is really only to be explained by the self-cleavage and self-contradictoriness of the secular basis. . . . Thus, for instance, once the earthly family is discovered to be the secret of the holy family, the former must then itself be criticized in theory and revolutionized in practice. ('Theses on Feuerbach', IV)

This is the method that is exemplified in Marx's subsequent works. In these, however, the focus of attention shifts away from what he calls 'the mist-enveloped regions of the religious world' (*Capital*, I, p. 72), to the secular realm of political economy, and to

¹³ Although I did not stress it in my account of Freud in the last chapter, this point applies equally to his work. For Freud likewise seeks not only to interpret the content of dreams and neurotic symptoms, but also to explain their alien and distorted form and their genesis.

that secular form of alienated consciousness that Marx calls the 'fetishism of commodities'. But whether it is applied to secular or religious forms of consciousness, the essential point of this method is that the distortions they involve are not the product merely of inner, subjective or intellectual factors – they are rather a product of *reality itself*. To quote Godelier, 'it is not the subject who deceives himself, but *reality* which deceives *him*' ('Structure and Contradiction', p. 337).

By the 'fetishism of commodities', Marx refers to the fact that in commodity-producing societies like our own, value seems to be an objective property of things, and the economic laws which flow from it appear to have an independent character and to assert themselves forcibly 'like an over-riding law of Nature' (*Capital*, I, p. 75).

These are the appearances which a capitalist commodity economy presents. But they are false appearances, Marx argues. Value is not a property of things *as such* at all. In order for a thing to have an economic value it must enter into particular social relations in a particular way. Value is the property of things, therefore, only in so far as they are embedded in social relations – only in so far as they have the *social form* of commodities. Value is a social phenomenon, a social relation: it is 'a relation between persons expressed as a relation between things' (*Capital*, I, p. 74).¹⁴ And fetishism is the process 'which metamorphoses the social, economic character impressed on things in the process of social production into a natural character stemming from the material nature of those things'.¹⁵

The comprehension of value as a manifestation of social relations was the great scientific achievement of classical political economy. And yet this discovery is not in itself sufficient to dispel these appearances. For they are *objective* – fetishized, alienated – appearances, not mere mistaken ideas, intellectual errors or subjectively-based illusions. They are 'the *objective appearance* of the social characteristics of labour' (ibid., p. 82, my emphasis). For the seeming independence of economic categories is a real and objective feature of the situation, a *reflection of reality*, and specifically of the fact that

as a general rule articles of utility become commodities, only because they are products of the labour of private individuals who carry on their work independently of each other. . . Since the producers do not come into social contact with each other until they exchange their products, the specific social character of each producer's labour does not show itself except in the act of exchange. In other words, the

¹⁴ I take issue with G. A. Cohen's rigid insistence that value is a property *and not a relation* in 'Marxism and the Dialectical Method'.

¹⁵ Quoted by Geras, 'Marx and the Critique of Political Economy', p. 295.

labour of the individual asserts itself as a part of the labour of society, only by means of the relations which the act of exchange establishes directly between the products, and indirectly, through them, between the producers. To the latter, therefore, the relations connecting the labour of one individual with that of the rest appear, not as direct social relations between individuals at work, but as what they really are, material relations between persons and social relations between things. (ibid., pp. 72–3)

For Marx, then, economic alienation reflects phenomena and forces at work in commodity-producing societies; phenomena and forces which assert themselves with objectivity and necessity like laws of nature. He could not put it more clearly: 'the categories of bourgeois economy . . . are forms of thought expressing with social validity the conditions and relations of a definite, historically determined mode of production, viz. the production of commodities' (p. 76). For this reason, moreover, the appearances represented by such categories – even though they are ideological and mystified ones – cannot be dissolved simply by theoretical or intellectual criticism; but ultimately only by a material – a social and historical – transformation which eliminates commodity production as the basis of economic life. 'The life-process of society, which is based on the process of material production, does not strip off its mystical veil until it is treated as production by freely associated men, and is consciously regulated by them in accordance with a settled plan' (p. 80).

The same points apply to religious forms of thought. Religious ideas, likewise, are not mere errors or illusions. On the contrary, they reflect reality both in their specific content and form.

The religious world is but the reflex [i.e. reflection] of the real world. And for a society based upon the production of commodities, in which the producers in general . . . reduce their individual private labour to the standard of homogeneous human labour . . . Christianity with its *cultus* of abstract man . . . is the most fitting form of religion. (p. 79)

In pre-capitalist forms of society, on the other hand, the limited development of production, and the corresponding narrowness of social relations, 'is reflected in the ancient worship of Nature, and in the other elements of the popular religions' (*idem*). Moreover, the practical implications are the same as in the secular case: 'the religious reflex of the real world can . . . only . . . finally vanish when the practical relations of everyday life offer to man none but per-

factly intelligible and reasonable relations with regard to his fellow men and to Nature' (*idem*).¹⁶

Structuralist Accounts

For Marx, then, fetishism, whether religious or economic, is a false and illusory form of consciousness; but not purely and simply so. Not only does its content contain some measure of validity and truth; but its distortions, too, are the product and reflection of real conditions. Thus Marx, like Freud, believes – and, in important cases, demonstrates – that false ideas, as well as true ones, reflect reality. The false and illusory constructions of ideology do not, therefore, constitute the refutations of realism they are claimed to be by relativist writers.

This is the major point I wish to establish in this part of the book. However, I cannot let matters rest quite yet; for the account that I have just given of the concept of ideology has been the target of incessant attack by structuralist and post-structuralist writers. Althusser's work has been particularly influential in this context. Some consideration of it, and of the work it has spawned, is unavoidable. A full and adequate treatment of all the issues raised by this work is out of the question here, for its influence has been enormous and wide-ranging. Indeed, this body of ideas has become all but the constitutive ideology of whole areas of study: for example, film and 'cultural' studies, certain areas of literary criticism, and the heavy-theoretical end of women's studies. I shall confine myself to a brief discussion of some of the epistemological problems this work raises.

These, however, are quite central ones for structuralism and its successors. For the rejection of realism and the reflection theory is the first principle of their accounts of ideology. In particular, Althusser's position on this question follows directly from his more general views about the relation of ideas to the world. We have already

¹⁶ This important point is also made very clearly and concretely by Lenin in his writings on religion. 'It would be stupid to think that . . . religious prejudices could be dispelled by purely propaganda methods. It would be bourgeois narrow-mindedness to forget that the yoke of religion that weighs upon mankind is merely a product and reflection of the economic yoke within society' ('Socialism and Religion', p. 10). To forestall predictable misunderstandings, it is important to note that Lenin by no means denies the value of intellectual argument against religion. 'Does this mean that educational books against religion are harmful or unnecessary? No, nothing of the kind. It means that Social-Democracy's atheist propaganda must be *subordinated* to its basic task – the development of the class struggle of the exploited *masses* against the exploiters' ('The Attitude of the Workers' Party to Religion', p. 22).

encountered these. Our knowledge and beliefs about the world are 'constructs'. Things as we are conscious of them are as much the products of our knowledge itself as reflections of reality; they are 'objects of knowledge' to be distinguished absolutely from 'real objects'.

Likewise, ideology is a construct, a 'system of representations'. But what is represented in ideology, Althusser insists, is not the real world, not real social relations, but rather (yet another!) 'new' and 'specific' form of reality: 'ideological reality' ('Ideological State Apparatuses', p. 128; cf. *For Marx*, p. 233).

Thus Althusser rejects the view that ideology is a form of consciousness which reflects economic conditions in a distorted and false form. This account, he argues, is not capable of comprehending the great power and influence of ideology; and the virtue claimed for his theory is that it can do so. For the realist position suggests that as material and economic conditions change, as the productive forces develop, social relations and ideologies should automatically be transformed. Experience, however, often seems to tell a different tale. And loath as Althusser is to recognize experience as his ally, it is the strongest argument in his favour, and the basis for the widespread appeal of his views.

A particularly important experience has been that of the emergence, during this century, of 'actually existing' socialist societies.¹⁷ For in these societies, the economic and political situation has been radically transformed, yet many of the ideas and attitudes characteristic of the old order remain. The material base has changed dramatically, and yet the ideological superstructure – as embodied not only in ideas and attitudes, but also in cultural forms, customs, habits and institutions – remains unaltered and intact.

Moreover, it is not necessary to look to the socialist world to learn this lesson; it is evident a great deal closer to home. For the ideology of the family – the ideal of the monogamous, patriarchal, nuclear family – is a pervasive feature of our society; and one which seems to persist and endure as a universal norm, despite the fact that it less and less reflects the realities of family life. These ideas have been voiced time and again by members of the women's movement. At the most basic level, the ideology of the family embodies the stereotype of the household 'organized . . . on the basis of a division of labour between a primary breadwinner (male) and a primary

¹⁷ This useful phrase is drawn from Bahro, *The Alternative in Eastern Europe*. With it he is, of course, referring to societies like the Soviet Union, China and those of Eastern Europe, etc., in which capitalism has been overthrown and in which socialist regimes, of however imperfect a character, have been established.

childrearer (female)'. But social reality is changing; and as a result 'this form of family-household is markedly less prevalent than it is usually assumed to be. The stereotypical nuclear family accounts, roughly, for only one third of households in Britain today' (Barrett and McIntosh, *The Anti-Social Family*, pp. 7-8). Yet the ideology of the family, it is argued, shows no signs of 'withering away'.

In this light it is not difficult to see what Althusser means when he talks of ideology as the representation of 'imaginary' relations. The family is portrayed as a harmonious social unit, in which each member has a specific role and duties, and in which each finds satisfaction and fulfilment.¹⁸ Moreover, this picture of the family is not an individual creation: it is a social product which is imposed upon individuals; it is a 'system of representations' which is 'in-scribed' not only in the minds of individuals, but in social forms – in institutions and cultural forms, rituals and practices (Althusser, 'Ideological State Apparatuses', *passim*).

Conceived in this way, the ideology of the family is, indeed, an imaginary creation, a social construct, a set of representations discrepant from the reality of family life. And there is truth in this view; I have no wish to deny it. However, I do wish to insist that this account reflects only one aspect of the ideology of the family, and that it is a superficial and one-sided account.

In the first place, it presents a very one-dimensional picture of the ideology surrounding the family. The ideological representations of the family are a great deal more subtle and complex, and more responsive to changes in actual conditions, than this account allows. These representations by no means always idealize the family. Its problems and tensions have also been exposed and explored, almost obsessively even, in recent films and literature. Ideology is not the monopoly of the idealizers of the family, as Althusser implies. Particularly in the last few years, the family has been the focus of furious ideological debate and conflict. It is clear that just as there is ideology which idealizes the family, so there is ideology which criticizes it. Thank heaven that this is so! – otherwise the established ideology of the family would go unchallenged and uncriticized.¹⁹

¹⁸ See Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, §§158-81, and *Phenomenology of Spirit*, pp. 267ff, for an unashamed expression of this ideology.

¹⁹ In using the term 'ideology' here I don't intend any judgement about the truth and adequacy, or otherwise, of these ideas. In general, I have tried to use the word primarily to mark and describe the social and historical character of ideas, in an epistemologically neutral manner. The present chapter, however, since it is devoted specifically to a discussion of false ideas, may tend to obscure this fact.

Critiques of the family often represent it as a prison and a strait-jacket on individuals, particularly women. Counterposed to these 'representations' is the vision of forms of 'loving', 'cooperative', 'caring' and 'emotionally satisfying' relationship, unconstrained by established family forms. No doubt it would be easy to show the imaginary contents, the fantasy elements, in many such representations. Again, however, to see only this aspect would be to take a superficial and one-sided view. Barrett and McIntosh usefully stress that socialists and feminists have had varied and often ambivalent attitudes to the family.

Socialists . . . have found it impossible to maintain a purely critical stance to the family. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the labour movement has consistently struggled to protect this most popular of working-class institutions, when necessary at the expense of women workers. Any call to 'smash the family' is usually perceived not only as romantic anarchism but as vanguardist and patronizing. (p. 19)

Moreover, 'the history of feminism presents us with many contradictions on these questions' (*idem*).

The Althusserian account may suffice if your only concern is to criticize and reject an ideology, but not if you wish to understand it. For ideology is a more complex and contradictory phenomenon than this picture allows. Once this is appreciated, it is an easy matter to see that ideological conflicts about the family are the products and reflections of *real* conflicts. For who can be so blind as not to be aware that the *reality* of modern family life is full of tensions, conflicts and contradictions? These real conflicts are reflected and represented in ideological conflicts: the earthly family is, indeed, the secret of the ideal, the ideological, the holy family.

Moreover, according to Marx and Engels, the conflicts-and contradictions, which infect both the real family and the ideology of the family, are the product and reflection of deeper and more general conflicts in society, between the developing forces of production and the existing relations of production. But they are not an immediate and direct reflection. Ideology has a 'relative autonomy'. It does not change at once and automatically with economic development; and yet, 'in the last instance', the influence of material factors is overwhelming and decisive.²⁰

²⁰ For the classic presentation of these views, see Engels' letters to Bloch (21 September 1890), Schmidt (27 October 1890), Mehring (14 July 1893) and Borgius (25 January 1894), all in Marx and Engels, *Selected Works*.

Althusser, too, is fond of these phrases; but, as even his followers have pointed out, they cannot be reconciled with the anti-realist and anti-materialist line that predominates in his work. With merciless consistency his 'post-structuralist' successors have rid his account of ideology of what vestiges it has of realism and materialism. Ideology is no longer a 'representation' of anything which even pretends to be objective or real – it is a 'signifying practice'; and, as Hirst explains, 'the products of signifying practices do not "represent" anything outside them, they cannot serve as a means of expression of class interests or of misrecognition of class interests' ('Althusser and the Theory of Ideology', p. 408).

The language here may be novel, but these ideas are perfectly familiar ones: they are the stock-in-trade of the kind of neo-Kantian relativism and idealism discussed above. Eagleton describes them in more recognizable terms as follows.

The sign as 'reflection', 'expression' or 'representation' denies the productive character of language: it suppresses the fact that we only have a 'world' at all because we have language to signify it, and that what we count as 'real' is bound up with what alterable structures of signification we live within. (*Literary Theory*, p. 136)

The real world thus drops out of the picture as irrelevant. Not even in 'the last instance' does ideology reflect or refer to an independent social reality: it creates and constructs its own, entirely autonomous, 'world'.

The effect of this philosophy is to discourage any empirical understanding of the realities of family life. It removes all attention from material and economic phenomena. It focuses exclusively upon the supposedly separate realm of ideology, and upon the ways in which the 'family' (the ideology of the family, that is) is represented and constructed in thought.²¹ Moreover, these views make ideology into an absolutely separate and autonomous realm, immune to social influence and social change. According to Hirst, 'Marxists must get used to the idea that important social divisions are not simply dependent on particular forms of the economy and politics and that they will not vanish with their supersession' (*ibid.*, p. 398). This bleak perspective has nothing to recommend it, either to Marxists or to anyone else. It denies the most elementary and basic insight of Marx in relation to the family: namely, that the family is a social and

²¹ Foucault's talk of different 'discourses' has precisely the same effects, and for the same reasons.

historical phenomenon, which changes and develops, ultimately in response to economic and political pressures.²² To deny this is absurd, and doubly so for anyone who would like to call themselves a Marxist.

Furthermore, it is vital to see that the experience of socialist societies, although it has presented many hard problems for Marxism, is no refutation of this basic principle. For the family has undoubtedly changed in 'actually existing' socialist societies; and it has done so under the pressure of economic and political forces (although not always in predicted or wished-for ways). In the Soviet Union, for example, it is well known that such changes have been occurring and that they have been of concern to the authorities. The birth rate has dropped to a low level, and the divorce rate has increased dramatically – but only in those areas which have experienced the greatest economic development (i.e. the Russian areas). In our own society, too, the family and the ways in which we think about and portray it have been changing in response to economic forces, which have drawn women into the labour market, disrupted traditional communities, etc.

Of course, many unsatisfactory features of family life remain, both here and in the socialist world. It is true that in existing socialist societies the position of women remains a subordinate one, and people live out their lives in family units not radically different from those under capitalism; and all this may seem a long way from the idea and ideals of socialism. But that is not relevant here. For it goes no way towards showing that the family is an ahistorical and autonomous social form. On the contrary, the fact that such criticisms of the family are widespread, indicates and reflects, rather, the presence of antagonistic and contradictory – negative and 'critical' – forces within society itself, of which these ideological criticisms are the expression and reflection. For, as Marx and Engels say, 'if theory, theology, philosophy, ethics, etc. [i.e. ideology] comes into contradiction with existing relations, this can only occur because existing social relations have come into contradiction with existing forces of production' (*The German Ideology*, p. 52).

Contrary to the claims that are regularly made for them, neither structuralism nor post-structuralism sheds significant light on the power of ideology or on its resistance to criticism and change. We are none the wiser on this score for being told that ideology is an 'imaginary' construct, or that it is a system of representations,

²² The clearest presentation of this account is, of course, in Engels, *The Origin of the Family*.

discourses, signifying practices, or whatever. For the *source* of these imaginary representations and of their influence remains entirely unexplained.

On the other hand, Marx has a clear and very illuminating answer to these questions, as Lenin explains.

Why does religion retain its hold on the backward sections of the town proletariat, on broad sections of the semi-proletariat, and on the masses of the peasantry? Because of the ignorance of the people, replies the bourgeois progressist, the radical or the bourgeois materialist. . . . The Marxist says that this is a . . . superficial view . . . It does not explain the roots of religion profoundly enough; it explains them, not in a materialist, but in an idealist way. In modern capitalist countries these roots are mainly social. ('The Attitude of the Workers' Party to Religion', p. 21)

Where do incorrect ideas come from? They come from *reality* – like all ideas. In particular, ideological representations derive from and reflect reality. They take idealized and distorted forms, moreover, because of the contradictions and conflicts which are a part and parcel of real life. *Their power is the power of reality.*

Part III

Relativism, Truth and Progress

7 Some Responses to Relativism

A Common Core?

I have been defending the view that all ideas – false as well as true – reflect reality. In the previous part of the book, I focused upon the cases of dreams and ideological illusions in order to illustrate and explain this position. It is true, of course, that these are only two particular cases, and that there are many other problematic areas which must also be dealt with before it could be claimed that realism of this sort has been properly worked out. This is the long-term ‘research programme’¹ for such realism, but it is beyond my present scope. Nevertheless, the cases of dreams and ideologies are key ones. They have been central to philosophical debate in this field and they have provided the main basis upon which sceptical and relativist arguments have been developed.

Such arguments have been very influential in recent years. Their impact has been felt not only in philosophy, but in virtually every area of the humanities and social sciences. They are presented as a new and exciting approach, which holds out the promise of providing a sweeping and radical critique of established ideas and attitudes. Moreover, these ideas are often portrayed as the outcome of the most challenging and significant currents of modern thought – especially Marxism and psychoanalysis.

I have argued that these latter theories provide no support for relativism or scepticism. However, the relativist case does not rest only upon an appeal to Freud and Marx. Nor does it rely only on an appeal to specific cases like dreams and illusions. As we saw at the beginning of the last chapter, an important set of general philosophical arguments is also deployed. These arguments are designed

¹ The phrase is from Lakatos, *The Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes*.

to discredit the traditional view that knowledge can be given secure foundations, either in reason or in experience, and to undermine the ideas of objectivity, rationality and truth. In order to defend realism it is necessary to reply to these philosophical arguments in philosophical terms. That will be my purpose in the coming chapters.

I will begin by examining some recent responses by analytical philosophers to relativism and scepticism. For, although these ideas have been influential ones even in analytical circles, by no means everyone has been swept along by this fashionable tide. Many people, on the contrary, have seen relativism as an absurd and even dangerous philosophy. It has seemed to them to be a pernicious and all-pervasive irrationalism which threatens to undermine and destroy all the most valuable and hard-won achievements of human thought and culture. As a result, a number of writers have sought to defend the truth and objectivity of knowledge against the sceptical and relativist challenge.

Undoubtedly the most interesting and important arguments along these lines are those in the philosophy of language associated with the names of Putnam, Kripke and Davidson. This work has been presented as a new form of realism, involving a novel and powerful approach to these old problems. For these philosophers seemed to be developing techniques which by-passed the perplexing thicket of traditional epistemological problems, and yet which offered an alternative basis for a realist and objectivist position and for a rejection of relativism.

Unfortunately, it is now becoming clear that this work has not lived up to its initial promise in this respect. The old epistemological problems are not so much by-passed, as ignored. For this reason, I shall argue, it cannot ultimately provide a satisfactory basis for realism. Nevertheless, in saying this, I do not wish to detract from the real originality and importance of this work. The defence of realism by these writers has greatly strengthened the realist outlook and shed important light on some of the central issues in the theory of knowledge, even where it is not fully satisfactory. Moreover, it has brought new (and much needed) life to analytical philosophy. For this reason, I shall spend most of the present chapter discussing this work.

Before I do so, however, it is worth noting that much of the resistance to relativism has taken less original and novel forms. Instead, not surprisingly perhaps, it has consisted of the reiteration of traditional empiricist and/or rationalist arguments. In particular, there has been a strong tendency among opponents of relativism to try to deny the major premise of the relativist argument – namely,

the idea that consciousness and reason are essentially social and historical phenomena; and then, like the seventeenth and eighteenth century philosophers, to search for an absolute and immutable basis for knowledge, which would guarantee its truth and objectivity. This is not a tenable position, as I have already tried to show. The social and historical character of knowledge is an evident fact; and there is no reason to deny it, save the fear that a recognition of it would be fatal to objectivity, truth and rationality.

This fear has, however, been the driving force behind a good number of the recent responses to relativism. Hollis and Lukes, for example, insist that a common core of beliefs and rational principles is shared by all human beings, in all cultures, in all historical periods. Hollis thus writes,

there are, because there have to be, percepts and concepts shared by all who can understand each other, together with judgements which all would make and rules of judgement which all subscribe to. If understanding is to be possible, there must be, in Strawson's phrase 'a massive central core of human thinking which has no history'. ('The Social Destruction of Reality', p. 75)

These universal beliefs and principles are the foundations upon which rational knowledge may be justified, and upon which different cultures with different conceptual schemes may be compared, and relativism rejected.² For, according to Hollis, relativism is intended 'to rot away the props of [the] notion of objectivity' (p. 69), and the only possible cures that he can envisage are empiricism or rationalism in their traditional, foundational forms. Hollis then proceeds to reject the empiricist appeal to the given. He seeks, instead, 'to place an *a priori* constraint on what a rational man can believe about his world' (p. 83).

When it comes to specifying the nature of these 'constraints', however, Hollis is disappointingly quiet. He acknowledges that Kant's categories have not fared well in this role, but he has nothing to offer in their place except the vague assurance that 'men are rational'. What are needed, in order to make this position a credible one, are some convincing examples, and an argued response to the philosophical difficulties for such views raised by the arguments of Quine and Wittgenstein, outlined in the last chapter. But none of these things are given by Hollis. As Barnes and Bloor rightly say, 'Lukes and Hollis make no serious attempt to describe the common core, or to mark its boundaries. Rather they seek to show that it must

² These ideas are shared by Lukes, and developed by the two of them in a series of papers, some of which are usefully collected in Wilson (ed.) *Rationality*.

exist, if the possibility of communication and understanding between distinct cultures is admitted' ('Relativism', p. 35).

Faith in the possibility of communication between cultures and a belief in universal reason are, no doubt, worthy views. However, the mere presupposition of them does not constitute an argument. On the showing of Hollis and Lukes, it is difficult to see why we should maintain these beliefs in the face of the relativist onslaught. Indeed, it might seem more rational to embrace relativism, with all its paradoxes and problems, than to insist dogmatically on such assumptions. Fortunately, as I shall argue presently, we are not confined to these alternatives. For the moment, however, there are other recent responses to relativism to be considered.

The Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme

A more promising-looking approach is that of Davidson. He tries to block the relativist argument at its very source, by rejecting the divorce of 'conceptual scheme' from 'reality' upon which it is founded. For relativism, as we have seen, is based upon the distinction between the 'given' and the 'constructed'. Conceptual schemes, paradigms, interpretations, or whatever, are regarded as ways of organizing and giving form to a 'neutral' and 'unformed' content. This has the effect of making reality as it is known by us ('our world'), a mere creation of our scheme, a mere artefact of our particular 'perspective'. Such relativism, Davidson argues, is incoherent.

The dominant metaphor of conceptual relativism, that of different points of view, seems to betray an underlying paradox. Different points of view make sense, but only if there is a common coordinate system on which to plot them; yet the existence of a common system belies the claim of dramatic incompatibility. ('On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme', p. 6)

Davidson is thus led to reject the dualism of the given and the constructed upon which such relativism is based: 'this . . . dualism of scheme and content, of organizing system and something waiting to be organized, cannot be made intelligible and defensible' (p. 11).³

³ Following Quine, Davidson calls this the 'third dogma of empiricism'. It is not, however, an empiricist, but rather a Kantian doctrine. Empiricists, to be sure, distinguish the given from the constructed; but they do not regard the given as a purely unformed content, in this Kantian manner. On the contrary, according to empiricism, all the content of the world is given immediately in experience; and our 'interpretation' or 'conceptual scheme' merely summarizes the data of experience, and adds nothing to it.

Davidson is surely right about this. As I, too, have been arguing, the dualistic and absolute separation of 'ways of seeing things' (i.e. appearances) from objective reality must be resisted by the realist, for it makes the idea of knowledge of the objective world incomprehensible and impossible; and so too, as Davidson points out, the idea of different perspectives on a common reality. However, in place of such dualism, Davidson has nothing to offer but a vague gesturing towards direct realism. 'In giving up the dualism of scheme and world, we do not give up the world, but re-establish unmediated touch with the familiar objects whose antics make our sentences and opinions true or false' (p. 20).

One can sympathize with the impatience that the realistically-minded Davidson evidently feels in the face of the extravagant idealism of so much recent relativism; but nevertheless, such direct realism is not a satisfactory response. Indeed, it is a position relative to which the dualism that Davidson is criticizing constitutes an advance. For there is an important truth contained within such dualism that Davidson, in his simple realistic zeal, is in danger of missing. To be sure, the *dualistic* and *absolute* divorce of scheme from reality must be resisted by the realist; but not in favour of the mere reduction of thought to reality in direct realist fashion. How plain and easy things would be if our concepts never diverged in any way from reality. Unfortunately, things are not like that. Reality, the true nature of things-in-themselves, is not given in an unmediated and direct way to us. Knowledge is not a mere given datum, a mere gift of nature; it is rather a human (and social) achievement, a product of theoretical and practical work.

