

Joseph Dietzgen

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This article is the first of a series on neglected philosophers. Some subjects will, like Dietzgen, be largely unknown, others simply forgotten by British philosophy departments. Later articles will (we hope) include introductions to Merleau-Ponty, Cassirer, Collingwood and Foucault. Other suggestions would be welcome

JOSEPH DIETZGEN is indeed a neglected philosopher. How many people know that he was the man Marx introduced to the 1872 Congress of the First International as 'our philosopher'? Or that it was Dietzgen, not Plekhanov, who first coined the phrase 'dialectical materialism'? Or that for the first thirty or so years of this century Dietzgen's *Philosophical Essays* were to be found on the bookshelves of any working class militant with Marxist pretensions?

Who, then, was Dietzgen? What were his views? And, indeed, why has he been neglected?

Joseph Dietzgen was born in December 1828 near Cologne. His father was a master tanner and it was in this trade that Dietzgen was trained and worked. He was neither a capitalist nor a propertyless worker but an artisan owning and working his own instruments of production. What distinguished him from other pioneer scientific socialists like Marx and Engels was that he never went to university; he was a self-educated man. Dietzgen was involved in the 1848 rising and after its failure left for America returning, however, after a couple of years. He spent another two years in America after 1859 and went there again in 1884, never to return. He died in 1888 and is buried in Chicago.

Dietzgen was not just interested in philosophy, though this was his main interest. He was also a writer on economic and political matters for the German Social Democratic press, especially in the 1870s. Marx commented favourably on Dietzgen's review of *Capital* in his Afterword to the Second German Edition.¹ The two men were personal acquaintances.

Dietzgen wrote in German, but a number of his writings, including the most important, were translated into English in the early years of this century and published as two books² by the Charles H. Kerr Co. of Chicago. The book bearing the title *The Positive Outcome of Philosophy* contains not only this, his last work originally published in 1887, but also his first work, *The Nature of Human Brainwork* (1869), and also his *Letters on Logic*. The other book, *Philosophical Essays*, contains translations of some of the propagandist articles Dietzgen wrote in the 1870s and also his pamphlet *Excursions of a Socialist into the Domain of Epistemology*. This pamphlet, especially Chapter 3, 'Materialism versus Materialism', is perhaps the best outline of Dietzgen's views in his own words. For, frankly, Dietzgen's works are not easy to read, partly because of the subject matter, but partly also because Dietzgen tended to express himself somewhat philosophically and to needlessly repeat himself.

In his introduction, written in 1902, to the English edition of *The Positive Outcome of Philosophy*, the Dutch Marxist, Anton Pannekoek, described Dietzgen's philosophical writings as 'an important and indispensable auxiliary for the understanding of the fundamental works of Marx and Engels.'³ Ernst Untermann, another German Social Democrat who had emigrated to America, expressed a

similar view: 'Dietzgen rounded out the work of Marx and Engels by a consistent monist conception of the Universe.'⁴ Are these opinions justified? In this writer's opinion, yes. Marx's historical materialism is a materialist theory of history and society; it is not, and was not meant to be, a materialist philosophy. Of course, being an atheist, Marx must have had a materialist conception of the universe but he never wrote much about it. Nor was there any reason why he should have. His specialities were history, sociology and economics, not philosophy or epistemology. Engels made an attempt to back up the materialist conception of history with a materialist philosophy but, in many respects failed to do this satisfactorily. It was Dietzgen who succeeded and in this sense can justly be said to have filled a 'gap' in socialist theory

Dialectical Materialism

Dietzgen was a thoroughgoing empiricist and materialist. For him all knowledge was derived from sense-perception; and what human beings perceived had a real existence independent of their perception of it.

The Nature of Human Brainwork (1869) presents an empiricist theory of knowledge derived from a rejection of Kantian dualism. Kant had claimed that Reason (=science, knowledge) could only deal with the world of experience, but the world of experience, according to him, was only a world of appearances or, to use a word derived from Greek meaning the same, a world of 'phenomena'. Thus science could never come to understand the world as it really was, the world of what Kant called 'things-in-themselves' of which he supposed the world of phenomena to be but appearances. For Kant there were two worlds: a world of phenomena, which was all the human mind could come to understand, and a world of things-in-themselves beyond human experience and understanding.

