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by
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Forgotten Books

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Scepticism in Philosophy

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Moscow Editor's Note: 'This article was published in *Sovremenny Mir*, no 7, 1911. *Sovremenny Mir* (*Contemporary World*) – a literary, scientific and political monthly published in St Petersburg from 1906 to 1918. Raoul Richter (1871-1912) – German idealist philosopher.'

Raoul Richter, *Scepticism in Philosophy*, Volume 1 (translated from the German by V Bazarov and B Stolpner, Library of Contemporary Philosophy, Issue 5, Shipovnik Publishers, St Petersburg, 1910).

I

This is a very interesting book. It should be read and reread and that more than once. It deals with the very latest questions in knowledge, and presents these very well. But it also suffers from at least one substantial shortcoming: the proffered solutions of these well-presented questions are unsatisfactory. Therefore, in reading and rereading the book, one has to be constantly on the alert. The more so as the author possesses intelligence and no little knowledge and readers can be easily influenced by him.

The author's work is still unfinished; this is only the first volume. R Richter says:

The final solution concerning the measure of truth contained in the realist or idealist views must be held over till Volume 2. Here we have been concerned first of all to show in both these views ways out which have not been obstructed by the scepticism of antiquity and permit us at least to discern the properties of things. (p 281)

That must be kept in mind. However, judging by the contents of Volume 1, we may already say with all justification that R Richter, if he does not exactly uphold the point of view of idealism, has assimilated many of its arguments; and this fact has brought a very noticeable and very annoying element of confusion into his world-outlook. The translators, Messrs V Bazarov and B Stolpner, have not noticed this weak point of the German writer. It is clear why: idealism has regrettably wrought even greater havoc in their world-outlook too. But an unbiased person, capable of thinking consistently and of reading the book carefully, will easily find where R Richter has gone wrong. His work is concerned with the question of scepticism. The sceptics used to say: we do not know the criterion of truth. Anyone agreeing with them on this point must admit that their position is unshakeable. But R Richter does not agree with them. How does he refute the proposition that is the key to the whole of their position? What, in his view, is the criterion of truth, and, finally, the famous question which Pontius Pilate put to the arrested Jesus – what is truth?

'Truth', replies R Richter, 'is a *concept of relationship*, expressing the relationship of judgements to the senses of the subject.' (p 347) Elsewhere he says:

Truth... is a concept the source of which is the human spirit; to find it is a task set by the human spirit alone, and therefore to be

resolved by it alone; it is a knot tied by the human spirit and therefore to be unravelled by it alone... A truth in itself is... an utterly unrealisable thought. (p 191)

It follows from this that, according to Richter, only the relationship of the truth to the subject is possible. He is not a bit afraid of this conclusion. He declares categorically:

It goes without saying that we reject the ordinary definition of truth as ‘agreement between the conception and its object’, and this for two reasons. First, the sense of the evident attaches only to judgements and not conceptions. Secondly, the assumption of the relationship between conceptions and objects – and this assumption is the basis of the definition given above – is either a *petitio principii* ^[1] or a remote result – and one, moreover, disputed by all idealists – of applying criteria of truth. Both characteristics are circumstances that are fatal precisely for a definition of truth. (p lvi)

Let us examine this. A particular person seems to me to be pale. Is that true? A stupid question! Once a particular person seems to me to be pale, there is nothing to argue about; that is undoubtedly how he seems to me. It is quite another matter if, on this basis, I utter the judgement: ‘That man is ill.’ It may be true, or it may be false. In which case is it true? In the case when my judgement corresponds to the actual state of the person’s health. In which case is it false? That is self-evident: when the actual state of the person’s health and my judgement on it do not correspond. That means that truth is precisely correspondence between the judgement and its object. In other words, it is the definition rejected by R Richter which is correct. ^[2] To put it another way: our author says that truth is related only to the subject. On this point he is strongly influenced by idealism. The idealist denies the

existence of the object outside human consciousness. Therefore he cannot define truth as a certain relationship between the judgement of the subject and the actual state of the object. But being reluctant to contradict idealism, R Richter comes into conflict with the most legitimate requirements of logic. His view on the criterion of truth is a great, one may say an unpardonable, mistake. I considered it my duty to draw the attention of Russian readers to this error which Messrs Bazarov and Stolpner failed to notice, and could not notice, because they too, regrettably, are infected with idealism.

