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A LITTLE LIBERATORY INTRODUCTION TO TALKING ABOUT KNOWLEDGE*/ (2021, 4,400 words)

> Lenin's note to Hegel's *Wissenschaft der Logik,* „Human consciousness does not only reflect the objective world but also creates it" (*Werke* 38: 203) … takes into account that knowledge is a _reception_ of the natural and historical _world of experience_, a _construction_ of a _world of knowledge_ proper to human subjectivity, and an _anticipation_ of the _possible worlds_ for pre-conceiving thought.
>
> > Hans Jőrg Sandkűhler

> [The goal of philosophy is] to show the fly the way out of the flytrap.
>
> > Ludwig Wittgenstein

> Que sçays-je (What do I know)?
>
> > Michel de Montaigne

0. This essay wishes to delve upon what Wittgenstein's wondrous epigraph on the fly in the flytrap means here and now, in the dire emergency the degenerating capitalism enforces upon humanity and our ecosystem. It notes that philosophy and knowledge is always pursued by some people and for some goal to be implemented by further (groups of) people. I am interested exclusively in the *liberatory* or Left group of goals. My stance arises from wonder and dismay at how much of what the "really obtaining" Left and Marxism of my generation firmly believed it knew turned out partly or wholly wrong, and what are the means and methods to minimise this. I do not doubt that strategic human knowledge (*Erkennen*) is possible, once we focus on it not as a fenced-off project without subject and goal, but as a history and theory of understanding and furthering the interests of humanity and those that concretely represent it: for example, the Aegean poets and philosophers plus Athenian dramatists, Jehoshua and Spartacus, Diderot and Saint-Just, Lenin's Bolsheviks and Brecht with Benjamin, Lao Zi and Mao, Toussaint's Haiti and Marcos's EZLN[1/] –always against the background of the hundreds of millions murdered and the billions lesioned by our rulers to stymie and deflect these representatives.

To understand how to believe better, with a reasonable chance for success, we have to take a large step back from the historical everyday and ask: What are the necessary presuppositions for a general epistemology? What are the criteria for attempting to understand what is knowledge and how can any answer be justified (from slight buttressing to strong causality)? This would also mean embarking upon the criteria for both the general possibility and the particular felicity of valid answers about our pragmatic reality.[2/] I am not presenting here a theory nor even a fully articulated hypothesis, but what seem necessary building blocks for such positions and criteria.

I posit *first* that knowledge bearers are human persons and smaller or larger societal groups and institutions; knowledge means are general premises (presuppositions) and specified positions; and knowledge ends are human interventions into the societal and historical pragmatic reality with the goal of furthering the wellbeing of people and the humanisation of the species Homo sapiens. All three are historically constituted by the needs and interests of societal groups and classes.

Second, I posit that we cannot do without a "possibilist" and *non-absolutist materialism*. Materialism radically opposes the monotheistic stance of *credo ut intelligam* (I believe in order to understand) and replaces it by *intelligo ut credam* (I understand in order to believe): so far so good. However, materialism must acknowledge that it has to continually negotiate between the *non-identity* of knowledge and reality (for if they were identical, the limits and structure of our knowledge would be frozen once and for all) and the -- partial but for key practical matters provisionally valid -- *identity* of knowledge and reality (otherwise we could not successfully intervene into it at all). This means that no presupposition or knowledge is unhistorically absolute: materialism cannot obtain purchase upon reality without dialectics. Dialectics centrally means that any totality has inbuilt contradictions which make for changes, glacially slow or explosively sudden. The only possible objects of cognitive acts are flexible and imperfect totalities. Flexible means changeable in extension and intension (see section 1.2); imperfect means not only unfinished but in principle unfinishable multiplicities and dualities. This amounts to using simultaneously a firm belief into some practically possible actions while tempering it with a permanent "soft" skepticism (cf. Suvin "Approach"). All commitments to an absolute Truth are sociopolitically absolutist too.

1. A first central problem for epistemology is to find a royal road towards clarifying how can our knowledge relate to reality. *That* it can is an evolutionary axiom which underlies the coming about and survival of the human species. Kant argued that, although sensory experience does not make us immediately aware of the world, one must suppose it exists in order to make sense of those experiences through reason (cf.

