PART ONE

SOCIAL REASONS FOR SCIENTIFIC PRACTICE

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Pragmatism as a Vision of the World and as a Method: A Philosophical Examination of the Challenges Presented to Contemporary Social Research by Subjective Idealism

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Carried along by the current wave of postmodernism, today, pragmatism dominates the entire social, economic and cultural field. With respect to epistemology, its world vision and its methodology have succeeded in establishing themselves in all sectors of research in the sciences of man and society: philosophy, literature, sociology, economics, political science, etc. As a theory of knowledge, pragmatism makes the claim of understanding reality starting from views of "radical empiricism." Thus, it merges reality with "experience," i.e., with the satisfaction of subjective interests of the informed subject. It is here then that pragmatism meets the central problem of subjective idealism, which relates man's knowledge of the world to the content of his own consciousness. The decisive question raised then by subjective idealism and pragmatism is the following: is knowledge of the objective world possible? Essential in epistemology and in methodology, this question involves another, that of the very possibility of objective truth and absolute truth in the undertaking of knowledge. This article will attempt to answer these various questions.

The Historical Context of Pragmatism

The current trend of pragmatism and subjective idealism is inseparable from the global expansion of capitalism. At the same time as its development at the end of the 19th century, this doctrine quickly emerged as the philosophy of the advanced

industrial bourgeoisie. Its objective was to offer a credible alternative to the Enlightenment of the previous century. A historical reminder would be useful here. The philosophy of the Enlightenment, with its concepts of Reason, the Universal and Freedom, established itself on modern consciousness as a world view of a bourgeoisie in search of its own identity. This was a century *par excellence* of the reform of mentalities and social and political revolution; 18th century Europe needed a coherent and stable body of principles. The cosmic and historical odyssey of reason, such as it was later synthesized by Hegel, encapsulates this vision of the world. By clear and unequivocal affirmation of the principle of reason and the universal, the new bourgeois Europe, recently emerged from the Middle Ages, provided itself with theoretical, cultural and political means to realize its essential historical purpose, thanks to science and technology, but also to the construction of a modern capitalist economy and a liberal and democratic state. As defined by the thinkers of the Enlightenment, and also by Hegel himself, the idea of reason and the universal certainly appears as a global vision of the world, but also as general explicative principle of the enigmas of the universe.

The formation of pragmatism and the rediscovery of subjective idealism (inspired both by ancient sophistry, the sensualism of George Berkeley and the empirio-criticism of Ernst Mach) attempted to provide a philosophical response to the decline of the great systems directed towards a global explanation of the world, whether it be the Enlightenment itself or Hegelianism or Marxism. The particular character of these systems was to adopt a project or provide a utopia, a vision. In advanced capitalist societies, it was hedonism – as a moral and social ideal – and the cult of the moment, which replaced vision, utopia, the meaning of history and perspectives. Corresponding to the triumph of positivism, it was this period which saw philosophy renounce its deepest-rooted claim which, since Descartes, had been to transform the world. Henceforth, philosophy could allow itself to downwardly revise its ambitions by assigning itself a minimum task, i.e., to interpret the world. By way of example: Wittgenstein established that as it is not a doctrine, but a mere activity, the only true goal of philosophy consisted in the logical clarification of thought. If, for Wittgenstein, a philosophical work consists essentially of clarifications and not explanations or suggestions, it is because "the objective of philosophy it to clarify and rigorously define the scope of thoughts which otherwise are, as it were, confused and blurred" (Wittgenstein 1961:52). Analytical philosophy gave these views their radical form. In his critique of this latter current of thought, Herbert Marcuse sized up these questions, by taking up the challenge raised by systems of this sort, not only in philosophy and methodology, but also in social thought itself, in its totality.

Let us return to the subject of pragmatism. Whether it be Charles S. Peirce, John Dewey or even William James, pragmatism refuses to look at reason and science as a global explanation of the world. Far from being an attempt to decipher

enigmas of the universe, these enigmas appear from this point on as a simple way to act on the real. As theories particular to the advanced industrial era, pragmatism and subjective idealism mean that – in the same way as empiricism, nominalism and utilitarianism with which they are joined – after the great revolution of the 18th century, bourgeois society no longer had any plans to formulate on a global society: no radical metaphysics to promote, nor any theoretical explanation of the world to provide. From that point of view, society can content itself with *pragmatically* managing the acquired knowledge of the industrial revolution, by settling for promoting the *laboratory spirit*, in the exclusive service of the capitalist economy.

