

# Knowledge as a Social Phenomenon

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The idea that knowledge is a social phenomenon is no longer either novel or unfamiliar. With the growth of the social sciences, we are accustomed to seeing ideas and beliefs in social and historical terms, and trying to understand how they arise and why they take the forms that they do. Philosophers, however, are only gradually coming to terms with these views. For they call in question ideas about the nature of knowledge which have dominated epistemology since the seventeenth century.

The two major traditions in this branch of philosophy – empiricism and rationalism – both regard genuine knowledge as made up of absolute truths; and they look upon false ideas as sheer errors and illusions, which must be revealed as such and ‘committed to the flames’. Of course, these philosophies both recognize the fact that our thoughts and beliefs are subject to social influence. For it is no new discovery that different people, in different societies, in different historical periods, see the world differently. However, such influences are seen as purely negative and distorting ones. They are looked upon as the source of errors and illusions, which must be eliminated if we are to achieve genuine knowledge.

The aim of traditional epistemology is to provide a method to do just this. It seeks to establish an indubitable and universally valid basis for knowledge, either in immediate experience or in *a priori* reason. In this way, it hopes to guarantee our claims to knowledge and to refute scepticism. The social account of knowledge threatens to undermine this whole approach. It challenges the view that either experience or reason can provide a fixed bedrock upon which knowledge can be founded. *All* ideas and beliefs are social products. Social influences cannot be eliminated. Knowledge is social through and through.

This social approach to knowledge, it is often thought, must inevitably lead to relativism and scepticism; and some recent writers have not shrunk from drawing this conclusion. For fear of it, however, many others feel they must reject the social view of knowledge altogether and defend the traditional concepts of absolute truth and error. They try to do so by maintaining that facts about the social character of ideas are irrelevant to epistemological questions of truth and falsity. Thus we seem to be presented with a choice between two equally unsatisfactory alternatives. Either we acknowledge that knowledge is a social phenomenon and embrace relativism, or we cling to the absolute view at the cost of denying the social picture of knowledge. These are commonly regarded as the only alternatives. Yet they are not, I will argue. For it is possible to recognize that knowledge is a social phenomenon

without descending into relativism or scepticism. There is another way. This is the social and historical approach in the theory of knowledge, most fully developed by Hegel and Marx.

## Hegel

Hegel is perhaps the first great European thinker to comprehend knowledge in thoroughly social and historical terms. He is aware that in doing so he is challenging the traditional, foundational picture of knowledge, and with it the concepts of absolute truth and error. He makes this point himself in the ‘Introduction’ to his *Phenomenology of Spirit*. For this reason, perhaps, he is often taken to be an advocate of relativism. But he is not. On the contrary, Hegel is a strong realist, fully committed to the notions of objectivity and truth.

In particular, he defends his own outlook as a scientific one, and he criticizes previous philosophies for being mistaken and defective in various ways. Yet he does not dismiss them entirely as pure error. No sense can be made of the history of thought, he insists, if it is regarded in these terms; for then it would consist of nothing but ‘a museum of the aberrations of the human intellect’,<sup>1</sup> a mere catalogue of erroneous views.

Rather, we must see that knowledge is something which develops in a progressive manner. Earlier theories constitute necessary stages in this process. For earlier theories contain some aspects of the truth, which are preserved and incorporated in the new and more adequate theories which arise out of them. In this way, superseded views are not absolutely mistaken, and nor are they simply discarded as knowledge develops.

At the same time, this account casts doubt on the idea of absolute truth; even if, as Engels argues, Hegel himself is reluctant to question it.<sup>2</sup> For the history of knowledge is an unending process, in which earlier and less adequate theories are continually being replaced by more accurate and more adequate ones; and it never reaches ‘absolute truth’, a final point from which no further development is possible.

In contrast to the traditional approach, therefore, Hegel does not conceive of knowledge as the building of an immutable superstructure on the basis of eternally fixed foundations. It does not involve such absolutes. Rather our understanding develops progressively, through a process in which each earlier stage is necessary for the emergence of the next. The analogy which recurs throughout Hegel’s writing is 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.<sup>3</sup>

### The Concept of Ideology

Similar ideas are involved in Marx's philosophy. For Marx, too, treats ideas as social and historical products: he regards them as ideologies. This term has come to be used in a variety of ways by social scientists. Frequently, it is taken to have a purely sceptical and negative meaning. To describe ideas as 'ideological' is often simply to reject them as partial, relative and false.