All knowledge involves mediation, it is never a mere immediately given datum. This is a familiar point in philosophy. It is the point that Kant is making when he says that 'intuitions without concepts are blind' (*Critique of Pure Reason* A51=B75); and it is a point that has been made by countless subsequent philosophers. Nonetheless, it is a point worth reiterating, for the idea of immediate knowledge is an appealing one; and one that, at present, has a strong influence in the analytical tradition. Thus it seems plausible to suggest, like Davidson, that through experience we are in 'unmediated touch' with the whole concrete richness and particularity of reality, and that such direct experience must be the basis and source of all knowledge. This, at least, is the empiricist view. The history of empiricism, however, is instructive here. For, when we look for what is 'unmediated' and directly given in experience, nothing can be found which answers to these names.

Davidson mentions the 'familiar objects' in our environment.

These, however, are not fit candidates for being the immediate objects of perception. For, in our perception of them, the work of interpretation – of mediation by thought – is already evident. In perceiving this brown, rectangular object in front of me as a desk, I have clearly classified and categorized my experience of it, and brought it under my conceptual scheme. Berkeley makes this point very clearly in the passage quoted in the last chapter (p. 85 above) about the two people looking at the portrait of Julius Caesar. However, the idea that we immediately perceive mere coloured patches, with which Berkeley and so many subsequent empiricists rest content, is no more satisfactory. To say that there is a brown, rectangular patch in my visual field, is equally to have classified and interpreted my experience. We are reduced ultimately, to the conclusion that the only items with which we are directly acquainted are what is characterized only as being ‘this’, ‘here’, and ‘now’.⁴ However, as Hegel shows in his celebrated discussion of ‘Sense Certainty’ at the beginning of *The Phenomenology of Mind*, these are abstract and empty terms which fail to specify anything determinate. For everything can be a ‘this thing, here, now’, and nothing is given by these words which could provide a basis for any specific knowledge. In Hegel’s words,

if nothing is said of a thing except that it is an actual thing, an external object, this only makes it the most universal of all possible things, and thereby we express its likeness, its identity, with everything, rather than its difference from everything else. When I say ‘an individual thing’, I at once state it to be really quite a universal, for everything is an individual thing: and in the same way ‘this thing’ is everything and anything we like. More precisely, as this bit of paper, each and every paper is a ‘this bit of paper’, and I have thus said all the while what is universal. (*Phenomenology of Mind*, p. 160)

The conclusion to which Kant and Hegel and many others have thus been led is that there is nothing specific which is a bare immediate datum, directly given in experience. For the given must be *taken*. Knowledge is always and everywhere the product of interpretation, construction and mediation.

It is important to be clear about what is involved in these statements. In particular, it is vital to see that these arguments show only that nothing *specific* – no particular data, no concrete and determinate content – is given purely directly and immediately in experience, which can serve as a basis for knowledge. However, this is not

⁴ As Russell realizes, see ‘The Philosophy of Logical Atomism’, ch.2.

necessarily to say that there is no such thing as immediate experience. It is not necessarily to imply that all determinate consciousness, all knowledge, is therefore purely mediated, a *mere* product of interpretation, nothing but a mental construction. This is the path to out-and-out idealism, but we are not obliged to go down it. For the fact is that *neither* direct realism *nor* such idealism are satisfactory positions.

This, certainly, was the view of both Kant and Hegel; and it is important to see this since their authority is often claimed for the extreme idealist position. In fact, neither of these philosophers denies that we have immediate sensory contact with the world of things-in-themselves, independent of consciousness. Quite the contrary, both equally insist not only that we *do* have such immediate experience, but that it is an essential element in all our knowledge. Knowledge, for Kant, is no mere conceptual construction (still less a product of ‘discourse’): ‘concepts without content are empty’ (*Critique of Pure Reason*, A51=B75), he insists. *Both* percepts and concepts are necessary for knowledge. Kant is clear and explicit on this point.

So too is Hegel; and there can be no excuse save ignorance for the frequent assertions that Hegel denies immediate experience. What Hegel *does* say (and Kant too), and what is surely correct, is that pure immediate sensation – while it does exist and is, indeed, a necessary element in all knowledge – is not specific data for us. The immediately given must be grasped and taken. Until and unless it is so, it remains something entirely indeterminate, which cannot serve as a foundation and a basis of knowledge in the way required of it by both empiricism and direct realism. These are the conclusions of Hegel’s discussion of ‘Sense Certainty’ at the beginning of the *Phenomenology*.

It is true, of course, that Hegel is critical of the notion of immediate experience as it has been used in epistemology, but he does not simply reject it. As with all the other stages in the *Phenomenology*, immediate experience is not abandoned in the subsequent development, but rather *preserved* and *developed*. By putting immediate sensation at the beginning of his account of knowledge, therefore, Hegel is in effect arguing that it is at the basis of all knowledge. And this is a point that he makes quite explicitly elsewhere in his writing. For example,

nihil est in intellectu quod non fuerit in sensu: there is nothing in thought which has not been in sense and experience. If speculative philosophy refused to admit this maxim, it can only have done so from a mis-

understanding. It will, however, on the converse side no less assert:
nihil est in sensu quod non fuerit in intellectu. (*Logic*, §8)

In other words, we must agree with Davidson in rejecting the dualist and idealist picture, according to which our ‘conceptual scheme’ – our knowledge – is a purely mental product which cuts us off from ‘the common coordinate system’ of objective reality. However, we must also reject the alternative that Davidson offers, of denying ‘the very idea of a conceptual scheme’ and regarding knowledge as based purely upon our ‘unmediated touch’ with the objective world.

Knowledge is *neither* the product of pure, direct and unmediated sensory contact with the world, *nor* is it a purely intellectual and mental creation. These either/or alternatives must *both* be rejected. In their place must come the realization that knowledge essentially and necessarily involves *both* an immediate and a mediated aspect. It is to Hegel that we must turn for an understanding of how this is possible. For immediacy and mediation are opposites which exist in unity. Each is *relative* to, and *correlative* with, the other. In other words, they are dialectically related opposites. They become useless and empty abstractions only when the attempt is made to deny their unity and keep them absolutely separate and apart from each other.

On the other hand, as relative notions, immediacy and mediation are useful and indeed necessary terms in any adequate account of knowledge. It is in this relative sense that I am immediately aware of the objects around me. I look up and at once – immediately – I recognize my desk and the familiar objects upon it. To another, perhaps from an entirely alien culture, these objects would not be immediately evident and apparent. There are countless familiar examples of this. To a doctor an X-ray photograph may immediately disclose the signs of tuberculosis, where I see nothing but a blur of greys. A physicist may see the cloud-chamber trace of an electron in an image that, for me, is only a jumble of ragged lines, etc.

However, what is directly and immediately apparent to us in this relative sense – the only sense that makes any sense – is a product of experience, of education and, therefore, of mediation. This point is made particularly clearly by Hegel. He writes, for example,

truths which we well know to be results of complicated and highly mediated trains of thought present themselves immediately and without effort to the mind of any man who is familiar with the subject. . . . The facility we attain in any sort of knowledge, art, or technical expertness, consists in having the particular knowledge or kind of action present to our mind in any case that occurs, even, we may say,

immediate in our very limbs, in an outgoing activity. In all these instances, the immediacy of knowledge is so far from excluding mediation, that the two things are linked together – immediate knowledge being actually the product and result of mediate knowledge. (*Logic*, §66)⁵

There is, I know, a strong temptation to follow the classical empiricists and, like Berkeley, to try to distinguish what is ‘given immediately to the senses’ from what is contributed by interpretation in such cases. The burden of what I have arguing, however, is that these two elements – the immediate and the mediated, the given and the constructed – cannot ultimately be separated. The idea of a mediated immediacy – immediacy in the relative sense – is an illuminating and useful notion. But if we ask for something more immediate than this, we can find nothing concrete that answers to this demand.

What this means is that we cannot absolutely and completely separate out and distinguish the sensory from the intellectual component in knowledge, as the empiricist (and, indeed, the Kantian) philosophy would have us do. The immediate sensory given is inextricably bound up with its mediation by education and by thought. What is given to the senses changes and develops with these influences. Through education and thought, *the senses themselves are transformed*. In an illuminating and suggestive passage, Marx writes

the *senses* of the social man differ from those of the non-social man. Only through the objectively unfolded richness of man’s essential being is the richness of subjective *human* sensibility (a musical ear, an eye for beauty of form – in short *senses* capable of human gratification, *senses* affirming themselves as essential powers of *man*) either cultivated or brought into being. . . . The *forming* of the five *senses* is a labour of the entire history of the world down to the present. (*1844 Manuscripts*, pp. 301–2)

In this relative sense, then, we can say that we are immediately aware of reality; and we must most certainly oppose the idealist attempt to deny the essential contribution that (direct) experience makes to knowledge. However, with respect to the sort of direct realism that has become so prevalent among analytical philosophers, the crucial point is that the immediacy in question here is a

⁵ See also Hegel’s less well-known, but important and useful discussion of immediate knowledge in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, I, Introduction, A.III and Part I.B.

mediated immediacy, a relative immediacy. What is given, in order to be given to consciousness and to knowledge, must also be taken; and what is taken can be mistaken. There is no basis of absolute certainty in such immediate experience – there are no incorrigible foundations for knowledge to be had here.

Putnam's Realism and its Problems

Putnam advocates a different though, as we shall see, related approach to these problems. His realist writings have undoubtedly been the most important philosophical opposition to relativism, and, together with the related work of Kripke, the most interesting body of thought to have emerged out of the analytical tradition in recent years. Moreover, this work has developed the philosophy of realism in new and important ways.

Having said that, however, it must also be said that this work fails ultimately to live up to its initial promises. Putnam sets out to defend the basic tenets of realism against idealism, relativism and scepticism. He does so on the basis of an account of meaning – a philosophy of language – which gives central place to the notion of reference. The meaning of a word (and so, too, the object of a thought), he argues, is not something ideal or merely mental: it is not given simply by the logical content of the concept it denotes. Nor do meanings reside merely in the speaker's *intentions*. The meaning of a word is determined by its *reference*, by the (non-intentional) object to which it refers. "Meanings" just ain't in the *head* ('The Meaning of "Meaning"', p. 227)⁶

By basing his realism on an account of meaning in this way, Putnam hoped to evade epistemological difficulties of the sort that I have just been discussing, which created such problems for realism in the past. But he does not succeed in doing so. For Putnam's position, like Davidson's, is, I shall argue, ultimately founded on a form of direct realism. And, again like Davidson's, it is a form of direct realism which remains relatively crude and undeveloped precisely because of its attempt to by-pass and avoid any epistemological discussion.⁷

⁶ Putnam's point here is the same one as I have been making (though in a very different language), when I have insisted that appearances are necessarily appearances of something, and that they always refer to a *material* (and not a merely intentional) object.

⁷ These are 'crude' and 'undeveloped' forms of direct realism relative to, for example, the work of the 'New Realists', and of writers such as Alexander and Anderson earlier this century. These philosophers provide a more sustained and developed exploration

However, on the basis of his philosophy of language, and up to a point, Putnam gives a clear and effective defence of the realist position against relativism. In the philosophy of science, for example, he rejects the Kuhnian idea that different scientific theories are 'incommensurable', and that scientists working with different paradigms inhabit 'different worlds'. Kuhn, as Putnam says, 'writes as if the same term cannot have the same referent in different paradigms (theories belonging to . . . different paradigms correspond to different "worlds", he says)' (*Meaning and the Moral Sciences*, p. 22). The result is that, on Kuhn's account, the development of scientific theory becomes a mysterious and inexplicable process: an arbitrary succession of merely different and 'incommensurable' perspectives on different 'worlds'. Realism, by contrast, as Putnam insists, holds on to what Davidson calls a 'common coordinate system': namely, the objectively real world, which is the referent of our words, ideas and theories. Different theories do not create their own 'worlds'. On the contrary, they offer different, more or less adequate, perspectives upon the one, common, objective and real world. Such realism, Putnam rightly argues, is able to give a far more plausible and satisfactory account of scientific development, according to which 'a partially correct/partially incorrect account of a theoretical object . . . is replaced by a *better* account of the same object' (p. 19). Scientific theories are, in Lenin's words, 'approximations' to truth.⁸

As an example, Putnam discusses the development of the concept of the electron from Bohr and Rutherford's early theories to the present. Modern science has considerably extended our understanding of the electron, with the result that it is no longer believed that there is anything which *precisely* fits the Bohr–Rutherford picture. Nevertheless, argues Putnam, it would not be reasonable to suggest that contemporary scientists are referring to something *different* to Bohr or Rutherford when they talk of 'electrons'. We must operate a principle of 'charity' or 'benefit of the doubt' here.

of the epistemology of direct realism, and show, far more fully than Davidson and Putnam, the scope and power that this philosophy can have. See, especially, Holt *et al.*, *The New Realism*; Alexander, 'The Basis of Realism' and 'On Sensations and Images' (which provide useful brief summaries of the central themes of his much longer and more detailed, *Space, Time and Deity*); and Anderson, 'The Knower and the Known'. See also the useful accounts of these writers in Lovejoy, *The Revolt Against Dualism*, and in Passmore, *A Hundred Years of Philosophy*.

⁸ Unfortunately, as we shall shortly see, Putnam does not entirely succeed in holding on to this perspective.

There *are* entities – in fact just the entities we now call ‘electrons’ – which behave like Bohr’s ‘electrons’ in many ways. . . . And the principle of the benefit of the doubt dictates that we should, in these circumstances, take Bohr to have been referring to what we call ‘electrons’. . . . We have a different theory of the *same* entities . . . his term did refer. (p. 24)

The principles of ‘charity’ and ‘benefit of the doubt’ are specifically designed to acknowledge the fact that scientific theories are not absolutely true and perfect accounts of their objects; but rather ‘approximations’ to truth. Some measure of error is possible in a scientific theory, without its terms thereby being robbed of reference and rendered meaningless. Thus Putnam insists that Bohr and Rutherford’s theory of the electron does indeed refer to the electron, even though their account of its nature is not fully accurate.

Putnam is vague and indefinite about how far such ‘charity’ and ‘benefit of doubt’ should extend; but he is quite definite in his view that there must be limits. There must be a recognizable continuity between present and earlier theories if we are to extend the ‘benefit of the doubt’ to them. For, ‘the benefit of the doubt can be *unreasonable*; we don’t carry it so far as to say that *phlogiston* referred’ (p. 25).

The case of phlogiston is an instructive one, and it has been much discussed in the philosophy of science. The theory of phlogiston was at the basis of eighteenth-century chemistry. According to it, combustion consisted in the expulsion of a hypothetical substance (phlogiston) from burning bodies. This theory corresponds to immediate appearances and was sufficient to explain most of the chemical phenomena known in the eighteenth century. Using this theory, Priestley even succeeded in isolating oxygen experimentally; but he could not make the conceptual shift needed to see his discovery as oxygen, and continued to think of it as ‘dephlogisticated air’.

However, observations and experimental results which could not readily be accommodated within this theory, and which posed serious difficulties for it, accumulated rapidly towards the end of the eighteenth century. These problems led to the revolution in chemistry instituted by Lavoisier, whereby combustion came to be seen, not as a process in which phlogiston was *expelled* from a burning body, but rather as one in which oxygen was *combined* with it. This constituted a profound shift of vision, a qualitative change, in the understanding of chemical processes.⁹

⁹ See Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, for an interesting discussion of this case from a philosophical point of view. See also the suggestive remarks by Engels, comparing Marx’s impact on economics with Lavoisier’s on chemistry, in his ‘Preface’ to *Capital, II*, pp. 15ff.

Although much talked about by eighteenth century chemists, it is now perfectly clear that there is no such substance as ‘phlogiston’. The term, as Putnam sees it, thus lacks a reference, and the theory involving it must be false or meaningless. In other words, the phlogiston theory is regarded by Putnam as a sheer error, which no ‘charity’ or ‘benefit of the doubt’ can rescue. By contrast, I have been arguing in this book that there are no sheer errors, no mere illusions, in human thought. All our ideas and beliefs reflect reality in some degree. To put this in Putnam’s language, what I am maintaining is that all theories have a reference. All refer to some objective aspect of the world, and this applies equally in the case of phlogiston (though, to be sure, some do so more adequately than others). Putnam, however, tends to treat reference as an all-or-nothing affair. *Either* a term refers *or* it does not. Thus Bohr’s account of the electron refers, at least on a charitable view of it; whereas Priestley’s idea that he had isolated ‘dephlogisticated air’ does not.

The account of realism for which I am arguing rejects this account of reference. Reference should not be seen in such exclusive either/or terms. There are no theories which entirely and absolutely lack reference, nor any whose reference is perfect. Reference is, rather, a matter of *degree*. Our terms and theories *approximate* more or less to objective reality; they refer more or less adequately to it. Only in these terms can any sense be made of the history of science. Likewise, we must be a great deal more ‘charitable’ to our scientific predecessors if we are to make any sense of the history of science.

In the case of phlogiston, however, it may well seem that it is rather Putnam’s view that is the more plausible one. Since there is no such substance, it seems only natural to insist that the proponents of phlogiston theory were in error and talking of nothing real. But this is a hasty and superficial conclusion. To appreciate this, it is necessary to see that ‘phlogiston’ is not a term which occurs in isolation. Put back in its context, it was the cornerstone of the theory which embodied and expressed the eighteenth century understanding of the chemical world. It would clearly be short-sighted and unrealistic to regard eighteenth century chemistry as nothing but a tissue of error and illusion. Yet this is just what Putnam suggests when he insists that the central term of this chemistry had no reference, and when he refuses to be ‘charitable’ towards it.

Despite the fact that there is no such stuff, the phlogiston theory was not a mere error. On the contrary, by the time that Priestley and Scheele, using this theory, had isolated what we now know to be oxygen, the phlogiston theory had come to encapsulate a consider-

able body of theoretical and practical knowledge about chemical properties and reactions. It provided the basis upon which modern chemistry was built. The phlogiston theory, indeed, represented a giant step forward from the idea that fire was a miraculous gift from the Gods, or that it was an irreducible force, one of the four ancient elements. For the phlogiston theory, in contrast to these earlier views, embodied a recognition that combustion is a phenomenon which can be analysed and understood as a chemical reaction between substances; and this theory helped scientists in the eighteenth century to organize and to comprehend an increasingly extensive body of experimental and practical data.

In short, this theory underlay the growth and development of chemistry in the eighteenth century, which directly led up to the discovery of oxygen and to the creation of modern chemistry by Lavoisier and others at the end of that period. From the middle of the eighteenth century, starting with the work of Joseph Black, as Kuhn says 'the investigation of gases proceeded rapidly, most notably in the hands of Cavendish, Priestley and Scheele. . . All these men, from Black through Scheele, believed in the phlogiston theory and often employed it in their design and interpretation of experiments' (*The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, p. 70).

They could do so, with the immensely productive results that their work had, only because the phlogiston theory did, in fact, reflect reality to some degree. It offered *some* account – indeed, at the time, the *best* account – of the phenomena of chemistry as then known.

The much-maligned phlogiston theory . . . gave order to a large number of physical and chemical phenomena. It explained why bodies burned – they were rich in phlogiston – and why metals had so many more properties than did ores. . . In addition, the phlogiston theory accounted for a number of reactions in which acids were formed by the combustion of substances like carbon and sulphur. Also it explained the decrease of volume when combustion occurs in a confined volume of air. (pp. 99–100)

The phlogiston theory, that is to say, reflected reality, even if only approximately and imperfectly. However, by the end of the eighteenth century, its limits were being revealed. As the experimental investigation of gases and the phenomena of combustion was pushed forward, an increasing number of results were recorded which were anomalous and difficult to accommodate within the phlogiston theory. The result, as Kuhn writes, 'was a variety of gas samples and gas properties so elaborate that the phlogiston theory proved in-

creasingly little able to cope with laboratory experience' (p. 70). The theory was, as Kuhn puts it, 'in crisis', and it was rapidly abandoned and replaced, through the work of Lavoisier and others, by the quite different and opposed oxygen theory.

To adopt Putnam's view would be to make a complete mystery of this process. Modern chemistry did not emerge out of mere nothingness, out of pure error and illusion. It did not drop from the skies, it was not a miraculous conception in Lavoisier's head. On the contrary, it was built upon the positive basis and results of the phlogiston theory and of the experimental findings to which that theory led.

I must insist again that in arguing thus, I am not suggesting either that phlogiston exists or that it ever has existed. Unfortunately, however, this is the conclusion that Kuhn sometimes seems to want to draw from this history. As Putnam says, 'Kuhn talks as if each theory does refer – namely to *its own* "world" of entities' (*Meaning and the Moral Sciences*, p. 23). Kuhn, indeed, writes that, 'after discovering oxygen Lavoisier worked in a different world' (p. 118). He would apparently have it that Priestley lived in a 'world' containing phlogiston, while Lavoisier lived in 'world' of oxygen. This is absurd, and Putnam is right to reject it. Priestley and Lavoisier both inhabited one and the same world, which contains oxygen, and which does not, and never has, contained phlogiston. Were this not so, and were Kuhn right, the historical development of science would again be a mystery. For, if eighteenth century chemists really had lived in a world of phlogiston, they never could have discovered oxygen and escaped from it. On this account, each scientist would be locked up in his own self-created 'world', immune to experience of the objective world and to any possible problems and anomalies it might contain for his views.¹⁰

Nonetheless, it is quite possible to be 'charitable' towards the phlogiston theory without going to Kuhn's extravagant lengths. Indeed, if we are to make any sense of the history of science, such charity is absolutely necessary. The phlogiston theory and the oxygen theory represent successive stages in the approximation of theory to reality. Both refer to and reflect reality, but the oxygen theory does so the more adequately and more accurately. This is the only reasonable and rational, the only correct, account of the matter; and nothing but a one-sided metaphysics can prevent us from accepting it.

Just as it is wrong to regard the phlogiston theory as mere error, in the way Putnam does, so too it is wrong to regard modern scientific

¹⁰ For more on this theme, see my 'Contradiction and Dialectic in the Development of Science'.

theories as pure and absolute truth. These two views are in fact, complementary ones: they are opposite sides of the same metaphysical coin. Putnam's account involves both. For it is against the standard of the truth of current theories, that he deems previous theories, beyond the rescue of 'charity', to be false (*Meaning and the Moral Science*, p. 22).

However, if previous theories are regarded as sheer error, it is difficult to see why this should not also turn out to be the case with current views. If past scientific theories have been revealed, by subsequent research, to be false and to refer to non-existent things, there would seem to be every good reason to suppose that present theories are ultimately destined to suffer the same fate. Interpreted à la Putnam, the history of science has been a veritable catalogue of errors, which threaten, in sceptical fashion, to engulf the present too: 'just as no term used in the science of more than fifty (or whatever) years ago referred, so it will turn out that no term used now . . . refers' (p. 25).

According to Putnam, 'it must obviously be a *desideratum* for the theory of reference that this meta-induction be blocked' (idem). However, this is obvious only if you think that current views are pure truth, that past theories are pure error, and that the job of realism, in the philosophy of language and in the theory of knowledge, is to provide a guarantee for this pure truth. But the fact is that science, and all the rest of human consciousness and human thought, has a history. It develops and changes. At any given stage, it is necessarily limited, imperfect, relative. It is only an approximation to truth, destined to be superseded and replaced by further and better approximations as knowledge develops.

Realism has nothing to fear from these undeniable facts. It has no need to try to 'block' the conclusion that science has a merely historical, relative and transitory character. Putnam, though, would like to do precisely this. Just in the same way as elsewhere he wants to rule out *a priori* the sceptical idea that we could be 'brains in a vat' (chapter 4 above), so he wants to *guarantee* our present knowledge in a traditional epistemological fashion. He wants to provide foundations for it. And, despite the apparent novelty of his approach, this is an important part of the purpose behind the 'causal theory of reference' developed by him and by Kripke, as I shall go on to argue.

The Causal Theory of Reference

As we have seen, it is Putnam's view that if the words we use are to be meaningful, then they must refer; there must be something which corresponds to them in the world. The question that arises is: how is reference established? What fixes the reference of our words and ensures that they have meaning? Putnam rejects the idea that meanings reside in inner mental states: 'meanings just ain't in the head'. Rather, they reside in the *material* and *causal* relationship which is established, through the use of language, between subject and object. The model is naming. The fact that I mean water, for example, when I say 'water', is ultimately to be explained by the fact that I am *causally connected* with the substance water. I point to some water and say 'this is water'. In a material and practical way, I put myself and my words in relation to the object. It is in this way that their reference and meaning is fixed and guaranteed.¹¹

According to Putnam, different people can use terms like 'water' (or 'electron') with very different ideas about the nature of the thing named. There may even be no 'concept', no idea about water, shared by all those who use the term. The important thing is that, with the term 'water', they all refer to the same physical substance. This is ensured by the fact that each, in his use of the term, is in a certain material relationship with the substance itself. Putnam gives the example of electricity.

I cannot . . . think of anything that *every* user of the term 'electricity' *has to know*. . . . Benjamin Franklin knew that 'electricity' was manifested in the form of sparks and lightning bolts; someone else might know about currents and electromagnets; someone else might know about atoms consisting of positively and negatively charged particles. They all use the term 'electricity' without there being a discoverable 'intuition' that they all share. . . . What they do have in common is this . . . each of them is connected by a certain kind of causal chain to a situation in which a *description* of electricity is given, and generally a *causal* description – that is, one which singles out electricity as *the* physical magnitude *responsible* for certain effects in a certain way. ('Explanation and Reference', pp. 199–200)

Such a situation Putnam calls an 'introducing event'.

¹¹ It is this direct and unmediated relationship between words and the world which underlies what Putnam calls the partly 'indexical' character of language. This is also the basis upon which Kripke, in *Naming and Necessity*, argues that words like 'water' 'rigidly designate' their object in 'all possible worlds'. Kripke, however, is less interested than Putnam in using these ideas epistemologically in defence of realism.