Laboratory Spirit, Methodology and Theory of Knowledge

To inaugurate a new era of Enlightenment, such was the ambition of pragmatism. Unlike the Enlightenment of the 18th century which incarnated with the ideals of reason, the universal and freedom, the new Enlightenment brought on by the laboratory spirit would mean the clarification of ideas with the help of experiments. Skeptical with respect to the "natural light of reason," the horizon of pragmatism was limited to light constructed artificially in the experiment. Pragmatism can, thereby, be seen as the incarnation *par excellence* of the laboratory spirit. The characteristic trait of this spirit was to think of all things as in a laboratory, i.e., in the sense of experimentation. If the experiment is the guaranteed starting point of thought, it is because it appears as the privileged instrument in the hands of the researcher to avoid errors and arrive at a certain knowledge. In short, the issue is to submit all concepts by which the researcher operates to experiment so that it can reveal to him what these concepts intrinsically conceal. The concept of force is sufficient to illustrate since it only refers to the sum of its effects. It is thus only through their consequences that we are capable of recognizing objects and it is in the experiment that these consequences reveal themselves with the greatest clarity.

This approach had direct consequences on the very concept of truth. The laboratory spirit meant that, from then on, neither the inspired knowledge of priests, nor the subtle logic of metaphysicists, nor the scholarly dialectic of philosophers, is any longer the source of truth. As a methodology, pragmatism teaches that the researcher who engages in experimentation is not meant to start from an *a priori* idea. He should, rather, attempt to directly confront reality in order to force it to reveal its mysteries to him. We can, therefore, better understand the concept of *practical* which refers narrowly to the experimental action to which each idea should be subjected to be legitimized. It is the Greek etymology itself, *pragma*, i.e. *action*, which inspired the theoreticians of pragmatism. Claiming that our beliefs only make up rules for action, pragmatism asserts that to develop the content of an idea, the researcher has only to determine the conduct that this idea

is likely to provoke (James 1968:49). This means that in order that thoughts concerning a given object might be clear, it is above all important to identify which practical effects the object in question contains. Pragmatism, therefore, postulates the absolute primacy of the act on all which is thought. A conclusion is called for at this juncture: the validity of reasoning is, principally, a question of fact and not of idea or thought.

It is on this precise point that the pragmatist approach was able to establish a radical opposition between the spirit of modern science and the spirit of ancient metaphysics. The pragmatist method sees ancient metaphysics as an attempt at sublimation of the self-contained world, made up of a limited number of fixed forms on the inside and set off by rigid boundaries on the outside. On the contrary, pragmatism sees in the spirit of modern science, a world open *ad infinitum* and varied. This is, in short, a world without limits, stretching beyond all definite markers. The spirit of modern science then corresponds to the ruin not only of immutable substance, but also of the idea of truth and certainty referred to fixed objects with fixed properties. When J. Dewey attacks the question of certainty, he stresses that research on the subject is confused with research on experimental methods of control, i.e. regulation of conditions of change compared with their consequences. Therefore, the search for certainty is assimilated into the quest for practical certainty, security and the safety of instrumental operations. Dewey sees in scientific objects simple control instrumentalities. The control instrumentalities should be understood as objects of reality itself and not as discoveries of the immanent properties of real substances (Marcuse 1967:77).

It seems that here we have one of the most radical critiques of "ontological metaphysics" in the permanent quest for essences. Once the basic postulates of such a metaphysics have been removed, philosophy and science are henceforth reduced to a series of questions that the researcher can finally submit to observation, in the definition of exact science. C. S. Peirce, for example, could only grant some interest to philosophy insofar as it was likely to reduce fundamental philosophical questions to simple scientific questions. In its attempt to forcibly bring philosophy into the Procrustean bed of science, pragmatism, thereby, betrays its well-known cohabitation with the most radical trends in modern positivism.

