

# IN DEFENCE OF PHILOSOPHY

AGAINST  
POSITIVISM AND PRAGMATISM

*by*  
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## P R E F A C E

THIS BOOK sets out to examine and criticise the work of some of the contemporary representatives of one of the most influential of modern philosophies, the philosophy of positivism. It does so from the point of view of Marxism, dialectical materialism.

It is above all in the United States of America that the positivist philosophy is being energetically propagated today. A number of leading European positivists emigrated to the United States, where their tendencies met and began to coalesce with the typically American philosophy of pragmatism. The result is seen in a considerable output of philosophical writings. In view of the rôle which America plays in world affairs today it seems especially important to take note of such American trends in philosophy.

By positivism I understand an entire tendency in philosophy which, while maintaining that all knowledge is based on experience, says that knowledge cannot reflect objective reality existing independent of experience.

In opposition to this essentially idealist trend in philosophy I defend and expound in this book the principles of dialectical materialism.

It is a sequel to my previous book, *Science versus Idealism*, which was also concerned with the criticism of positivism. It makes the examination of positivism, begun in that book, more complete and up to date. And I have also endeavoured to put right some mistakes which, as I now think, were contained in *Science versus Idealism*, especially in relation to the social rôle of philosophy and the nature of empirical science.<sup>(1)</sup>

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(2) The assistance of a number of other members of the Communist Party in whose company I have taken part in discussions on Marxism and the natural sciences;

<sup>(1)</sup> I analysed these mistakes in an article in *Modern Quarterly*, Vol. 4, No. 3, p. 282 ff.

(3) The criticisms made by Howard Selsam and Harry K. Wells, of the Jefferson School of Social Sciences, New York, of the first draft of the chapter on pragmatism;

(4) The criticisms of *Science versus Idealism* contained in reviews of it appearing in the British journal *Communist Review*, the American *Political Affairs*, the Soviet *Bolshevik* and *Problems of Philosophy*, and in the introduction written for the Russian edition by Academician G. F. Alexandrov.

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A few paragraphs of Chapter 2 previously appeared in an article on *Marxism and the Development of Philosophy* in *Modern Quarterly*, vol. 3, No. 2, or in a booklet *Dialectical Materialism and Science*, published by Lawrence and Wishart Ltd., London. And a few paragraphs of Chapter 1 and Chapter 6 appeared in an article on *Logical Positivism* contained in the volume *Philosophy for the Future*, published by The Macmillan Company, New York. I gratefully acknowledge the permission of The Macmillan Company to reproduce these paragraphs here.

Page references to quotations from works by Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin, by Stuart Chase, William James and John Dewey, as well from all English authors, refer to the English editions of the works in question.

MAURICE CORNFORTH

## PREFACE TO THE PRESENT EDITION

IN THE YEAR since this book was first published in London I have been able to consider further the subjects treated in it, in the light of various criticisms.

The main purpose of the book is stated in the Introduction, and its main conclusions are summed up in the final chapter. I think that the considerations advanced in the Introduction and the conclusions drawn in the final chapter are correct. I can see no reason to modify them. But there certainly are some mistakes in the intervening chapters which ought to be corrected. I am taking this opportunity to draw attention to them.

The most serious defect undoubtedly lies in the treatment of pragmatism.

Here in England we have not in general been well acquainted with pragmatism. In this book I have undoubtedly taken pragmatism too much "at its face value"—paid too much attention to what it says about itself on the label, instead of analysing the ingredients inside the bottle.

As a result of his study of pragmatism, Lenin reached a very definite conclusion about it, which is stated in a footnote in Chapter 6, section 4 of *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*. "From the standpoint of materialism, the difference between Machism and pragmatism is as insignificant and unimportant as the difference between empirio-criticism and empirio-monism." In the chapter on pragmatism in this book, however, I give too much weight to the differences in formulation between pragmatism and ordinary positivism, and to the so-called naturalism of the pragmatists. Thus, a lot of space is devoted to discussing Dewey's "naturalism" as if it were a kind of mistaken materialist theory, erring mainly by not properly appreciating "the genesis of thinking in social production." I would not say that the detailed points made in this discussion are wrong. But they are allowed to blur the essential point, that Dewey's "naturalism" is itself nothing but a dressed-up form of subjective idealism.