For Dietzgen, to posit the existence of a second world beyond the world of experience was simply metaphysical nonsense. 'Phenomena or appearances appear - voilà tout!'⁵ The world of phenomena was the only world; phenomena were themselves real, the substance of the real world. Phenomena, however, says Dietzgen, do not exist as independent entities; they exist only as parts of the entire single world of phenomena. The world of reality is a single entity embracing all observable phenomena, past, present and future. Reality is thus infinite, having no beginning nor end. It is constantly changing.

*The universe and all things in it consist of transformations of matter, which take place simultaneously and consecutively in space and time. The universe is in every place and at any time itself new or present for the first time. It arises and passes away, passes and arises under our very hands. Nothing remains the same, only the infinite change is constant, and even the change varies. Every part of time and space brings new changes.*⁶

The world of reality is a never-ending, ever-changing stream of observable phenomena, and it exists only as a whole. That Reality, Existence, the Universe, Nature - call it what you will (and Dietzgen called it many things drawn from philosophy, e.g., the Absolute, the Good, Truth, even God) - is a united whole, a single unit, is the

basis of Dietzgen's theories and is endlessly repeated in the *Letters on Logic*, written over the period 1880-3 to Eugene, one of his sons.

As can be seen, this conception of the universe is both materialist (since it posits the existence of a world of reality independent of men's perception of it) and dialectical (since it sees the world of reality as a changing, differentiated unity). It was for this reason that Dietzgen called his philosophy 'dialectical materialism', a phrase he first used in his 1870s articles in the German Social Democratic press.⁷ This was some years before Plekhanov, who is generally said to have originated this phrase (which is not to be found in the writings of Marx or Engels), even claimed to be a Marxist. Plekhanov, it should be noted, meant something rather different by it than did Dietzgen; he was the father of the undialectical State philosophy of present-day Russia which also, unfortunately, goes under the name of 'dialectical materialism' and with which Dietzgen's quite different theories are not to be confused.

What is Knowledge ?

The human mind is not the metaphysical mystery that idealist philosophers try to make it. As something that can be observed and studied, it too is part of the world of phenomena. Once this is recognised, as Dietzgen insists it should be, then it is possible to give a materialist explanation of the nature of thinking. Dietzgen's philosophy is in fact essentially such a materialist epistemology.

Human brainwork consists, says Dietzgen, in generalising from experience, in constructing abstract general concepts on the basis of perceptions supplied by the senses. The senses perceive a continuous stream of different phenomena; the role of the mind is to make sense of this stream by distinguishing and naming parts of it. The mind, as the organ of human understanding, understands the world by classifying it.

*Knowledge, thinking, understanding, explaining, has not, and cannot have, any other function than that of describing the processes of experience by division or classification.*⁸
[Dietzgen's emphasis]

Phenomena are classified by the mind into different categories on the basis of common characteristics. But the categories, or concepts, are abstractions from reality, mental constructs. A table, for instance, does not have a separate, independent existence; it is the name given by the human mind to a certain group of recurring phenomena perceived by the senses. A table (and indeed all other things) is an abstraction, a mental construct. In reality all things are interdependent parts of the whole which is the entire world of phenomena:

*The world is not made up of fixed classes, but is a fluid unity, the Absolute incarnate, which develops eternally, and is only classified by the human mind for purposes of forming intelligent conceptions.*⁹

This dialectical view contrasts with the everyday - and undialectical - view that the world consists of a collection of separate, fixed objects. Dietzgen does not challenge the usefulness of this latter view. On the contrary, he recognises that men must form such a view of the world if they are to orient themselves and survive in it. It is this ability to generalise, to, as it were, stop the continuous stream of phenomena (so that parts of it can become subjects for abstract thought), that distinguishes men from other animals and has

enabled them to intervene in and control the external world. But, says Dietzgen, 'we ought to know that stopping the stream of phenomena and classifying it into separate, fixed objects is only a mental operation, however vital to the survival of the human species:

*The logical household use of rigid conceptions extends, and should and must extend, to all science. The consideration of things as 'the same', is indispensable, and yet it is very salutary to know and remember that the things are not only the same and congealed, but at the same time variable and fluid.*¹⁰

To state that things are mental constructs can give rise to the misunderstanding that you are saying that they are only mental constructs and that you are therefore an idealist who sees the external world as the creation of the mind. But Dietzgen was not saying that things were simply mental constructs: things were mental constructs out of the real world of phenomena as perceived by the senses; things were abstractions, yes, but abstractions from an objectively-existing external reality. Although a thing as such, as a separate independent object, did not exist, there was certainly something in the real world of phenomena which corresponded to it that existed. The mind was not so much constructing the external world as reconstructing an image of it.

Science altogether does not want and cannot want to accomplish more than the classification of perceptible things according to species and varieties; its entire desire and ability is confined to the mental reconstruction of the different parts of a differential unity.
[emphasis added]

*It is the substantial force of the Universe, in which they participate, which has brought about the things that are, and all that the human mind can do is to form a picture of its gradual, consistent and rational working.*¹¹

These passages make it quite clear that for Dietzgen the external world existed independently of the human mind. Unfortunately, as we shall see, this did not prevent him from being misunderstood on this point.

A further aspect of Dietzgen's dialectical materialism is that knowledge can never be absolute or complete, all knowledge is relative; our classification or description of the world must always be regarded as a tentative approximation liable to revision in the light of further experience. Dietzgen's last work, *The Positive Outcome of Philosophy* (1887), ends with the following rule for scientific investigation which remains valid to this day:

*Thou shalt sharply divide and subdivide and farther subdivide to the utmost, the universal concept, the concept of the universe, but thou shalt be backed up by the consciousness that this mental classification is a formality, by which man seeks to register and systematize his experience; thou shalt furthermore remain conscious of thy human liberty to progressively clarify thy experience, which is constantly enriched in the course of time, through modified classification.*¹²

Mind and Matter

Dietzgen, as we saw, called himself a materialist. There are however various kinds of materialism and Dietzgen was careful to differentiate his dialect-

ical materialism from what he called 'one-sided', 'narrow' and 'mechanical' materialism. This was the view (indeed the traditional materialist view going back to the philosophers of Ancient Greece) that the world is composed of tiny particles of tangible 'matter' and that the mind and thinking are simply the effects of the movement of these atoms. Writes Dietzgen:

*The distinguishing mark between the mechanical materialists of the 18th century and the Social-Democratic materialists trained in German idealism consists in that the latter have extended the former's narrow conception of matter as consisting exclusively of the Tangible to all phenomena that occur in the world.*¹³

[Dietzgen's emphasis]

Every phenomenon, everything that occurs, exists, as part of the entire world of phenomena. Since non-tangible phenomena, e.g., ideas, thoughts etc, also occur, they are just as real or, if you like, just as 'material' as tangible phenomena:

*In the endless Universe matter in the sense of old and antiquated materialists, that is, of tangible matter, does not possess the slightest preferential right to be more substantial, i.e. more immediate, more distinct and more certain than any other phenomena of nature.*¹⁴

Dietzgen had no objection to the classification of the world of phenomena into two general categories, one consisting of tangible phenomena and called 'matter' and the other consisting of mental phenomena and called 'mind'. He had no objection either to explanations of mental phenomena in terms of tangible phenomena. What he was concerned to point out was that, in this sense, both 'mind' and 'matter' were abstractions, even if very general ones, from the real world of phenomena. The rigid distinction between 'mind' and 'matter' was a mental distinction that did not exist in the world of phenomena which, despite this mental operation, remained an undivided whole:

*The mind is a collective name for the mental phenomena, as matter is a collective name for the material phenomena, and the two together figure under the idea and name of the phenomena of Nature.*¹⁵

This was the basis of Dietzgen's statement, which, as we shall see, so upset Lenin, that 'our materialism is distinguished by its special knowledge of the common nature of mind and matter' [his emphasis].¹⁶ By this he simply meant that both mind and matter were parts of the world of observable phenomena.