Let us take the question of the validity test. With experimental science, this question undergoes a radical transformation, compared to the approach coming out of Newtonian physics, for example. In this approach, it is the inherent properties of real objects that are mainly targeted in the validity test, ones isolated from the others, but firmly fixed and immutable. In contrast, with respect to experimental inquiry, the validity of the subjects of thought mainly depends on the consequences defining these subjects. Contrary then to Newton's mechanism which postulates the unity and immutability of the world order, the experimental spirit removes from the world not only its unity and order, but also its stability

and eternity. It is the same experimental spirit which permanently places pragmatism in sensualism, thereby justifying its hostility with respect to abstraction as a principle of knowledge. In turning away from abstraction, this doctrine claims to turn away "from anything that makes thought inadequate [...], from anything so-called absolute or an alleged origin, to turn towards concrete and appropriate thought, towards facts, towards effective action" (James 1968:52). It is in this way that belief founded on the authority of reason and abstractions was replaced by belief in the unpredictable revelations of the ever new and open experiment. The ancient universe founded on formal abstractions such as "God," "Matter," "Reason," the "Absolute," could only retreat faced with the immensity and the kaleidoscopic stream of phenomena.

These sensualist views are not peculiar to pragmatism but can be traced back at least to Berkeley (1944). His *prosopopee* on Philonous and Hylas is interesting from this standpoint. Rebelling resolutely against traditional metaphysics, the Anglican bishop was already worried about the fact that our knowledge of facts has been led astray by the false hypothesis of the double existence of perceptible things. Berkeley believed neither in the existence of thought, nor that of the world. In fact, the existence of matter and its reflection in thought is called into question. Such is the issue in the dialogue between the Friend of the Mind (Philonous) and the Friend of Matter (Hylas).

As his name indicates, Hylas is a materialist. For him, the perceptible appearances of things, colors, forms, etc. provide information on the way in which phenomena appear to the consciousness that perceives. Essences exist behind these phenomena. On the other hand, Philonous incarnates immaterialism. As a sensualist, he states that things do not exist independently of the sensations of the informed subject. The phenomena are only a complex of sensations, a sum of mental representations or a group of ideas, and not the reflection of the external world. Both the form and the area that these phenomena occupy in space constitute sensations. The yellow color of the orange is only a visual sensation, the contact of my hand, a tactile sensation, the flavor that I taste, a mere state of consciousness. According to Philonous, things only have reality to the extent that they are perceived, touched, tasted, felt. Consequently, I cannot really allow myself to state that an idea of the thing exists, or that the thing is reflected in my consciousness. The thing is simply a set of ideas and nothing more. If Hylas admits the existence of a material substance, an essence hidden behind perceptible appearances, Philonous, on the other hand, denies the existence of such a substance beneath the perceptible. By so doing, he transforms consciousness or the mind into a demiurge, since Philonous wants to transform things into ideas, pure representations of ideas in things.

As a concrete realist, Berkeley does not understand that Descartes dares to doubt the senses, whereas they constitute, in his mind, the true seat of phenomena. Berkeley is convinced that the world which unfolds in front of us is really colored,

sonorous, soft or hard, as it appears to us. That is to say that the perceptible representations, i.e., ideas, make up reality itself: the appearance and the phenomenon are the very being of the world. Hence, *phenomenology* – i.e. the description that we make of the world – and *ontology* coincide; they are not in opposition as in the philosophy of Plato, for example.

In this philosophy, the only things that truly exist are those that we can perceive with our senses. As a result, all which escapes our perception does not exist. This means that matter, according to Berkeley, is coextensive with our representations. And this matter has neither substance, nor essence; it does not refer to an unknowable in-itself, i.e. things in the world are transparent, spread out as they are on the surface. Essence and substance, the in-itself and the ontological substrate of phenomena only appear as metaphysical fictions to Berkeley. The kaleidoscopic flux of phenomena are the only things which truly exist, changing and diverse appearances. Thus, for example, the fruit that I see as round and yellow, and the one that I touch and perceive as smooth or rough, do not actually refer to the same object. Because the real fruit that exists in nature that might be both round and yellow, rough and smooth. What really exist are diverse, simultaneous or successive appearances. The unity of the supposed thing is, according to Berkeley, only the unity of the name under which men regroup some appearances. Such is the foundation of nominalism. Such a nominalism means that the thing only derives its unity from its deepest essence, and thus, far from being real or substantial, this unit refers simply to a convention.