In some cases, of course, my relationship to the object referred to by my words will be more indirect than this. I have learned the words from other users, and not from direct contact with the object. For example, I can talk of the South Sea Islands, although I have never visited them. In such cases, argues Putnam, my words can be related, through the causal chain of users, to an 'introducing event' and hence to the object (again, cf. Kripke). For, at the end of the chain, there must be a direct and material relationship of the word to the object. Putnam's idea is that in *practice*, through pointing and by other means, a *direct* and *immediate* relationship must be established between my words and the object in order to guarantee their reference. I say '*this*' is what I mean by 'electricity' (pointing to a manifestation of its effects); and, by so doing, I form a causal and material relationship between my words and the real world. I, so to speak, tie my words indissolubly to objects in the world.

One apparent advantage of this account is that it seems to circumvent a problem which often confronts direct realism. For, as we saw in chapter 2, there is much in our knowledge which is not immediately presented in experience, and which cannot, therefore, be directly pointed to. Indeed, electricity is a good example. We cannot see electricity, only its effects.¹² As we have just seen, Putnam's way around this problem is to say that the reference of terms like 'electricity' is fixed by pointing to the manifest and immediately apparent effects that electricity is taken to explain, and by then specifying that 'electricity' refers to the cause of those effects.

However, this will not do – not, at least, for Putnam's purposes. For this way of specifying the reference of the term 'electricity' gives no guarantee that the word refers to an object in the world in the way that Putnam requires. In just the same way, after all, chemists in the eighteenth century specified the reference of the term 'phlogiston'. They would have pointed to instances of combustion and said that phlogiston was the cause of such effects. Yet Putnam could not possibly accept that they had thereby succeeded in fixing the reference of 'phlogiston', since it is his view that this term does not refer.

This is an important objection. It crushes any hope that the causal theory of reference could provide a secure basis for knowledge. For the object of my pointing and naming can always be interpreted in different ways (as phlogiston or oxygen, for example), and the mere fact that I am pointing and naming gives no guarantee that my words succeed in having a fixed reference and meaning.

¹² We can, of course, directly *feel* electricity, if it is sufficiently strong.

It may be thought that such difficulties arise only with cases like phlogiston and electricity, where the object is not present directly to the senses, and must be referred to indirectly *via* its effects. However, the problem is a deeper one. As we have seen, Putnam hopes to guarantee the reference and meaning of words on the basis of the direct relationship which is created between word and object when the word is introduced by pointing at the object and naming it; but things are not so simple. When these ideas are explored, we are rapidly driven back to the problems about immediacy and mediation which are endemic to direct realism and which I discussed in the last section.

To see this, consider an example of an object which is immediately apparent: for example, the glass of water which is on the table in front of me. I point to it and say '*this* is water'. In so doing, according to Putnam, I thereby establish a direct relationship between my words and this object. Nothing, it seems, could be more straightforward. Yet even here there are problems, which arise out of the fact that my words are immediately related not only to the object to which I mean to refer with them (this water), but equally to all the other things to which I am causally related (which is to say all the other things in the universe).¹³

Of course, when I point and say '*this* is water', I mean to establish a unique and particular relation between my words and the water. I mean to specify a unique and particular substance. But the question is: do I, in fact, succeed in doing so? And the answer, for the reasons discussed in the last section, must be: No. For, as we saw, *everything* is equally a '*this* thing'. In specifying the reference of my words as a mere '*this*', I do not succeed in specifying whether I mean the water, or the glass, or whether I am talking of its shape, its colour, the light reflecting from its surface, etc. I do not succeed in specifying a particular object of reference. No doubt, I *meant* the water as such; but as Hegel remarks, with the words '*this* thing', I do not succeed in *saying* it. It seems as though the subjective side – the *intentional* element – what I *meant* in pointing and by my words, needs to be brought back into play here, in order to distinguish the relationship between my words and their referents from other relationships between my words and objects which are equally present.

But Putnam does not want that. He wants the relationship between word and object to be a purely causal and material one,

¹³ Assuming, that is, that the universe is a single material system in which all things are related causally to all others. Nothing, however, hangs on this particular point in this context. The crucial point is that I am also causally and materially related to many things besides this water.

established immediately and directly by pointing. However, this relationship cannot be established and guaranteed in such a direct and immediate fashion. That is what I have been arguing. In doing so, I am not, of course, denying that people can, and often do, make their meaning clear by pointing to things and naming them. However, I am denying that the relationship established by pointing to an object is ever a merely immediate and direct one that can serve, by itself, as a basis and guarantee for the reference and meaning of our words. On the contrary, although there is certainly a direct aspect to it, this relationship is also always one that is mediated by *social* and *linguistic* conventions. In pointing and naming, my gestures and words must be *interpreted*. They must be taken *correctly* if they are to serve as a basis for understanding and knowledge; and they may not be. They cannot by themselves guarantee knowledge.

The point that I am making is one of the implications of the Hegelian argument against immediate knowledge that I outlined in the last section. It is also a point made graphically and effectively by Wittgenstein. The meaning of gestures and of words must be interpreted; and so the possibility is introduced of *misinterpretation*. To make this clear, Wittgenstein asks us to imagine a situation ‘in which a person naturally reacted to the gesture of pointing with the hand by looking in the direction of the line from finger-tip to wrist, not from wrist to finger-tip’ (*Philosophical Investigations*, §185). He makes the same point using the analogy of a sign-post, as follows.

Does the sign-post leave no doubt open about the way I have to go? Does it show which direction I am to take when I have passed it; whether along the road or the footpath or cross-country? But where is it said which way I am to follow it; whether in the direction of its finger or (e.g.) in the opposite one? – And if there were, not a single sign-post, but a chain of adjacent ones . . . is there only *one* way of interpreting them? (§85)

Of course, Wittgenstein recognizes that we can, and do, use pointing to specify our meanings, and sign-posts to guide us, without such doubts and difficulties usually arising. However, the point that he is making is that this is not because a direct and immediate relationship has been established between these symbols and their objects. Rather, it is because their use is mediated and determined by certain common social practices: ‘a person goes by a sign-post only in so far as there exists a regular use of sign-posts, a custom’ (§198).

Conclusions

It would be a mistake to conclude from these arguments that our words are not directly related to the objective world, or that our ideas and theories do not refer to a material reality independent of them. That is the pathway to idealism, which we have all along rejected. On the contrary, we must agree with the realism which is at the basis of Putnam’s position. He is right to insist that an adequate account of language and thought must deal with the relationship of our words and ideas to the world. Indeed, as I have argued, in order to provide a satisfactory account of the progressive development of thought, we must go further, and insist that *all* ideas – false as well as true – refer to reality. We must agree with Bradley when he writes that ‘every kind of thought implies a judgement’ and ‘every judgement, whether positive or negative, and however frivolous its character, makes an assertion about reality’ (*Appearance and Reality*, p. 252). Our words and ideas always and necessarily refer to reality (and by ‘reality’, like Putnam, and unlike Bradley, I mean the objective, material world, and not one that is merely subjective and ‘mentally constructed’). Only on this basis is it possible to develop a satisfactory and consistent account of knowledge.

Nonetheless, the relation between language and the world, between thought and reality, is never a *purely* immediate one. That is the burden of what I have been arguing. *Mere* immediacy is an unreal abstraction. Although there is certainly an immediate aspect to the relationship of our words to the world, this is only one aspect of that relationship, which is also always and of necessity a *mediated* one. In particular, when I point and say ‘this’, it is true that I establish an immediate and physical relationship between my words and their object; but the immediacy involved here is what I have described above as a *mediated* and *relative* immediacy. It is a relationship which is established only in the context of a system of rules and conventions. It is a relationship which necessarily involves *interpretation* and which hence gives rise to the possibility of *misinterpretation*. There is, therefore, no certain basis for knowledge to be found in this relationship *taken on its own*. It is not possible to guarantee the reference of our words and theories merely by pointing and saying ‘this’, in the way that Putnam and direct realism require. There are no indubitable foundations for knowledge to be had here.

The final conclusion to this chapter, then, is mainly a negative one. We must abandon the traditional epistemological project of

finding foundations for knowledge, either in the operations of reason *a priori* (like Hollis and Lukes), or in the immediate relationship of our language and thought to the world (like Davidson and Putnam). To that extent, we must agree with the 'anti-epistemological' position. But how, then, are we to avoid the sceptical, relativist and idealist conclusions which the supporters of the anti-epistemological approach standardly go on to draw, and which seem inevitable once the idea that knowledge has secure foundations is rejected? How can knowledge be justified? It is clear that we must answer these questions if we are to continue to maintain the realist belief in the possibility of knowledge of the objective world.

8 Theory and Practice

Concepts and Reality

The conclusion towards which my arguments have been pointing is that there is an important measure of truth in the relativist position. For, as we have seen, no knowledge is given directly in experience, unmediated by thought and social influence; nor are there any universal and necessary truths of reason. The traditional empiricist and rationalist approaches in epistemology must be abandoned. Knowledge is a social and historical phenomenon for which there are no absolute and indubitable foundations. The case for these views is overwhelming. Moreover, they are implied by some of the most significant currents of modern thought. Nonetheless, such ideas still meet with much resistance from philosophers. The great barrier to their acceptance is the fear that they are fatal to the concepts of knowledge, truth and objectivity, and will lead inevitably to out and out relativism.

I now want to show that this is not so. It is possible to recognize the social character of ideas and actions, and yet avoid relativism and scepticism. It is possible to reject the traditional foundational method in epistemology, without adopting a purely negative and 'anti-epistemological' stance. For *there is* another way, an alternative approach, in the theory of knowledge. This involves the idea that knowledge can be justified in historical terms, and it leads towards the development of a dialectical and historical epistemology.

As we have seen, the major problems that relativism raises for traditional theories of knowledge revolve around the fact that knowledge is a social phenomenon. Let us briefly recall why it is that this poses such difficulties for these theories. The classical empiricists and rationalists were not unaware of the fact that social and historical conditions influence experience and thought. However,

they typically assumed that such influences are extraneous and distorting ones, which obscure and obstruct us in the attempt to gain knowledge of the objective world. Hence the search for absolute foundations, intended to provide a basis for knowledge free of social influence, social distortion and social relativity.

Relativism denies that such foundations can be discovered. For this reason, it is often presented as an 'anti-epistemological' approach. At best, however, this is a misleading label which gives it a quite spurious air of radicalism and novelty. In fact, relativism involves an old and familiar account of the basic issues in this area – a dualist or idealist account, drawn usually from Kantian sources.¹ In particular, it is important to see that relativism shares with the more traditional approaches in epistemology the assumption that social influences upon our ideas are essentially negative and distorting ones.

As long as this assumption is made, there are only two possible alternatives in the theory of knowledge, neither of them satisfactory. *Either* we must find a non-distorting, non-social foundation for knowledge in the traditional empiricist or rationalist fashion; *or* we must accept that it is impossible to have beliefs about the objective world undistorted by social influences, and relapse into relativism and scepticism.

If we are to progress beyond these equally unacceptable alternatives, this assumption must be rejected. And it *can* be rejected. So far from simply distorting our grasp of the objective world, social forms – as embodied in concepts, categories, discourses, world-views, etc. – are the essential means through which our knowledge develops beyond its lowest, merely instinctive and animal, level. It is wrong to imagine that social forms merely distort our consciousness of reality and cut us off from knowledge of the objective nature of things. I have already criticized this theory in its more abstract and individual, Kantian form (in chapters 2 and 3). It must also be rejected in its social, neo-Kantian, relativist form. Social forms – social relations and socially created modes of thought – do not act as a barrier between us and the material world. Still less do they 'construct' their own merely mental and subjective world. All this is what Lenin rightly calls the 'sophistry' of idealism. Quite the con-

¹ It should be noted that there is also a more empiricist and mechanistic strand of relativist thought. This has been developed particularly in the 'sociology of knowledge'. See Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia*. For a more radical version of this approach, applied in the area of history and philosophy of science, see Barnes, *Scientific Knowledge and Sociological Theory*; Bloor, *Knowledge and Social Imagery*; and Barnes and Bloor, 'Relativism, Rationalism and the Sociology of Science'.

trary, it is only by social means – and especially through the use of language – that we can gain a knowledge of objective reality, beyond the most basic and elementary level.

Human thought and human consciousness are essentially social. Our concepts and categories, our theories, our 'ways of seeing things', are social and historical products. So, too, are our practical relations to the world, our forms of activity in and on it. All these propositions are true; but there is nothing in them that entails that we are therefore isolated and walled off from objective reality. Social relations are, so to speak, both the medium and the instrument through which we interact with the world, theoretically and practically. We are essentially social creatures.

The influence of categories and social forms of thought may be usefully compared with that of a lens or other refracting medium on vision. A lens alters and transforms the image of the object transmitted to the eye. In that sense, one can say that the lens 'distorts' the image. But in saying this, the fact must not be forgotten that a lens also *transmits* the image, and does not create it. The image that is transmitted may indeed be a distorted one, but it is nonetheless an image of the object, both transmitted and transformed. The object, that is to say, is *refracted* in the image, but not *created* in it. This is true even of the most distorting media. To choose an intermediate case, however: frosted glass, for example, as well as obscuring specific details, also transmits light and shadow and colour.

A refracting medium, in other words, both transforms and transmits, both distorts and reveals, the object. Social relations and social forms have, in this respect, an analogous effect. Through them, the object is refracted in consciousness. Social relations affect and alter the way we apprehend the world; but at the same time they reflect and reveal reality for us. It is quite incorrect, therefore, to see the effects of categories and concepts, of social forms, as a purely negative and distorting one. Some lenses can, of course, obscure and cloud vision; but on the other hand, the use of lenses has also enormously deepened and extended our knowledge of nature. The microscope and the telescope, for example, have revealed to us countless features and properties of the world, not known to the unaided eye; and, on the basis of this new knowledge, mankind has developed a whole range of new practical activities and techniques.

Our concepts and categories, our 'world-view', our 'way of seeing things', that is to say, do not act as barriers between us and reality. Our ideas and beliefs are not cut off from the world. Still less do we mentally or socially 'construct' our 'own' world. Our ideas and

beliefs, on the contrary, *reflect* reality; and it is only through our use of language, and the categories and concepts that it embodies, that our knowledge of the objective world is developed.

The Role of Interpretation

But how can we know that our ideas reflect objective reality and how they do so? This is, no doubt, the question that will have been occurring to many readers, for it is the central question of epistemology. Moreover, it will probably seem that the position that I have been adopting makes an answer to this question quite impossible. For our contact with reality, I have been arguing, is never purely direct and unmediated; it is always mediated by, filtered through, social forms and social relations. It is as though social forms – concepts and categories – are like *irremovable* lenses, through the medium of which we are condemned to view the world. And so, it is argued, we can never apprehend reality as it is in itself. We know it only as it appears to us, refracted through social relations, and altered and transformed by social influences. We can never, therefore, compare the appearances we apprehend with things-in-themselves; and so we can never be in a position to judge whether or not our ideas reflect reality.

This hoary old argument should be familiar. It dates back to Berkeley, at least; and it is part of the stock-in-trade of idealism. It is, indeed, only another variation of the old theme that our concepts and categories cut us off from a knowledge of the objective world. This idea is false; and so, too, are its variations. It is absurd to say that we cannot compare our ideas with objective reality. For in actual life we constantly do just this. Whenever we act upon our ideas, we put them to the test of reality, through experience and through practice. At times, even, when engaged in conscious and deliberate experiment, such testing becomes the primary purpose of our activity. Experience, practice, is the test of truth.

This is the realist view, the materialist view. It is also, of course, the empiricist view. However, the empiricist account of the process of testing is an unsatisfactory one and must be rejected. For, as I have insisted, the results of experience need to be interpreted – they do not disclose their significance immediately or directly, as the empiricist believes. Experience, in and of itself, does not provide an absolute and directly given basis upon which knowledge can be founded. In the process of knowledge, there is no such thing as the

simple and immediate verification or falsification of theories by experience described by the empiricists.

This is evident when one looks at the way in which knowledge actually develops. Kuhn has argued this point particularly persuasively against the Popperian idea of ‘falsification’. He writes, ‘no process yet disclosed by the historical study of scientific development at all resembles the methodological stereotype of falsification by direct comparison with nature’ (*The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, p. 77). In saying this, Kuhn does not wish to deny that a scientist may come to reject a theory in the face of contradictory empirical evidence and to develop a new one. However, he insists, this is not merely a process of ‘refutation’; it is not merely a matter of rejecting the theory in the face of contradictory evidence. No established scientific theory, says Kuhn, is ever *merely* abandoned, merely refuted. On the contrary, a theory is relinquished only when it can be *replaced* by a more satisfactory one. And, before such a new theory has been developed, evidence which cannot be explained and comprehended by the old theory is treated, not as a refutation of it, but rather as constituting ‘puzzles’ and ‘anomalies’ for it. It is only when a new and more satisfactory theory – a new ‘paradigm’ in Kuhn’s words – is developed that the old theory is finally abandoned and regarded as ‘refuted’. ‘Once it has achieved the status of a paradigm, a scientific theory is declared invalid only if an alternate candidate is available to take its place. . . . The decision to reject one paradigm is always simultaneously the decision to accept another’ (p. 77).

For example, empirical evidence that was difficult to reconcile with the phlogiston theory began to be revealed repeatedly by the work of such figures as Black, Scheele and Priestley in the second half of the eighteenth century. However, these scientists did not behave as the empiricist account suggests that they should have, and at once abandon the phlogiston theory as empirically ‘refuted’ and ‘falsified’. On the contrary, just as Kuhn describes, they tended to look upon these discrepant results as ‘puzzles’ and as ‘anomalies’ for the theory; and they searched for ways of explaining and understanding them within the terms of the theory. For, as I have argued (in chapter 7), the phlogiston theory provided the basic framework for the understanding of chemical phenomena in the eighteenth century. To have simply abandoned it would have been, in effect, to have abandoned chemistry. As Kuhn says, ‘to reject one paradigm without simultaneously substituting another is to reject science itself’ (*The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, p. 79). The phlogiston

theory, unsatisfactory as it was in some areas, on the contrary, could be relinquished only when it could be replaced by a more satisfactory theory. And, indeed, it was eventually rejected and replaced by the oxygen theory, as we have seen.

Until an established theory can be replaced by a more satisfactory one, however, a scientist will hold on to it, even while recognizing and acknowledging the existence of counter-instances and 'anomalies'. This is the way science *actually* proceeds; it is also the *rational* way to proceed. On the other hand, if one followed the empiricist suggestion, and abandoned a theory at the first sign of counter-evidence, no theory would ever get off the ground. For no actually existing theory is perfect. Real theories – even the best of them – are, at most, approximations to truth. As Kuhn says, 'there is no such thing as research without counter-instances' (p. 79), and thus 'all . . . theories confront counter-instances at all times' (p. 80). Sometimes such counter-instances turn out to be only apparent and temporary ones. The anomaly is resolved by further extensions and developments of the theory. At other times, however, anomalies may persist and remain recalcitrant to explanation until a new and more adequate theory is developed.

These arguments point again to the conclusion that the results of experience and experiment require interpretation – they do not have an absolute and immediate authority. The empirical evidence must be assessed, weighed and judged in the light of our other knowledge of the world before its significance can be established. In arguing thus, Kuhn is developing ideas which have been central to the rationalist tradition in the theory of knowledge. As I have indicated, writers in this tradition, from Kant onwards, have likewise emphasized the essential role that interpretation and reason play in the construction of knowledge.

In particular, Kuhn's account has many features in common with the 'coherence theory of truth' developed by rationalist and idealist philosophers in the nineteenth century.² According to this theory, the results of experience are judged true or false in accordance with how they cohere with the rest of our ideas about reality. Bradley, for example, says,

Facts . . . are true, we may say, just so far as they work, just so far as they contribute to the order of experience. If by taking certain judgments of perception as true, I can get more system into my world,

then these 'facts' are so far true, and if by taking certain 'facts' as errors I can order my experience better, then so far these 'facts' are errors. And there are no 'facts' which possess an absolute right. (*Essays on Truth and Reality*, p. 210)

It is, indeed, the case that experience does not reveal the truth to us immediately and indubitably, and that its results need interpretation. However, in saying this, we must be careful to avoid a false conclusion that Kuhn, for instance, is all too prone to draw. Although there is an essential element of interpretation in all knowledge and in all the data of experience and experiment, it by no means follows that all knowledge and all data is a mere construct or creation of interpretation or theory. An anomaly is, after all, a *fact* too; and no amount of 'interpretation' should ever lead us to reject the well-established testimony of experience as untrue. If reality, as revealed through experience and experiment, fails to conform to the expectations generated by theory, then we have a problem for the theory, an anomaly. Writers like Kuhn are correct to insist that such anomalies are not automatically and immediately to be regarded as refutations of the theory, in the Popperian and empiricist manner. For experience by itself does not have that sort of absolute authority as directly revealing truth. However, it is quite another thing, and indeed quite incorrect, to suggest that the discrepant results of experience can simply be interpreted away – dismissed and ignored. Our experience has revealed *something* – something we did not anticipate or expect, and something which contradicts, or which appears to contradict, our theory.

The notion of an anomaly is a suggestive and fruitful one in the theory of knowledge; and we have Kuhn to thank for introducing it. It is a strange paradox, therefore, that his own account of knowledge tends to rule out the very possibility of such discrepant and anomalous experience. For if, like Kuhn (in his rasher moments at least), we regard the 'facts' as a mere product of interpretation, then there never could be any anomalies. If paradigms create their 'own worlds', then the very possibility of discrepant and contradictory experience is excluded. If Kuhn were, indeed, right to say that eighteenth century chemists lived in a different, in a phlogiston 'world', then it would be incomprehensible how anomalies ever could have arisen in it, or how they ever could have managed to escape from it and develop modern chemistry. On this account, the development of scientific theory becomes an inexplicable mystery; for it portrays each period of science as hermetically sealed up in its own self-created and self-enclosed 'world', impervious to any new and contradictory experience. The history of science is thus reduced

² It should be noted that Kuhn himself remains sceptical about the notion of truth. See *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, ch.13.

to a series of quite arbitrary and inexplicable, sudden, absolute and irrational changes of 'world-view'.³

The scientist works with a theory and employs certain methods which are guided and determined by that theory. He puts the theory to work in practice and observes the results. These observations, these experiences, are not yet knowledge, but they are the indispensable basis for knowledge. In order to become elements of knowledge, these experiences must be interpreted. There is a very strong temptation to say that the interpretation somehow creates or constructs the data and the facts. But we should rather say that the interpretation, in so far as it is correct, *specifies, determines and makes us conscious of* the nature of the fact. *Something* is revealed by experience, immediately and directly. *Something* has been experienced; but the question of precisely what is not yet decided, not yet known. This is where interpretation comes in. Its job is to determine, to specify, to make conscious and articulate, the nature of the object revealed by experience. Until this is done, we have no knowledge. What is given immediately in experience must be interpreted and determined, must be taken up and responded to in a specific way, before it constitutes knowledge. As mere immediately given sensation, it is as yet something indeterminate *for us*. That is to say, we have not yet determined its nature for ourselves in a conscious and self-conscious, articulate fashion. We have not yet made it 'data', not yet made it an element of *knowledge* for us.

However, as I have insisted and as it is vital to see, this does not mean that there is no such thing as immediate experience. It does not mean that immediate sensation has no specific qualities, or that it is something indeterminate and unformed upon which we can impose any concepts and categories we choose. It is simply untrue to suggest that the interpretation of experience is an arbitrary matter, and that I can 'construct' of it any 'world' that I wish. On the contrary, what is given to us by the senses does have a determinate character, even though it is not yet determined by us, not yet data *for us*, and even though this character is not known to us until we have categorized and interpreted it.

Thus the construction involved in knowledge is not an arbitrary affair. My interpretation must be *of* the given experience, it must

³ These, at least, are the implications which follow from Kuhn's view that the proponents of different paradigms 'practice their trades in different worlds' (*The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, p. 150). However, thanks to the fact that Kuhn neither consistently maintains this view nor consistently follows out its implications, his account of scientific development is more interesting and worthwhile than it otherwise would be. The same, unfortunately, cannot be said for some later and more consistent relativists (like Foucault, Rorty and Derrida).

refer to it, it must be governed and *determined* by it. The role of interpretation is not simply to fabricate a 'world', but rather to determine and to specify, to elucidate and illuminate, the nature of the world which is, in fact, given in experience. In this connection, and *pace* Bradley and the coherence account of truth, what needs to be remembered is that the aim of interpretation in knowledge is not simply to construct a coherent and formally valid system of ideas, but rather to understand reality correctly, to illuminate and elucidate the object of our ideas.

The action of a lens again provides a helpful analogy. For interpretation has the effect of focusing and clarifying the significance of experience – elucidating and bringing into view what is given in it. And just as a lens can do this and, in so doing, extend the range of the senses, so too the development of knowledge extends the senses. Through it we become able to perceive and observe things which are not visible to the less knowing eye. 'Experience,' as Hegel somewhere says, 'is as large as the mind that comprehends it'. But this experience is no more the creation of mind than are the objects revealed through a lens the creation of the lens.

Interpretation, then, is not a purely arbitrary matter: it must be governed and determined by the nature and content of experience. On the other hand, we have rejected the idea that experience can provide absolute foundations for knowledge; and this implies that the character of experience does not entirely determine our interpretation of it. Interpretation always goes beyond what is merely given. Interpretation, as Kant argued (and as we have seen in chapter 2), is something imposed by us on our experience; for it involves the *a priori* elements of universality and necessity, which transcend what is given in any particular and finite experience. There is, in this way, as Popper calls it, a 'conjectural' or a 'hypothetical' aspect to knowledge.⁴ However, in this 'going beyond' what is given, our aim is not merely to escape refutation – or to invent a merely consistent and coherent theory – it is to elucidate and illuminate reality. We go beyond present and past experience with our theoretical interpretations in the attempt to *anticipate* future experience. Our purpose is to understand and reflect the totality of experience and the nature of reality more fully and more completely.

Interpretation goes beyond experience, and never can be entirely justified by or grounded in it. Nor, however, can interpretation be justified by reason *a priori*, in the Kantian manner. For, as we have

⁴ This is a central theme of both his *Logic of Scientific Discovery*, and *Conjectures and Refutations*.

seen (chapter 6), there are no universal and necessary forms of thought which all people, at all times, must apply to their experience, on pain of irrationality: there are no infallible methods of interpretation. What this means is that we cannot know, by the use of reason alone, whether or not the interpretation, the theory, that we have adopted and imposed upon our given experience, is a correct one. We have tried with our theory, with our hypothesis, to anticipate reality; but there is no *a priori* guarantee that we will have succeeded.