Those Dietzgen called the 'narrow' materialists made the mistake of not thinking dialectically, that is, of not realising that the parts of the world of phenomena do not exist independently but only as interconnected parts of that world. In taking one part of the world of phenomena and making it the basis of all the other parts, they were falsely ascribing a real, independent existence to what was in fact only an abstraction:

*This materialism is so enamoured of mechanics, that it, as it were, idolizes it, does not regard it as part of the world, but as the sole substance of which the universe is made up.*¹⁷

This was the same mistake as regarding the objects of everyday use as having an independent, separate existence. 'Matter' just as much as 'table' was a mental abstraction from the real

world of phenomena; in reality tangible phenomena do not exist separately from other phenomena, they exist only as an integral part of the entire single world of all phenomena.

It is worth emphasising again that this equal epistemological status of tangible and mental phenomena does not at all rule out scientific explanations of mental phenomena in terms of tangible phenomena, e.g., in terms of the physiological functioning of the brain and nervous system, or indeed of the explanation of all phenomena in terms of the movement of atoms. The fact that 'matter' and 'atoms' were mental abstractions from the world of phenomena did not in the least detract from their possible usefulness as concepts for understanding the world. As Dietzgen said of atoms:

*Atoms are groups. As smallest parts they exist only in our thoughts and thus give excellent service in chemistry. The consciousness that they are not plastic but only mental things, does not detract from their usefulness, but heightens it still more.*¹⁸

To understand the world was to divide it into necessarily abstract concepts. It was not Dietzgen's aim to decide which was the best way to classify, describe and explain the world but to show what we were doing when we did do this. To ascribe reality to any of these mental constructs, even so general a one as (tangible) matter was a confusion, was to think undialectically; the only thing that had a separate, independent existence was the entire world of phenomena itself. Dietzgen's criticism of one-sided, narrow materialism was a criticism of its confusion on this point, and not at all a criticism of the basic principles of materialism.

Dietzgen was essentially a philosopher of science. We would not want to claim that he always expressed himself clearly or adequately (his ontological proof of the universe and his virtual pantheism will make some readers wince - or smile), but despite his shortcomings he must be given the credit for first formulating a theory of the nature of science - as basically a description of the world for purposes of prediction and control - which is now largely accepted even if it does not call itself 'dialectical materialism' or indeed refer to itself as 'materialist' at all (mainly for fear of confusion with the narrow, one-sided materialism of the past - and present-day Russia).

Dietzgen's works, besides being difficult to obtain, make difficult reading. However, his best interpreter, the Dutch Marxist Anton Pannekoek, expressed himself very clearly. Pannekoek was himself a scientist, a professor of astronomy of world renown in fact, and wrote not only the introduction to the Kerr editions of *The Positive Outcome of Philosophy* but also, later, two short brilliant books applying Dietzgen's dialectical materialism: *Lenin as Philosopher* (1938)¹⁹ and *Anthropogenesis* (1944). Unfortunately these are just as difficult to obtain as the works of Dietzgen himself.

Lenin versus Dietzgen

At about the same time as Dietzgen was writing, two other German-speakers, Ernst Mach in Austria and Richard Avenarius in Switzerland, were working out a theory of science which was in a number of ways similar to Dietzgen's. One of Avenarius' followers called this theory 'empirio-criticism'. We can't go into this theory here except to say that it too

saw knowledge as essentially the classification of experience. However, while Dietzgen never doubted the independent existence of the world of phenomena or experience, empirio-criticism was ambiguous on this point. It wished to construct the world from 'experience' (sense-data, etc) but since experience is the experience of human beings it came very near to saying, and some of its exponents did say, that the human mind (or minds) was as vital to the existence of the external world as external phenomena themselves.