The Question of Objective Truth

Two decisive questions are hidden behind these sensualist views: the question of the existence of the objective world and that of objective and absolute truth. Pragmatism rejects the claim of man to arrive at objective and absolute truth. This contestation is justified because of the impossibility that man could faithfully represent the external world. Any attempt to represent such a world is doomed to failure. A neo-pragmatist like Richard Rorty is truly convinced that human consciousness – and, therefore, the philosophy which is a witness to it – is not the "mirror of nature," and that contrary to their claims, no science is capable of reflecting the true essence of things and being. Hence, the title of his work, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, where he strikes out at any idea of reflection.

Against the theory of reflection which postulates the objective knowledge of laws of nature and a certain approach to the absolute, Rorty reintroduces outdated concepts particular to empirio-criticism, for example, consensus, convention, description, justification, and convenience, etc.

Let us examine the case of consensus. Pragmatism is defined as anti-essentialism. As such, it does not define the "objective" according to a relationship with the essence of things, but simply "according to the ease with which those who ob-

serve these things arrive at a consensus" (Rorty 1995:64). It is the "degree of ease with which the subjects create a consensus" that pragmatism substitutes for the former objective-subjective distinction. Thus, to assert, for example, that values are more subjective than facts, is simply to say that it is less easy to agree on the beautiful, the ugly, good and evil than on geometric figures, for example.

Let us take another example, justification or more precisely, justified belief. By placing justified belief at the center of any process of knowledge, pragmatism always aims to delegitimize objective and absolute truth. "Truth is what is meant to distinguish knowledge from well-founded opinion, from justified belief," writes R. Rorty. But, he adds, "if truth is, as James said, "the name that we give to everything that proves to be favorable to belief... we can obviously not see how truth would differ from what is justified" (Rorty 1995:33). Rorty's conviction is that there is absolutely nothing to say on the subject of truth, and that philosophy should limit itself to justification or to guaranteed assertibility. The reason for this is that the concept of truth does not seem to be of greater use than the idea of "correspondence with the real." Rorty is convinced that if "a way of being in the world" scarcely exists, or that "nothing such as the intrinsic nature of reality exists," that means that neither does there exist a way in which this reality should be represented. What does exist, on the other hand, is "causal pressure" (Rorty 1995:36) or the multiple "ways of acting in order to achieve human hopes for happiness." Yet, considering that access to such happiness does not generally differ from justified belief, it is thus legitimate to abandon any idea of representation of reality.

Such an approach to knowledge and truth makes any idea of certainty illusory. To speak of the search for certainty is, for pragmatists, an attempt to flee from the real. The researcher should, therefore, abandon the concern of knowing if what he believes is well-founded or not, and should instead ask if he possesses sufficient imagination to develop interesting alternatives to his own beliefs (Rorty 1995:37).

Substituting hope for knowledge, as Rorty does, takes on a particular interest for pragmatism. This doctrine is concerned with definitively eliminating fundamental concepts of modern philosophy, in relation, for example, with nature and the limits of human knowledge, the epistemic situation of man, etc. The things being thus considered, the researcher will learn to renounce all attempts at knowledge of the external world which, according to the classical theory of knowledge, would begin, for example, by the "data of the senses." The researcher should renounce the idea of a "natural order of reasons" to which each person should conform to justify his own beliefs, because, as perspicacious as he may be, he has no means by which to distinguish between science and non-science. Thus, considering the absurdity of a "natural order of reasons" to which each person should conform to justify his beliefs, it is, as a result, necessary to admit the legitimacy of all beliefs. For example, science and religion should both be

considered as two legitimate paths also leading to true beliefs, although these beliefs respond to completely different ends.

Thus, as a theory of knowledge and as methodology, pragmatism rejects truth as an epistemic truth concept. In fact, for this doctrine, truth is not the objective of research, since research itself and justification are capable of pursuing a multitude of particular goals. And, furthermore, there is not a superior objective, which, as a result, would dominate all the other goals and which would be called "truth."