Marx's philosophy, however, cannot properly be understood in these terms. This can best be seen in Marx's account of religion. Certainly, for Marx, religious ideas are ideological; and it scarcely needs saying that Marx is an uncompromising critic of religion, a materialist and an atheist. Nevertheless, his treatment of religion is significantly different from that of earlier, eighteenth-century, materialist and atheist critics of religion. They rejected religion as pure illusion, bred of ignorance and fear, and fostered by priests and rulers in order to reconcile people to the established order. There is much in these views that Marx accepts. However, his account also differs in important respects. For religious ideas, according to Marx, are not purely illusory or arbitrary. Following and extending the work of the 'young Hegelian' critics of religion, like Strauss (*The Life of Jesus*, 1835) and Feuerbach (*The Essence of Christianity*, 1841), he insists that religion has a real, though distorted content. Although religious ideas are fantastic and illusory – 'the opium of the people' – at the same time they reflect and express a real content. And this becomes apparent when we understand the conditions which give rise to religious ideas, and the reactions which are expressed and reflected in them.

*Religious suffering is at one and the same time the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world and the soul of soulless conditions.*<sup>4</sup>

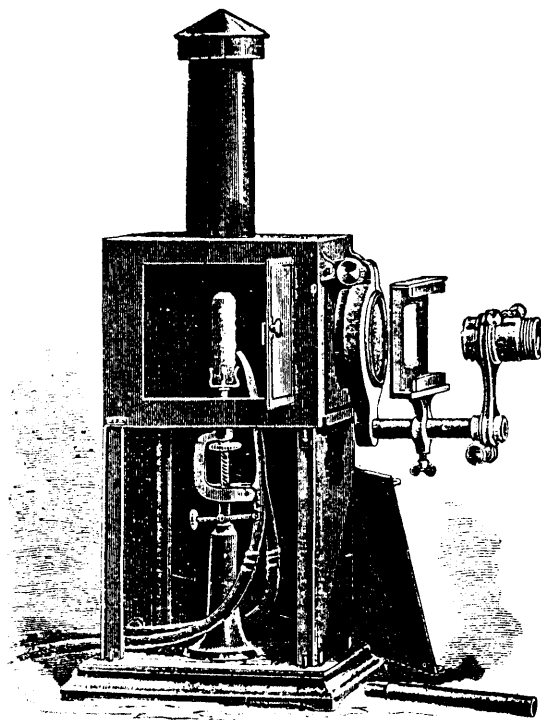
In short, religion reflects objective conditions and articulates real aspirations, even though these are represented in a distorted fashion, by being projected into a mythical and heavenly 'beyond'. The religious world is thus 'dissolved into its secular basis', as Marx puts it, and 'the earthly family is discovered to be the secret of the holy family'.<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, Marx takes this analysis further. He not only attempts to *interpret* and make sense of ideological forms of consciousness, he also tries to *explain* their genesis and thus to account for their alien and distorted form. Describing the general assumptions underlying this approach he writes,

Consciousness can never be anything else than conscious existence, and the existence of men is their actual life-process. If in all ideology men and their circumstances appear upside-down as in a *camera ob-*

*scura*, this phenomenon arises just as much from the historical life-process as the inversion of objects in the retina does from their physical life-process.<sup>6</sup>

In other words, consciousness always arises out of, and reflects reality, *even in its distortions*. And what this implies is that there are no absolute errors or illusions – there is an aspect of truth in *all* ideas that are actually believed, no matter how mistaken or false they may appear.