"Dewey's philosophy, which he parades as 'naturalism,' in opposition to idealism, is actually itself nothing but a subtle and disguised form of subjective idealism. It is subjective idealism in a new dress of 'naturalism,' patched up of doctrines about the organism and its environment, of stimulus and response, of the continuity of the logical and the biological, of ideas as instruments of practice, of truth as that which works in practice."

That is stated in the third section of my chapter. But it is stated only in passing, as it were, and is then lost sight of for many pages.

In summing up the main characteristics of pragmatism in the concluding section of the chapter, I wrote that: "Pragmatist philosophy is based on a 'naturalistic' view of thinking." That is what pragmatism says about itself, how it advertises itself. But it is not true. In reality, pragmatism is subjective idealism dressed up as "a naturalistic view of thinking."

Tied up with this mistake is a mistake in the estimation of the social roots of pragmatism in America. It is stated that pragmatism began as "the philosophy of rising American capitalism" and only later turned into "the philosophy of American imperialism." That is wrong. Pragmatism began and will end as the philosophy of American imperialism.

This is evident if we merely consider the timetable of events. Thus American capitalism entered upon its monopoly phase, American imperialism took definite shape and embarked upon its aggressive career, at the close of the 19th century. And pragmatism was fairly launched as a philosophical movement at just the same time. Dewey's first studies in pragmatist "logic" coincided with the war against Spain for the Philippines and Cuba in 1898 and James's lectures on pragmatism were delivered in 1906-7. The rise and development of pragmatism in the United States coincided with the rise and development of imperialism, and did not ante-date it.

The aggressive, imperialist character of pragmatist philosophy has been described quite correctly, I think, in the relevant sections of this book. So has the character of pragmatism as a philosophy of "big business." What is not correct is the statement that pragmatism, as a distinctive trend of philosophy, originally belonged to the pre-imperialist phase of "rising capitalism."

In order to avoid misunderstandings, it may be as well to remember here certain considerations about imperialism which were advanced by Lenin.

"Nowhere in the world has monopoly capitalism existed in a whole series of branches without free competition, nor will it exist. To write of such a system is to write of a system which is divorced from reality and false. If Marx said of manufacture that it was a superstructure on mass small production, imperialism and finance capitalism are a superstructure on the old capitalism. If its summit is destroyed, the old capitalism is laid bare. . . . If we had an integral imperialism before us, which had entirely made over capitalism . . . it would have resulted in a system in which everything would have been subordinated to finance capital alone. . . .

It is not so in reality." (V. I. Lenin, *Selected Works*, Vol. VIII, p. 338.)

This applies as much to American as to any other imperialism. So it is only to be expected that the typical philosophical product of the epoch of imperialism in America, pragmatism, should contain undercurrents of ideas which express the old free competition structure of capitalism, and which, continuing over from earlier philosophical movements, occasionally obtrude themselves in the writings of certain pragmatists. Indeed, such ideas were particularly in evidence in the writings of William James, who had much of the old-fashioned liberal in his make-up and who, at the time of the war against Spain, had even come out openly as an opponent of imperialist expansion. It is this phenomenon which I had mistakenly interpreted as meaning that pragmatism began as a pre-imperialist philosophy.

In pointing out, moreover, the militant aggressive character of pragmatist philosophy, which is by no means an "armchair philosophy," I should have dealt with the excursions which pragmatism makes into the practical sphere of social and political policies. Pragmatists, and notably John Dewey himself, have never confined themselves to general philosophical theory. In saying that their philosophy is a philosophy of practice, they have been as good as their word and have had much to say and have exerted considerable influence in practical affairs, in American home and foreign policy. But material on the direct social and political teachings of pragmatism is lacking in this book. It would be necessary to include it, in order to demonstrate the true nature of pragmatist philosophy.

In this connection it should have been noted, too, that pragmatism incorporates into itself and continues other currents of idealist philosophy besides positivism. According to positivism, our world is the world of sense-data, and these sense-data are simply "given" to us and have to be accepted. But pragmatism, maintaining that there is no objective reality independent of man, teaches that man by his own activity makes his own world for himself. Herein pragmatism is certainly influenced by the type of idealism which was popularised in Europe by Nietzsche, for example, and which also became one of the ideological ingredients of German fascism. According to this theory, the "supermen" who make and change the world are responsible to no one and nothing but themselves, have the absolute right to assert themselves and are "beyond good and evil."