There is only one way to find this out. We must return to experience, we must *act* upon our theory, we must test our hypothesis in reality and observe the results. Of course, this new experience, in its turn, requires assessment and interpretation before its significance can be known – it does not carry any absolute or indubitable authority. Moreover, in the course of interpreting and assessing such new observations and results, the theory is developed and extended.⁵ These developments of theory must now be tested in practice, and the results interpreted; the new interpretation tested against reality, and so on. This is the process by which knowledge develops.

We use existing theory to interpret and to determine the significance of our experience and also to guide our actions. In the course of them, new experience arises, some of it inevitably discrepant with our expectations (for no theory is perfect). In the process of assessing the significance of this, we develop our theory. These developments of theory must, in their turn, be acted upon and tested out in experience. In this way, the development of knowledge involves a constant *interaction* between theory and experience, theory and practice. We use theory in order to interpret and assess, in order to criticize and develop, experience; and we use experience in order to test, to negate and extend, our theory.

Moreover, in this process of interaction between experience and theory, as I have stressed, *neither* moment has absolute authority. For, on the one hand, we have rejected the empiricist view that the data of immediate experience provides an indubitable basis for knowledge, and that a theory must be rejected as ‘refuted’ if it is in contradiction with it. On the contrary, an essential part of the role of theory and interpretation in knowledge is to enable us to make sense of – to bring coherent system and order to – the welter of apparently

⁵ This is particularly the case with anomalous and discrepant results, for it is the power of negation and contradiction which drives knowledge forward. I explain and argue for this important point at length in ‘Contradiction and Dialectic in the Development of Science’.

conflicting experiences with which we are confronted. In the process we must necessarily criticize and reject some of this experience as insignificant, erroneous and anomalous.⁶

On the other hand, we have equally rejected the rationalist and idealist view that our theory, our interpretation, our world-view, our paradigm (call it what you will), has an absolute authority over the data of experience. The facts, as I have insisted, are not mere constructs of theory, mere creations of thought. For, if the results of experience were mere artefacts of interpretation, then no conflicts between experience and theory could ever arise. Scientific theory would be pure dogma, impervious to criticism or change. If we are to make sense of the history and development of knowledge, on the other hand, we must recognize that the testing of theories and interpretations against reality, through experience and practice, is an essential moment in the process of knowledge; and that, through such testing, we are led to criticize and negate, to modify and develop, our theories.

In sum, neither empiricism – with its one-sided stress on experience – nor rationalism – with its one-sided stress on interpretation and thought, is capable of providing an acceptable account of knowledge. These either/or extremes must both be rejected. Instead, knowledge must be regarded as a process, involving the interaction, the *mutual* action, both of experience on theory, and of theory on experience. In the development of knowledge, neither experience nor theory in themselves, have an absolute and decisive authority; and yet each, nonetheless, has a *relative* authority and makes an essential contribution. For each can negate, contradict and lead to the change and development of the other. Experience requires interpretation; and interpretation needs to be tested in experience, in practice. The result is a continual process of interaction between theory and experience, theory and practice. And knowledge just *is* this process: it *is* the dialectical, the concrete, unity of theory and practice.

Practice and Knowledge

I am well aware that in using phrases like the ‘dialectical unity’ of theory and practice, and the ‘unity of opposites’, I risk forfeiting

⁶ Cf. Bradley, ‘if I am to have an orderly world, I cannot possibly accept all “facts”. Some of these must be relegated, as they are, to the world of error, whether we succeed or fail in modifying and correcting them. And the view which I advocate takes them all as in principle fallible’ (*Essays on Truth and Reality*, p. 210).

whatever sympathy and indulgence I may have gained from the reader. For, to most people, these phrases have a mysterious and even mystical sound. Unfortunately, these reactions cannot be put down to mere prejudice. These terms have been so much abused by would-be writers on Hegel and dialectic that they have become almost useless. Indeed, I would happily do without them if I could. They are, however, unavoidable in this context, at least until more satisfactory terms have been devised. For they are the correct – the precise and accurate – philosophical terms for the ideas that I am developing and expressing. Moreover, it is vital to see that in this context, at least, there is nothing really mysterious or mystical about them. For with them I mean to refer to two quite evident features of knowledge.

First, that knowledge must be seen as a process in which *both* thought and experience, theory and practice, have an essential role. In this way, there are elements of truth in both the empiricist and the rationalist accounts of knowledge. At the same time, however, both are unsatisfactory, in that each in its own way makes an abstraction of one of these aspects and stresses it in an exclusive and one-sided way. In knowledge, however, thought and experience, theory and practice, should not be regarded as distinct and separate elements, but rather as the equally essential moments of a single process. And once these opposites are seen *dynamically*, as parts of a *process*, then the way in which they can exist in unity becomes comprehensible. So far from being mysterious and mystical, this unity, indeed, can be seen as the *transition* from theory to practice and vice versa, and as an evident and obvious feature of the development of knowledge.

It is important, moreover, to stress that *practice* is an essential moment of that process; and that the nature and development of knowledge cannot properly be grasped unless the role of practice in it is recognized. Indeed, I shall go on to argue in a moment that practice is the primary aspect in the development of knowledge. Before that, however, it is necessary to insist on the point that practice plays a role in knowledge at all; for this is ignored and, indeed, implicitly denied by classical theories of knowledge. This point is brilliantly made by Marx in the first of his 'Theses on Feuerbach'.

The chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism . . . is that things, reality, sensuousness are conceived only in the form of the *object*, or of *contemplation*, but not as *human sensuous activity, practice*, not subjectively. Hence it happened that the *active* side, in contradistinction to

materialism, was set forth by idealism – but only abstractly, since, of course, idealism does not know real, sensuous activity as such.

The criticism that Marx here makes of 'all hitherto existing materialism' applies equally to the classical empiricist and direct realist accounts of knowledge. For it has been a quite characteristic feature of the empiricist tradition to look upon experience as a purely passive registration of sensations, ideas or sense-data. 'In the reception of simple ideas,' says Locke, 'the understanding is most of all passive' (*Essay*, II.i.25). Hume, likewise, regards experience as being composed of 'impressions' – that is, as something 'impressed' and 'imprinted' upon a passive and receptive consciousness. However, as we have seen, knowledge cannot be understood in these terms. We are, on the contrary, active in knowledge.

This point, as Marx says, has been emphasized by idealism; and particularly by the Kantian and neo-Kantian theories that I have been discussing. Thus Kant and his modern relativist followers stress 'the active side' by constantly insisting that knowledge is a human construction, a human creation, a human product; and they look upon this work of construction as purely *mental* and purely *theoretical* in character – as an activity purely of *thought*.

There is no doubt that mental activity is involved in knowledge.⁷ However, it is equally clear that it is neither the sole nor even the most important kind of activity involved. We are, indeed, mentally active in coming to know the world; but also, before that and at the basis of that we are *practically, materially* and *physically* active.

This may sound like a mere platitude; and so, perhaps, it is. But it is one that is denied by most traditional accounts of knowledge, and one which, therefore, has important implications in epistemology. A proper recognition of it, for example, can transform one's understanding of scientific method. For scientific testing is not simply a matter of making empirical 'observations'; nor is the activity of the scientist confined to the mere theoretical interpretation of his results. The scientist does not passively await experience. On the contrary, he actively seeks it out through *experiment*, the aim of which is, as one might say, to *evoke* and to *call forth* the relevant data. Science is *active* and *experimental* in character. It essentially involves the *activity* of the scientist upon nature; the active interference with, and testing of, the objective world to see how it responds. Moreover, experiment and practice are not peculiar to science only – they are an essential aspect of knowledge quite generally. As Mao says,

⁷ Marx does not deny this. Elsewhere, for example, he talks of the 'reproduction' of the concrete situation 'in thought' ('Introduction', (1857), p. 206).

if you want knowledge you must take part in the practice of changing reality. If you want to know the taste of a pear, you must change the pear by eating it yourself. If you want to know the structure and properties of the atom, you must make physical and chemical experiments to change the state of the atom. ('On Practice', p. 8)

Practice, furthermore, is not only an essential aspect of knowledge, it is the most basic and fundamental, the primary aspect.⁸ 'Where do correct ideas come from?' asks Mao, with his marvellous simplicity and directness: 'do they drop from the skies? No. Are they innate in the mind? No. They come from social practice, and from it alone' ('Where do Correct Ideas Come From?' p. 134). Ideas arise from practice, from experience (incorrect, as well as correct ones, I am arguing). And, as Mao insists, they must be returned to experience – acted upon and tested in practice.

Knowledge begins with practice, and theoretical knowledge is acquired through practice and must then return to practice. . . . The knowledge which grasps the laws of the world, must be redirected to the practice of changing the world. . . . This is the process of testing and developing theory, the continuation of the whole process of cognition. ('On Practice', p. 14)

In other words, practice is primary in the development of knowledge; it is the ultimate criterion of truth.

Of course, as I have already I hope sufficiently stressed, this does not mean that the results of experience and practice have an absolute and immediate authority. These results need to be assessed and interpreted. The view that I am developing fully acknowledges the essential role that interpretation and thought play in knowledge. It recognizes that the results of experience and experiment cannot be judged in themselves and in isolation, but only in the context of how they cohere with the rest of our ideas of the world. On the other hand, as a form of realism and materialism, it denies that interpretation or thought can *make* truth, or be the ultimate criterion of truth. In short, it denies the coherence theory of truth.⁹

Up to this point, the dialectical materialism that I am propounding has had much in common with the views of Hegelian coherence

⁸ See Mao, 'On Contradiction', for an account of the idea of the 'primary aspect' of a contradiction. In particular, it is important to note that it is a *relative* and not an absolute notion.

⁹ This theory was particularly associated with the Hegelian idealist strand of nineteenth century philosophy. Its most notable exponent in this country was Bradley. See, especially, his *Essays on Truth and Reality*; and also, Joachim, *The Nature of Truth*.

theorists like Bradley.¹⁰ But here, over the issue of practice, the idealism of the coherence theory and the materialism that I am defending finally part company. For the moment of thought, of theory, of interpretation and of coherence in knowledge, is, according to materialism, only a secondary and subordinate one. Interpretation does not create its own world *ex nihilo*. On the contrary, the world exists objectively, in itself, independent of thought. The question of truth is the question of how things are in objective reality. The means of deciding this must, ultimately, involve the testing of our ideas and beliefs against reality: putting them into contact, into confrontation, with reality; and the way we do this is through experience, through practice. This is the materialist account of knowledge.

The idealist theory, by contrast, maintains that the truth of our ideas is determined by their coherence and systematic order. Thus Bradley makes the moment of interpretation the decisive and primary one in the development of knowledge. 'The observed fact', he says,

must agree with our world as already arranged, or at least must not upset this. If the fact is too much contrary to our arranged world we provisionally reject it. We eventually accept the fact only when after confirmation the hypothesis of its error becomes still more ruinous. We are forced more or less to rearrange our world, and more or less perhaps to reject some previous facts. The question throughout is as to what is better or worse for our order as a whole. (*Essays on Truth and Reality*, p. 212)

In other words, the coherence theory maintains that the truth of our ideas is determined, not by the comparison and confrontation of ideas with objective reality, but rather by the system and relationship of our ideas with each other. The obvious and damning objection – the materialist objection – to this theory, is that according to it our knowledge is cut off from the objective world. It becomes a purely ideal creation, not related to, not anchored in, material reality.¹¹

¹⁰ Indeed, I would like to record here how much I have learned from Bradley in my understanding of the issues dealt with in this book.

¹¹ Cf. Williams' aptly entitled book *Groundless Belief*, which gives a thoughtful and interesting defence of a version of the coherence theory. He notes that proponents of the coherence theory 'can become haunted by the picture of one's belief system incorporating all sorts of internal relations of justification while, as a whole, floating above the world with no point of contact' (p. 101). Unfortunately, he then follows Rorty in trying to fend off this objection by jettisoning the idea of the objective world altogether. I have already criticized this view above, chapter 6.

But how can we know the nature of objective reality, the nature of things as they are in themselves, independent of our consciousness of them? How can we test our ideas against this reality, and compare our beliefs with it? These are the questions that will be asked. These are the questions that continually recur. And to them, at the end of the day, there is only one answer: if I have specific and genuine doubts – if, for example, I am like the person who, when he switches out the light at night, wonders whether he has set his alarm; or if I am like the scientist wondering whether, or to what extent, a hypothesis will turn out to be correct – then there is only one answer: Dr Johnson's answer. In response to Berkeley's philosophy, so Boswell recounts, Johnson struck 'his foot with mighty force against a large stone, till he rebounded from it – "I refute him thus"' (*Life of Johnson*, I, p. 292). The answer, that is to say, is *practice*.

But from all sides we shall be told that this is 'crude stuff' and 'no answer'. Neither Berkeley nor Kant nor any other philosopher, it will be said, denies that we can have knowledge of the real world. Their 'doubts' are of a philosophical variety. They do not really doubt that there are stones and that we can kick them; but they do give a different, an anti-realist, a dualist (agnostic) or idealist account of the material world, and of our actions in it. Moreover, it is often said that this alternative, idealist, account is 'irrefutable'. Even Engels and Lenin say this. But both nonetheless spend a good many pages refuting it (over 400 in Lenin's case!). Of course, they do not 'prove' their point in an absolute, incontrovertible and indubitable manner. No knowledge – and certainly no philosophy – can be proved like that. Indeed, the very idea of 'proof' in philosophy is one that should be abandoned, for it is thoroughly misleading and unhelpful one.¹²

However, in a more realistic sense, idealism can certainly be refuted. This is what materialist philosophers throughout the ages have done. This is also what I have tried to do, by showing, first of all, that materialism represents a coherent and viable alternative to idealism or agnosticism. I have shown, that is to say, that – despite the arguments of idealism or agnosticism – it is possible to maintain the otherwise self-evident realist view that there is an objective, material world independent of consciousness, of which we can have knowledge. And, secondly, I have argued that materialism offers the only basis upon which the nature of actual knowledge, and the nature of truth, reality and reason can be grasped and understood.

¹² This is a theme in Schopenhauer's work. See also, Magee, *The Philosophy of Schopenhauer*.

The ultimate justification of materialism is thus a materialist one: not only is materialism a possible and a coherent outlook, it is also, and more importantly, one that positively *works in practice*.

If one looks carefully at the history of philosophy, indeed, one can see that this has been the constant and regular reply of materialism and realism to idealism, dualism and scepticism. Locke, for example, responds to the sceptical doubts that Descartes raises at the outset of his philosophy (in *Meditations*, I) not like Descartes himself, with an appeal to *a priori* reason and to God's goodness, but rather like Johnson, with an appeal to practice. 'But yet', Locke says,

if . . . anyone be so sceptical, as to distrust his senses, and to affirm that all we see and hear, feel and taste, think and do, during our whole being, is but the series and deluding appearances of a long dream, whereof there is no reality . . . [then] I make this answer. . . . Our faculties [are] suited not to the full extent of being, nor to a perfect, clear, comprehensive knowledge of things free from all doubt and scruple; but to the preservation of us, in whom they are. . . . If our dreamer pleases to try, whether the glowing heat of a glass furnace, be barely a wandering imagination in a drowsy man's fancy, by putting his hand into it, he may be perhaps wakened into a certainty greater than he could wish, that it is something more than bare imagination. (*Essay*, IV.xi.8)

Marx responds to idealist scepticism in similar terms. 'The question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a *practical* question. Man must prove the truth, i.e. the reality and power, the this-sidedness of his thinking in practice' ('Theses on Feuerbach', II). Even Hegel argues in this way. With delightful irony he mocks the Kantian and agnostic view as follows.¹³

The difficulty arising from the one-sided assumption of the theoretical consciousness, that natural objects confront us as permanent and impenetrable objects, is directly negated by the practical approach . . . Of a metaphysics prevalent today which maintains that we cannot know things because they are absolutely shut to us, it might be said that not even the animals are so stupid as these metaphysicians; for they go after things, seize and consume them. (*Philosophy of Nature*, §246z)

¹³ In its full context (not quoted here), it should be noted that Hegel is in fact maintaining that the practical attitude constitutes a proof of his idealism. See also the similar passage in *Phenomenology of Mind*, pp. 158–9. I would dispute this, of course, but it is not relevant to do so here. The important point is that the practical attitude is the refutation of Kantian agnosticism and scepticism, as Hegel argues.

Contrary to the common charge, there is nothing ‘crude’ or ‘unphilosophical’ in these materialist ideas. The trouble with them rather seems to be that they are expressed with too much subtlety and too much irony to be widely and properly appreciated. Sometimes, perhaps, one needs the more plain and direct style of an Engels or a Mao before what is being said is understood.

Knowledge, I have argued, develops through a process of interaction and dialogue between theory and experience, theory and practice. The accumulation of new experience – and particularly anomalous experience – leads to problems for a theory, and thus to its development. This, in turn, leads to new forms of practice and to new problems for theory. Kuhn gives an excellent description of this process in the history of science, in his account of the functioning of what he calls ‘normal science’. By this he means science conducted under the guidance of an accepted and established paradigm. Normal science, by its very nature, as Kuhn shows, leads to the practical attempt to extend the theory to new areas, and thus to the accumulation of problems and anomalies for it. These, when the weight of them accumulates sufficiently,¹⁴ provoke a ‘crisis’ in the theory, which leads to the search for alternative theories and eventually to a scientific ‘revolution’, in which the old theory is replaced with a new one.

However, as I have argued above, Kuhn’s more general theory of knowledge – his neo-Kantian relativism – is in contradiction with this account of the development of knowledge, since, by one-sidedly stressing the constructive role of theory in knowledge, it should make the very existence of anomalies an impossibility. On the other hand, empiricism, with its equally one-sided stress upon the authority of experience and experiment in knowledge, is also incapable of comprehending the development of knowledge. This process can be understood only if it is looked upon in dialectical terms as one in which theory acts upon experience, and experience acts upon theory. Knowledge, that is to say, must be seen as the unity of theory and practice.

¹⁴ Here, in Kuhn’s account, we have an excellent example of what dialectical philosophy refers to as the transformation of merely quantitative into qualitative change. However, in contrast to Kuhn, a vital point that dialectic makes about such transformations is that there is *both* an aspect of continuity and of discontinuity about them. I will return to this point in chapter 10.

9 The Case of Psychoanalysis

The Politics of Epistemology

Knowledge, I have been arguing, involves both a practical and a theoretical aspect. In the last chapter I developed this account for the most part in general and philosophical terms. In this chapter I will present a particular example, in order to make clear some of its significant features. My example will be psychoanalysis. I will argue that Freud’s approach is, as he claimed, a scientific one; and that it is one of the virtues of the theory of knowledge that I am giving that it can recognize this. Lest this seem a quite willfully paradoxical and perverse example to focus upon, however, let me first of all explain my purpose in choosing it.

The scientific status of Freud’s theories has been, and continues to be, a controversial and much disputed topic. Thus, I could not hope to appeal to the scientific authority of Freud’s work in order to bolster my own account of knowledge. For that purpose, I would obviously choose an area of scientific work, like physics or chemistry, the authority and status of which are less in dispute. However, in the discussion which follows I have a different end in mind.

It is in the controversial and disputed areas of thought, like that of psychoanalysis (and Marxism), that the significance of a theory of knowledge is most directly evident. For it is particularly in these areas that epistemology has a *practical* effect. In the exact sciences, like physics, chemistry and mathematics, which have secure authority as sciences and established methods of procedure, the workaday scientist is not usually concerned by, or troubled with, epistemological or methodological problems. He just gets on with the job. (This is what Kuhn refers to as ‘normal science’.) That is not to say that philosophical and methodological questions do not arise in the exact sciences. Indeed, they do – but only at the outer limits of the subject.

Such questions, however, are much nearer to the heart and centre of the social and human sciences. In most areas of the social sciences there are different competing approaches and methods, each claiming to be philosophically justified and scientific. Philosophical questions have a more immediate practical significance, and can be ignored only by an act of wilful blindness.

Work in the theory of knowledge has thus tended to focus upon the exact sciences in order to draw lessons about the nature of knowledge and the methods of gaining it. These lessons, however, are then applied to the social sciences, where theories and methods are much more in dispute.¹ This is the practical side of epistemology – its ‘politics’ as they say. The social sciences – psychoanalysis and Marxism in particular – are quite central to this ‘politics’.² In discussing psychoanalysis in this context, therefore, I will not only be arguing further for my position, but also making clear where I stand on these issues.

Structuralism and the Significance of Theory

Let us look, then, at the claim that psychoanalysis is a science. This is a claim that Freud consistently made for it. At the outset, however, it should be emphasized that he did not regard his theory as an immutable and absolutely true one. Regrettably, however, the view that psychoanalysis is an unshakable dogma has become an all-too-familiar one among some of his followers. Freud himself, by contrast, was continually changing, refining and developing his views throughout his long life. Nevertheless, he was convinced that psychoanalysis represented a real, and, indeed, a revolutionary, step forward in psychology. It had, Freud believed, demonstrated that many aspects of behaviour, previously regarded as arbitrary and insignificant – like errors, dreams and neurotic symptoms – had a meaning, and could be interpreted and understood in relation to the

¹ It should be noted that this is an example of the application of theory to practice, and of the movement from the theoretical to the practical described in the previous chapter.

² This is particularly clear in Popper’s work, for example, which has a quite explicit political purpose. In recounting his intellectual development, he writes, ‘my problem perhaps first took the simple form, “What is wrong with Marxism, psychoanalysis, and individual psychology? Why are they so different from the physical sciences, from Newton’s theory, and especially from the theory of relativity? . . . I felt that these other three theories, though posing as sciences, had in fact more in common with primitive myths than with science; that they resembled astrology rather than astronomy” (*Conjectures and Refutations*, p. 34). See also Popper’s similar and somewhat fuller account in *Unended Quest*, ch.8.

rest of psychological life. It had discovered and revealed new and previously unknown aspects and forces of the mind.

In recent years, the claim that psychoanalysis is a science has been insistently made by the structuralist followers of Lacan. According to Althusser, for example, ‘Freud founded a *science*. A new science which was the science of a new object: the unconscious’ (*Freud and Lacan*, p. 184). This ‘new object’, as Althusser goes on to stress, is not directly given in experience or encountered in practice; it can be known only with the help of theory.

Some important insights about psychoanalysis are contained in these views. Psychoanalysis is, indeed, essentially and centrally concerned with unconscious mental phenomena; and these, by their very nature, are not directly evident to consciousness. The techniques of analysis – the method of free association, the focus on the transference, etc. – are specifically designed to reveal this material. It is all too easy to forget this when assessing psychoanalytic theory. Because it deals with human psychology and with everyday life, there is a strong temptation to imagine that we are all in a position to assess the truth of psychoanalysis on the basis of our own immediate experience. Judged on that basis, many of Freud’s ideas seem extravagant, implausible, and even repugnant. However, just as with any other science, the question of the plausibility of psychoanalysis is quite irrelevant to its truth. Judged merely on the basis of everyday experience, the idea that material objects are made up of millions upon millions of sub-atomic particles also seems an implausible one; but this is no more a valid basis of objection to the atomic theory than it is to psychoanalysis.

Psychoanalysis does not claim to give a merely plausible account of what is evident to direct and conscious experience; it claims to give a *true* account of forces and features of the mind which, in the normal course of events, are hidden from consciousness. For psychoanalysis, just like physics, describes a level of reality not directly and immediately revealed to the senses, but discovered only through specialized techniques of investigation, guided and governed by theory. This is certainly what Freud believed. He writes,

we have adopted the hypothesis of a psychical apparatus . . . which gives rise to the phenomena of consciousness only at one particular point and under certain conditions. This hypothesis has put us in a position to establish psychology upon foundations similar to those of any other science, such as physics. In our science the problem is the same as in the others: behind the attributes (i.e. qualities) of the object under investigation which are directly given to our perception, we have to discover something which is more independent of the

particular receptive capacities of our sense organs and which approximates more closely to what may be supposed to be the real state of things. (*Outline of Psychoanalysis*, p. 105)

Just as the facts of atomic physics have been discovered and revealed only by means of the methods and techniques of modern physics, so, too, the facts of the unconscious can be revealed and made evident only by using the methods and techniques of psychoanalysis. The demand that Freud's theories be assessed by supposedly 'neutral' experimental methods which ignore or exclude the techniques of psychoanalysis is therefore an absurd and inappropriate one. It presupposes the empiricist idea that reality is revealed directly in immediate (i.e. unmediated and hence 'neutral') experience.³ Such an account of knowledge is entirely unsatisfactory, as I have argued; it cannot comprehend even the nature of physics, let alone that of psychoanalysis.

On the other hand, Althusser's structuralism is in no better position to do so. If empiricism involves a one-sided stress on the role of experience in knowledge, Althusser's account (characteristically for structuralism) involves an equally one-sided emphasis upon the role of theory in knowledge. 'As in every authoritatively constituted science,' he writes,

the practice (cure) is not the absolute of the science, but a theoretically subordinated moment. . . . If this thesis is correct, analytical practice . . . does not contain the secrets of psychoanalysis; it only contains one part of the reality of psychoanalysis, the part which exists in practice. . . . Neither do the technique and method contain the secrets of psychoanalysis, except as every method does, by delegation, not from the practice but from the theory. Only the theory contains them, as in every scientific discipline. ('Freud and Lacan', p. 184)

It is true that all science, all knowledge, involves thought, interpretation and theory, as I have argued. However, if the contribution of

³ For the demand that psychoanalysis should be assessed in this way, see e.g., Eysenck, 'Psychoanalysis - Myth or Science?' (no prizes for guessing Eysenck's answer), and Cioffi, 'Freud and the Idea of a Pseudoscience'. Cosin *et al.* usefully show how Cioffi assumes that 'the true facts could not be opaque but must be available to the inspection of any untrained, unbiased observer. Such a step would be disastrous for the physical sciences. Propositions in physics, e.g., to which observation is relevant, cannot be assessed by the untrained observer. . . . In speaking as if tests should be made by carrying out unbiased observation, Cioffi is asking psychoanalysts to test propositions in psychoanalysis in the context of other people's theories, including the . . . versions of these prevalent in the culture of "commonsense", or to use Cioffi's own term, as "intuition"' ('Critical Empiricism Criticized', pp. 42-3).

experience and practice is entirely subordinated to theory in this fashion – if the 'secrets' of the world are regarded as being constituted only by theory – then the result is an extreme rationalism which is no better able than empiricism to comprehend the nature of knowledge.