Conversely, there are no absolute truths. Knowledge can never be indubitably or immutably certain. It is always a product of specific social and historical conditions and limited thereby. It can only ever be a more or less satisfactory approximation to truth – something partial and relative. But that does not mean it is without any justification whatever, and *merely* relative. According to Hegel and Marx, neither pure absolutism nor mere relativism provides a satisfactory account. These either/or extremes must both be rejected in favour of a social and historical theory of knowledge.<sup>7</sup>

### Epistemology and Social Theory

These ideas have had a profound impact on modern intellectual life; an impact that extends far beyond the Hegelian and Marxist traditions, and into all areas of philosophy and social thought. But old ways of thinking die hard. Many contemporary philosophers still cling on to the traditional view that truth and error are absolutes. They try to defend this approach by arguing that facts about the social and historical origins of ideas have no relevance to the epistemological questions of their truth or falsity. Epistemology, they insist, is an autonomous subject, quite distinct from, and independent of social theory. John Anderson puts the point clearly when he writes,

an account of how views arise is not an account of their truth, any more than in general, an account of a thing's

origin is an account of the thing; and thus an exposition of the social influences on philosophical thought is *not philosophy* and can settle no philosophical problems.<sup>8</sup>

Such views are highly questionable. Indeed, in the light of the way the social sciences have transformed our understanding of intellectual life, it seems little short of absurd to maintain that nothing of positive epistemological significance can be learned from the study of the social origins of ideas. Nevertheless, such views have been very widespread among analytical philosophers, and also influential in other schools, such as structuralism. Moreover, the arguments which are used to defend them raise important issues which must be dealt with if the social approach in the theory of knowledge is to be explained and defended.

These arguments run as follows. Whether an idea is true, it is said, is simply a matter of whether or not its content corresponds to reality; and this is quite independent of its genesis. Given this assumption, it seems that facts about the causes of an idea are neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for its truth. An idea can be true of a situation without being produced by it; and it can be the product of a particular situation without being true of it. Let us examine each of these claims in turn.

### Reference and Reality

In the first place, then, the fact that an idea has a particular causal origin, it is said, can never be a necessary condition for its truth. For example, an idea can just happen to correspond to reality, it can be true purely by chance. So it is argued.

But what aspect of reality is in question here? A clock, for example, may seem to show the time simply in virtue of the way its hands are set. It is 'correct', according to this view, if the way it is set corresponds to the actual time, and this is quite independent of how the clock is otherwise functioning. In this sense, a clock which changes randomly may just happen to be correct on occasions; and a clock that is stopped will be precisely correct twice per day. On the other hand, a clock which keeps time perfectly but which is set just one second fast will never be correct.

This whole way of talking is seriously misleading. It would be more illuminating to say that a random or a stopped clock does not really show the time at all, but only appears to do so, since the position of its hands gives no information whatever about the time. Whereas a clock which is running accurately, but set wrongly, can be informative about the time – and likewise with a clock which either gains or loses in a regular fashion. Indeed, most actual clocks and watches fall into one or other of these categories. In other words, for a clock to be telling the time it is not sufficient that the hands happen to point to the correct time. There must be some regular – i.e. causal – relation between its operation and the passage of time.

Similar arguments apply to the relation of ideas to reality. The view that a belief is true if it corresponds to reality, regardless of how it arises, is open to the same objections. If my ideas were, indeed, produced purely randomly, there would be no reason to say that they refer to any particular aspect of reality at all. For the content of a belief, the aspect of reality to which it refers, is not an intrinsic property of the belief. It is not determined purely by a subjective intention; it does not consist in a sort of inner 'pointing' of the idea towards reality. Meanings, as Putnam puts it, 'just ain't in the head'.<sup>9</sup> On the contrary, in order for my ideas to refer to a particular aspect of reality, they must be *objectively* con-

nected with it. Ultimately, they must have arisen from it and be causally linked to it in some way. In short, being caused by its object *is* a necessary condition for the truth of a belief. This, at least, is the materialist and realist view.<sup>10</sup>

### The Nature of Illusion

For this reason, moreover, it is possible (and, in certain circumstances, necessary) to distinguish the *apparent* object of a belief or idea from its *real* object. This distinction is useful in responding to the second line of criticism of the historical approach. This approach, I have argued, leads to the view that there is some truth in all ideas. However, it will be objected that a belief may be the product of a particular situation but not true of it.



Consider, for example, the illusion that there are pools of water in the road ahead which is often experienced on a hot sunny day. Although the illusion is caused by these conditions, it is not true of them. Likewise with religious ideas. Although they may well arise from particular social and historical conditions, that is not to say that they are true of them. Indeed, to many realistically minded people the insistence that there is some truth in such false ideas will seem a quite unnecessary and unwarranted concession to subjectivism and obscurantism.