Scruton passim): in a stronger version, I would argue that our inferences from experience lead to checkable actions and consequences. But how can mental processing ground a realisation of collective interests and needs in human and non-human nature? Are not entities internal to the mind ideal (impalpable) while the external ones are real (palpable)? How can a realist signification come about?

1.1. I would concede that purely introversive signification might dominate, e.g., in music and some impoverished – if technically interesting – segments of visual arts or glossolalic poetry, but it seems proper in this essay to concentrate on how signification is co-constituted, and for practical purposes predominantly shot through, by extroversive signification. In Putnam's words, meanings "ain't in the head… [but] interactional" ("Meaning" 227). All that seems to us immediately given by sensual "evidence" or perception is mediated by dominant presuppositions, the stronger when unconscious.

Further, as Goodman and Elgin argue (150ff.), no proposition claiming knowledge can be validated if one's belief in it, though it may happen to be true, is not connected to other propositions which "tether" it, making it part of a consistent and justifiable argument. A formally coherent tether implying accounting and arguing for your insights (a stance or horizon) there certainly must be, or no judgment will be possible, and thus no critical politics or cognition. Epistemologists divide according to the nature of this indispensable tether. "Internalists" believe the tether is purely mental and formal: knowledge is anchored by justification epistemically accessible to the knower, usually as compossible propositions in natural language, possibly buttressed by mathematics, that employ only concepts and categories plus various operations by which they form a system. "Externalists" believe knowledge is anchored to a not only mental fact or set of facts that makes it true, and there is a debate as to the anchor, which could be arrived at inductively or deductively. The "internal" absolutism (cf. Ernst 90-93) presents the danger of closed systems of statements chasing each other's tail but with insufficient or aberrant justification (e.g. the Nazi belief); while the "external" absolutism presents the danger of unjustifiable assumption of opening or anchoring, usually some certainty of a divine kind.

The proper answer to this dilemma, which I shall also take as an axiom is: the division between real and ideal entities of knowledge or *epistemata* (Sandkűhler 15) is to be firmly rejected. A pioneering insight here was Marx's revolutionary updating of Bacon's "knowledge is power": "theory also becomes a material force as soon as it has gripped the masses" ("Introduction"). To generalise this approach, while factoring in also an update of Vico's correlation of *vera* and *facta* (proof by practical effect): what seems merely internal and ideal (theory) is really homogeneous with what seems merely material and external to people (material force) -- otherwise they could not interact –

and they are mediated by the mind. The "ideal" concepts, categories, and other logical (but always also historical) forms are a cognitive reality that is epistemologically not different from any other more easily recognisable "reflections" of non-mental reality: say the "internal" image of a person, a house or a machine. While in the mind, the logical forms and -- for me more important as richer – the semantic forms are epistemic elements or aspects just like the apparently isomorphic reflections of easily noticeable objects. Both ideational forms and "reflections" are collective constructs independent of a merely personal consciousness. All the supposed "objects" of our "subjective" activity are always already theory-laden (cf. Goodman & Elgin, and Elgin 183-85). As Gramsci noted, whether there could be a reality independent of humanity is for humans an empty question -- unless it is used as a hyperbolic spur for action before the end of humanity, I would add – and he acerbically compared the vacuous concept of an objective universe outside of human history and praxis to belief in God (*Selections* 440-48). And echoing Marx's 2nd Thesis on Feuerbach, "In science too, looking for reality outside people, in a religious or metaphysical sense, is merely a paradox" (*Quaderni* II: 1457).

Therefore, a materialism based on collective practices and returning into a possible human practice must radically refuse any primitive "reflection" of objective reality in us supposed subjects. Any observational description necessarily incorporates presuppositions (cf. Whitehead 62-63). The fulcrum of this proper materialism cannot be either reified objects or "pure" ideas and/or "pure" perceptions but only phenomena correlated to *methods* as well as to the investigation's *purpose* (cf. Putnam "Meaning," *Realism,* and *Reason*); therefore, it cannot do without mental *epistemata*. It is a methodical knowledge, checkable by physical or mental experiment: it is fully wedded to some variant of an experimental method as ushered in by the young revolutionary bourgeoisie, from Bacon to Saint Simon. It is value-laden (Putnam): that is, both factual and fictional, also both rational and emotional (or better, it indicates that these oppositions are dubious).