It is all very well to say that Freud has a theory which refers to a 'new object', the unconscious. The question remains, however, of how we can know that this theory, and the specific interpretations and explanations based upon it, give a true, objective and useful picture of psychological life. According to Althusser, 'a practice and a technique, even if they give results, do not deserve the name of science unless a theory gives them the right to it, not by mere declaration, but by rigorous proof' (pp. 184-5). But this is pure rhetoric on Althusser's part. Although he endlessly asserts the 'scientificity' of psychoanalysis, he gives no argument for this, let alone 'rigorous proof': dogmatic assertion ('mere declaration') is all that he offers.⁴

The Practical Side of Analysis

Purely on the basis of theoretical considerations – purely *a priori* – it is impossible to know that psychoanalytic theory is correct. Freud's theories are in no way different from other theories in this respect. The psychoanalyst is confronted with a person who describes and exhibits his symptoms, feelings, memories, dreams and associations. From this material, the analyst begins to form a hypothesis about the meaning and cause of the symptoms, and especially about the character of the unconscious wishes expressed in them. The analyst, that is to say, makes a certain 'interpretation' of the material with which he is presented; or, in Freud's words, he makes a certain 'construction' of it. But how can the analyst know that this interpretation or construction is a correct one? Even if one grants that psychoanalytic theory is in general a scientific theory, it in no way follows that *this particular application* of it is a valid and objective one.

The question of how psychoanalytic interpretations can be tested and verified cannot be satisfactorily dealt with, as the structuralists

⁴ Such dogmatism is a familiar and characteristic feature of structuralist accounts of psychoanalysis. See also, e.g., Mitchell, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*, which, while giving a generally reliable account of psychoanalysis and an interesting critical discussion of alternative theories, continually insists upon the 'scientificity' of Freud's theories with no supporting argument or discussion whatever.

tend to do, simply by branding anyone who dares to ask it a 'crude empiricist'; it is a genuine and important one. Freud, at least, thought so. In 'On Constructions in Analysis' he gives an illuminating and useful account of this issue. It is an important one because a major – perhaps the major – basis for scepticism about Freud's theories is the belief that psychoanalytic interpretations are immune from empirical testing, and that they are quite arbitrarily imposed by the analyst on the empirical data. Psychoanalysis, it is argued, is untestable - unverifiable and/or unfalsifiable – a 'pseudoscience'. Nagel's view is typical: 'there is surely good general ground for the suspicion that Freudian theory can always be manipulated so that it escapes refutation, no matter what the established facts may be'⁵

The crudest versions of this argument maintain that Freud's account of the mind is nothing but a 'mythology': in Eysenck's words, 'a set of semi-religious beliefs disseminated by a group of people who should be regarded as prophets rather than scientists' (p. 67). This view, it seems to me, is untenable and unworthy of serious attention. Quite apart from the general arguments I have already given to the effect that no ideas are pure illusion, the impact of Freud's ideas on twentieth century thought has been so massive and so widespread, that it is quite simply incredible to suggest that his ideas are entirely and completely lacking in value or truth.⁶

However, there is also a somewhat more sophisticated version of the argument that psychoanalysis is an untestable 'pseudoscience', which seeks to take account of – indeed, to explain – the great impact of Freud's ideas. According to this version, it is a mistake to regard psychoanalytic theory as a description of empirical facts at all. Freudian interpretations do not convey scientific knowledge – that is not their purpose. Rather, Freud's theories and interpretations are, in Wittgenstein's words, 'propounding a ... myth' (*Lectures and Conversations*, p. 51). Freud, according to Wittgenstein, was weaving a fiction. He was providing an interpretation, a story, which linked together the various details of the patient's life (the symptoms, memories, dreams, associations, etc.) into a coherent

⁵ Quoted with approval by Cioffi, 'Freud and the Idea of a Pseudoscience', p. 510. Cf. also Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations*, pp. 37ff; Eysenck, 'Psychoanalysis – Myth or Science?' etc.

⁶ This is also the conclusion of most attempts to test psychoanalytic theory in an experimental fashion outside the analytical context. See, e.g., Kline, *Fact and Fantasy in Freudian Theory*, who concludes that 'any blanket rejection of Freudian theory as a whole (e.g. Eysenck) simply flies in the face of the evidence' (p. 350). See also Fisher and Greenberg, *The Scientific Credibility of Freud's Theories and Therapy*. I was led to these references by Hopkins, 'Introduction' to Wollheim and Hopkins (eds) *Philosophical Essays on Freud*, p. xlvi, which contains a useful brief discussion of these issues.

and unified theoretical whole which appears to give them meaning and significance.

Freud argued that his theories were repugnant to most people and that their reception was impeded by strong irrational resistances ('The Resistances to Psychoanalysis'). Wittgenstein, by contrast, asserts that Freud gives us 'a picture which has a peculiar attraction for us' (p. 26). This 'peculiar attraction' is supposed to account for the influence of Freud's ideas. It is also supposed to account for the therapeutic effects of psychoanalysis. The patient is led to accept the analyst's 'story'; and in this way his symptoms are rendered less alien and disturbing to him. However, the analytic story remains just that – a mere story, an arbitrary and subjective fiction, for which it is neither appropriate nor possible to demand evidence or empirical tests. On this view of Freud's theory, a psychoanalytic interpretation is a merely arbitrary and subjective imposition by the analyst. According to Wittgenstein,

Freud remarks on how, after the analysis of it, the dream appears so very logical. And of course it does. You could start with any of the objects on this table – which certainly are not put there through your dream activity – and you could find that they all could be connected in a pattern like that; and the pattern would be logical in the same way. (*Lectures and Conversations*, p. 51)

And, he asks rhetorically, 'couldn't the whole thing have been differently treated?' (p. 45).

Wittgenstein is here basing himself on an account of knowledge with which we are already well familiar. It is, indeed, nothing but a version of the sort of neo-Kantian scepticism that we have often met with, applied to the particular case of psychoanalysis. For here again we have the view that interpretation or theory is something imposed arbitrarily upon the empirical data, which creates and constructs the object of supposed knowledge.

Just as we found this to be unsatisfactory as a general account of knowledge, so it is unsatisfactory as an account of psychoanalysis. The analyst does indeed begin by observing the material presented by the patient and attempting to form an explanation, an interpretation, a 'construction' on this basis. Wittgenstein's analogy of 'interpreting' the objects on a table corresponds roughly to this phase of analytical work. If the process stopped at this point, it would indeed be impossible to assess the truth of psychoanalytic interpretations: for as I have just insisted in relation to Althusser's account, this cannot be known purely *a priori*, on the basis of theoretical considerations alone. Indeed, Wittgenstein's account shares with Althus-

ser's, and with other forms of rationalism, the assumption that theory is the primary aspect of knowledge and that psychoanalytic ideas and 'objects' are mere theoretical constructs. However, Wittgenstein at least – in contrast to Althusser – sees that theory alone is not a sufficient basis for the claim to knowledge.

The phase of theoretical interpretation is, however, only the first phase of psychoanalytic work: it is merely what Freud calls a 'preliminary labour'.⁷ The 'construction', the interpretation that results from this labour must be tested in practice. In this connection, it is vital to see that interpretation is a *practical* as well as a theoretical activity in analysis. The activity of the analyst is not the purely theoretical one of observing and forming hypotheses, it is also the practical one of *communicating* the interpretation to the patient. The analyst, unlike the person in Wittgenstein's example, is in *active* relation with his subject (the patient). Psychoanalysis is not a matter of mere passive and detached observation, combined with the purely theoretical activity of 'interpretation'. Like all real and concrete forms of knowledge it essentially involves practical and material activity. This *action* of interpretation is the essential means by which the *theoretical* interpretation is tested. It is the *experimental* activity of the analyst, designed to elicit further material from the patient, to *evoke* evidence which will either confirm or disconfirm the hypothesis.

The testing of psychoanalytic hypotheses thus proceeds in a manner exactly similar to their testing in other sciences. A hypothesis is formed on the basis of observations. It is put to the test in practice, in a manner that is (partly at least) designed to reveal further aspects of reality and to evoke empirical data, in terms of which the hypothesis may be assessed.⁸ In the light of the new data

⁷ 'Constructions in Analysis', p. 260. The phase of theoretical construction is only a 'preliminary labour' where the analysis of actual patients is in question, as I go on to explain. As for Freud's analyses of cases based on biographies, etc., and also where psychoanalysis is used in literary and film criticism, Wittgenstein's analogy has more force. However, it should be remembered that such uses of psychoanalysis are entirely secondary, and dependent for what authority they have, upon the theory which Freud developed primarily through his therapeutic work.

⁸ The activity of the analyst is only partly a scientific one. It is also, and indeed primarily, of course, governed by therapeutic goals. In seeking to understand psychoanalysis it is essential to recognize it as both a science and a therapy. Because of this, both its theory and practice have a double aspect. The theory functions not only as an explanation of human behaviour, but also as a guide to, and justification of, analytic therapy; and the practical activity of the analyst is at once both a method of experiment and research on the one hand, and a therapy on the other. These two aspects may work in harmony; but equally they may not. Elsewhere I have tried to show how an understanding of the conflicting theoretical and practical pressures of science and therapy help to illuminate Freud's account of health and illness. See 'Mental Illness as a Moral Concept'.

that results, the hypothesis, the interpretation, the theory, is modified and developed; again it must be tested in practice – and so knowledge develops. This is precisely how Freud describes the analytic method. 'The analyst,' he says,

finishes a piece of construction and communicates it to the subject of the analysis so that it may work upon him; he then constructs a further piece out the fresh material pouring in upon him, deals with it in the same way and proceeds in this alternating fashion until the end. ('Constructions in Analysis', pp. 260–1)

Of course, when I talk of the hypothesis being tested in practice, I do not mean to suggest that the patient's response constitutes an immediate, direct or automatically decisive answer. On the contrary, as always with the materials of experience, the responses of the patient to the analyst's interpretation themselves require interpretation. Freud is particularly clear upon this point. He deals with it in the course of answering the charge that the analyst manipulates the data so that it always confirms his theory. Freud responds to this criticism by conceding – indeed by insisting – that the patient's reaction to interpretation itself requires interpretation. 'It is true that we do not accept the "no" of a person under analysis at its face value; but neither do we allow his "yes" to pass. There is no justification for accusing us of invariably twisting his remarks into a confirmation. In reality things are not so simple' (p. 262). In other words, all responses need to be interpreted. Neither a 'yes' nor a 'no' can be taken simply at face value; and, drawing on his analytic experience, Freud goes on to spell out some of the factors which may help in assessing the true significance of the patient's response.

In this connection it should just be noted that, for Freud, the verification of a psychoanalytic interpretation does not necessarily rest upon the ultimate assent and avowal of the subject of it.⁹ In practice, it is often a matter of a more complex and overall judgement of a person's behaviour. There is nothing that should be unduly surprising in this, however, for in our everyday understanding of people's actions we can often arrive at a well-founded view of a person's motives without that person themselves having directly told us of them.

The justification of psychoanalytic interpretations, in sum, lies in the process of mutual interaction of theory and practice. The view that analytic interpretation involves only the fabrication of a story which binds its incidents and elements into a coherent pattern sees

⁹ Contrast Wittgenstein, *Lectures and Conversations*, p. 42, who does not seem to be properly aware of this point.

only one moment, one aspect, of this process, and focuses upon it in a one-sided and exclusive fashion.

This is not to deny, of course, that it is a feature of analytic interpretation, as of all theoretical explanation, that it demonstrates the pattern in things, and renders the world intelligible and coherent. Freud certainly recognized this as an important part of the justification for his theory. He writes, for example,

the data of consciousness are exceedingly defective; both in healthy and in sick persons mental acts are often in process which can be explained only by presupposing other acts, of which consciousness yields no evidence . . . All these conscious acts remain disconnected and unintelligible if we are determined to hold fast to the claim that every single mental act performed within us must be consciously experienced; on the other hand, they fall into demonstrable connection if we interpolate the unconscious acts that we infer. ('The Unconscious', p. 99)

It is clear, however, that Freud would never have been content with the view that coherence is the sole justification for an interpretation. For, beyond this, he maintains also that an interpretation may be true in the sense that it reflects real aspects of the world, and that this is proved in practice. Thus, in the same passage, he goes on to say that 'the assumption of the unconscious helps us to construct a highly successful practical method, by which we are enabled to exert a useful influence upon the course of conscious processes' (*idem*).

Freud was thoroughly realistic in his approach to psychology. He regarded the unconscious and the other phenomena revealed by psychoanalysis as objective and real forces at work in our lives. He would have had no time whatever for the view that analytic interpretations are mere fictions. He scornfully dismisses Janet's view that the concept of the unconscious is a mere '*façon de parler*' with the remark that psychoanalysis 'is compelled . . . to take the concept of the unconscious seriously' (*An Autobiographical Study*, p. 55).¹⁰

The meaning of a dream or a symptom, as revealed by psychoanalysis, is not a mere story or myth. And the idea that analytic interpretation is a sort of deciphering of a 'text' leads to no end of error and confusion. For the unconscious is, on the contrary, something *objective* and *real* – a force which makes itself felt in a person's life. The ultimate test of this proposition must be practical; and, in the case of psychoanalysis, the relevant practice is psychotherapy. Moreover, as I have stressed, the activity of the

analyst is not confined to the purely intellectual plain. *Contra Lacan et al.*, the unconscious is not like a mere language, and analytic therapy is not a purely theoretical activity. Its purpose is not primarily to get the patient to accept a particular theory or 'story' at an intellectual level; but rather to help him to tackle and influence the causes of his symptoms in a practical fashion. This process is comprehensible only in realistic terms. It implies that the analytic 'story' is not only a coherent and attractive one, but one that correctly reflects the real forces at work unconsciously in the patient. Freud makes the point as follows.

The doctor has no difficulty, of course, in making [the patient] a supporter of some particular theory . . . In this respect the patient is behaving like anyone else – like a pupil – but this only affects his intelligence, not his illness. After all, his conflicts will only be successfully solved and his resistances overcome if the anticipatory ideas he is given tally with what is real in him. (*Introductory Lectures*, p. 505)

Some Doubts and Difficulties

When writing in defence of the scientific status of psychoanalysis, it is difficult to avoid giving the impression that one regards psychoanalytic theory as faultless. That is certainly not my view, however, nor is it the point that I have been seeking to make. What I have been arguing is, rather, that we should reject attempts to dismiss Freud's ideas as mere 'mythology' or 'pseudoscience' on purely *a priori*, epistemological grounds. Both the empiricist and the rationalist accounts of knowledge which underlie these attacks on psychoanalysis are incapable of explaining even the least controversial examples of knowledge. When it comes to a controversial and genuinely problematic case, like psychoanalysis, neither is capable of offering any illumination. The one tries to dismiss Freud's theory as 'mythology' and 'pseudoscience'. The other (at least in its recent structuralist version) attempts, on equally *a priori* epistemological grounds, to defend Freud's ideas by a dogmatic insistence on their theoretical perfection. The defects of both approaches do more to expose the inadequacies of these rationalist or empiricist theories than to illuminate Freud's methods. For such illumination we must turn rather to the dialectical account of knowledge as the unity of theory and practice which I have been developing.

These are, in fact, very much the terms in which Freud explains his own method. But the fact that this is so, is not in itself any

¹⁰ Compare a similar passage in *Introductory Lectures*, p. 296.

guarantee that his actual practice always conformed to this method. Indeed, if one looks at his work, it is clear that it did not always do so. Freud had a very strongly speculative turn of mind; and there is much in his work that can rightly be described as 'metaphysical', and even as 'mythological' in character. The practice of analytic therapy, moreover, is equally open to abuse (although I know of no evidence to suggest that Freud abused it). There is certainly much that is imperfect in both the theory and the practice of psychoanalysis. Freud was aware of this. He writes, for example,

I have not always been a psychotherapist. Like other neuropathologists, I was trained to employ local diagnoses and electro-prognosis, and it still strikes me myself as strange that the case histories I write should read like short stories and that, as one might say, they lack the serious stamp of science. I must console myself with the reflection that the nature of the subject is evidently responsible for this, rather than any preference of my own. The fact is that local diagnosis and electrical reactions lead nowhere in the study of hysteria, whereas a detailed description of mental processes such as we are accustomed to find in the works of imaginative writers enables me, with the use of a few psychological formulas, to obtain at least some kind of insight into the course of the affliction. (*Studies on Hysteria*, p. 231)

This, though written at the outset of Freud's psychological career, conveys a spirit and an attitude which continued in his work to the end. No doubt, psychoanalysis is imperfect. However, it also contains real and practical knowledge in psychology, which should not be rejected on purely *a priori* epistemological grounds, but only when it can be replaced by an alternative and more satisfactory psychological theory and method.

In my discussion of psychoanalysis so far, I have been assuming that psychoanalysis is, indeed, the most satisfactory psychological theory as yet available. I have been discussing the question of how it is possible to assess particular analytic interpretations and hypotheses, given an acceptance of the general theoretical and methodological framework of psychoanalysis. Many people, however, do not accept it. At most they believe only that psychoanalysis is one among many different possible alternative approaches in psychology. The question then arises of how, and on what basis, the psychoanalytic approach can be justified against these others. The answer to this question, in general terms, must be the same as the answer to the more specific question that I have just dealt with. Practice is the test of truth. The only way in which we can know of the truth of a theory is to test it against reality, modify the theory

according to the results observed, test it again, and so forth. This is the process by which knowledge is assessed and developed.

I do not dispute that the field of psychology is one in which knowledge is not yet well developed and which, therefore, presents very real problems for this account of knowledge. For, in this field it does, indeed, seem that quite different and opposed approaches are equally possible. It appears that, for example, Freudian, Jungian, Adlerian and many other forms of psychoanalytic theory, as well as entirely different approaches like that of behaviourism, can all equally be justified in the way that I have described.

Despite the fact that this is widely believed to be the case in psychology, I do not think it is so. Though psychoanalysis is an imperfectly developed approach in some respects, it constitutes a real and significant advance in the objective understanding and treatment of human psychology; and it has been responsible for discoveries and ideas which will have to be incorporated into any further developments in this field. It is arguable, indeed, that despite its imperfections, there is quite simply no equally valid alternative approach to psychoanalysis in the specific areas that it covers. There is no equally satisfactory account of neurotic symptoms across their whole range, nor of dreams or of errors and 'faulty actions' (*parapraxes*). That is to say, it is arguable that psychoanalysis offers the best understanding of its subject yet developed.

Of course, there are those who would completely reject these statements and, like Eysenck and Cioffi, persist in regarding Freud's ideas as sheer mythology. However, the mere fact that such views are held is no proof that they are correct. After all, there are still people who believe that the earth is flat – but that goes no way towards showing that the earth is in fact flat, or that different, equally valid views on this issue are possible. As Marcel says, '*on est toujours libre de ne rien comprendre à rien*'.¹¹

Nevertheless, it must be admitted that the practical results of psychoanalysis – its therapeutic effects – are far from impressive. Not that any other available psychology is better placed in this respect. However, the dismal practical results of psychoanalysis must leave a serious question-mark hanging over it. Of course, as always, these results require interpretation; and the correct interpretation to give of them is far from clear. For it is possible that these practical problems are due, not primarily to inadequacies of Freud's theory, but more to the intractable character of the problems themselves, and to the very limited resources that the analyst

¹¹ Quoted in Cooper, *Psychiatry and Anti-Psychiatry*, p. 1.

can bring to bear in tackling them. A proper recognition of these considerations is essential to any adequate assessment of psychoanalysis. The analyst sees only the patient, and works with him or her alone. The patient's past, his relationships to others, his social and economic circumstances, etc., are all factors beyond the power of the analyst to influence. The therapist must accept them as given facts of the situation and work within the constraints that they impose. Changes in these circumstances, moreover, may bring about significant psychological changes which the analyst, for all his efforts, cannot effect. As Freud acknowledged,

it is in combating the motives of illness that the weak point in every kind of therapeutic treatment of hysteria lies. This is quite generally true, and it applies equally to psychoanalysis. Destiny has an easier time of it in this respect . . . it has only to take away a motive for being ill, and the patient is temporarily or perhaps even permanently freed from his illness. How many fewer miraculous cures and spontaneous disappearances of symptoms should we physicians have to register in cases of hysteria, if we were more often given a sight of the human interests which the patient keeps hidden from us! In one case, some stated period of time has elapsed; in a second, consideration for some other person has ceased to operate; in a third, the situation has been fundamentally changed by some external event – and the whole disorder, which up till then had shown the greatest obstinacy, vanishes at a single blow, apparently of its own accord, but really because it has been deprived of its most powerful motive, one of the uses to which it has been put in the patient's life. ('Fragment of an Analysis', pp. 56–7)

In this way, although it is true that the uncertain effectiveness of psychoanalytic therapy remains an anomaly and a very serious problem for psychoanalysis, it may, in the end turn out that the reasons for this are not inconsistent and incompatible with psychoanalysis; and that an understanding of them will represent a development and an extension of psychoanalytic theory, rather than a refutation of it.

These are, I recognize, controversial and contentious thoughts. In order to be established they would need to be supported by detailed psychological arguments, which are beyond my scope. For my primary purpose here has not been to defend psychoanalysis as a science, but rather to illuminate some of the epistemological problems it raises.

10 Progress and the Nature of Truth

The Concept of Relative Truth

I have been arguing that knowledge develops through the interaction of theory and practice. In this process we must find a place for the notions of objectivity and truth. For I have rejected the relativist and sceptical attempt to undermine these notions and to portray the history of knowledge as an arbitrary succession of different theories, all with equal claims to validity. On the contrary, the account that I have been defending involves the view that we can and must distinguish a pattern and a direction in this development: there is *progress* in knowledge. Thus I have argued that modern chemical theory is not only different from that of the eighteenth century, it constitutes a deeper and a more adequate account of reality, a closer approximation to truth. The purpose of the present chapter will be to explain and defend this account of the nature of truth and of progress in knowledge.

In some areas of thought, it is true, the idea of objective truth seems to have little application, and no direction of progress is evident. Psychology is one such. For in psychology it seems particularly plausible to maintain that different and equally valid approaches are possible. I have already expressed my belief that this is not, in fact, the case. However, the point I now wish to make is that, whether it is so or not, it goes no way towards proving the general relativist argument. To the extent that alternative approaches are, indeed, 'equally possible' in psychology, to that extent no psychological theory can claim to be scientific or true in an unqualified or unproblematic way. For when we say that an idea is 'true' or that a theory is 'scientific', we mean not just that it is a *possible* 'way of seeing things', but that it is a *correct* way of seeing

things, which accurately and adequately reflects their nature, and which has a claim to validity greater than that of other views.

If these claims cannot be made for psychoanalysis, or for other psychological theories, then so much the worse for them. However, such claims can certainly be made for better established theories in other areas of thought. The relativist idea that alternative, equally valid interpretations and theories are *always* possible, in *every* field, is untenable. At present, there are no viable alternatives to the theory of relativity, or to modern chemistry or modern atomic physics. There are no other, equally valid 'ways of seeing' the phenomena that these theories see. But for these theories, we would be entirely blind to, and ignorant of, the phenomena that they describe. We cannot validly see the world in terms of the phlogiston theory, or in pre-Einsteinian or pre-electron terms. The reasons for this are not simply that these earlier theories fail to comprehend many now-known aspects of reality. More importantly, much of our technology, and even of our everyday activity, is based upon these theories and this knowledge. Modern scientific knowledge has been proved in *practice* and its predecessors disproved. And we can and must say that in relation to past and present alternatives, these modern theories constitute *truth* and represent a *progress* in knowledge.

I should make it clear, however, that when I say that the development of knowledge involves progress, I do not mean an inevitable or necessary progress towards a pre-determined end. Indeed, I would specifically deny this. For it seems all too possible that humanity will destroy itself, or come so near to doing so as to set the course of history back catastrophically. Unlike the nineteenth-century idealists, I am not suggesting that there is a teleology, immanent either in ideas or things, driving them towards a predestined goal. Nevertheless, the development of knowledge, as a matter of fact, has a progressive form. If one looks at the course of history, a pattern of progress is apparent. Or, to put the point in a less empiricist manner: the development of knowledge can be adequately and coherently comprehended only in terms of the view that it has involved progress.¹

Moreover, the idea that knowledge develops in a progressive and historical fashion points to a conclusion, towards which other strands of my argument have also led. The objectivity, rationality and truth which are achieved in the development of knowledge are not absolute but rather relative in character. For, as I have argued,

¹ See Childe, *Progress and Archaeology* for a useful discussion of the evidence relating to progress in the material aspects of life.

knowledge is never, and can never be, indubitably or immutably certain. It is, on the contrary, only ever an approximation to reality – something partial and relative. However, although we cannot say that a theory – modern chemistry, say – is absolutely true, we can hold that it is true *relatively*. We can validly maintain that it is the best account available to us, the closest *approximation to truth* of which we know. Moreover, in the case of chemistry at least, we can say this with confidence and in the knowledge that it is not seriously disputed.

For this stage in our knowledge, current chemistry is a necessary and justified set of beliefs. That is to say, *relative to* presently available alternatives, modern chemistry is the most satisfactory account of its object so far developed. It is this relative judgement that we make when we say that current beliefs are 'true', 'objective', 'rational' and 'scientific'. Our beliefs are justified *relatively*, not absolutely. They are justified relative to the currently available empirical evidence and relative to the currently evolved theoretical understanding of it. But relative to these they *are* justified. This justification, though relative, is *real*.² For the available experience and theory is the only evidence and basis which exist; and, if our knowledge is justified in relation to this, it is justified in the only way it ever can be.

There is a sense, then, in which 'alternatives' to our present theories are possible; but it is not the one intended by relativism. Alternatives are possible in the sense that present theories are fallible and constitute only a particular stage in the development of our understanding of the world, which has arisen on the basis of previous theories, and which is destined ultimately to be superseded by different – new and higher – forms of knowledge.

