

Practice

According to Engels (1883/1940), the successes of industry and experimentation were the most telling objection against the skeptics who deny us access to the thing-in-itself. The Empiricists had taken the position that sensations come to a *passive mind* and that, upon that basis (as Hume had insisted), we have no justification for discussion of processes of causality (Lenin, 1947). If, however, you drop the assumption of a passive mind and suppose, instead, that people and scientists are active enquirers into phenomena, people who prod and poke at it, in order to draw from it knowledge, the logic of skepticism and the assumption of passive reception, is brought to question. It is in *practice* in the real, objective, accessible world that we test the validity of our ideas and beliefs. When we turn to some object and test our perceptions of that object we put our sense-perceptions to an infallible test. If they correspond with the phenomenon our expectations and beliefs will not be contradicted. I perceive, for instance, a tree trunk over a stream and think it capable of supporting my weight. I commence the crossing and discover to my wet chagrin that it could not. Since my anticipations, based upon sense-perception, failed I do not doubt the world, I doubt me and investigate further. I discover that what appeared to be a solid log, at first estimation, is in fact hollow from rot. My idea of the log now corresponds with it more perfectly.

If these perceptions have been wrong, then our estimate of the use to which an object can be turned must also be wrong, and our attempt must fail. But if we succeed in accomplishing our aim, if we find that the object does agree with our idea of it, and does answer the purpose we intended it for, then that is positive proof that our perceptions of it and of its qualities, so far, agree with reality outside ourselves. (Engels, in Lenin, 1947, p. 94)

That is the very nature of the whole scientific enterprise—the testing of notions in the world, and the abandonment of ideas that do not fit with reality and the preservation of those that have not been proven false.

Throughout human history it has been *practice* that has led to all of the advances that we have made over our ancestors of 20,000 years ago. It is that, too, that has contributed to the accumulating store of knowledge that is collectively called culture (including scientific, technical, and practical knowledge stored in individuals and libraries). We have steadily gone from little knowledge of things-in-themselves to an expanding knowledge of things-for-us. We have gradually learned what uses things can be put to and made them ever less things-in-themselves (Lenin, 1947). Magnetism was unknown to us at one time but we eventually began to expose its secrets and used it to our advantage in long sea journeys where the stars and the sky had, previously, been our guide. Or look what we have done with electricity since Ben Franklin had his kite's tail lit up by a bolt of lightning or since Thomas Edison developed the light bulb. The computer that I am currently working at demonstrates this to me. Now, to this point in our history, we have probed so far that we can create mechanical hearts that can and do keep the ill alive. It is practice that underlies such advancements and supports our quest for what might be considered true.

On Absolute Truth

In our transition from ignorance to knowledge we are expanding upon our store of relative truth (Lenin, 1947). We do not have absolute knowledge of the universe but, relative to what we once knew, we have increased our grasp of what may be considered absolutely true. What

was unknown yesterday, e.g., how to safely depart the planet, is no longer hidden from us. At the same time we must admit that a great deal about the planet and the universe remains unknown to us, e.g., how to predict earthquakes. When we consider the advances being made by science it becomes obvious that we have access to an objective and knowable world.

Once we accept the point of view that human knowledge develops from ignorance, we shall find . . . millions of observations not only in the history of science and technology but in the everyday life of each and every one of us that illustrate the transformation of “things-in-themselves” into “things-for-us” The sole and unavoidable deduction to be made from this—a deduction of which all of us make in everyday practice and which materialism deliberately places at the foundation of its epistemology—is that outside us, and independently of us, there exist objects, things, bodies and that our perceptions are images of the external world. (Lenin, 1947, p. 88)

That there is an objective world, that is, in principle, knowable absolutely, dialectical materialism does not dispute. Our knowledge, at this point in historical time, is, however, only relatively true. What we know is dependent upon the historical conditions of our existence.

The materialist dialectics of Marx and Engels certainly does contain relativism, but it is not reducible to relativism, that is, it recognizes the relativity of all our knowledge, not in the sense of denying objective truth, but in the sense that the limits of approximation of our knowledge to this truth are historically conditional. (Lenin, 1947, p. 121)

The expanding universe could not have been part of the conceived-of-world for people like Newton. We, on the other hand, have sent telescopes into space, e.g. the Hubble space telescope, and have other technical devices that enable us to chip away at the thing-in-itself and render it ever more a thing-for-us. The limits of knowledge are conditioned historically but there is no reason to suppose that we cannot expand our reach into what is real. Knowledge is thus historically relative and, so long as each generation can build upon its forbearers, there is no reason to suppose our future grasp will not be all the more comprehensive. Knowledge, then, is relative to the conditions of existence but that does not imply a relativism and skepticism about objective knowledge; hardly. We must further acknowledge that the universe continues to change and, in terms of absolute knowledge, we have no reason for assuming that new laws or properties may not come into being as they have throughout the past development of the universe. Life, mind, and culture burgeoned forth as new forms of existents at one point in history and who can say that nothing new can befall us.

References

Engels, F. (1940). *Dialectics of nature* (C. Dutt, Trans.). New York: International. (Originally published 1883.)

Lenin, V. I. (1947). *Materialism and empirio-criticism*. Moscow: Progress.