II

R Richter thinks that once we accept the existence of a relationship between conception (more correctly, judgement) and object, we are committing a *petitio principii*. But where is the *petitio principii* in what I have said about the necessary and adequate conditions for the truth of the judgement: that pale man is ill? In what I said on this subject there is no sign of the logical error which so frightens our author that he wards it off by an obvious and gross blunder – as the saying goes, jumping out of the frying pan into the fire.

We already know what is the matter. In saying: ‘my judgement of a particular person’s state of health is correct only if it agrees with the actual state of the particular person’, I am assuming something which is unacceptable to idealists and which, as R Richter says, they dispute. This assumption is that the object exists independently of my consciousness. But an object existing independently of my consciousness is an object-in-itself. In assuming that objects have such existence, I am rejecting the fundamental tenet of idealism that *esse = percipi*, that is to say, that being is equal to being-in-consciousness. But R Richter wants none of this. True, the object mentioned in my example is such a

special one that only very few idealists venture to apply to it their principle of *esse = percipi*. I ask, how may one be sure that a particular *man* is ill? But what do these words *esse = percipi* mean in their *application to man*? They mean that there are no other people than the person who at that particular moment is proclaiming the principle. The consistent application of this principle leads to *solipsism*. The overwhelming majority of idealists, despite the most inexorable demands of logic, do not venture to go as far as to land in *solipsism*. Very many of them stop at the point of view which is now called *solohumanism*. This means that, for them, being remains being-in-consciousness, in the consciousness, however, not of an individual but of all the human race. To agree with them, one would have to answer the question: ‘Is there an external world?’ by saying: ‘Outside myself, that is to say, independently of my consciousness, there is only the human race. Everything else – the stars, the planets, plants, animals, etc – exist only in human consciousness.’

The reader will recall the conversation between the sotnik and the philosopher Khoma Brut. ^[3]

‘Who are you, where do you come from, and what is your calling, good man?’, asked the sotnik.

‘A seminarist, student of philosophy, Khoma Brut...’

‘Who was your father?’

‘I don’t know, honoured sir.’

‘Your mother?’

‘I don’t know my mother either. It is reasonable to suppose, of course, that I had a mother; but who she was, and where she came from, and when she lived – upon my soul, good sir, I don’t know.’

Obviously, the philosopher Khoma Brut was far from averse to criticism. Only sound reasoning convinced him that he had had a mother. But he nevertheless admitted her existence. He did not say: ‘My mother exists (or existed) only in my consciousness.’ If he had said so (considering himself born of a woman who existed only in his consciousness), he would have been a *solipsist*. Though he was no stranger to criticism, he did not go the length of drawing such a conclusion. Therefore, we may presume that he took his stand, for example, on *solohumanism*. If this presumption is correct, he did not confine himself to admitting his mother’s existence alone, but in general recognised the ‘plurality of individuals’. He did deny, however, the existence independently of consciousness of those objects on which these individuals act in the process of social production. So that if his mother was, shall we say, a baker, he would have had to confess that she existed independently of his consciousness, whereas the buns she baked existed only in her and his mind and in the minds of the individuals who bought and ate them, naively imagining that these buns had existence in themselves, independently of human consciousness. If he saw a herdsman driving his cattle, as a solohumanist he would have had to admit that the herdsman existed independently of his consciousness, while the herd of cows, sheep and pigs existed only in his mind and in that of the herdsman tending those conceptual animals. He would have had to utter a similar ‘judgement’ when he saw protruding from the pocket of his worthy fellow-traveller Khalyava the huge tail of the fish that had been filched by the learned theologian. The theologian exists independently of the consciousness of the philosopher Khoma Brut, but the pilfered fish has no other

existence except in the consciousness of these two learned men, and, of course, the ox-cart driver from whom Khalyava had filched it. Philosophy of this sort is, as you see, distinguished by its great profundity. There is only one thing wrong: on the very same day and at the very same hour when the philosopher Khoma Brut recognised that the theologian Khalyava (or the rhetorician Gorobets, it's all the same) had being apart from his consciousness, he would have run into irreconcilable contradiction with the principle of *esse = percipi*: he would have had to admit that the concept *being* is in no way conveyed by the concept *being-in-consciousness*.