Apart from the above defects in the chapter on pragmatism, there are three other points to which I think it is necessary, more briefly, to draw attention.

In the chapter entitled "Semantics of the Dog Kennel," which deals with Professor Charles Morris's "science of signs," I have quite correctly pointed out that Professor Morris's "science" is absolutely inapplicable to human language. But I have left it an open question whether or not it is applicable to the "signs" by which animals communicate with one another, and to animal behaviour generally. However, it can be shown that Professor Morris's "science" is inapplicable to animals also. It is as phoney in the dog kennel as it is in the house. Behaviourism, on which Professor Morris relies, is a pseudo-science from beginning to end.

The two remaining points concern corrections to the chapter on Dialectical Materialism.

The section entitled "Materialism *versus* Idealism in the Conception of Change and Development" (p. 34) is incomplete. I showed that the bourgeois philosophers who recognised the fact of development all gave idealist explanations of it. But I should also have pointed out that most of them, turning their backs on Hegel's discovery, regarded all development as a smooth process of evolution. Marxism does not put them right merely by providing a materialist explanation of development. Marxism provides a radically new concept of development.

Finally, under the heading "Science, Technology and Philosophy," (p. 50) where I note, quite correctly, "the profound influence on philosophic ideas of scientific discoveries and technical inventions," I go on to state that philosophical ideas have "had their basis in the techniques of the age." This statement is certainly misleading, and runs directly counter to well-known teachings of Marxism. It is one thing to say that the form which philosophical ideas have taken has been influenced by techniques. Such a statement is perfectly true. But it is another thing to say that techniques form the basis of philosophical ideas. The latter statement cannot be substantiated. Philosophical ideas are part of what Marx called the social superstructure, which arises on the basis, not of existing forces of production, or of techniques, but of the relations of production, the economic structure of society.

The point involved here was put very clearly by Stalin, in his recent work, *Marxism and Linguistics*. "The superstructure . . . does not reflect changes of development of the productive forces immediately and directly, but only after changes in the base, through the prism of changes wrought in the base by the changes in production." This "base" is "the economic structure of society."

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## INTRODUCTION

EVERYBODY has some kind of philosophy, even though they have never learned to discuss it. Everybody is influenced by philosophical views, even though they have not thought them out for themselves and cannot formulate them. For philosophy is nothing but our most general account of the nature of the world and of our place in it—our world outlook.

But the working out of philosophical views in an exact and systematic way has become a specialised job, undertaken by the trained members of various schools of philosophy. Nowadays it has even become a profession, so that we can speak of "professional philosophers". As a result, much of the discussions of these schools has become largely uninteresting and incomprehensible to everybody but the "professionals" and their coterie.

*What is most of all needed, however, is that philosophy should cease to be so specialised—the preserve of the schools—and become the possession of the masses of the people.*

This does not mean that it should be vulgarised and made easy. Spinoza, one of the greatest philosophers, said that "all excellent things are as difficult as they are rare". He was right in thinking that excellent philosophy is difficult, but it does not follow that it must also be rare.

What it does mean is that *philosophy must serve the masses of the people by helping them to answer their own problems.*

This is not the aim of the philosophers of the schools. They have tended to become more and more specialised, and more and more remote from the problems and interests of the people. For their part, they look on this as a virtue and think they are painstakingly unravelling the truth—an operation so intricate that only the most highly trained can attempt it. But in reality they are only obscuring and distorting the truth in a maze of conundrums of their own invention.

These conundrums and all the subtleties of the scholastics are not, as they themselves imagine, products of pure abstract thought. If they were, they could be of no possible interest except to other "pure thinkers". But the thinkers and their thoughts are in fact the products of the social order—in our



case, of the capitalist social order. In this way the most metaphysical of their speculations have their roots firmly embedded in material reality. The philosophers of the schools are those who fundamentally accept the social order; they accept its outlook and its valuations and do not seriously challenge it or seek to change it. It is this which determines the character of their philosophical views, their basic theoretical assumptions and approach, their disputes and their problems.