The Privilege of Language and Description

Against the concept of absolute, objective truth, Rorty's neo-pragmatism asserts the infinite privilege of language to which he relates the entire consciousness. Isn't all consciousness a question of language? It is here that pragmatism encounters psychological nominalism. Concerned with the "linguistic dissolution of reality" (Morilhat 2004:107-110), such a nominalism means that the human being will never be capable of taking a step outside of language which describes phenomena. in the same fashion, he will not be capable of grasping reality outside of the mediation of linguistic description.

Once the distinction between appearance and reality suppressed, pragmatism endeavors to replace this dualism by a much more operative and realistic distinction, namely, the distinction between a less useful description of the world and a more useful description of this world (Rorty 1995:59). According to these views, the researcher does not attempt to enter into a relationship with the real in order to know it or to discover the truth of its essence. The methodological approach of pragmatism, on the contrary, calls on the researcher to be more self-effacing: he should content himself with describing the real according to his needs. And what each of us should retain from this world is not so much the truth of its essence as what is useful to us. As Rorty adds, psychological nominalism is "the corollary of the doctrine according to which there is nothing to know outside of what is affirmed in the statements which describe it" (Rorty 1995:69). It is thus because each sentence stated about an object constitutes an implicit or explicit description of a relationship that this object has with other objects. Let us take an example. All that I know about my table, for example, is that it is rectangular or square, smooth or rough, that it was made from such or such tree species of the forest, that I use it as furniture, etc. Thus, pragmatism teaches us that there is plainly nothing to know about this object, outside of truthful sentences which enable me to witness this reality. Pragmatism recognizes an exclusive role for sentences, that of establishing relationships between objects. In describing objects in the world, sentences also attribute a relational property to them. An example: let's suppose that we are trying to find out what the table is intrinsically. The best response that we can obtain is the following: it is "that what we can truthfully say is that it is brown, it's ugly, that it

hurts your fists if you hit it, that you can run into it, that it is made of atoms, etc." (Rorty 1995:74). Pragmatism then definitively asserts the impossibility of going beyond language to reach some form of non-linguistic knowledge.

Richard Rorty saw modern physics as the ultimate refuge for researchers who still believe in the existence of a universe external to language or the consciousness. Indeed, the great illusion of physics consists in believing that it is capable of thrusting us outside of ourselves, our language, our needs or our objectives. Rorty is convinced that physics can teach us nothing about the world or even about the intrinsic nature of things. Its only quality lies in the practical utility of its descriptions of the world. As the other sciences, physics should be part of human plans.

We should note that, despite appearances, this question is not new; it is already present not only in Wittgenstein's linguistic problem, but also in the epistemology of a physicist like H. Poincaré. Relativism and subjectivism are the common ground of these doctrines, even applied to a field such as geometry.

In fact, for Poincaré, space and time appear as purely mental constructions. Instead of the world imposing them on us, as it is currently accepted, it is we, on the contrary, who impose time and space on the world. Poincaré made two kinds of spaces coexist: a space called geometric and objective and a representative space. According to the physicist, the latter can be broken down into a tactile space, a visual space, and a driving space (Poincaré 1968:245). Poincaré's point of view is that the researcher does not represent external bodies for himself in geometric space; he contents himself with thinking about these bodies, as if they were situated in geometric space (Poincaré 1968:82). It is in only this way that he gives a privileged place to consciousness, to the point of definitely installing geometric "law" in relativism and subjectivism. His viewpoint is that all geometries are essentially relative; none can be truer than another. The difference between one geometry and another lies simply in the fact that one geometry can be more convenient than another (Poincaré 1968:76).

The concepts of human plans, convenience, goals, needs, etc., imply not only the repudiation of objective truth but also the fact that there are an infinite number of approaches, descriptions or even points of view on a same subject. It is only in this way that pragmatism renders all quest for truth in the scientific approach vain. And, in the absolute, scientific research itself, as a requirement for truth and certainty, becomes without a subject. From the cultural standpoint, pragmatism establishes the legitimacy of all human plans. According to Rorty, no one should be allowed to ridicule any human plan or even any deliberate form of human life. This means that each person is free to consider true what another may hold to be false. Moreover, Rorty teaches us that it is perfectly useless to try to convince an interlocutor who does not share the same needs as you, because, all "discussion requires that one agree on the precedence of needs" (Rorty 1995:84). The impor-

tant point in a discussion, he writes, is that we agree on the use of the same instruments to work towards satisfying shared needs. Because, no debate, no argument, however rigorous it may be, can succeed in modifying the central plan of an individual and lead him to change his point of view. Changing point of view on a particular question means that the interlocutor no longer sees the interest or the relevance of the arguments that he was defending up until then. Because reason and truth are only myths, and because the ordinary man is far from being a cognitive being, absolutely nothing can make him likely to be converted by arguments rather than knocked over by irrational forces (Rorty 1995:86).