No doubt, any personal consciousness will at best render reality only rather partially, its *epistemata* will be embryonic -- both incomplete and rough-hewn (allomorphic); however, this can for practical purposes be largely alleviated for tasks at hand if collective experimentation with proper feedback obtain. In that case, materialist knowledge appears through the activity of bearer-protagonists and is constituted as positions and propositions of various scope. The greatest examples I know thereof – in terms of both scope and value -- would be Marx's theory of capitalism and Einstein's two Relativities; within the art mode or domain of knowledge, there are comparably great ensembles, say Shakespeare's or Zeami's theatre, the "realistic" and the modernist novel or some agglomerations of verse, but since such macro-texts are as a rule not

analysed as wholes, this remains a postulate. All materialist knowledge is situational but such paragons are in feedback with long-duration situations, lasting centuries.

In this context, direct reference to ontologies is to my mind not necessary for a realistically modest epistemological method, in diametrical opposition to the most instructive case of the horrors of Heidegger. From arguments for this stance, I offer two. First, amid our rapidly escalating dangers to the very existence of human civilisation and bios, depth care about ontology can be left for happier times. Symmetrically obverse, I would refuse any hermeneutics based on exclusive autarchy of either discourse or modal logic. True, long duration stabilities are needed for any judgment, but unless the epistemic worlds are constantly porous to sociohistorical praxis, they lead to sterility.

Second, science after Einstein has revealed that the historical knowledge of mankind was confined to the mesocosm where Newtonian physics obtain. In the sub-atomic microcosmos and the astronomic megacosmos, our meso "laws" are at best subsumed and usually replaced by different regularities. It is very probable our views of micro and mega are still hugely anthropomorphic. Further, this also holds for our views of the immensely complex mental life of Homo, a continent whose Columbus (for good and bad) was Freud. Our species is still like the child skipping stones across one ocean bay. The fallibility of all our propositions and judgments means that a chance for right knowledge is systematically frustrated in our time, especially in matters of politics in the widest sense, where oligopoly about information and upper-class secrecy about State actions (remember Assange!) prevail, as well as the general poisoning of the noosphere by the rulers' lies and omnipresent blathering. To the contrary, we should recur to Marx's resolute refusal not only of censorship but also of financial control as constrictions for intellectual labour and for empowering the powerless is a necessary component of what he considered a realisation of human freedom.

1.2. Let me insist on two key elements and nodes for knowledge. The *first* is its being imbued with *interests, desires, goals, values, and norms*[3/.] "Concepts," boldly affirmed Wittgenstein, "express our interest and guide our interest" (point 570). What Putnam has passionately dubbed "The Philosophers' of Science Evasion of Values" (title of his chapter 8 in *Collapse*), hides that "Knowledge of facts presupposes knowledge of values…. justifying factual claims presupposes value judgments" (*Collapse* 137). A fact is only a fact for a given human collective at a given situation. Examples: the existence of the Americas was not a fact for the Old World before Columbus. Or: the existence of vaccines against Covid-19 is not a fact today (end of 2021) for the majority of humankind since it has no access to them.

In particular, I take *norm* in the meaning of both a widely accepted societal standard and a model that serves in feedback with "a principle of right action binding upon the members of a group [in order] to guide, control, or regulate proper and acceptable conduct" (*Merriam*). Not having norms (interests, desires, values), however implicit and fragmentary, is impossible.

In that limited sense, all opinions are constructed and relatively wrong or limited, yet nonetheless some are valid within given limits. This needs a sense of relevance or pertinence, impossible to detach from the situation of the knower (cf. also Prieto), and some opinions are more wrong than others. This holds pre-eminently for those I would call monoalethist (from *alethé*, truth): all those -- from monotheists to lay dogmatists (Fascists, Stalinists, and believers in the Invisible Hand of the Market) -- who hold they have the Absolute Truth, including the belief that relativism is absolute. Only belief in the absolute right, Haraway's „God-trick" (589), is absolutely wrong.