There are a number of schools arguing with one another. But their whole argument fulfils a definite social function. In some cases the philosophical schools elaborate ideas which amount to a more or less direct defence of things as they are. Others know that there is something wrong, but inculcate a passive acceptance of social evils by teaching that they flow from the very nature of things and from the necessary imperfections of mankind. Others express the demand for a change, but sidetrack this into utopian schemes. All, in these various ways, are a force operating in men's minds to make them accept the capitalist order and defend it. And however remote from the common man the philosophical schools may be, their teachings nevertheless do not fail to influence him.

As capitalism has entered upon its last phase—monopoly, the phase of imperialism; and as all its contradictions have become intensified and it has entered upon a state of insoluble general crisis; so its philosophy has become more involved, more abstract, more specialised.

*And at the same time one tendency above all has come to the top, and that is to retreat from any point of view which seeks through philosophy to understand the world and our place in it, but to say that the real world is unknowable, that it is the arena of mysterious forces which pass our comprehension. Far from trying to find out how we can advance human knowledge and human action, the philosophers set about explaining the necessary limitations of human knowledge and human action.*

This is nothing but the ideological expression of the general crisis of capitalism. Capitalism has reached its limits of development. Within the limits of capitalism men are at the mercy of forces which they can neither understand nor control, and this is reflected in the specialised teachings of philosophers. The consequences of the limitations of the capitalist social order are represented by the philosophers as belonging to the very nature of the world and of the human mind.

All this means that *there has taken place and is taking place a process of the real degeneration of philosophy. Philosophy has become highly specialised, remote from the people, abstract and barren, a doctrine not of the advancement of knowledge but of the limitations of knowledge, not a force for human emancipation but an apology for the existing social order.*

It is against this type of philosophy that this book is written. Against the philosophies of capitalism it defends the philosophy of the struggle for socialism—Marxism, dialectical materialism.

Because of the existing state of "professional" philosophy, many people are asking what is the use of philosophy anyway, and are deciding they have no use for it. But this merely means that they themselves uncritically accept all sorts of odds and ends of philosophical doctrines, including those of the very philosophers they pretend to despise, which operate in their minds without their thinking about it. For everyone is influenced by philosophy, and if they take no interest in it, that merely means that they are influenced by whatever secondhand scraps of it come their way through the schools, the press, the church, the radio and the cinema. To have no use for philosophy means uncritically to accept and to use capitalist philosophy.

Men do need an orientation. And because of the bankruptcy of contemporary "professional" philosophy there are some who are now calling for the revival of all sorts of outworn creeds from the past—such as the philosophy of Plato, or such as "Christian" philosophy, whatever that is conceived to be.

Their desire to escape from the barrenness of the contemporary schools, and to produce a philosophy which will give some conscious orientation to the common man, may be praiseworthy. Nevertheless, by digging for this in the archives of the past they are in effect passing over the achievements of several centuries of human progress, and, in particular, the achievements of modern science. The net result is that they produce an orientation which is the very opposite of a scientific outlook, and leaves men the prey to all sorts of superstitions. It is only another facet of capitalist philosophy. Conscious of the failure of capitalism's professional philosophers, these people turn back and seek for inspiration in the philosophy of the middle ages or of ancient slave society.

The philosophy of the present and the future must build on the foundations of the past. But it must build on them. It must advance our understanding of the world and of human society

on the basis of the discoveries of science and of the experience of the struggle for progress. Only in this way can philosophy meet the needs of the people. And it is just this which Marxism has achieved. *In Marxism, philosophy meets the needs of the people by helping them so to understand the nature of the world and of man's place in it as to be able to change the world and to transform human society—to advance man's dominion over nature and to emancipate mankind from oppression and superstition.*

Marxism, which bases its orientation on the struggle to end capitalism and to advance to communism, sets itself against the barren abstractions of the schools of capitalist philosophy and against those who are seeking to revive dead theories from the past. It unlocks the door of philosophy for the people, and makes alive for them the heritage of the past, by continuing the tradition of philosophical thought which seeks to achieve a rational comprehension of the material world and of history. It is only by striving to change the world that we can understand it, and by striving to improve the condition of man that we can understand human nature.