In other words, our knowledge does not rest upon absolute and immutable foundations, but nor is it without any justification and merely relative. We must reject both pure absolutism and mere relativism as unsatisfactory either/or alternatives. Instead, we must develop an historical and a dialectical account of knowledge. The outlines for this are present in Hegel's philosophy, as Engels realizes:

with Hegel truth . . . was no longer a collection of finished dogmatic propositions. . . . Truth now lay in the process of cognition itself, in the long historical development of science, which mounts from lower

² This phrase is taken from Bradley. 'Morality', he says, 'is "relative" but none the less real' (*Ethical Studies*, p. 190).

to ever higher levels of knowledge, without ever reaching, by discovering some so-called absolute truth, a point at which it can proceed no further. . . . Each stage is necessary and therefore justified for the time and conditions to which it owes its origin. But it becomes decrepit and unjustified in the face of new, higher conditions which gradually develop in its own womb. (*Ludwig Feuerbach*, pp. 7-8)

At each stage in the development of knowledge, the ideas of that stage are necessary and justified. This justification is, to be sure, relative to experience and to thought as it has developed at that stage; but it is not, for all that, merely 'conventional' and 'arbitrary', merely relative. For, relative to this particular stage of development, these ideas are true and correct, in the only sense of these terms which has any application. This, I think, is what Lenin is saying in the following obscure but suggestive passage.

The distinction between subjectivism (scepticism, sophistry, etc) and dialectics . . . is that in (objective) dialectics the difference between the relative and the absolute is itself relative. For objective dialectics there is an absolute *within* the relative. For subjectivism and sophistry the relative is only relative and excludes the absolute. (*Philosophical Notebooks*, p. 360)

We may even, in this context, talk of 'absolute' truths. This is the way in which people ordinarily talk and regard their views. In the normal course of life we do not regard things '*sub specie aeternitatis*' (*Spinoza, Ethics*). Rather, we take the limits and the relativity of our position and perspective for granted. And, *relative* to this position and perspective, our current knowledge is true and justified. *Given* these limits, we are accustomed to make these judgements without qualification and 'absolutely'. 'There is an absolute *within* the relative', as Lenin says.

However, it is important to see the relative nature of this 'absolute'. Such a 'relative absolute' is a useful notion, and the theory of truth built upon it illuminates the nature of knowledge. On the other hand, if we demand something 'more absolute than this', then we can find nothing that will satisfy us. As Bradley says,

within limits and in their proper place our relative view insists everywhere on the value and on the necessity of absolute judgements, both as to right and wrong and as to error and truth. . . . If you ask me, for example, whether there is truth in the statement that $2+2=5$, I answer that (though I am ignorant of mathematics) I believe this to be sheer error. The world of mathematics, that is, I understand to rest on certain conditions, and under these conditions there is within

mathematics pure truth and utter error. It is only when you pass beyond a special science, and it is only when you ask whether the very conditions of that science are absolutely true and real, that you are forced to reject absolutism. (*Essays on Truth and Reality*, p. 266)

In this way, the historical view of knowledge which I have been defending can accommodate and acknowledge the truth in both the absolute and the relative views, while avoiding the one-sidedness which characterizes them both.³ Ultimately, our beliefs and ideas are only partial and relative, mere approximations to truth; and they are destined to be revealed as such by the future advance of knowledge. However, given our present experience and present level of theoretical understanding, some of these views, at least, are objective, rational, justified and true. To quote Bradley again, who puts the matter better than any other writer I know,

in general . . . every error upon our view contains some truth, since it has a content which in some sense belongs to the Universe. And on the other side all truths are in varying degrees erroneous. . . . The difference between error and truth . . . in the end consist[s] in degree. In the above statement the words 'in the end' must be emphasized. . . . The relative view of error and truth may be held and taught one-sidedly. But, rightly understood, it comprehends, and on a lower plane it justifies, the absolute view. In the realm of the special sciences and of practical life, and in short everywhere, unless we except philosophy, we are compelled to take partial truths as being utterly true. We cannot do this consistently, but we are forced to do this, and our action within limits is justified. (pp. 257-8)

That is to say, paradoxical as it may sound, we treat our knowledge as true – and 'absolutely' so – relative to our present stage of knowledge. But in the end, it is a matter of degree and relative.

During the eighteenth century, the phlogiston theory was regarded as true and objective. As a result of investigations conducted on the basis of this theory itself, as we have seen, its limits and its relativity were progressively revealed. On the other hand, and as part of this process, the oxygen theory, which started life as a mere hypothesis in Lavoisier's mind, was developed and extended into a scientific theory which proved to provide a better account of chemical phenomena and a closer approximation to reality. The absolute and the relative in knowledge must be conceived as dialectically related opposites, which interpenetrate and pass into each other.

³ Cf. similar remarks about the concept of immediacy in chapter 7 above.

Lavoisier's idea, which was initially subjective and relative, became objective and 'absolute'. However, this 'absolute', this truth, is only a relative absolute – only a stage in the development of truth, which will ultimately be revealed as relative – as limited and partial – by new and more adequate theories which will be developed on its basis, and which will supersede it.

The idea that truth is relative and a matter of degree has its critics, of course. According to Ewing, for example, this idea

seems flagrantly to contradict the law of excluded middle, according to which the only alternatives are absolute truth or absolute falsehood so that a judgement can only be partially true or partially false in the sense that it is analysable into several judgements some of which are absolutely true and others absolutely false. (*Idealism*, pp. 208–9)

I shall come back to the idea that 'relative' truths can be analysed into absolutely true and absolutely false elements in the next section. First, however, I will concentrate on Ewing's view that the idea of degrees of truth is in conflict with the law of the excluded middle. Ewing is surely right about this; but the correct conclusion to draw is: so much the worse for the law of the excluded middle. For if you insist on adhering to its rigid either/or logic, the development of knowledge and the history of science become incomprehensible. I have already made this point (in chapter 7) in relation to the development of chemistry in the eighteenth century. The phlogiston theory has now been shown to be false; and it has been superseded by the oxygen theory. However, the discovery of oxygen was made upon the basis of the phlogiston theory; and, for this reason, it cannot be regarded as pure error and falsehood. On the contrary, as I have insisted, in some measure it approximates to and reflects reality; and it thus embodies a measure of truth. To regard modern chemistry as the pure light of truth, which emerged out of the pure darkness of error, is an absurd and untenable way of looking at the history of science. Yet this is the inevitable result of dogmatically adhering to the law of the excluded middle here.

Engels, as so often, has a better sense of the reality of things. He gives another example from the history of chemistry to make his point. The example is Boyle's Law, according to which the volume of a gas will vary inversely with its pressure, at constant temperature. Regnault, as Engels describes, discovered that this law does not apply in certain cases. If Regnault had adhered to the law of the excluded middle, he would have been obliged to conclude that since

Boyle's Law is not absolutely true, it must be absolutely erroneous. 'Had he done so', argues Engels,

he would have committed an error far greater than the one contained in Boyle's Law. . . . However, Regnault, being a man of science, did not indulge in such childishness, but continued his investigations and discovered that in general Boyle's Law is only approximately true and in particular loses its validity . . . as soon as the pressure approaches the point at which liquefaction begins. Therefore Boyle's Law was proved to be true only within definite limits. But is it absolutely and finally true within those limits? No physicist would assert that. (*Anti-Dühring*, p. 128)

Engels is surely right about this. The claim to absolute truth is foreign to science. However, it is very familiar in philosophy, where it is often made as though it followed from immutable laws of logic and as if no alternatives were conceivable.

John Anderson, for example, on behalf of his own brand of metaphysical realism, asserts that the idea of degrees of truth 'means nothing'. On the contrary, he says,

the realist would be right in saying that Boyle's Law has been shown to be false; and the most that Engels can say is that something like it is true. Boyle asserts that all gases have the property *X*; Regnault shows that this is false, but that *all gases within specific bounds* have the property *X*. In other words, a *different* property is true, not relatively but absolutely. . . . Whatever Engels may say . . . he must admit, as an absolute fact, that some gases under some conditions have the property *X* or he must say, as he does not wish to do, that Boyle was quite wrong about gases. ('Marxist Philosophy', p. 297)

This all sounds very cut-and-dried and clear; but Engels has it right when he calls such views 'childish'. The problem is that they make nonsense of the history of chemistry. Of course, Regnault discovered that something different to Boyle's Law is true; but he did so *on the basis of* Boyle's Law, and by *developing* Boyle's Law. The either/or logic that Anderson and Ewing both apply makes this development – and, particularly, the continuity and the progressive process involved in it – quite invisible. The development of knowledge and the history of thought become comprehensible only if such crude metaphysical dogmas are discarded, and the relation between truth and error regarded in a dialectical way, in concrete and realistic terms, as a matter of degree and relative.

Qualitative and Quantitative Change

The ideas that truth is a matter of degree, and that knowledge develops progressively are not peculiar to dialectic. They are also a feature of much traditional epistemology and of many traditional accounts of the history of science. It is important, therefore, to be clear about the distinctive character of the dialectical account. In particular, it is important to distinguish this account from the view, put forward by Ewing and many others, and quoted in the preceding section, to the effect that partial truths can always be resolved into elements, some of which are absolutely true and others absolutely false. A theory, on this account, has a degree of truth which increases as the number or proportion of its true elements increases. Knowledge is thus pictured as a collection of individual and fragmentary items of data; and each discovery, each new extension of knowledge, is regarded as adding further such items to the existing store of knowledge. In Kuhn's words, 'scientific development becomes the piecemeal process by which these items have been added, singly and in combination, to the ever growing stockpile that constitutes scientific technique and knowledge' (*The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, pp. 1-2). In other words, the idea of progress involved here is a purely quantitative one.

Kuhn and others have criticized this picture of the development of knowledge in illuminating and important ways. During one of its phases, it is true, the history of knowledge does appear to proceed by a gradual and steady process of quantitative addition. In periods of what Kuhn calls 'normal science', when there is a commonly accepted framework of assumptions and methods, the major work of science consists in refining this framework and extending it to new areas of application. In this process, the framework, the paradigm, is developed to make new discriminations and to cover new phenomena – it is developed both intensively and extensively. But these developments do not fundamentally or essentially alter the framework, they do not change its identity – they are *quantitative* and not *qualitative* ones.

For example, Newton gave only an outline of the theoretical principles of mechanics in his *Principia*. During the two centuries which followed the publication of this work, these principles were applied to numerous new areas and, as a result, the framework of Newtonian mechanics was greatly extended and refined.

Initially, such development appears to be a purely quantitative phenomenon. However, as Kuhn goes on to argue, this 'normal'

phase is not the only phase in the development of science. During the normal and quantitative stage of development, problems and anomalies are generated. The accumulation of these leads eventually to a 'crisis' for the theory which can be resolved ultimately only through a *qualitative* change. The old paradigm is rejected and a new one adopted. There is a discontinuous break, a rupture – a scientific revolution occurs.⁴

Thus, Newtonian mechanics was steadily extended and developed with brilliant success in the eighteenth century and in the first half of the nineteenth century. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, however, the weight of problems and anomalies for it had accumulated to a critical degree. The resolution of the crisis, through the development of relativity theory and the quantum theory at the beginning of this century, constituted a radical and revolutionary theoretical shift, a qualitatively new way of understanding the physical world. Similarly, as we have seen, the oxygen theory of combustion represented a revolutionary break from the phlogiston theory which preceded it. In general, as Hegel says,

every birth and death, far from being a progressive gradualness, is an interruption of it and is the leap from a quantitative into a qualitative alteration. It is said, *natura non fecit saltum* [nature makes no leaps]; and ordinary thinking when it has to grasp a coming-to-be or a ceasing-to-be, fancies it has done so by representing it as a *gradual* emergence or disappearance. But we have seen that the alterations of being in general are not only the transition of one magnitude into another, but a transition from quality into quantity and vice-versa, a becoming-other which is an interruption of gradualness, and the production of something qualitatively different from the reality which preceded it. (*Science of Logic*, pp. 369-70)

On the other side, however, it is vital to see that such revolutionary and qualitative changes are not absolute, total, abrupt and arbitrary ones. On the contrary, there is an essential relationship, an essential unity, between the quantitative and qualitative phases. There is a development and transformation from the quantitative into the qualitative phase. In short, there is continuity as well as discontinuity here.

At first, it may well appear that quantitative change is quite independent of qualitative change and external to it. A thing may, it seems, change quantitatively – it may grow and develop gradually –

⁴ Althusser also makes this point, e.g. in *Reading Capital*, ch.1. The language of 'scientific revolutions' and 'paradigms' is Kuhn's; 'breaks' and 'ruptures' is that of Althusser and structuralism.

without changing qualitatively and in its very nature.⁵ However, such gradual and quantitative changes have their limit. When they exceed what Hegel calls their 'measure', there is an interruption of gradualness – a sudden change to a new form, a new stage – a 'leap from a quantitative into a qualitative alteration' (*Science of Logic*, p. 370).

Quantitative and gradual development, that is to say, leads ultimately to qualitative change. Thus qualitative change is not an entirely sudden, abrupt and arbitrary occurrence – it does not arise from nowhere. On the contrary, it is essentially related to the gradual and quantitative processes which preceded it. It is the outcome of these processes, and precipitated by them. Hegel puts it graphically: 'a quantitative change takes place, apparently without any further significance: but there is something lurking behind, and a seemingly innocent change of quantity acts as a kind of snare, to catch hold of the quality' (*Logic*, §108z).

For this reason, a qualitative and revolutionary transformation is never an entirely sudden or unheralded event. If one looks carefully at the period which immediately precedes a revolution, one can see the signs and symptoms of the impending change. With the French Revolution in mind, Hegel writes,

just as the first breath drawn by a child after its long, quiet nourishment breaks the gradualness of merely quantitative growth – there is a qualitative leap, and the child is born – so likewise the Spirit in its formation matures slowly and quietly into its new shape, dissolving bit by bit the structure of its previous world, whose tottering state is only hinted at by isolated symptoms. The frivolity and boredom which unsettle the established order, the vague foreboding of something unknown, these are the heralds of approaching change.⁶ The gradual crumbling that left unaltered the face of the whole is cut short by a sunburst which, in one flash, illuminates the features of the new world. (*Phenomenology of Spirit*, pp. 6–7)

On some occasions, Kuhn is aware of these points. He recognizes the unity and continuity of the quantitative and qualitative, the normal and the revolutionary stages of scientific development; and he has illuminating things to say on this subject. For example, he shows how, by its very nature, the work of normal science generates anomalies and contradictions for the established paradigm. He describes the way in which normal science produces its own crisis, its

⁵ Cf. Hegel, 'quantity, as distinguished from quality, is a characteristic of such kind that the characterized thing is not in the least affected by a change in it' (*Logic*, §99z).

⁶ This is the mood that is so well captured and portrayed in Chekhov's plays.

own negation and its own supersession. In the words of Marx, he shows how each stage of science, through its own inner processes, produces its own 'gravediggers'. He writes, for example,

the more precise and far-reaching [a] paradigm is, the more sensitive an indicator it provides of anomaly and hence of an occasion for paradigm change. In the normal mode of discovery, even resistance to change has a use. . . . By ensuring that the paradigm will not be too easily surrendered, resistance guarantees that scientists will not be lightly distracted and that anomalies that lead to paradigm change will penetrate existing knowledge to the core. The very fact that a significant scientific novelty so often emerges simultaneously from several laboratories is an index both to the strongly traditional nature of normal science and to the completeness with which that traditional pursuit prepares the way for its own change. (*The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, p. 65)

In passages such as this, it is clear that Kuhn is aware of the dialectic of quantity and quality which I have been describing. Unfortunately, however, this is not the predominant theme in his work. More often his quite undialectical relativism and idealism call the tune, with the result that revolutionary changes are portrayed as absolute, arbitrary, and total transformations, on the model of *gestalt* shifts of vision.⁷ The conclusion of the above arguments, however, is that this account is not a satisfactory one. As I have tried to show, the development of knowledge is neither a purely gradual and quantitative process, nor does it involve a total, absolute and arbitrary shift of perspective. Rather, it involves a progressive development through qualitatively different stages, in which there is *both* a quantitative *and* a qualitative moment.⁸

⁷ See *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, chs 6 and 10. See also Hanson, *Patterns of Discovery*, ch.1, for an extended use of the *gestalt* analogy. Just as there are good reasons to criticize this as an account of the history of knowledge, so too it should be questioned as an account of the psychology of vision.

⁸ These ideas will already be familiar to many people through Engels' account of the dialectical 'law' of the 'transformation of quantity into quality and vice-versa' (see especially *Anti-Dühring*, Part I ch.12). Unfortunately, Engels is not at his most illuminating or persuasive in these passages, and his discussion does not provide a particularly useful basis for an understanding of these issues. Nevertheless, that should not be allowed to obscure the fact that the idea of the unity of quantity and quality is an essential principle of dialectical thought; and one which is forced upon us if we wish to comprehend the way in which knowledge develops.

Knowledge as a Historical Phenomenon

The idea that the justification of knowledge requires the discovery of fixed and indubitable foundations has mesmerized modern Western philosophy. I have argued already that it is impossible to find such foundations. It is now clear that this whole picture of the structure of knowledge must be rejected.

The idea of absolute foundations is expressed in striking and famous terms by Descartes as follows. ‘Archimedes asked only for one fixed and immovable point so as to move the whole earth from its place; so I may have great hopes if I can find even the least thing that is unshakably certain’ (*Philosophical Writings*, p. 66). But just as the idea of an absolute, Archimedean point has been abandoned in the field of mechanics, so too it must be rejected in the theory of knowledge.⁹ But not in favour of the sceptical view that knowledge is merely relative, arbitrary and without foundations. On the contrary, the historical and dialectical account of knowledge which I have been developing leads to the view that the justification of knowledge is relative *but real*.

In the development of knowledge we start, no doubt, with what is evident and given to us in experience and in thought. We start with appearances, which we take, initially, as given and as revealing reality. What is directly given to us in this sense, however, is not a matter of absolute and pure immediacy, as I have argued at length already.¹⁰ Rather it is a mediated and a relative immediacy. What we take to be evident and immediately apparent depends upon our level of biological, social and historical development. It is not an unshakably certain foundation; nor does it need to be, since it is only an initial and preliminary foundation. In the course of new experience and thought, in the course of the development of knowledge, this starting point comes to be questioned and criticized. Initial appearances are rethought and reinterpreted. As Bradley says,

⁹ Cf. M. R. Cohen, ‘if it is urged that when no one fact is absolutely certain, we have no *ποντικόν* or *πόντον* point of support on which the whole body or system of knowledge can rest, we may point to the analogous abandonment of the search for something on which the whole earth can rest’ (*Reason and Nature*, p. 87).

¹⁰ See chapter 7. Cf. also Althusser, ‘the raw material on which the labour of science is expended . . . contrary to the ideological illusions . . . of empiricism or sensualism, [is] never an existence whose essence is pure immediacy and singularity (“sensations” or “individuals”). [A science] always works on something “general”, even if this has the form of a “fact”. . . . A science always works on existing concepts’ (*For Marx*, pp. 183–4).

the foundation in truth is provisional merely. In order to begin my construction I take the foundation as absolute – so much certainly is true. But that my construction continues to rest on the beginnings of my knowledge is a conclusion which does not follow. It does not follow that, if these are allowed to be fallible, the whole building collapses. . . . A foundation used at the beginning does not in short mean something fundamental at the end, and there is no single ‘fact’ which in the end can be called fundamental absolutely. (*Essays on Truth and Reality*, pp. 210–11)

What is at first taken to be evident and immediately given is, through the further development of knowledge, eventually realized to be only the appearance and outward manifestation of a deeper inner reality. In the process, what was at first taken as evident and given – as the foundation and starting point – is deposited to the level of appearance. However, it is important to see that in this process, the previous view is not simply rejected and abandoned – it is also preserved. The development of knowledge thus involves what Hegel calls the process of ‘*aufheben*’. A variety of attempts have been made to render this term in English: it has variously been translated as to ‘supersede’, ‘sublate’, ‘overcome’, ‘depass’, etc.; but none of these terms successfully captures what Hegel claims to be its ordinary German meaning. ‘To sublate (*aufheben*)’, he writes, ‘has a twofold meaning in the language: on the one hand it means to preserve, to maintain, and equally it also means to put an end to. . . . Thus what is sublated is at the same time preserved’ (*Science of Logic*, p. 107).

This kind of developmental process is beautifully illustrated and illuminated in the system of Hegel’s philosophy. Moreover, Hegel’s *Logic*, may be read epistemologically, as an account of the development of knowledge. It starts with the category of abstract Being which, as Hegel stresses, is the immediate character of things and the way in which they at first appear.¹¹ But the category of Being undergoes a process of alteration and development due to its own inner contradictions, and new categories arise (or so, at least, Hegel argues). The arguments that Hegel uses to move from one category to the next are often dubious and unsatisfactory; but that does not detract from the grandeur and importance of his overall conception. Each new stage develops out of, and rests upon, what went before. What was previously basic and fundamental is, in this process, transformed and altered, and yet also built upon and developed. Through the course of its development, what is initially immediate divides into an outward appearance and an inner essence. The

¹¹ ‘Pure Being’, says Hegel, is ‘immediacy itself’ (*Logic*, §86).

second part of Hegel's *Logic*, 'the Doctrine of Essence', is particularly concerned with this process, which corresponds to the epistemological stage when what was initially and immediately taken for Being and for truth is realized to be appearance only, concealing and yet, at the same time, revealing a deeper underlying reality or essence.

In this process, moreover, the initial appearance, the initial stage, is not simply rejected – it is incorporated and preserved in the later stages. For example, when a thing is burned, it initially appears that something is expelled from it: smoke and heat are given off, and it is reduced to ashes. The phlogiston theory is based upon these appearances and reflects them, as we have seen. At the end of the eighteenth century it was realized that these *were* only appearances, and that the underlying process of combustion is a quite opposite one. Likewise, the geocentric perspective embodied in Ptolemyan astronomy reflects and corresponds to initial appearances. The sun does indeed seem to rise above the horizon and to circle the earth. It was only through the course of long practical and theoretical study of the heavens that it was realized that this view is false, and that it is rather the rotation of the *earth* that is responsible for these appearances. However, this realization does not absolutely negate or cancel the initial appearances. Despite our present beliefs, the sun still appears to rise, to move about the earth and to set; and combustion still appears to be a process of expulsion. It is just that we have come to realize that these appearances are, indeed, appearances of a deeper, underlying reality which is quite otherwise and different.

These are the terms in which Hegel describes the development of knowledge, and even of philosophy. In it, he says,

the earlier [stages] are preserved in the later; but subordinated and submerged. This is the true meaning of a much misunderstood phenomenon in the history of philosophy – the refutation of one system by another, of an earlier by a later. Most commonly the refutation is taken in a purely negative sense to mean that the system refuted has ceased to count for anything, has been set aside and done for. Were it so, the history of philosophy would be of all studies the most saddening, displaying, as it does, the refutation of every system which time has brought forth. (*Logic*, §86z)

However, according to Hegel, 'no philosophy has ever been refuted'.¹²

The refutation of a philosophy . . . only means that its barriers are

¹² For a fuller treatment of this theme by Hegel, see *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, I, 'Introduction'.

crossed, and its special principle reduced to a factor in the completer principle that follows. The history of philosophy . . . in its results, resembles not a museum of the aberrations of the human intellect, but a Pantheon of godlike figures. (*ibid.*)

In a well-known passage, Hegel compares the development of knowledge with the growth of a plant.

The bud disappears in the bursting-forth of the blossom, and one might say that the former is refuted by the latter; similarly, when the fruit appears, the blossom is shown up in its turn as a false manifestation of the plant, and the fruit now emerges as the truth of it instead. These forms are not just distinguished from one another, they also supplant one another as mutually incompatible. Yet at the same time their fluid nature makes them moments of an organic unity in which they not only do not conflict, but in which each is as necessary as the other; and this mutual necessity alone constitutes the life of the whole. (*Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 2)

The development of knowledge cannot be understood as the building of a superstructure upon an unchanging foundation. Knowledge is not based on such absolutes. On the contrary, knowledge develops progressively through stages, in the succession of which there is no 'Archimedean point', no element which remains fixed and unchanged throughout. The foundation at each new stage is the previous stage; and each earlier stage, as Hegel stresses, is necessary for the development of the next. The foundation and justification of knowledge is historical and relative, but real.

Theories of Truth

There is no absolute truth, there is no absolute error. Truth and falsehood are matters of degree. All ideas reflect reality, but only more or less adequately, more or less truthfully. These are the conclusions that we have reached. But what does it mean to say that a theory reflects reality more or less adequately or truthfully? What makes true ideas true? What is the nature of truth? These are questions which must now be discussed. In order to do so, it will be useful briefly to situate the views that I have been developing in relation to the major traditional accounts of truth.

The correspondence theory is the most immediately attractive and plausible of these, for it is the realist account of truth. According to it, true ideas are true because they correspond to the facts. The correspondence theory locates truth in the relation between ideas

and the material world apart from them. In this way, it embodies the central tenet of realism: that true ideas reflect objective reality, which exists independently of consciousness. In some shape or form, for this reason, the idea that truth is correspondence is an essential part of all realist and materialist epistemology.¹³

However, in the form in which it has traditionally been put forward, correspondence is portrayed as an absolute, all-or-nothing matter. True ideas, on this account, correspond; and false ideas fail to correspond. I have already argued at length that our knowledge of the world cannot be grasped and understood in these terms. All ideas, false as well as true, correspond to and reflect reality in some measure and in some degree. But this reflection is not something immediate or absolute. On the contrary, it is always mediated by, and relative to, our interpretation and our forms of activity. No actually existing theory is infallibly true, and none is sheer error and illusion. Such absolutes have no place in the real world. Truth and falsity, correspondence and non-correspondence, are matters of degree and relative.

These sorts of criticisms of the traditional all-or-nothing version of the correspondence theory and the idea that truth has degrees, have usually been associated with the coherence theory of truth. According to this theory, truth is located, not in the relationship between ideas and objects independent of them, but rather in the logical relations of ideas among themselves. It is the coherence and order of our ideas as a whole which guarantees their truth. 'System', says Bradley, is the test of truth, which consists in 'a whole of knowledge as wide and as consistent as may be' (*Essays on Truth and Reality*, p. 202).

The coherence theory embodies an important measure of truth, as I have tried to show. There are no immediate data. What is directly given must be assessed and interpreted in relation to the body of our knowledge. The test of 'system' is, indeed, an essential aspect, a necessary moment, in the development of knowledge. However, the coherence theory in its traditional form makes truth into a purely internal property of ideas. The idealism of this must be rejected. Reference to objective reality is an essential aspect of truth; and mere coherence is not a sufficient test of this. Pure reason *a priori* gives no guarantee of truth. Our ideas and theories must be tested against reality in practice; for practice is also an essential moment – indeed, it is the primary moment – in the development of knowledge. This is the view that I have been defending.