Such objections are based on a misunderstanding, however. The point of saying that there is some truth even in an illusory experience, like a mirage, is not to suggest that, in some sense, there really are pools in the road in such a case. Of course, there are not. Clearly the experience is false about the object it appears to be about. This is a minimal insight, however, and there is more that we can say about the experience than this. But we can do so only if we reject the view that epistemology is autonomous and facts about the origins of ideas are not relevant to it. For it is precisely a grasp of these facts that enables us to understand what is going on in such cases.

They make it clear that pools in the road are only the *apparent* object of the experience. What we are seeing in a mirage is not something in the road at all. Rather, we are seeing the *sky*, refracted through the hot air. The *real* object of the experience is the sky; and, when the experience is understood in this way, it is evident that there is some truth in it. It correctly reflects some of the visual aspects of the *real* object, the sky – e.g. its blueness and its brightness – though, of course, in a distorted and illusory form. And it does so, moreover, because the experience is ultimately caused by light from the sky.

A similar analysis applies in the more complex and interesting case of religious experience and belief. For, according to the view I am defending, religion is also a fantastic and illusory form of experience. The apparent objects of religious belief do not exist: there is no heaven, there are no gods. These are important conclusions, which form the starting point for the criticism of religion. But this criticism can be taken further, as the social and historical approach reveals. Marx writes that

The religious world is but the reflex 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, more especially in its bourgeois developments, Protestantism, Deism, etc., is the most fitting form of religion.<sup>11</sup>

Religious beliefs have their origins on earth, not in heaven; in alienated aspects of social relations, which are then projected into a transcendent 'beyond'. These earthly phenomena are the *real* objects of religious belief. Grasping the real origins of religious ideas makes it clear that they are distorted forms of appearance, *not* of God and heaven, but of the believer's *real* and *earthly* situation. This is their real object. The secret of the holy family is, indeed, as Marx says, the earthly family.

No doubt, illusory ideas are false about their apparent objects. In these cases, objective reality is not as it is literally taken to be. For all that, however, such ideas are not absolute errors, or *pure* illusions. There is an element of truth in them, even though it is present in a distorted form. This element of truth becomes evident when the real object of these ideas is revealed; and this is done by understanding their genesis, by discovering the circumstances which give rise to them.

In short, an account of the origin of ideas is quite essential to a full and proper understanding of their nature and content, and for an adequate assessment of their truth or falsity; just as, in general, an account of a thing's origin is a necessary part of a satisfactory account of it. We must reject the absolute, anti-historical, and anti-genetic views which lie at the basis of the traditional outlook in the theory of knowledge and much contemporary philosophy. Only in this way can we begin to recognize the real significance of the view that knowledge is a social phenomenon.

## Notes

- 1 G. W. F. Hegel, *Logic*, trans. W. Wallace, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 3rd edition, 1975, p. 126.
- 2 F. Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*, in K. Marx and F. Engels, *Selected Works*, 2 vols., Foreign Languages Publishing House, Moscow, 1958.
- 3 G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1977, p. 2.
- 4 K. Marx, 'Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right. Introduction', in *Early Writings*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1975, p. 244.
- 5 K. Marx, 'Theses on Feuerbach', in K. Marx and F. Engels, *Selected Works*, 2 vols., Foreign Languages Publishing House, Moscow, 1958.
- 6 K. Marx and F. Engels, *The German Ideology*, Part I, International Publishers, New York, 1970.
- 7 For a fuller account of these ideas see S. Sayers, *Reality and Reason*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1985. In the remainder of this paper I respond to some objections made to these ideas. I am grateful to D. Goldstick, J. O. Young and C. Radford for putting these objections to me.
- 8 J. Anderson, 'Marxist Philosophy', in *Studies in Empirical Philosophy*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1962.
- 9 H. Putnam, 'The Meaning of "Meaning"', in *Mind, Language and Reality*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1975.
- 10 Similar ideas have been interestingly developed and defended in recent years, in the form of the 'causal theory of reference', by writers like Putnam and Kripke. See Putnam, 'The Meaning of "Meaning"' and 'Explanation and Reference', in *loc. cit.*; S. A. Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1980; and S. Sayers, *Reality and Reason*, chapter 7.
- 11 K. Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1, Foreign Languages Publishing House, Moscow, 1961, p. 79.