The pragmatist approach leads unavoidably to the sophistry. Moreover, pragmatists fully accept the contested views of Protagoras according to which man is the benchmark of all things. Everything is beyond all discussion, both scientific facts and moral values. These concepts defy all analysis because they correspond to a way of saying: "This is my position: I cannot say anything about it; I cannot do anything else" (Rorty 1995:121).

Dialectic Approach of Questions Raised by Pragmatism

The approach of the real proposed by pragmatism raises enormous methodological problems. For example, no one can seriously question the concepts of objective reality and absolute truth without sinking into the worst of difficulties. Yet, as Lenin notes with good reason, reducing the concept of truth to adjustment, belief, justification, consensus and simple convenience, is to take a collection of words for theory. So that its hypotheses might be true, pragmatism should first prove that the most indisputable scientific laws are only useful fictions or even the result of consensus between researchers. He must prove that the assertion that the earth is round, that it has a history and turns around the sun is a mere convention, a convenience, a belief; that, therefore, it is up to us to believe or not to believe this. And yet, we know that those truths are not only objective and absolute, but also eternal. Such an attitude is as absurd as claiming that the slavery of Africans and the Holocaust of the Jews are only relative truths, from the imagination of some individuals assessing the world from their own point of view. Those are some examples of indisputable absolute and eternal truths, which then depend neither on my point of view nor on my belief, and even less on simple convenience, agreement or justification.

Victims of their poor methodological choices, pragmatism and subjective idealism are not able to admit that the world, such as it exists independent of us, is reflected in our consciousness through the senses. There is no doubt that sensation is the primary source of our knowledge, as the Pharaonic theory of knowledge had discovered. According to the document of Memphite philosophy, the eyes see, the ears hear, the nose breathes, they provide information to the heart (understanding); and it is the latter which gives all knowledge and it is

language which transmits what the heart has ordered. Certainly, the theory of sensation can also lead us into subjectivism and relativism, as we can see in the work of Berkeley who considers bodies a complex of sensations. The truly scientific approach, which is based on the dialectic method, is just the opposite. It recognizes sensations as images of bodies and of the external world. This approach prepares us then to admit the existence not only of an objective world independent of our sensations and sentences that we use to describe them, but also of objective, absolute truth. Objective and absolute truth exists because objective reality itself exists.

Let us correctly situate this problem within the theory of knowledge, and examine the dialectical movement which leads to absolute, eternal truth. The main weakness of pragmatism is that, since the time of Charles Peirce, John Dewey and William James, this doctrine has never been able to correctly pose the problem of absolute truth, because we do not resolve any problems by coming out right and left with pompous and deafening expressions like: *c*onvention, convenience, adjustment, belief. The most important scientific and philosophical task is, on the contrary, to resolve dialectically the problem of close relations between absolute truth and relative truth.

In appropriate terms, F. Engels was able to grasp the issue of this question in *Anti-Dühring*, where he poses and clearly answers "the question of whether the products of human knowledge, and which ones, can have a supreme validity and an absolute right to truth" (Engels 1973:117).

To answer this decisive question, Engels recommends examining first what is human thought itself, in its profound essence. Is it the thought of an individual or that of humanity in its totality? According to Engels, far from being an individual matter, human thought deserves to be understood as the thought of humanity, taken as a whole. This thought, however, can only exist concretely "as the individual thought of billions and billions of men, past, present, and future." (*Ibid.*) This is then how the author expresses dialectically the contradiction between the absolute character of human thought and its actualization in living beings with extremely limited thought. In fact, according to him, "the sovereignty of thought is born out in a series of men whose thought is hardly sovereign, and the strong knowledge of a right to absolute truth, in a series of relative errors. Neither one nor the other can be realized completely except by an infinite duration of the life of humanity" (Engels 1973:117).