Marxist philosophy thus stands on the highroad of the development of philosophy, which can only advance as it serves the cause of human emancipation. It is the legitimate successor of all that was best in the philosophy of the past, in contrast to the degenerate philosophical schools of capitalism.

*It is for this reason that I have called this book "In Defence of Philosophy". Dying capitalism in its struggle for survival threatens all human values, and we need to defend them. The defence of philosophy and the advancement of philosophy has become the defence of socialist philosophy, that is, of dialectical materialism, just as, indeed, the defence of human culture in general has become the defence of socialist culture.*

It is well known that the best method of defence is usually to attack. This is the case in philosophy. Progress and truth is only won in the midst of the struggle against reaction and error. Therefore I attack bourgeois philosophy.

But in this book I have nevertheless not attempted to examine in detail all the various schools of contemporary philosophy. To do that would be a very long-drawn-out affair. I have concentrated on one alone, the school of *positivism*, and of that only on some of its most recent manifestations.

Positivism claims to be an *empiricist* philosophy, that is, a philosophy which says that all knowledge comes from experience

and that nothing can be known by the light of pure reason or intuition independent of experience. Nevertheless, positivism employs its own principles in interpreting experience and interpreting knowledge. And these principles lead to the negative conclusion that we can never know anything of the real external world.

If we are scientific, say the positivists, we can formulate ideas which serve to correlate the sense-data which we receive when we observe things; or, as the particular variety known as *pragmatists* have it, ideas which are found to work, in the sense that we find it pays us to believe them and act on them. But our ideas do not and cannot reflect objective material reality, which exists independent of our thinking of it and experiencing it.

Thus *the central features of positivism as a philosophical tendency are: first, the doctrine that all knowledge must be based on experience, opposition to speculative "system-building"; second, the doctrine that knowledge, based on experience, can serve only to correlate observations or to predict the results of various operations, and cannot reflect objective reality existing independent of experience.*

The positivists have elaborated various theories about the nature of thinking, knowledge, truth, scientific method and language corresponding to this doctrine. The positivist outlook has penetrated deeply into modern philosophy of science in particular, and it includes those philosophical trends and theories known as logical analysis, logical positivism, logical empiricism, semantics and pragmatism. These are the theories which are examined in this book.

I consider these positivist theories to be in essence false and reactionary. What is wrong with them is not that they oppose philosophical "systems" and hold that all knowledge is based on experience. On the contrary, that is quite correct. What is wrong with them is that their denial that knowledge, based on experience, reflects objective reality existing independent of experience leads to their creating new idealist systems and to their disrupting and falsifying scientific thought. I have tried to put the case against them; and the case which I have tried to put against them is the case of Marxism, of dialectical materialism.

*Positivism concentrates within itself all the most negative features of bourgeois philosophy—the doctrine of the limitations of knowledge and the unknowability of the real world. At the same time it carries to the*

*furthest pitch the narrow specialisation of philosophy, scholastic phrasemongering and barren abstraction. And it issues in views about the natural sciences which serve only the perversion of the sciences to suit the ends of monopoly capitalism, and in views about society which serve exactly the same ends.*

Thus it serves as one of the chief and most influential agencies—perhaps the chief one—of capitalist ideology in philosophy. And this makes it particularly worthy of detailed examination.

Both in criticising bourgeois philosophy and in attempting to expound Marxist views, I have made a very liberal use of quotations from the classics of Marxism—the works of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin. Since whenever these works are quoted someone is always sure to start talking about “appeals to the sacred scriptures”, it is worth stating briefly why such quotations are necessary in such a book as this.

In the first place, a Marxist is one who, convinced of the correctness of the fundamental principles of Marxism, endeavours to apply and to develop these in theory and in practice. Naturally, therefore, he must seek to make the fullest use of the rich heritage contained in the classical works of Marxism, and continually turns to these for guidance.

In the second place, in these works many things have been said supremely well. Why try to re-state in other terms what has already been so well stated?

In the third place, the statements quoted have been argued and substantiated by their authors in the works to which reference is made. If anyone doubts this, he can turn to the works in question. A Marxist, therefore, in writing about philosophy, or about many other subjects, does not start, as it were, from scratch, but starts from what has already been substantiated in the classical works of Marxism. Marxism is a progressive science, which wins positions and moves forward.