¹³ It is for this reason that I have insisted upon the related notion of reflection in my account of knowledge.

'The truth is the whole,' says Hegel. However, the realist must insist that the whole involved in knowledge is not a purely *ideal* one. Knowledge does not consist of a mere set of ideas, however systematic and coherent they may be. For, at the basis of the system of our ideas, there exists a system of *practice*. The whole involved in knowledge is first of all and primarily *real* and *practical* in character.

The increasing system and order of our ideas is based upon and reflects an extension and intensification of our *practical* activity in the world. In the course of historical development, we have extended not only our theoretical understanding of the world; for along with this widening and deepening of scientific understanding, has gone the development of new techniques and practical abilities, in relation to an increasing range of natural forces and phenomena. A deeper and more extensive vision and understanding of the world goes hand in hand with a wider and more intensive practical relationship to reality. Theory and practice form a necessary unity. This is the conclusion to which these arguments lead. It is also a conclusion that Spinoza reaches in his philosophy. His ideas on this matter are well summed up by Hampshire as follows:

The kind of knowledge which my mind possesses is necessarily linked with the power or disposition of my body to be affected to a greater or lesser extent by changes in extended Nature; my mental ability and my physical ability are substantially the same ability conceived under two different attributes; modifications of my mind are always and necessarily modifications of my body, and the modifications of my body are the counterpart of the modifications of my mind. What distinguishes a person from the lower animals and from so-called inanimate objects is that a person is a more complicated organism liable to be affected by its environment in a greater variety of ways; it is therefore able to reflect more of the order of causes in Nature as a whole. (Spinoza, p. 108)

Such views are also an element of Marx's thought. He writes, for example,

the more universal . . . man is, the more universal is the sphere of inorganic nature on which he lives. Just as plants, animals, stones, air, light, etc. constitute theoretically a part of human consciousness, partly as objects of natural science, partly as objects of art . . . so also in the realm of practice they constitute a part of human life and human activity. . . . The universality of man appears in practice precisely in the universality which makes all nature his *inorganic* body . . . nature, that is, in so far as it is not itself human body. Man *lives* on nature – means that nature is his *body*, with which he must remain in

continuous interchange if he is not to die. That man's physical and spiritual life is linked to nature means simply that nature is linked to itself, for man is a part of nature. (*1844 Manuscripts*, pp. 275–6)

In these terms, we may say that man, through his history, has been awakening into activity 'limbs' and 'organs' which have previously lain dormant. He has been developing and coming to exercise powers and capacities beyond even the imagination and dreams of previous generations. Marx makes this point in striking terms when he writes, 'all mythology subdues, controls and fashions the forces of nature in the imagination and through imagination; it disappears therefore when real control over these forces is established. What is Vulcan compared with Roberts and Co., and Hermes compared with the *Crédit Mobilier*?'¹⁴

There is, then, an important measure of truth in the coherence account. However, we must reject the one-sided and idealistic form in which it is usually developed. A true idea is, indeed, one which can be accommodated and made coherent with the rest, but *as a reflection of reality*. This latter qualification is essential. Mere internal coherence and consistency among ideas is never the ultimate aim of knowledge; for, beyond that, we seek always for a coherence which corresponds to reality apart from our ideas.

There is thus some truth in both of the traditional theories. The process of knowledge, the development of truth, involves *both* a moment of correspondence, in which ideas are formed out of and tested against the objective world, *and also* a moment of coherence, in which the results of experience are assessed and interpreted in the light of the system of our ideas and activities as a whole. Truth develops in a process which involves both these aspects as necessary moments. This is what I have been arguing.

I am aware that this discussion of truth leaves many of the details in this area uninvestigated and many of the problems unanswered. In particular, I have confined my attention to the epistemological aspect of the issue of truth. I have concerned myself exclusively with the question of how the truth of ideas and theories can be known and tested. There are also, however, metaphysical issues concerned with the *nature* of truth and reality, which are inevitably bound up with the epistemological positions in this field, and which raise a new dimension of difficulties for the views that I am defending.

In particular, the coherence theory of truth has traditionally been associated with the metaphysical view that reality itself is coherently

¹⁴ 'Introduction (1857)', p. 216. I have taken the liberty of reversing the order of Marx's sentences in this passage.

and rationally ordered. Blanshard puts this point clearly when he says,

if one admits that the pursuit of a coherent system has actually carried us to what everyone would agree to call knowledge, why not take this ideal as a guide that will conduct us farther? What better key can one ask to the structure of the real? Our own conviction is that we should take this immanent end of thought in all seriousness as the clue to the nature of things. (*The Nature of Thought*, II, p. 263)

When we follow up this 'clue', according to Blanshard, we arrive at the conclusion that

reality is a system, completely ordered and fully intelligible, with which thought in its advance is more and more identifying itself. We may look at the growth of knowledge, individual or social, either as an attempt by our minds to return to union with things as they are in their ordered wholeness, or the affirmation through our minds of the ordered whole itself. And if we take this view, our notion of truth is marked out for us. Truth is the approximation of thought to reality. It is thought on its way home. Its measure is the distance thought has travelled, under the guidance of its inner compass, toward that intelligible system which unites its ultimate object with its ultimate end. (ibid., p. 264)

In other words, the coherence theory of truth seems to lead naturally to that most notorious and extravagant-seeming of Hegelian doctrines – the view that 'the real is the rational'.

Even the limited and relative form in which I have endorsed coherence as a test of truth appears to point in the same metaphysical direction. Moreover, the idea of the unity of reality and reason is one that has surfaced at earlier stages of my argument. In order to complete the account of knowledge that I have been giving, it is necessary to consider some of the issues raised by this idea; and that is what I shall do in the concluding part of the book.

Other Cultures and Our Own

Before leaving the topic of progress, there is one more issue upon which I should briefly touch. For to defend the idea of progress is bound to call forth not only epistemological and metaphysical objections, but also moral and political ones. To maintain, as I have done, that our contemporary understanding of the world is a truer, more adequate and more objective one than those of other historical

periods and other cultures, is to invite the accusation of being arrogant and ethnocentric. To regard one's own present view as the most adequate and best developed and, on this basis, to pass judgement on other views, it is argued, is to deny validity and dignity to other cultures. It is to adopt an oppressive and inhuman attitude to other peoples – an attitude associated with colonialism and imperialism.

It is a measure of the impact and influence that Winch's work has had that the poor old Azande are almost invariably trotted out at this point. The Azande are an African tribal group who were the subject of a celebrated anthropological study by E. E. Evans-Pritchard (*Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic Among the Azande*), discussed by Winch in his article 'Understanding a Primitive Society'. Winch praises Evans-Pritchard for 'going a great deal further than most of his predecessors in trying to present the sense of the institutions he is discussing as it presents itself to the Azande themselves' (p. 79). Nevertheless, Evans-Pritchard does not go far enough in this direction to satisfy Winch, since, in Evans-Pritchard's account, 'there is more than one remark to the effect that "obviously there are no witches"; and he writes of the difficulty he found, during his work with the Azande, in shaking off the "unreason" on which Zande life is based and returning to a clear view of how things really are' (p. 79). Winch wants to argue that the Azande have a world-view and a form of life which, though they differ radically from those of modern Western society, are equally coherent and equally valid. It is important to see that, for Winch, the Azande world-view is not only just as coherent, but also just as true, as our own.¹⁵ This is apparent in the following passage, for example,

a primitive system of magic, like that of the Azande, constitutes a coherent universe of discourse like science, in terms of which an intelligible conception of reality and clear ways of deciding what beliefs are and are not in agreement with this reality can be discerned. (p. 83)

To judge beliefs like those of the Azande to be 'false', 'pre-scientific', 'mystical', 'primitive' or 'irrational', as did an earlier generation of anthropologists, argues Winch, is not only epistemologically unjustifiable, but also morally objectionable. For we must avoid 'imposing the image of [our] own culture on more primitive ones' (p. 102) and be sensitive to the moral significance of other forms of life (p. 105ff).

¹⁵ In his tendency to run together questions of coherence and questions of truth, Winch shows himself to be in the idealist tradition of the coherence theory, even if (like Kuhn) his view of the concept of truth is a more sceptical one.

For better or worse, however, Western culture has already been imposed upon more primitive ones (including that of the Azande), all over the world. In order to appreciate the moral and political consequences of this fact, it is first of all necessary to see that the Azande are not a tribal group existing in timeless isolation, as Winch's writing tends to suggest – they are not an anthropological abstraction. The Azande are real people, living in the real world of modern Africa, and subject to its forces. They are, in fact, Ugandans, Somalians and Kenyans; for these modern national political boundaries have divided up their traditional territories. In this and countless other ways, modern political, economic and social forces – Western science, technology and 'civilization' – have impinged irreversibly on their world. In the process, modern Africa has witnessed events and been convulsed by powers undreamed of in pre-colonial, pre-imperialist days. What is Azande witchcraft in the face of General Motors? What are Azande oracles and magic in the face of Western science and technology?

To acknowledge that Western scientific and economic methods have a truth and a power which are, in many respects, vastly superior to those of the Azande, is merely to recognize a palpable fact, proved in practice by the way in which these forces have everywhere invaded, conquered and destroyed less developed forms of society. In saying this I have no desire to condone the appalling misery and degradation which has accompanied this impact. I do, however, wish to acknowledge it as a fact. To recognize this fact, to recognize the reality of our knowledge and the objective truth of our ideas, need involve no denigration of other people's beliefs, nor any denial of value to their ways of life. For *all* ideas, I have argued, have some measure of truth and reflect reality to some degree.

On the other hand, to argue that Azande tribal beliefs and practices form a coherent and self-sufficient – equally valid, equally true – world of their own, is absurd and untenable. Furthermore, there is nothing morally or politically praiseworthy about it. There is nothing 'ethnocentric' in the view that the Azande have much to learn from Western science and Western society. On the contrary, it involves rather the recognition of an evident fact; and one that is surely not lost upon the average Azande. For the attitude that tribal beliefs and customs are valid and sufficient in themselves, in the context of contemporary Africa, is a narrow and reactionary form of tribal chauvinism. Such tribalism has been the curse of African politics, and there is nothing progressive about it. For the impact of the West in Africa is irreversible: progress in Africa must take *national* and not tribal forms; it must involve the economic develop-

ment of the nations of Africa into modern industrial societies. This is the universal view of progressive forces in Africa and in other parts of the Third World.

However, the idea that other cultures, other forms of life, other ways of seeing things, are equally valid and equally true, is not, and never has been, primarily a Third World philosophy. It is a philosophy of the developed and industrial world. In recent years, it has reflected a reaction of liberal-minded guilt and remorse to the destructive impact of colonialism and imperialism in the Third World. But well intentioned as this response may be, it is a confused and unhelpful one.

These are the first points that need making on these issues, and they are important ones. However, they go little way towards resolving the deeper problems in this area. These are very real, and do not affect only the Azande and other Third World people: they are not confined to other cultures. On the contrary, these issues have also dominated British politics in recent years. For the questions of what value we should place on our own tradition and culture, and what attitude we should adopt to foreign ideas and influences, have been at the centre of political debate in this country. They have also been reflected in British philosophical thought.

On the left, and particularly in the Marxist tradition, these issues have been articulated and discussed in an explicit and conscious fashion, most notably in the debate, in the sixties, between Perry Anderson and E. P. Thompson.¹⁶ Anderson argued that the British intellectual tradition is moribund and dead, and that we should look overseas – and particularly to Europe – for models and inspiration. In these attitudes he has been followed, in the last ten years, by a whole host of academics and intellectuals, who have taken them to extravagant lengths by importing the latest Parisian fashions and trends, lock, stock and barrel. On the other side, E. P. Thompson has devoted much of his considerable energy to documenting and urging the value and strength of Britain's own radical tradition; and in this he is foursquare in the tradition of patriotic radicalism which runs through our history, and which has been such a powerful influence in our intellectual life.¹⁷

¹⁶ See Anderson, 'Components of the National Culture' and 'Origins of the Present Crisis'; and Thompson, 'The Peculiarities of the English' and 'The Poverty of Theory', both in *The Poverty of Theory*. Anderson, however, has been revising his views considerably in recent years: see, *Arguments Within English Marxism*, and *In the Tracks of Historical Materialism*.

¹⁷ For an illuminating historical account of this tradition, see Cunningham, 'The Language of Patriotism, 1750–1914'.

At first sight, it may seem that analytical philosophy, in Britain at least, has been carrying on in a world of scholarly detachment, isolated from and immune to these political questions and political influences. It is true, indeed, that like most academic philosophy, it has been, almost universally, a remote and scholastic tradition. For all that, however, like every philosophy it is a child of its times, and a reflection of the particular social and political context in which it arises. However, in place of the conscious and articulate debate about these issues that has occurred on the left, there has been only blindness to them and silence about them among analytical philosophers in this country. Some have even gone out of their way to deny that such philosophy has any connection with social or political questions, but this demonstrates only that they are unconscious of the ways in which their work has in fact reflected wider social and political currents.¹⁸ For there is no doubt that even the most cloistered forms of academic thought respond to such forces.

In the case of British analytical philosophy this is best seen by looking at the changes which have occurred within this tradition in the last twenty years. In the mid-sixties, before the influence of the student movement had been felt, philosophical work in British universities was confined almost exclusively within the analytical tradition. Britain could still look upon itself as the centre of the English-speaking philosophical world, even though it had clearly lost that position economically and politically. Other, alien, philosophical ideas and intellectual influences were dismissed and ignored with a complacency that now seems remarkable; and which was well illustrated by Mary Warnock when she said, 'when Sartre wrote in 1960 that Marxism was the "inescapable philosophy of our time", readers in England were inclined to say, with an air of superiority, that they at least had escaped it' ('Marxist Course', p. 27). In a similar vein, Warwick University's *Prospectus* for 1972 advised potential students that

the courses at Warwick are those which would be recognized as acceptable in universities throughout the English-speaking world, and we would expect our graduates to be equipped to deal with the kinds of discussions going on in the graduate schools of Oxford, Harvard, or Canberra. They would, however, be in some difficulty in the Sorbonne, the University of Moscow, or a Zen Buddhist monastery. You should apply to the latter institutions, rather than to

¹⁸ See, e.g., M. Warnock, 'Marxist Course'; and also my 'Towards a Radical Philosophy'.

ourselves if you have no desire to study within the broad tradition of philosophy represented by such writers as Russell, Wittgenstein, Carnap, Popper, H. H. Price, Quine, Ryle, Ayer, Austin and Strawson.¹⁹

Although British philosophers on the whole remain very insular in their attitudes, we should be thankful for small mercies: it is difficult to imagine such things being written today. Intellectual and philosophical life in this country has changed significantly in the last twenty years. Two aspects of these changes are particularly noticeable. First of all, Sartre has been proved correct: even the British have not succeeded in escaping the influence of Marxism (or of psychoanalysis). Moreover, Continental European and Hegelian ideas have had an irresistible impact on intellectual life in this country. The value and importance of these currents of thought is no longer something which needs to be justified. The complacent dismissal of them now appears for what it is: a narrow chauvinism and self-imposed ignorance.

In the second place, and as regards analytical philosophy, the centre of gravity has unmistakably shifted across the Atlantic. Britain is no longer the centre of the English-speaking philosophical world. In recent years there have been few, if any, genuinely significant and original developments in analytical philosophy emanating from this country, by contrast with American work which has been has been vigorous and lively.

But what is striking in these developments is how faithfully they reflect Britain's changing position in the world. For in this period, Britain has declined from being able at least to think of itself as a major world power and at the centre of world affairs, to being quite evidently a second-rank nation, increasingly subject to the contradictory pressures exerted by the United States on the one side, and by Europe on the other.

That our philosophy should reflect our political situation and its changes is an important fact, though not, I hope, a surprising one, in view of all that I have said. And just as these changes have posed the profound political problem of re-assessing Britain's role in the world, so they pose similar issues in the world of philosophy. The blind and uncritical importation of ideas and theories, even of language and mannerisms, from abroad (whether it is from the *École Normale Supérieure* or from Harvard) threatens to take the place of original and independent philosophical thought in this country. On the other hand, it is equally unproductive to adopt a narrowly

insular attitude, and refuse to learn from what is going on in other parts of the world. Philosophical and intellectual life has greatly benefited from the work of European and American writers in the recent period. But their ideas must be thought through and expressed in *our own* language, and developed and brought to bear on *our own* particular situation and *its* particular problems, if their significance is to be properly appreciated. We can usefully learn from Mao here:

Our policy is to learn from the strong points of all nations and all countries, learn all that is genuinely good in the political, economic, scientific and technological fields and in literature and art. But we must learn with an analytical and critical eye, not blindly, and we mustn't copy everything indiscriminately and transplant mechanically. ('On the Ten Major Relationships', p. 303)

¹⁹ Quoted in *Radical Philosophy* 2, Summer 1972, p. 33.

Part IV

Reality and Reason

11 Reality and Reason

Reasons and Causes in the Theory of Knowledge

There is an objective material world which exists independently of consciousness, and which can be known by consciousness. This is the basic realist thesis that I have been defending throughout this book. I have done so by insisting that our ideas are ultimately products and reflections of reality. In developing these views I have relied heavily on Hegel. Like him, I have been led, by a number of different paths, towards the conclusion that consciousness and the material world, theory and practice, reason and reality, are opposites which exist in unity: in Hegel's infamous words, 'what is rational is actual and what is actual is rational' (*Philosophy of Right*, p. 10).

Few propositions in philosophy can ever have met with such hostility and incomprehension. The mere mention of this dictum is bound to provoke accusations of 'idealism' and 'mysticism'. Such charges, however, are unwarranted; they are based upon only a superficial and confused understanding of the issues involved. It is true, of course, that Hegel's philosophy is an extreme form of idealism, which verges on mysticism at times. However, his idealism does not reside simply in the assertion of the unity of reality and reason, for this principle is not necessarily an idealist one. On the contrary, it is also a fundamental tenet of materialism. According to materialism, consciousness, thought and reason are the outcome and reflection of objective conditions – they are nothing transcendent and apart from the material world. Indeed, contemporary materialism even goes under the title of the (mind-brain) 'identity theory' for precisely this reason.

The rejection of this principle, and the insistence on keeping the realms of reality and reason apart from each other, is, rather, a

characteristic feature of dualism. Such dualism is an important aspect of the Kantian account of knowledge. Kant argues – correctly, I have maintained – that knowledge essentially involves a rational element: the application of categories, concepts and interpretations to experience. *Contra* Kant, however, the vital thing to see is that our ‘way of seeing things’ is not an arbitrary creation; and it does not stand as a barrier, cutting us off from things-in-themselves. On the contrary, our concepts and categories themselves reflect reality, and can embody knowledge of reality.

This, at least, is the realist view; and it implies, as I have argued, that species and kinds, laws and necessities, are objective features of the material world itself. The coherence, the order and regularity that we perceive in the world really is in it, as the objective property of things-in-themselves. The world is orderly in its forms and law-like in its behaviour – it is explicable in rational and scientific terms. Reality, that is to say, is rational.

To many people, I know, these ideas will seem paradoxical and counter-intuitive. For it is widely believed and frequently argued that reason is a distinctively and exclusively human capacity. Rationality is portrayed as a human ability which cannot be accounted for in the materialistic and causal terms of the natural sciences. According to this view, reason is a faculty which transcends our merely physical being and which sets us apart from the rest of natural creation. This is Kant’s view. His philosophy involves an absolute and dualistic distinction between the rational sphere of human thought and activity on the one hand, and the sphere of mere nature on the other. Knowledge is an exclusively human prerogative, since it essentially involves a rational as well as a sensory element.

Among contemporary philosophers, on the other hand, there has been a strong tendency to identify reason, not with a faculty of mind, but rather with the ability to use concepts and language. The result, however, is usually a similar dualism, involving, if anything, an even more restricted picture of reason and knowledge. Rorty’s work is a good example of this. Knowledge, he argues, is a phenomenon which transcends the natural world and which cannot be understood or explained in merely empirical or causal terms. To make this point, Rorty quotes W. Sellars, according to whom, ‘in characterizing an episode or a state as that of *knowing*, we are not giving an empirical description of that episode or state; we are placing it in the logical space of reasons, of justifying and being able to justify what one says’ (*Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 141). As we have seen, Rorty repudiates realism in all its aspects. He rejects the idea that knowledge involves a relation of reflection between the knower

and the known; rather, he insists, it relates ‘persons and propositions’ (p. 152). Consequently he argues that knowledge ‘is manifested only by beings whose behaviour we construe as the utterance of sentences with the intention of justifying the utterance of other sentences’ (p. 182).

This is an extraordinarily narrow view of knowledge. It not only confines knowledge to the human world; it makes it into a purely theoretical, purely rational and purely linguistic phenomenon: practical knowledge and the knowledge of experience are excluded. A beautiful refutation of such views is given by Dickens in *Hard Times*. In Gradgrind’s dreadful schoolroom the children – the ‘little pitchers’ as Dickens calls them – are being filled with ‘facts’. The scene unfolds as follows:

‘Girl number twenty’, said Mr Gradgrind, squarely pointing with his square forefinger, ‘I don’t know that girl. Who is that girl?’
 ‘Sissy Jupe, sir’, explained number twenty, blushing, standing up and curtseying. . . .
 ‘Let me see. What is your father?’
 ‘He belongs to the horse-riding, if you please, sir.’
 Mr Gradgrind frowned, and waved off the objectionable calling with his hand.
 ‘We don’t want to know anything about that, here. You mustn’t tell us about that, here. Your father breaks horses, don’t he? . . . Very well, then. Give me your definition of a horse.’
 (Sissy Jupe thrown into the greatest alarm by this demand).
 ‘Girl number twenty unable to define a horse!’ said Mr Gradgrind, for the general behoof of all the little pitchers. ‘Girl number twenty possessed of no facts, in reference to one of the commonest of animals! Some boy’s definition of a horse. Bitzer, yours’ . . .
 ‘Quadruped, Granivorous. Forty teeth, namely twenty-four grinders, four eye-teeth, and twelve incisive. Sheds coat in the spring; in — marshy countries, sheds hoofs, too. Hoofs hard, but requiring to be shod with iron. Age known by marks in mouth.’ Thus (and much more) Bitzer.
 ‘Now girl number twenty’, said Mr Gradgrind. ‘You know what a horse is.’ (pp. 48–50)

Although in other respects Rorty is poles apart from Gradgrind, the upshot of his account of knowledge is the same: Bitzer utters the relevant sentences – he knows what a horse is, Sissy doesn’t. The absurdity of this view is brilliantly demonstrated here. As F. R. Leavis observes, ‘Sissy has been brought up among horses, and among people whose livelihood depends upon understanding horses, but “we don’t want to know anything about that here”. Such knowledge isn’t real knowledge’ (*Dickens the Novelist*, p. 254).

Rorty is led to his view of knowledge through his hostility to realism. Knowledge, he insists, is not a relationship between a person and an object. It is not a causal but rather a rational phenomenon, which must be understood in terms of 'reasons' not 'causes'. Thus he castigates Locke for 'confusing' these two kinds of account, and for committing the 'genetic fallacy', which is supposed to consist in failing to distinguish questions of the justification and truth of beliefs from questions about their genesis and origin. But there is no 'confusion' in Locke on these issues. In this respect, at least, he is straightforwardly a realist. His whole account of knowledge is in genetic terms, and quite deliberately so. At the outset of his *Essay* he writes, 'I shall inquire into the original of those ideas, notions, or whatever else you please to call them, which a man observes, and is conscious to himself he has in his mind; and the ways whereby the understanding comes to be furnished with them' (I.i.3). It is clear that Locke regards reasons as a particular kind of cause. He would have insisted that we can justify ideas ultimately only in causal and genetic terms, by showing how they arise from the object itself, on the basis of experience.

The same accusation, I know, will be made against my own account of knowledge. It will be said that I fail to distinguish the claim that our ideas can reflect and embody knowledge and truth about reality, from the mere claim that they are caused by and arise from it. The outlook that I have been developing here does, indeed, require that we reject this distinction, at least in the rigid and exclusive form in which it is put forward by dualism. An impression in wax is caused by and reflects an object. In a more complex and mediated fashion, a photograph is caused by and reflects an objective situation. So too, in still more complex ways, our ideas are caused by and reflect reality, through the mediation of experience and thought. Of course, there are great differences between these various processes. The mind reflects reality in ways quite distinct from those in which a photograph reflects its object, as I have often emphasized. However, as I have equally insisted, there is no absolute division or distinction at work here. Our ideas, beliefs, knowledge *both* arise out of *and* reflect concrete – material, practical and causal – processes. That is what I have been arguing.

Nevertheless, the idea that the justification of knowledge is a matter of reasons, and nothing to do with its genesis, is a widespread one among contemporary philosophers. A clear and influential example of such views is contained in Popper's philosophy of science. According to Popper, we must avoid the error of 'inductivism'. Science proceeds by a process of 'conjecture and refutation'; but

where conjectures come from is irrelevant to their scientific status, which depends only upon the way in which our hypotheses fare in empirical tests.

A frequently cited example is that of Kekulé's discovery of the hexagonal structure of the benzene molecule. He is reported to have dreamed of this idea in his sleep. 'If wishes were horses then beggars would ride', goes the old saying. If dreams were, indeed, the pathway to knowledge we would all be scientists; for dreaming must surely be amongst the most widely distributed of human accomplishments. More is required for knowledge than this. In particular, it is evident that Kekulé would never have thought to relate his dream to the structure of benzene, had he not already had a background and store of knowledge on this topic; acquired not through dreaming, but through scientific – theoretical and practical – engagement with the substance, benzene, itself. It is fatal to divorce reasons and causes in the theory of knowledge. The genesis of our ideas is absolutely relevant to their justification as knowledge; for knowledge *does* refer to objects in the world, and can be acquired and justified only in relation to them.

The Naturalistic Approach

The approach that I am advocating is not a novel one. The naturalistic approach to the human world – to human reason and to human knowledge – has been spelled out, in its modern form, by a succession of realistically-minded philosophers since the seventeenth century. Moreover, it has been confirmed and vindicated by the major advances in the understanding of human life. In one area after another, the dualist idea that the human world is a realm of reason, distinct and separate from the natural world, has been discredited and rendered untenable. Thus Darwin has demonstrated the continuity of mankind with the rest of the living world; Marx the dependence of social and ideal forms on material and economic conditions; and Freud reveals the unconscious instinctive origins, the irrational and pre-linguistic character, of much of our psychology. Human beings are natural beings. Their powers and faculties are natural ones, which we must understand and explain in naturalistic terms.