My *second* focus is the inevitable articulation of knowledge that assigns rankings in time and space, which means recognising that the use of grouped concepts or *categories* is quite inevitable for making sense. Human understanding is multiply mediated, it uses complex. imbricated, and flexible means (a theory, an experiment, an action), it both theorises and objectifies for understanding. The Copernican revolution of Marx and Engels was to insist on the key category of *human work*, which in class society means the sometimes necessary but always alienating division of labour (I approached this in "Living Labour," quite initially). The central contradiction in capitalism arises from the division between capital and labour as mega-alienations of frozen labour from the past vs. presently needed labour – a huge undersea reef on which the ship of 20th-Century "really obtaining socialism" got wrecked.

1.3. Last not at all least but central, I posit that the supreme value and fulcrum of knowledge is its consubstantiality with personal and collective *freedom.* Not having norms based on humanising values (interests, desires) allows or indeed imposes an ideal horizon of slavery and fascism. It follows that Marx's and Engels's great insertion of the major human shapers of interests, desires, and values -- power politics and class horizons -- into the very structure of theorising is usable for all human sciences and probably further too[4/], even if in the natural sciences only in the final instance.

What does freedom imply, among other matters? First, the negotiation between the non-identity and the identity of knowledge and reality means no cognition can even theoretically be finite and full, there are only islands of knowledge in a vast ocean of nescience. Second, if the experimental method of knowledge is driven by purpose and strongly interfused with interests, desires, and values, the addressee of knowledge (say

a reader) is pre-eminently solicited to practice permanent *choices* how to interpret and evaluate the *epistemata* of a text. No text, in the widest sense of signifying systems that includes all writing and imagining fixed in a form -- whether scientific, artistic or purely a momentary newspaper or TV *doxa* -- can be read without being first somehow scanned and THEN imagined as a meaningful whole (cf. Jakobson, and my discussion in "The Day"). The very act of scanning a text open up the interpretive necessity as well as extroversive possibility of freedom: "Having reconstructed the fictional world as a mental image, the reader can ponder it and make it a part of his experience, just as he experimentally appropriates the actual world" (Doležel 21, and see much more in Eco *Role*).

Third, freedom for one and for all is always firmly based on vulnerable personal bodies and bodies politic, and since behaviour and cognition are whole-body processes, this includes what is usually called mind (or soul). Personal sovereignty is humanity's first and last "commons." Yet breathless capitalism is profoundly inimical to it and is working ceaselessly at new technological means of manipulating bodies — from the factory floor to biogenetics and capillary surveillance (in use) and then nanophysics (coming fast). So this discussion should properly branch into all mega-lesions of personal integrity, from war and other overt violence to hunger and all varieties of alienation.

1.4. The refusal of a subject-object split of blessed Cartesian memory holds for any human signic system, but becomes obvious when we focus on the only universally necessary system, though sometimes not sufficient (maths anybody?), for understanding: *human language*. Within it, the central conceptual pivot translating group interests and personal needs into epistemology is precisely *meaning*, whose articulation is a most pliable and rich semantico-pragmatic index of human self-production within the contradictory history of societal mega-formations. The universe of meanings has a sufficient autonomy to be the central subject-object of knowledge. Its bearer or protagonist is neither "the society" nor "the individual" but active persons associated in various ways. It remains to be analysed at length later whether and how the possible epistemic worlds issue into the epistemological Possible Worlds. The nodes of either are again categories (classifying forms) as "societally relevant *dimensions of meaning*, e.g. age, sex, power, possessions, kinship, food or clothing" (Schmidt n. p. [12]) but one could add more.

A key foundation stone here seems to me Frege's opposition of *Sinn vs. Bedeutung*, sense and meaning.[5/] In his discussing of "Morning Star" and "Evening Star" for the planet Venus, the two terms quoted are senses and Venus is meaning. The "senses" -- that is, the language fixations of a visual existent -- are ways in which the meaning is given to us (*Art des Gegebenseins*), once as associated with morning and once with evening; Wittgenstein would felicitously say that we "see Venus as" morning or

evening star. If generalised from single existents to concepts, this is also called extension (the set of all elements covered by the concept) and intension (the way these elements are given and the stance toward them implied). In fiction I would associate this with allegory, and centrally with the parable form and mode. This means that the interlinear causal systems guaranteeing coherence and readability always go beyond the actual *epistemata* used and enmesh with possibilities of wider and additional public understanding, which was its original meaning: *allos* means other, and *egorein* to speak or present publicly (as it were in the *agora*). In underground ways I believe this holds also in verbal genres claiming "factuality," which is why Marx and Einstein are not of concern only for old-style political economy or physics.