Empirio-criticism, partly because of its similarity with Dietzgen's dialectical materialism) enjoyed a certain vogue in Social Democratic circles in the early years of this century. A number of Social Democrats, including Dietzgen's son Eugene, misinterpreted Dietzgen in an empirio-criticist direction. Included in the Kerr edition of Dietzgen's *Philosophical Essays* is an essay on Max Stirner by Eugene wherein we read that 'whatever does not partake of the psycho-physical nature of the universe, cannot exist for us' and that '*phenomena outside of us ... exist independently of individual man, although they cannot exist for mankind independently of human consciousness.*'²⁰ [emphasis added]

Eugene Dietzgen would seem to be suggesting here that the external world is not an objective world but only an inter-subjective world, i.e., a sort of collective creation of all human minds which would not exist in their absence. Similar views were expounded also by a number of members of the Russian Bolshevik Party. Lenin was scandalised by this departure from materialism (as indeed it was) and set out to refute this deviation once and for all. In 1908 was published Plekhanov's *Fundamental Problems of Marxism* and in 1909 Lenin's *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*. Both contain a denial of the view we quoted earlier that Dietzgen had added something to the work of Marx and Engels. We won't deal with Plekhanov's criticism here except to say that he preferred Fuerbach's materialism to Dietzgen's dialectical materialism (though he retained the phrase 'dialectical materialism'.)

Lenin devotes a section of *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* to Dietzgen entitled 'How Could J. Dietzgen Have Found Favour with the Reactionary Philosophers?' in which he criticises in particular Dietzgen's view that the real, or material, world includes the intangible (thoughts, etc) as well as the tangible:

To say that thought is material is to make a false step, a step towards confusing materialism and idealism.

*That the conception of 'matter' must also include thoughts, as Dietzgen repeats in the Excursions, is a muddle, for if such an inclusion is made, the epistemological contrast between mind and matter, idealism and materialism, a contrast upon which Dietzgen himself insists, loses all meaning.*²¹

Lenin regards this as a 'deviation' by Dietzgen from materialism, without seeming to realise that this view is the basis of Dietzgen's whole materialist epistemology. It is not a question of Dietzgen expressing himself badly but of there being a fundamental difference between Dietzgen's materialism and Lenin's. Lenin was clearly one of those Dietzgen described as a narrow, one-sided, mechanical materialist.

Lenin's claim about the epistemological contrast between idealism and materialism being blurred if thoughts are regarded as part of the world of phenomena (= the material world) is not true. As we have seen, Dietzgen was quite able to make this

the basis of his epistemology and to remain a thoroughgoing materialist who never for one moment doubted the objective existence of the external world. Lenin was quite right, on the other hand, to attack people like Eugene Dietzgen who only gave the external world an inter-subjective existence. This was indeed a departure from materialism in the direction of idealism, but Lenin's criticism of it was made from the point of view of what Pannekoek in his *Lenin as Philosopher* called 'bourgeois materialism' not that of dialectical materialism.

Pannekoek, in this work (which is a reply to Lenin following the publication of German, English and French translations in 1927 and 1928), attempted to give an explanation of why the Russian Bolshevik Party should have adopted 'bourgeois materialism' as its theory. By 'bourgeois' materialism Pannekoek meant a materialism which seeks to explain everything in terms of physics and chemistry. When the bourgeoisie had to fight to achieve and retain power, said Pannekoek, they believed in the power of the physical sciences to change the world, practically by developing modern industry, and theoretically by exposing the religious views of their class opponents as superstitious nonsense. That Lenin and the Bolsheviks²² should have adopted a similar ideology to that of the rising bourgeoisie of Western Europe at an earlier period was to be explained, said Pannekoek, by the essentially similar task that confronted them: to carry out the equivalent of a bourgeois revolution in Russia which would sweep away the obstacles, institutional and ideological, to the development of modern industry there. Pannekoek saw Leninism as the ideology of a new ruling class whose historical task was to industrialise Russia on the basis of state capitalism, with militant physical-science materialism as its ideology. This materialism, though falsely called 'dialectical', is still the dominant ideology in Russia today.

Dietzgen Today

Whatever the explanation as to why Lenin rejected Dietzgen's dialectical materialism, the fact that he did contribute in large measure to Dietzgen becoming a neglected philosopher,²³ Dietzgen's ideas had been introduced into Britain before the first World War by the English-language translations of his works published by Kerr of Chicago, and had been propagated here by such organisations as the Labour College movement and the Socialist Party of Great Britain. Both of these continued to exist after the War and Russian revolution and both of them proclaimed a Marxism independent of Moscow. A textbook on Dietzgen's philosophy by an NCLC lecturer, Fred Casey, called *Thinking* (1922) was widely read in militant working class circles. Then in 1927 was published the first English translation of Lenin's *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*.²⁴ From then on, as in the 1930s, the Communist Party's false claim to be genuine Marxists came to be widely accepted, Dietzgen receded into the background. In 1936 T.A. Jackson, a professional Communist Party writer, included a vituperative attack, in true Leninist style, on the unfortunate Casey in his book *Dialectics*; to be a 'Caseyite', i.e., to accept Dietzgen's philosophy without Lenin's 'correction', became a heresy in Communist Party circles.