Perhaps the greatest barrier to the acceptance of these views, however, lies not in ideas about the human world, but rather in views about the natural world. For it is common for nature to be regarded in a purely mechanical fashion. Material objects and even

animals are supposed to be mere causal mechanisms, capable only of particular responses to particular conditions. It seems, then, an unsatisfactory and unacceptable sort of reductionism to try to account for all forms of human life and human thought on such a basis.

And, indeed, it is so. The naturalist and materialist account of reason must avoid such reductionism. In this connection, in the first place, it is important to see that animals are not mere mechanisms. They have powers and capacities which must be recognized as rational ones, at least by Kantian criteria. A dog, for instance, can 'interpret' its experience. It can recognize its food, its home, its owner; it can identify and categorize the objects in the world around it. Moreover, it can have expectations and form causal 'hypotheses'. For example, it can show that it expects to be fed or taken for a walk. The view implied by the Kantian philosophy, that animals are merely sensory organisms, capable only of mechanical responses to the particular present situation, is an untenable one.

In arguing thus I find I have an unaccustomed ally in Popper. Particularly in his recent writings, and quite inconsistently with his generally Kantian and dualistic views about knowledge, he has developed similar ideas in fruitful and interesting ways. He writes, for example,

observation is always selective. It needs a chosen object, a definite task, an interest, a point of view, a problem. . . . 'A hungry animal,' writes Katz, 'divides the environment into edible and inedible things. An animal in flight sees roads to escape and hiding places'. . . . The theory of inborn *ideas* is absurd, I think; but every organism has inborn *reactions* and *responses*; and among them, responses adapted to impending events. These responses may be described as 'expectations' without implying that these expectations are conscious. The newborn baby 'expects' in this sense to be fed. In view of the close relation between expectation and knowledge we may even speak in quite a reasonable sense of 'inborn knowledge'. (*Conjectures and Refutations*, p. 46)

According to Popper, our rational capacities and our knowledge have a biological basis, and the developed forms of theoretically articulate knowledge are grounded in simpler and more primitive material forms. Popper even extends this account to plant life.

Animals and even plants are problem solvers. . . . The tentative solutions which animals and plants incorporate into their anatomy and their behaviour are biological analogues of theories; and vice-versa:

theories correspond to endosomatic organs and their ways of functioning. Just like theories, organs and their functions are tentative adaptations to the world we live in. (*Objective Knowledge*, p. 145)

Indeed, even at the inorganic level there are reactions and responses akin to those that Popper is describing. It is wrong to think that the natural world is made up of mere particulars and particular reactions; and that order and regularity are features that we have invented and imposed upon it. On the contrary, as Hegel says, 'reason is in the world', in the sense that even in the world of inanimate matter, things respond in rule-governed and law-like ways. For causality, it must be stressed, is law-like behaviour. It involves the regular reaction of *kinds* of things to *kinds* of conditions. Litmus paper, for example, turns red in acid: it responds in a certain kind of way in a specific sort of situation. The burglar alarm sounds when the door is opened. Even purely chemical and physical phenomena exhibit what have been called 'discriminative' responses.¹ Such responses are ordered and governed by *universals*. Thus litmus paper reacts to the universals of acidity and alkalinity. What this shows, I have argued, is that the categories of acidity and alkalinity are *objective* ones. They are not merely our interpretations, our 'ways of seeing things', still less those of the litmus paper; but inherent features of things-in-themselves.

Quite clearly it would be absurd to attribute the use of concepts and categories to litmus paper or to burglar alarms; and I must emphasize that this is not what I am suggesting. However, it is important to appreciate that the sort of 'discriminative' responses shown by these objects are *precisely* the kinds of reaction that Kant suggests are rational ones, requiring the use of concepts and categories; and it is difficult to see how a Kantian, at least, can decline to regard them as such.²

'What is rational is actual and what is actual is rational'. Paradoxical as it seems, there is an important measure of truth in this notorious Hegelian principle. Hegel, however, develops this idea in a thoroughly unsatisfactory form. The accusations of idealism and mysticism directed against his philosophy are, indeed, justified. Reason, he believes, is 'in the world' and 'actual', not only in the sense that the world is rationally ordered and intelligible in rational terms; but also in the sense that material and objective reality is the product, the expression, the 'self-alienation' of the 'Idea', of reason.

¹ The phrase is from W. Sellars, quoted by Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 182.

² Rorty notices this problem, but evades the implications of this line of thought by identifying rationality with language use (*Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, pp. 182ff).

Despite his own protestations, Hegel's philosophy is best seen as a sort of pantheism, in which the world is a creation and a realization of the divine rational will.

Materialism is the direct opposite of this. As Marx very clearly explains, it inverts Hegel's philosophy and 'turns it on its feet'.³

For Hegel, the life-process of the human brain, i.e. the process of thinking, which, under the name of 'the idea', he even transforms into an independent subject, is the *demiurge* [the creator] of the real world, and the real world is only the external, phenomenal form of 'the idea'. With me, on the contrary, the ideal is ~~nothing~~ else than the material world reflected by the human brain, and translated into forms of thought. (*Capital*, I, p. 19)

In arguing that there is truth in the idea that the actual is rational, unlike Hegel I am not seeking to suggest that the world is animated by thought or reason. On the contrary, I am arguing for the materialist conclusion that our rational powers and capacities arise out of, and are continuous with, the natural behaviour of things. In the human world, to be sure, reason is developed in forms higher than those found elsewhere in nature. It is developed to the point of self-conscious and articulate thought and knowledge. Nonetheless, as I have tried to show, these distinctively human forms of rationality are ultimately the developments of kinds of response which, in less developed forms, pervade the material world.

Nature is at the basis of reason: there is no gulf, no absolute divide between the natural world and the realm of reason. On the contrary, human rational thought and activity are a development of simpler and more primitive biological and physical responses. No appeal to transcendent and supernatural mental faculties is required in order to explain and understand them. My point and purpose here, in other words, is not the Hegelian one of spiritualizing nature; it is rather the materialist one of *naturalizing reason*.

Theory and Reality

I have been arguing that there is an important measure of truth in the idea that reason and reality are united, which must be recognized in any satisfactory realist and materialist account of knowledge. However, these ideas are so strongly associated with the further reaches of Hegelian mysticism that they are likely to be greeted with considerable suspicion and scepticism. Popper's writ-

³ Marx is very clear about his relationship to Hegel in this respect, but that has not prevented a jungle of misinterpretation from growing up around this topic. For further discussion see *Hegel, Marx and Dialectic*, pp. 83ff.

ings on this topic are an extreme example of such scepticism, and have done much to foster it. Although his increasingly realist inclinations and biological speculations should have led him to a sympathy with these ideas, hostility to Hegel (and to Marx) remains an overridingly powerful motive in his thought. Thus he dismisses the Hegelian assertion of the unity of reason and actuality as 'the worst of all absurd and incredible philosophical theories' (*Conjectures and Refutations*, p. 330). Influential though it has been, Popper's account of Hegel's philosophy is little better than caricature; and it would not merit discussion except for the light it can help to shed upon the unity of reality and reason. For it is not this Hegelian idea which is really the 'absurd and incredible' one, but rather Popper's preferred alternative.

According to Popper, the problem that Hegel sets out to answer is: 'how can mind grasp the world?' Hegel's answer, says Popper,

'Because the world is mind-like' [i.e. because the actual is rational] has only the appearance of an answer. We shall see clearly that this is not a real answer if we only consider some analogous arguments like 'How can the English language describe the world?' – 'Because the world is intrinsically British'. (*Conjectures and Refutations*, p. 330)

This is crude stuff. Nonetheless, there is some truth in it: for Hegel does essentially argue that we can use reason to know the world because the world is rational.

The materialist would see the reflective relationship here as the inverse and opposite of this, as I have stressed: thought can grasp the world because our thought is *world-like*. Our ideas, that is to say, correspond to and reflect reality. Popper, however, rejects the reflection theory in all its forms, using the Kantian kinds of argument that I have criticized at length already. This is the real basis of his hostility to the idea that reason and reality are united. Thus he goes on to take Sir James Jeans to task for being troubled by the question: 'how can mathematics grasp the world?' and for answering 'because the world is mathematical'. Jeans, he says, was puzzled by the fact that *a priori* mathematical ideas – the products of pure reason – can have application to the physical world. According to Popper, Jeans is being misled here by the error of inductivism. For, as we have just seen, it is Popper's view that the origins of a theory are irrelevant to the question of its scientific status or truth. What matters is whether it has application and is empirically testable; and often, he claims, useful theories are arrived at purely speculatively.

However, the questions that worried Jeans are not as fruitless as Popper suggests. To be sure, Jeans' views on mathematics are

rationalist and idealist ones. In the first place, the idea of purely rational, purely *a priori*, knowledge is one that I have already criticized: not even the truths of mathematics can claim this status, as Wittgenstein and Quine have shown (see chapter 6 above). Beyond this, however, Jeans poses the problem in idealist terms, and his account needs to be 'turned on its feet'. For it is not so much that the world is mathematics-like; rather, mathematics is, or has been made, world-like. That mathematics can be applied in physical theory so that it reflects reality is not the product of pure reason operating *a priori*; it is rather the result of a long process of practical activity and thought – it is a human, social and historical achievement.

A look at the actual history of mathematics reveals that its early development was not a purely rational and *a priori* process, as Jeans suggests. Still less was it the result of speculative 'conjectures' as Popper would have it. It has its origins in the empirical and practical operations of counting, measuring, surveying and assessing. The experience and results of these operations are first generalized in empirical and pragmatic rules of calculation for particular operations, and only later are they formalized into abstract and apparently *a priori* mathematical ideas.⁴ As Engels says,

pure mathematics deals with the space forms and quantitative relations of the real world – that is, with material which is very real indeed. The fact that this material appears in an extremely abstract form can only superficially conceal its origin from the external world. But in order to make it possible to investigate these forms and relations in their pure state, it is necessary to separate them entirely from their content, to put the content aside as irrelevant. . . . Even the apparent derivation of mathematical magnitudes from each other does not prove their *a priori* origin, but only their rational connection. . . . Like all other sciences, mathematics arose out of the *needs* of men; from the measurement of land and the content of vessels, from the computation of time and from mechanics. But, as in every department of thought, at a certain stage of development the laws, which were abstracted from the real world, become divorced from the real world, and are set up against it as something independent, as laws coming from outside, to which the world has to conform. (*Anti-Dühring*, pp. 58–9)

In other words, mathematical ideas are not absolutely *a priori* ones, the products of pure reason alone; nor are they mere specula-

⁴ For a detailed and illuminating account of the earliest development of mathematics along these lines, see Childe, *Man Makes Himself*, ch.8.

tive 'conjectures' which fit the world only by chance. On the contrary, as Engels says, they arise 'out of the needs of men'. But although Engels is fully conscious of their social and historical character, he is far from suggesting that they are therefore merely relative, subjective or arbitrary, in the manner of relativists like Rorty. The point he is making is rather that mathematical ideas have a real – not just an ideal and rational – content. Through the mediation of social relations, they reflect reality. They are the product of a lengthy, historical process of experiment and practice, combined with the process of comprehending these results in general and theoretical terms. By these means, mathematical reasoning has been developed to reflect the world in more and more adequate terms. That is how it can grasp the world.

Determinism and Creativity

No doubt, I shall be accused of 'determinism'; for this is the charge that is regularly brought against anyone propounding realism or materialism in the theory of knowledge, particularly when it takes the form of the reflection theory. This theory, I shall be told, is a crude and unsatisfactory one: it inevitably portrays the mind as a passive mirror; and it is incapable of understanding or explaining the way in which the mind's activity and creativity contribute to knowledge.

For the most part, I have dealt with these objections already, but the charge of determinism is one that needs some discussion. To that charge I must plead guilty. Indeed, the view that I have just been defending – that the actual is rational, in the sense that it is orderly, regular and explicable in scientific terms – is only another way of stating the thesis that everything that happens is determined and governed by law.

It should not be surprising that my ideas have led to this conclusion; for determinism has always been a recognized part of the scientific and materialist outlook. However, realism in its more traditional forms has often tended to see our ideas as being determined by and reflecting objective reality only when they are true; it has typically refused to extend this approach to false and illusory ones. These have not been regarded as reflections of reality. Rather they are supposed to arise from the misuse of our understanding or reason. Locke's realism, for example, takes this form; and Descartes' too, as we shall see in a moment. By contrast, I have been arguing that realism and determinism must be extended to cover *all* ideas –

false as well as true. All ideas, no matter how apparently subjective, arbitrary, illusory and false they may appear, arise from and reflect reality. This has been my basic theme. This, I have argued, is the conclusion towards which the development of the social sciences points; it is the lesson of the work of Hegel, Freud and Marx; and it is the only satisfactory philosophical framework for the theory of knowledge.

It is important to see that these ideas involve the rejection of a very influential alternative account of error; the account, namely, which lies at the basis of the dualist and idealist theories of knowledge that I have been criticizing throughout this book. According to these theories, our ideas and beliefs about the world are never wholly determined by the objective situation or by the materials presented to the senses. Theory is 'underdetermined' by evidence; and different interpretations are always possible.⁵ The view of the world that we adopt is ultimately a matter of our choice, and a product of our wills, either individually or collectively.

The basic principles of this view of error are expressed with great clarity and persuasiveness by Descartes, in *Meditations*, IV. Descartes is answering the question: 'where do our errors come from?' We cannot blame God for them, Descartes insists, since God is good and would not deceive us.⁶ That is to say, we cannot simply hold the objective situation responsible for our errors.

Nor, Descartes goes on to argue, can we blame our mistakes upon the inadequacy and insufficiency of our faculties. The faculties involved in knowledge are the senses (the 'intellect') and the will ('judgement'). Our senses provide the materials for knowledge; but until we bring judgement to bear on these materials, and interpret them, the question of truth and error does not arise. 'By mere intellect I do no more than perceive the ideas which are matter for judgement; and precisely so regarded the intellect contains, properly speaking, no error' (p. 95). Judgement and interpretation, on the other hand, involve the exercise of choice and freewill, and with them the possibility of misinterpretation and error does arise. The cause of error is not any deficiency in our power of will and choice, for this, according to Descartes, is 'infinite'. Rather, it arises from the fact that we choose to assent to things for which we have no valid warrant: it arises, that is to say, from the misuse of our freedom of

⁵ See, e.g., Quine, *Word and Object*, ch.1, for an influential presentation of this view in these terms.

⁶ Cf. Hegel's view that 'all that God is he imparts and reveals' (*Logic*, §140z); but Hegel's approach is a dialectical one, and he equally acknowledges that appearances conceal the essence of things (see chapter 3 above).

interpretation and power of judgement. In short, we have no one to blame but ourselves for our errors.

The account of knowledge that I have been advancing is the very opposite of this. Our way of seeing things, I have argued, is not an arbitrary matter; we are not at liberty to interpret the world as we will. On the contrary, the objective conditions, and the ways in which we relate to them, determine not only the experience we have, but also the way in which we interpret that experience. In particular, false ideas – errors and illusions – are not our subjective creations: they are not due to the misuse of our wills. Our errors have objective causes, and the more we understand of them, the more we see how they are not *mere* errors, but are rather determined, both in their form and content, by the objects to which they refer and by the practical and social relations through which they are mediated.

It is only in these terms that we can make sense of the history of thought. Thus, as we have seen, eighteenth-century chemistry becomes incomprehensible if we insist, in Cartesian fashion, in regarding the phlogiston theory as sheer error due to the misuse of their powers of judgement by eighteenth century chemists. But we can gain some understanding of it if we look upon this theory as a stage in the growth of chemical knowledge and as part of a process of approximation to truth. Nor can the fact that religious interpretations of the world dominated the thought of the Middle Ages (and persist still today) be understood if we adopt the Cartesian view; whereas such ideological conceptions can be explained in an illuminating way in terms of the sort of realism that I am defending. Attractive as it may initially appear, the Cartesian account of error is not a satisfactory one. Our way of seeing things is not a mere matter of choice: it is objectively determined. As Godelier says, and as I have argued, 'it is not the subject who deceives himself, but *reality* which deceives *him*' ('Structure and Contradiction', p. 337).

But if our errors are determined, how can we ever escape from them? This is the objection that will be raised. By portraying our ideas as mere products and reflections of objective conditions, determinism seems to exclude the very possibility of imaginative, creative or critical thought. For the essential feature of such thought, it may well seem, is precisely that it does *not* simply reflect reality. On the contrary, imagination and criticism, it will be argued, essentially involve a *negative* aspect and element, which no mere reflection account can explain. In imagination we create and conceive something which does not exist in reality. Criticism, moreover, involves questioning and opposing present reality: it involves negating what exists in terms of values and ideals, which envisage, rather, that

which does not exist but which *ought* to. In order to recognize the imaginative and critical powers of thought, it will be said, consciousness and reason must be viewed in a dualistic fashion, as forces separate from, and in potential opposition to, the world.

Mechanical materialism, it is true, is vulnerable to these objections, but not the dialectical form of materialism that I have been defending. For at the basis of these criticisms is an account of reality in purely positive terms – a positivistic metaphysics – which is shared both by dualism and by mechanical materialism. According to this view, present and existing reality is something purely and exclusively *positive* in character. Negativity, opposition and criticism, in so far as they can exist, must be brought to reality from outside, by human consciousness, freedom or reason.⁷

The dialectical approach is based upon the rejection of this view. Its first principle is that *reality itself* is contradictory. Opposition, negation and contradiction are *in the world*: they are objective features of what is. ‘Criticism’ is not the prerogative of human thought alone. On the contrary, all concrete things have negative and contradictory aspects. Nothing merely *is*, in a purely positive fashion: all things are contradictory; and, because of this, they are changeable and transient – destined to be negated and to pass away. These are the first lessons of Hegel’s logic, and the most fundamental principles of dialectic in all its forms. Thus at the outset of his *Logic*, Hegel argues that mere positive Being is an abstract and empty category. It is impossible to understand the world in terms of it, as dualism would have us do. ‘To materialized conception’, he writes, ‘existence stands in the character of something solely positive, and quietly abiding within its own limits. . . . But the fact is, mutability lies in the notion of existence, and change is only the manifestation of what it implicitly is’ (*Logic*, §92z). All concrete things, Hegel argues, are a unity of being and nothing, of positive and negative aspects; and the presence of these oppositions and contradictions results in the processes of becoming and change to which all concrete things are subject.⁸

Thus, according to dialectic, negation, opposition and criticism do not need to be brought to the world by the thinking and reasoning subject from the outside. Reality itself already contains negative and critical forces; it is already infected with conflict and opposition; it contains within itself the seeds of its own development and change.

⁷ The most important and influential presentation of this view is in Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*.

⁸ I am here summarizing, in very condensed form, ideas which I have explained and defended at greater length in *Hegel, Marx and Dialectic*.

In Hegel’s words, ‘wherever there is movement, wherever there is life, wherever anything is carried into effect in the actual world, there dialectic is at work. It is also the soul of all knowledge which is truly scientific’ (*Logic*, §81z).

Once these ideas are grasped and understood, it becomes clear that there is no need to posit reason as a force apart in order to explain the possibility of critical or imaginative thought. Where do critical ideas come from? Like all ideas, they come from reality. This account need involve no denial of the fact that thought and reason can criticize and oppose the established order. However, it does involve the view that when, in concrete conditions, they do so, they reflect the fact that opposing and negative forces have arisen in reality; and that existing conditions are themselves contradictory. This, certainly, was Marx’s view, as we have seen. ‘If theory, theology, philosophy, ethics, etc. come into contradiction with existing relations, this can only occur because existing social relations have come into contradiction with existing forces of production’ (*The German Ideology*, p. 52).

Knowledge and Freedom

These arguments, I know, are not sufficient to vindicate determinism, for they leave unanswered the most basic and widely felt objection to it. Namely, that it is a philosophy which quite directly denies human freedom; and which entails an attitude of fatalism and passivity to human life. In the epistemological form in which I have been defending it, it may even seem to suggest that it is beyond our power to influence our own thought or to eliminate errors and illusions from our beliefs. And, if so, what point can there be to philosophical thought? – what purpose in the theory of knowledge?

The position I have been defending is, indeed, a determinist one, but it is wrong to think that it must, therefore, involve a denial of human freedom. To be sure, it *does* deny that freedom is a transcendent phenomenon; it *does* rule out the idea that we can somehow escape the influences of the objective world and act entirely independently of natural laws. That is to say, it does deny the *dualist* account of freedom, but not in order to reject the concept of freedom altogether. The outlook that I have been defending involves, rather, a *realist* and *materialist* account of freedom.

According to this, freedom consists, not just in the ability to wish and to will, but also in the power to *act* successfully in and on the world. Freedom, in this sense, is not incompatible with determinism

— on the contrary, it presupposes determinism. For real freedom comes not simply from the exertion of a transcendent and unfettered will, but also from a knowledge of the forces at work in the world and from the ability to use this knowledge in the furtherance of our ends. As Engels explains,

freedom does not consist in an imaginary independence from natural laws, but in the knowledge of these laws and in the possibility which is thus given of systematically making them work towards definite ends. This holds good in relation both to the laws of external nature and to those which govern the bodily and mental existence of men themselves. . . . Freedom, therefore consists in command over ourselves and over external nature, a command founded on knowledge of natural necessity; it is therefore necessarily a product of historical development. (*Anti-Dühring*, p. 157)

In so far as we come to understand the causes and principles governing the operation of things, and learn to use this knowledge, to that extent we are no longer the mere passive victims of our conditions. We then have the capability of becoming active and free with respect to them. This view is put memorably by Bacon.

Man is but the servant and interpreter of nature: what he does and what he knows is only what he has observed of nature's order in fact or in thought; beyond this he knows nothing and can do nothing. For the chain of causes cannot by any force be loosed or broken, nor can nature be commanded except by being obeyed. And so those twin objects, human knowledge and human power do really meet in one, and it is from ignorance of causes that operation fails.⁹

This account of freedom applies also in the theory of knowledge; and it has been implicit in the views that I have been expressing. Our ideas — and particularly our errors — have objective causes, I have insisted: they are not merely the subjective products of will. This does not mean that they are irremovable, or that we must fatalistically resign ourselves to them. It does mean, however, that if we are to free ourselves from them, more than a mere effort of will is necessary. We must also understand and then tackle the material and objective causes which give rise to them.

This is the account of freedom that is implied in Freud's work. For

⁹ *The New Organon*, p. 29. A similar account of freedom is to be found in Spinoza, in Hegel and in the Marxist tradition (see especially, C. Caudwell, 'Liberty'). It is also implicit in Freud's work, as I shall indicate in a moment. S. Hampshire, *Spinoza*, ch.4, has an interesting discussion of the parallels between Spinoza and Freud on this topic.

neurotic symptoms, he stresses, cannot be altered or eliminated simply by an effort of will. They have an objective, a compulsive, character: they afflict people against and despite their wills. They are prime examples of human *unfreedom*. It is true that Freud sees neurotic behaviour as motivated and as intentional, but this does not mean that it is freely chosen. For Freud's crucial point is that neurotic motives and intentions are beyond the reach of consciousness and beyond the control of the will — they are *repressed* and *unconscious* ones.¹⁰

That is why all these asseverations that it is 'only a question of willing' and all the encouragements and abuse that are addressed to the patient are of no avail. An attempt must first be made by the roundabout methods of analysis to convince the patient herself of the existence in her of an intention to be ill. ('Fragment of an Analysis', p. 56)

Moreover, as I have stressed in my account of psychoanalysis and as Freud himself stresses, this analytic work of 'convincing' the patient cannot be understood in purely intellectual terms. It is not simply a matter of persuading the patient to accept a different 'interpretation', a different 'story', and to see his or her condition differently.

The idea that the neurotic is suffering from a sort of ignorance, and that if one removes this ignorance by telling him facts (about the causal connection of his illness with his life, about his experiences in childhood, and so on) he must recover, is an idea that has long been superseded, and one derived from superficial appearances. The pathological factor is not his ignorance in itself, but the root of this ignorance in his *inner resistances*; it was they that first called this ignorance into being, and they still maintain it now. In combating these resistances lies the task of therapy. ('Observations on "Wild" Analysis', pp. 301–2)

Psychoanalysis, that is to say, aims to free people from neurotic and compulsive patterns of action, not simply by appealing to their wills or intellects, but by discovering and tackling the *causes* of their conditions.¹¹

¹⁰ I make these points at greater length, particularly in relation to the existential and phenomenological account of psychoanalysis, in my review of Szasz, *Ideology and Insanity*.

¹¹ It should be noted, however, that Freud is ultimately reluctant to call psychoanalysis a 'causal' treatment, on the materialist grounds that the fundamental causes of neurosis are most likely biological in nature, and a causal treatment 'in the true sense of the word' would therefore need to tackle these. However, no such treatment is yet available; and, in its absence, psychoanalysis carries out some of 'the indispensable preliminary work' for it (*Introductory Lectures*, p. 487).

Marx's theory of ideology implies the same view of freedom, as I have emphasized in my account of it. Like all ideas, ideological illusions are not mere intellectual products. They are not the creations of pure reason, and they cannot be dispelled by an effort of reason alone, still less by a simple decision to 'see the world differently'. They have objective, material roots – they are determined. But far from implying a fatalistic attitude towards such ideology, Marx's view is the necessary basis upon which to tackle and eliminate it. Lenin, that most practical of thinkers, is clear about this.

We must know how to combat religion, and in order to do so we must explain the source of faith and religion . . . *materialistically*. The fight against religion must not be confined to abstract ideological preaching or reduced to such preaching. The fight must be linked up with . . . concrete practical work . . . which aims at eliminating the social roots of religion. ('The Attitude of the Workers' Party to Religion', p. 21)

Our ideas are determined by their objects, and by the social relations in which they are formed and through which they are mediated. This is the view that I have been defending. Contrary to the common belief, there is nothing passive or fatalistic in it. Quite the opposite, it provides the only basis upon which freedom can properly be understood. For it is only by understanding the causes of our ideas and the conditions which give rise to them, that we can hope to eliminate error and advance knowledge. And the theory of knowledge, by contributing to this understanding, has an important role to play in this task.

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Sean Sayers is Lecturer in Philosophy at the University of Kent at Canterbury. He is one of the founding editors of *Radical Philosophy*.

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ISBN 0 631 14274 6