Here it would be useful and to my mind necessary to discuss the central epistemic category of Possible Worlds, as "constructed by the creative activities of human minds and hands" (Doležel 14). But this is matter for another essay. [6]

Notes

*/ I acknowledge much stimulation and learning from the authors cited, including the overviews by Ernst and Sandkűhler. Behind them is my permanent drawing upon Brecht and Benjamin. All unacknowledged translations in this essay are mine.

I have decided a brief overview cannot bear any canonic bibliography. A useful tool when critically used could be the materials in the *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, http://www.iep.utm.edu/, and the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, htttp://plato.stanford.edu

1/ Possibly minor on a world scale but for this writer directly constitutive is the experience of Yugoslavia after 1941, stenographically: Tito and Krleža, Kidrič and the workers' councils, the Non-Aligned South as the refusal of the imperialists' Cold War (cf. my *Splendour*).

2/ As Pope noted, fools rush in where angels fear to tread. Still, I hope to be useful by opting in this essay to bracket whole libraries that deal with the most contentious question of defining and using "truth" as one's foundation stone, and with many other key terms (e.g. thought, conviction, claim, justification…), often taken over uncritically from linguistics or logic. My defence would be, first, that all introductions to epistemology I consulted acknowledge they are egregiously simplifying, and second, that I hope to be clearer in feedback with "fiction" in a following essay. This quite minimal discussion presents an orientation.

3/ This list of terms is provisional and not exhaustive. One would have to refuse also the reason-emotion split (as I do in other places) and then delve more deeply into the cognitive potential of non-conceptual or topological stances, foremost among them the spread between sympathy and love: "'Knowledge' is a familiarity, awareness, or understanding of someone or something, which might include facts (propositional knowledge), skills (procedural knowledge), or objects (acquaintance knowledge)" (Wikipedia). Yet – with all due respect -- the great majority of current professional epistemology is primarily concerned with propositional knowledge, slighting "knowing

how" and "knowing by acquaintance" (cf. the exceptional Polanyi, also Wikipedia, with modern ancestors in Gilbert Ryle and Bertrand Russell; but already in Plato's *Theaetetus* and *Meno* the allowing of non-propositional knowledge is clear in his instances of master artisans). It is difficult to believe that a depth involvement in understanding, say, music or painting -- or even humanising politics -- is non-cognitive.

4/ A parallel would be Bachelard's wonderful characterisation of Lobachevsky's enterprise in mathematics: "He has turned into dialectics (*dialectisé*) the notion of the parallel, invited the human spirit to dialectically round off our fundamental notions… and **upgraded polemical reason to the status of constituent reason**…." ("Lobatchewsky a dialectisé la notion de parallèle, il a invité l'esprit humain à compléter dialectiquement les notions fondamentales […] il a promu la raison polémique au rang de raison constituante…" 8-9, boldface mine).

I acknowledge here a major debt to the opus of Herbert Marcuse, an occulted Great Ancestor of ours to whom we shall have to return. I also take a good part -- say one-third -- of Nietzsche   most seriously wehile rejecting other aspects of his.

5/ I pluck this pioneering dyad from a long and rich work whose horizons I do not discuss, and that grow unfortunate when he gets to fictional existents such as Odysseus. Interestingly, Frege also uses "sign" for all such binary relations and may be taken as a forerunner of much more sophisticated semiotics.

6/ A Possible World is a provisional totality with a defined spacetime and agents -- all else is open. Possible Worlds in logical semantics (à la Kripke, or the Eco-type semiotics following logics) are maximally comprehensive and fully furnished, and therefore usually have to be very small and are only fit for introspective purposes; I would refuse them as a general tool for both theoretical and practical reasons: "Fictional worlds of literature [and other arts, also philosophy, DS] are incomplete" (Doležel 22). Rather than pertaining to logic or linguistics, a useful Possible World is epistemological: modelled on our historical world – that is, on dominant conceptions thereof or what Eco calls its imaginary encyclopedia -- yet significantly different from it. The possible cognitive increment lies in the difference and in its applicability, direct or very indirect, to our common world. All art and all planning deals implicitly with Possible Worlds; this is foregrounded in Science Fiction or Five-Year Plans (cf. much more in my "The Day").

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