We would not want to claim that the sole reason for Dietzgen becoming neglected was the fact that his materialism differed from that proclaimed by the State philosophers of Russia. Other factors entered into it too, including the difficult read-

ing that his writings make. Also, with the decline of religion as a social force, working class militants have felt less need to arm themselves with a militant materialism such as Dietzgen provided. Nor is it now really necessary to 'revive' Dietzgen. For, as we have said, his basic views have been absorbed into modern science which in practice is both dialectical and materialist. For the historical record, though, it is worth paying a tribute to the working tanner and socialist militant who pioneered these views. Dietzgen, radical philosophers of today should be aware, was the man who first formulated the theory of dialectical materialism as an essential complement to Marx's materialist conception of history.

Notes

- 1 *Capital*, Vol.I, pl6, FLPH, Moscow, 1961
- 2 *The Positive Outcome of Philosophy*, Charles H. Kerr, Chicago, 1906. A second, revised edition was published in 1928, from which the quotes for this article are taken. *Philosophical Essays*, Charles H. Kerr, Chicago, 1906 and 1917.
- 3 *Positive Outcome*, p63.
- 4 *Science and Revolution*, pl61, Kerr, 1905.
- 5 'The Nature of Human Brainwork', *Positive Outcome*, pl02.
- 6 *Ibid*, pl01.
- 7 *Essays*, pp139, 159, 208, 216 [231, 293, 294, 306, 307, 361].
- 8 'The Positive Outcome of Philosophy', *Positive Outcome*, p425.
- 9 'Excursions', *Essays*, p322.
- 10 'The Positive Outcome of Philosophy', *Positive Outcome*, pp374-5.
- 11 'Excursions', *Essays*, pp361-2 and p310 respectively.
- 12 'The Positive Outcome of Philosophy', *Positive Outcome*, p428.
- 13 'Excursions', *Essays*, p298.
- 14 'Excursions', *Essays*, p307.

- 15 'Excursions', *Essays*, pp311-2.
- 16 'Excursions', *Essays*, p308.
- 17 'The Positive Outcome of Philosophy', *Positive Outcome*, p368.
- 18 *Ibid*, p418.
- 19 *Lenin As Philosopher*, New Essays, New York, 1948, A French translation was recently published by Spartacus, 5 rue Ste-Croix-de-la-Brettonnerie, Paris IVE. See also Pannekoek's article 'Society and Mind in Marxian Philosophy', *Science and Society*, 1, 4, 1937.
- 20 'The Protetarian Method', *Essays*, p65 and p61 respectively.
- 21 *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, p290 and p292 respectively, Foreign Languages Press, Peking, 1972.
- 22 Trotsky too was a mechanical materialist who believed that, in principle, it was possible to explain everything, from the movement of the planets to thinking and consciousness, in terms of the movement and properties of the tangible atomic particles he supposed the world to be made up of. See the extracts from two speeches made in 1925 and 1926, reproduced in *The Age of Permanent Revolution: A Trotsky Anthology*, edited and introduced by Isaac Deutscher, Dell, New York, 1964, pp342-355.
- 23 Dietzgen was not entirely forgotten. See, for instance, 'Empiricism and Ethics in Dietzgen' by Loyd D. Easton, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, January 1958. Also the SPGB, and the World Socialist Party of the United States (from which this writer first learnt of the ideas of Dietzgen and Pannekoek), continued, and continue, to propagate his ideas.
- 24 There exist two English translations of Lenin's work. The first, the one published in 1927, evidently had various inaccuracies. For instance, it has a passage 'all materialists regard Dietzgen as an inconsistent philosopher' which the second translates 'materialists ... regard Dietzgen as a philosopher who is not entirely consistent'!

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