The erudite R Richter looks down on simple-minded realists with the lofty disdain of the 'critical' thinker; but he himself is so thoroughly infected with idealism that he is completely blind to the comical artlessness which, to a greater or lesser extent, is characteristic of all varieties of this philosophical trend. He takes seriously those arguments of idealist philosophy which deserve only to be laughed at, and in consequence he gives a wrong definition of truth. Here is how he formulates the theoretical-cognitive credo of 'extreme' idealism:

There exist no things, objects, realities, bodies, independent of the conceptions of them in a consciousness, and the things perceived by the senses are completely dissolved in the subjective and ideal parts of which they are composed. (p 247)

Let us assume that this is true – that no things, objects and bodies exist independently of the conceptions of them in consciousness. But if every particular person exists independently of the consciousness of other people, it positively cannot be said that there are no '*realities*' independent of consciousness. Surely every person existing independently of other people's consciousness

must be regarded as an indisputable reality, even though at the same time – in accordance with our first assumption – we regarded him as an incorporeal being. The penetrating R Richter does not realise this. Further. If an incorporeal man named Ivan exists independently of the consciousness of an incorporeal man called Pyotr, he may express certain judgements about Pyotr. These opinions will be true only if they correspond to reality. In other words, the incorporeal Ivan's judgements about the condition of the incorporeal Pyotr are true only if Pyotr is in fact what Ivan considers him to be. This must be admitted by every idealist, except, of course, the solipsist, who denies the plurality of individuals. And whoever admits this, by the same token also admits that truth consists in a judgement conforming to its object.

III

Richter says:

Deeply penetrating research is fathoming more and more the *law-governed relationships* between things and within them, and less and less the things themselves; these it is simply dissolving in the complex of such relationships. Consequently, the results of this research may for the most part be easily formulated in the language of any particular philosophical trend provided it does not attack these relationships, though it may have its own opinion about the concept of the thing. When the historian writes of a ruler possessing a noble or base soul, he merely wishes to say that the ruler concerned usually responded to such and such events with morally high or low thoughts, feelings and volitional impulses, and it is irrelevant to the historian whether the soul exists or not. (p 289)

Of course, for an historian it is a matter of indifference whether the *soul* exists or not. But it is by no means a matter of indifference to him whether the ‘*ruler*’ about whose actions he is forming a judgement exists or not. And it is precisely the ‘*ruler*’ who plays here the part of the disputed ‘*thing*’. Let us admit for a moment that natural science is in fact dissolving things more and more in the complex of relationships. Can the same be said of the social sciences? Where is the sociologist who would base his judgements on the proposition that people do not exist, that there are only social relationships... of people? Such a sociologist could be met with only in a mental institution. If that is so, it is evident that not every ‘philosophical trend’ can be reconciled with scientific research, at least into social phenomena. For example, the concept of evolution plays a titanic part in contemporary sociology. Can this concept be reconciled with those philosophical trends under whose influence our author elaborated his definition of the criterion of truth? If what we call the external world exists only in people’s consciousness, can we speak without an augur’s smile of those periods in the earth’s development which *preceded* the coming of the zoological species we call homo sapiens? If space and time are only forms of contemplation (*Anschauung*) that I myself possess, it is clear that when I did not exist these forms did not exist either, that is to say, there was no time and no space, so that, when I assert, for instance, that Pericles lived long before me, I am talking arrant nonsense. Is it not obvious that the ‘philosophical’ trend bearing the name of solipsism can in no way be reconciled with the concept of evolution? It maybe objected, perhaps, that if this is true as regards *solipsism*, it is untrue in relation to *solohumanism*; since solohumanism recognises the existence of the human race, then, while this race is still around, there will exist both forms of contemplation which are peculiar to it, that is, space and time. However, the following must be remembered. First,