Fourthly, these quotations are intended to be of use to students of Marxism, who must of necessity base their studies on the Marxist classics. They serve to bring out points contained in those classics and to show their relevance and application to contemporary problems.

Lastly, opponents of Marxism do not usually pay much attention to what Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin have actually said. They prefer to give their own garbled version of Marxism and then solemnly to discuss its inadequacies and errors.

These quotations are a challenge to such opponents. They are put forward because they provide the basis for cutting the way out of the maze in which bourgeois philosophy is wandering. Let the opponents refute them—they have been trying to do so for years—or else admit the power and truth of Marxist science. And let them reckon with the authentic statements of the founders of Marxism, not knock over Aunt Sallies of their own manufacture.

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## CHAPTER I

### THE LOGIC OF IRRATIONALISM— FROM RUSSELL TO CARNAP AND AYER

#### I. AGAINST PHILOSOPHICAL "SYSTEMS"

ONE result of the impact of the natural sciences upon philosophical thought has been that as the sciences have branched off from the stream of philosophical systems and developed their own special methods of investigation, so the activity of constructing a purely philosophical "system of the world", standing above the sciences and relying upon speculative and a-priori methods of argument, has become increasingly revealed as futile and unnecessary.

The need for a change in the whole character of philosophy, arising from the development of the natural sciences, was stated long ago and very explicitly by Engels, from the point of view of materialism.

The advance of scientific knowledge, he wrote, led to "a comprehensive view of the interconnection of nature by means of the facts provided by empirical natural science itself." This "finally disposed of" all need for philosophical system-building, and "every attempt at resurrecting it would be not only superfluous but a step backwards".<sup>(1)</sup>

"Modern materialism", he wrote in *Anti-Duhring*, ". . . no longer needs any philosophy standing above the sciences. As soon as each separate science is required to get clarity as to its position in the great totality of things and of our knowledge of things, a special science dealing with this totality is superfluous. What still independently survives of all former philosophy is the science of thought and its laws—formal logic and dialectics. Everything else is merged in the positive science of nature and history".<sup>(2)</sup>

A like conclusion as to the futility of the traditional types of system-building has also increasingly forced itself into recognition in bourgeois philosophy. While some of the idealist schools have continued to this day to invent system after system,

(1) Engels, *Feuerbach*, pp. 56-7.

(2) Engels, *Anti-Duhring*, p. 32.



they have as constantly been opposed and criticised by “scientific” empiricists, who have declared that empirical science was the only highway to knowledge.

This was made a leading principle, for example, by Compté, to whom we owe the term “positivism”. According to Compté, the “epoch” in which men tried to arrive at a comprehensive view of the world by means of metaphysical speculations was over; henceforth we must cultivate the methods of empirical science, which alone provide “positive knowledge”.

The positivistic empiricists, however, in their opposition to philosophical system-building, have regarded the view, expressed by Engels, that empirical science discovered the objective “interconnection of nature”, as itself a kind of hangover of past system-building.

Commenting on Engels’ statement that “what still independently survives of all former philosophy is the science of thought and its laws”, Lenin pointed out that this includes “what is now called the theory of knowledge, which must regard its subject matter historically, studying and generalising the origin and development of knowledge.”<sup>(1)</sup>

The new standpoint of dialectical materialism includes the materialist theory of knowledge, which studies knowledge as the developing social process of the discovery of the interconnections and laws of motion of the real material world.

But far from including in “scientific” philosophy a theory of knowledge which studies and generalises the origin and development of our knowledge of the objective world, *the fundamental feature of the positivist empiricist schools is that they have taken as their basis a theory of knowledge according to which we can know only our own perceptions to exist.*

Impressed by the fact that knowledge has its origin in experience and must be tested in experience, the positivist empiricists have forgotten that experience is itself the product of our practical interaction with external material objects, and have instead regarded it as in itself something ultimate.

Hence they have not regarded the “positive knowledge” which we gain by empirical methods as relating to the objective material world, and as affording a more and more comprehensive view of this world, but they have regarded it as relating simply to our own perceptions. It is perceptions, they say, which are the data of knowledge and the only objects of knowledge: to

<sup>(1)</sup> Lenin, *On Karl Marx*, Selected Works, Vol. XI, p. 17.