For Engels, such a contradiction can only be resolved in infinite progress, i.e. in the unlimited succession of human generations. It is only in this sense that one can say of human thought that it is just as sovereign as non-sovereign, as absolute as non-absolute. "Sovereign and unlimited by its nature," he adds, "its purpose, its possibilities and its final historical objective; non-sovereign and limited by its individual execution and particular reality" (Engels 1973:118). It is the same dialectic

of the relative and absolute that the thinker applies to "eternal truths." For him, "if humanity ever came to the point of no longer operating with eternal truths, results of thought having a sovereign truth and an absolute right to the truth," this would boil down to stating that it has arrived "at the point where the infinity of the intellectual world is depleted in deeds as in power, and thus accomplishes the much discussed feat of the counted uncountable."

Such are the arguments that philosophical materialism uses to escape not only from dogmatism but also from relativism. It is dialectics itself that is the privileged methodological tool enabling us to reach such a conclusion. Dialectics enables us to assert the infinite power of human thought, all the while recognizing its historical relativity. It is in this sense that we can say that, objectively, there is no line of impassable demarcation between absolute truth and relative truth or even, between truth and error.

The dialectic of truth and error, of absolute and relative, distances us more and more, not only from dogmatism, but also from relativism, characteristic of all non-dialectic thought. This latter oscillates constantly between the dogmatism of absolute truth and the dogmatism of absolute negation, hence relativism. In general, relativists are, according to Henri Lefebvre's term, "pessimists of knowledge, embittered, disillusioned by metaphysics, who miss absolute truth and state with a contained anger that this 'noumenal' truth exists but escapes us" (Lefebvre 1982:67). Such is, for example, the Kantian version of agnosticism and relativism. The pragmatist and postmodernist version is even more radical, since it denies the very existence of "*noumenal truth.*" As we see in the work of R. Rorty, pragmatism is an anti-essentialist doctrine, which denies the existence not only of absolute and eternal truths, but also of essences and substances. Instead of essences, this doctrine sees only moving nodes of relations.

Let us conclude on this point. Contrary to the relativism of those disillusioned by metaphysics (neo-Kantians and pragmatists combined), dialectical relativism is fundamentally optimistic. If it recognizes the relativity of knowledge, it is not because of some "metaphysical inevitability" or some infirmity of human reason condemned to never be able to penetrate the essence of things. Relativity can be explained simply "with respect to the stage actually attained by our knowledge" (Lefebvre 1982:67), i.e. dialectical relativism postulates the relativity of human knowledge, not to repudiate the concept of objective truth as such, but to emphasize the perpetual and infinite overrunning of the limits of knowledge. Dialectical relativism teaches us that each new stage of development of human knowledge enriches it with new grains of an ever broader, more specific, finer truth. It is in this way that we can state that each particular truth attained is essentially relative. However, the set of the crop of particular truths attained by human knowledge is part of a vast set of objective absolute knowledge.

Lenin clearly established this: if "the limits of the approximation of our knowledge compared to objective, absolute truth are historically relative," there is no doubt that "the very existence of this truth is certain as it is certain that we are approaching it" (Lenin 1979:129). The analogy of the painting presented by the author is interesting in this respect. The outlines of the painting "are historically relative, but it is certain that the painting reproduces a model existing objectively." According to this thinker, the fact that such or such moment, in such or such conditions, we have advanced in the nature of the knowledge of things to the point of discovering alizarin in coal tar or discovering electrons in the atom, is historically relative; but what is certain, is that any discovery of this sort is progress in "absolute objective knowledge." In short, all ideology is historically relative, but it is certain that for each scientific ideology (contrary to what occurs, for example, for religious ideology), there is a corresponding objective truth, an absolute nature (Lenin 1979:129).

When we assert that founding the theory of knowledge on relativism means to condemn oneself inevitably not only to subjectivism, skepticism and agnosticism, but also to sophistry, we touch the very core of the problem which concerns us here. Sophistry is the impassable horizon of relativist doctrines, particularly pragmatism and postmodernism. Starting with pure relativism, it is possible to justify all sorts of sophistry, all sorts of cynicism. The cynical views of pragmatism on an essential question like human rights cannot be explained otherwise.

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