solohumanism, as we have seen, totally excludes the view of man as a product of zoological evolution. Secondly, if time does not exist independently of the consciousness of the individuals making up the human race, it is quite incomprehensible where we get the right to assert that one of these individuals lived earlier than another, for example, that the celebrated Athenian Pericles lived prior to the notorious Frenchman Briand. Why can we not put it the other way round, namely, that Briand preceded Pericles? Is it not because our judgements adapt themselves here to the objective sequence of events, which does not depend upon human consciousness? And if that is indeed the reason, is it not clear that those thinkers were right who averred that although space and time as *formal elements of consciousness* exist not outside us, but within us, nevertheless to both these elements there correspond certain objective (that is, independent of consciousness) relationships of things and processes? Is it not plain, finally, that only by admitting the existence of these objective relationships do we have any possibility of constructing a scientific theory which will explain the emergence of the human race itself with the forms of consciousness peculiar to it! Being is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by being.

Nowadays, some people like to dilate on the distinctions between the 'sciences of nature' and the 'sciences of culture'. The writers who enjoy discussing this theme are all without exception more or less inclined to consistent idealism. They are trying to find a refuge for their idealist notions in the 'sciences of culture'. But, in fact, these sciences, that is, the social science in the broad meaning of the term, are even less reconcilable with idealism than the natural science. The social science presupposes society. Society presupposes a plurality of individuals. A plurality of individuals makes inevitable the distinction between the individual as he exists '*in himself*' and the same individual as he exists in the

consciousness of other people, as well as in his own.^[4] And that returns us to that theory of cognition against which representatives of various trends of philosophical idealism have raised their differing voices. The solohumanist is bound to accept the cardinal principle of this theory, which says that apart from being-in-consciousness there is also being-in-oneself. But the solohumanist denies the existence of all ‘things’ and ‘bodies’. To him, people are essentially nothing more than the bearers of consciousness, that is, nothing more than incorporeal beings. Hence it follows that everyone interested in ‘the last word’ in knowledge, yet desirous of steering clear of solipsism, is faced with a dilemma. To regard himself as an incorporeal being, or to agree with the materialist Feuerbach: *‘Ich bin ein wirkliches, ein sinnliches Wesen, ja der Leib in seiner Totalität ist mein Ich, mein Wesen selbst.’* (‘I am a real, sensual being, a body; it is this body, taken in its totality, which is my *ego*, my essence.’)

If R Richter had taken all this into consideration, his interesting book would have been even more interesting and incomparably richer in correct philosophical content. But if he had taken account of it, he would have been an exception among present-day German writers on philosophical matters. But to his misfortune, there is nothing exceptional about him just as, to their misfortune, there is nothing exceptional about his Russian translators, who failed to notice the weakness of their author’s arguments.

IV

I stated, and I trust have proved, that R Richter is deeply infected with idealism. Now I think it would be useful to add that the most profound and most orderly system of idealism – Hegel’s philosophy – has obviously much less attraction for him than other less profound and less orderly systems of idealism. I would say

more. It is very plain that he has not bothered himself trying to understand Hegel. Here is a vivid example.

At the beginning of his book, having examined the historical prerequisites of Greek scepticism, R Richter hastens to caution his readers:

However, it would be quite wrong to conclude from this that the achievements of the sceptical philosophers we are about to discuss were insignificant, as though all they had to do was skilfully to select and methodically to compare the ideas of their predecessors, as though, in the Hegelian sense, according to the reasonable development of the world they were bound to come when and as they did. We hope, on the contrary, that by our exposition of the philosophy of scepticism we shall succeed in proving its complete originality – an originality that is quite astonishing. Historical prerequisites are not yet spiritual causes. The spiritual father of philosophical scepticism was the genius of Pyrrho, and not the philosophers before him nor world reason, about which we know absolutely nothing. (pp 60-61)

That passage could never have been written by anyone who had taken the trouble to read Hegel's *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie*. Did the demands of 'self-developing world reason' induce Hegel to exclude the 'complete originality' of the creators of the most important philosophical systems? By no means. Did Hegel ever oppose world reason to the genius of individual thinkers? Decidedly never. But that is just the trouble: contemporary German authors of philosophical treatises know Hegel very badly. They are idealists, but the content of their idealism is infinitely poorer than that of Hegel. Of course, Hegel loses nothing at all by being ignored by present-day German writers; it is they who are the losers. Hegel was a great master of

the ‘treatment of ideas’, and he who desires to ‘treat ideas’ must pass through his school, even if he does not share Hegel’s idealist views. Conversely, present-day German writers who are occupied with philosophical questions treat ideas very clumsily. This is especially noticeable where they need most of all to display their intellectual powers, namely, when they are called upon to defend their idealist standpoint. It is precisely this point then that these people, who speak so contemptuously of ‘naive dogmatists’, themselves produce in their arguments some real pearls of naive dogmatism. ^[5]

V

The first volume of Richter’s work is a study of Greek scepticism. The first chapter outlines the history of this school of philosophy, the second sets forth its teaching, while the third is a criticism of the doctrine of scepticism. Let us dwell for a moment on the third chapter.

Greek scepticism posed three fundamental questions: 1) What is the nature of things? 2) What should be our attitude to things? 3) What will result for us from this attitude? Its answer to the first question was that every thesis on the nature of things may be opposed by an equally well-founded antithesis: that is, that their nature is unknown to us. To the second question, scepticism replied that our attitude to things must be one of unconditional scepticism, always abstaining from making a judgement of any kind (sceptical ‘Ἐποχή’). Lastly, the third question was answered in the sense that abstention from expressing judgement gives one imperturbability of mind (*ataraxia*) and the absence of suffering (*apatheia*) that make for happiness. What has Richter to say in his criticism of scepticism regarding these replies?

Let us take the reply to the first question. In his analysis of it, Richter distinguishes the following fundamental theoretical and cognitive positions: first, extreme realism; second, extreme idealism; third, moderate realism, which he also calls moderate idealism or ideal-realism. According to him, scepticism is capable of mastering only the first of these positions, namely, that of extreme realism; the other two are quite beyond it (p 199).

But we have already seen that the philosophical trend to which Richter gives the title of extreme idealism (that is, in fact, more or less consistent idealism) leads to insoluble and ludicrous contradictions. One would have to be very partial to 'extreme idealism' to imagine that it could possibly be regarded as an at all lasting philosophical position. Therefore, I shall not enlarge upon it further, but shall turn my attention to 'extreme realism' and 'ideal-realism'.

The Greek Sceptics, for example, posed the question: is honey sweet or bitter? To the majority of people it is sweet; but there are certain invalids to whom honey seems bitter. The sceptics concluded from this that we cannot know the true nature of honey. It is easy to notice that, in posing the above question, the Sceptics believed that honey could be either sweet or bitter in itself, quite apart from the person tasting it. But when I say that honey is sweet (or bitter) I only mean that it gives me the sensation of sweetness (or bitterness). Sensation presupposes a subject who is experiencing it. When there is no such subject, there is no sensation. To ask whether honey is sweet or bitter in itself is as absurd as to ask what a particular sensation is when there is no one to experience it. Yet this question, absurd as it may be, is perfectly legitimate from the viewpoint which Richter calls extreme realism. This viewpoint identifies the properties of the object with the

sensations these properties stimulate in us. Richter gives a good illustration of the standpoint of extreme realism when he says:

The tree whose leaves I see green, whose bark I see brown, whose hard trunk I touch, whose sweet fruit I taste and the rustle of whose topmost branches I hear, also has *in itself* green leaves, brown bark, a hard trunk, sweet fruit and rustling branches. (p 200)

Richter also notes correctly that, so far as science is concerned, *such* realism died long ago. The materialist Democritus was already able to distinguish the properties of an object from the sensations aroused in us by those properties. If the Sceptics could confound their adversaries by posing such questions as: is honey sweet or bitter in itself? – one may only conclude that both they themselves and their adversaries, who were apparently unable to stand up to them, were (to use the terminology R Richter has assimilated) ‘extreme realists’, that is to say, they held a quite untenable theory of cognition. In this regard, Richter is not mistaken.

VI

I pass on to ideal-realism. By ideal-realism (or real-idealism, or moderate realism) R Richter understands that view which acknowledges the existence of things independent of the subject, but ‘does not ascribe to these real things, as their objective properties, all the component parts of perception, but only some of them’ (p 221).

He points out correctly that this theory of cognition enjoys the widest recognition among contemporary naturalists. According to this theory, definite sensations *correspond* to definite properties or

conditions of things, but do *not resemble* them in any way. A definite sound corresponds to definite vibrations of the air, but the sensation of sound does not resemble the vibrations of the atmospheric particles. This can also be said of sensations of light, produced by vibrations of the ether, and so on. Thus this theory distinguishes the *primary* properties of bodies from their *secondary* properties, or the properties of the first order from the properties of the second order. The properties of the first order are sometimes called the physico-mathematical qualities of things. These include, for instance, density, shape, extension. Pointing out the distinction between the primary properties of things and their secondary properties, Richter remarks that this distinction completely invalidates the argument of the Sceptics which was based on the relativity of sensual perception, for example, on the fact that honey seems sweet to one person and bitter to another. From this relativity, the Sceptics deduced that things were unknowable. But to the 'moderate realists' this deduction is quite wrong. Indeed, colour exists only in relationship to light, and changes with changing light. This also applies exactly to the temperature of a given body, which induces in us sensations of either heat or cold, according to the temperature level of our blood, and so on. But from this it follows only that sensations are not primary properties of things, but the effects of the action of objects possessing certain primary properties upon the subject. That is all quite true. Here Richter is once again quite right. But then he goes on to say:

If, finally, the moderate realist cannot come to irreconcilably contradictory judgements on the secondary properties of things because, in his view, it is not through sensations at all that the properties of things become known, *on the other hand, he can get to know very well* the real properties which correspond to the purely subjective sensations, that is to say, which, like irritants,

arouse these sensations. For these irritants are always of a spatial, material, and consequently in principle knowable nature. (p 241)

It is impossible to accept this without a very serious reservation. Take note of Richter's argument with which he attempts to prove, in refutation of the Sceptics, that the moderate realist 'cannot come to irreconcilably contradictory judgements on the secondary properties of things'. And why not? 'Because, in his view, it is not through sensations at all that the properties of things become known.' That is not true. Though it is true that many 'moderate realists', submitting to the influence of idealist prejudices, imagine that the properties of things cannot become known through sensations. But how, indeed, can they not become known? A thing excites a particular sensation. This capacity to arouse a sensation in us is the property of the thing. Consequently once the particular sensation is known, this particular property of the thing also thereby becomes known. Therefore we must say the exact opposite to what Richter said: according to 'moderate realism' (we shall call it this for the time being), in general, it is through sensations (it would be more exact to say: by means of sensations), that the properties of things are known. This seems to be clear. Only one argument could really be advanced against this: that the sensation aroused by the particular property of a thing changes with the changing condition of the subject. But we have already seen that this objection will not stand up to criticism. Sensation is the *result* of interaction of object and subject. It is quite natural that this result should depend *not only* on the properties of the object, not only on the properties of what is becoming known, but also on the properties of the knowing subject. However, this quite natural circumstance does not in any way prove the unknowability of things. ^[6] Quite the contrary. It proves their knowability. The sensual and knowing subject not only can, but in certain circumstances must, be regarded as an object, for example, when

we are referring to an invalid in whom particular things produce unusual sensations. If honey tastes sweet to a man in good health and bitter to an invalid, only one conclusion may be drawn from this, viz: that in certain circumstances the human organism is capable of reacting in an unusual fashion to a definite irritant. This capacity is an objective property which can be studied, that is to say, known. Which means – and there is no need to be afraid of repeating this – that in accordance with the correctly understood view of ‘moderate realism’, *in sensations generally the properties of things become known*. This, in turn, signifies that those who contend that things are unknowable, citing in support of this the complete dissimilarity between a sensation (for example, sound) and the objective process that produces it (in this case, the wave-like motion of the air) are making a great mistake in the domain of the theory of knowledge. Incidentally, all that was said against the knowability of things by Kant and his followers is based upon this mistake. It was also at the bottom of Greek scepticism. We see that Richter himself is far from being free from it. This is also because, as we stated above, he is deeply infected with idealism. Looking at his ‘case’ from the angle of my theory of cognition, I would say that in succumbing to the influence of idealism, Richter acquired the ‘property’ of comprehending incorrectly the true meaning of the ‘moderate realist’ view. His subjective state distorted in a definite (and moreover most undesirable) way the effect upon him of the logic of this view. But this has not rendered either Richter or the doctrine of ‘moderate realism’ unknowable.

VII

In making his remarks regarding the unknowability of the properties of things in sensations, Richter admits, as we have seen, that ‘on the other hand, the “moderate realist” *can get to know very well* ^[1] the real properties which correspond to the purely

subjective sensations'. This expression 'to the purely subjective sensations' is very characteristic of Richter as well as of all those philosophising writers who, like him, have more or less succumbed to idealism. We shall recognise it as even more characteristic if we turn our attention to the conclusion which Richter finally reaches on the matter under discussion:

In so far as the elements of perception can be traced back to properties of things, these properties are basically knowable. In so far as the component parts of perception as properties of things would be unknowable, they are in general not properties of things. (p 241, author's italics)

What does Richter mean here by the component parts of perception which are unknowable as properties of things? Sensations. Why? Because sensations are '*purely subjective*' (my italics); they do not belong to the properties of the object which arouses these sensations in the subject. Good. Let us take this for granted, keep it in mind, and ponder the following example taken from Überweg – if my memory serves me right.

In a cellar there are a barrel of meal and two mice. The cellar is locked, there are no chinks in the floor, on the ceiling or in the walls, so no other mice can get in. Finding themselves in the happy possession of a whole barrel of meal, our two mice set about bringing into the world little mice who are also imbued with the lust for life thanks to the abundant food supply. In due course they too reproduce a generation of mice, who then go on to repeat the same story. Thus the number of mice continues to increase and the store of food decreases. Finally the moment arrives when the barrel is completely empty. What is the outcome? It is that a definite quantity of an object which is *devoid* of sensation (meal) has been transformed into a definite quantity of objects *that have*

sensations; for example: they suffer hunger now that all the meal has gone (mice). The capacity to have sensations is just as much a property of certain organisms as is their capacity to stimulate in us, say, certain visual sensations. Therefore, from this point of view too, Richter is wrong in saying that everything ‘purely subjective’ is beyond the meaning of the concept: properties of things. I am *I* – for myself and at the same time *Thou* – for another. I am a subject and at the same time an object. The subject is not separated from the object by an impassable gulf. Consistent philosophical thought convinces us of the unity of subject and object. ‘That which for me, *subjectively*’, says Feuerbach, ‘is a purely spiritual, insensible act, is in itself, *objectively*, a material, sensible act.’ This conception of the unity of subject and object is the heart of contemporary materialism. It is in this that we find the true meaning of ‘moderate realism’ (or ideal-realism). From which it follows that ‘moderate realism’ is nothing but materialism, but a materialism that is timid, inconsistent, hesitating in pursuing its conclusions to the very end and making more or less significant and (in any case) illegitimate concessions to idealism.

VIII

So far we have dealt with, strictly speaking, the first question posed by the Sceptics, namely, are things knowable? And we have seen that our author, infected with idealist prejudices, has not an entirely correct view of this question. But what does he say about the other two basic questions posed by Greek scepticism? As regards these, he argues as follows:

The Sceptics’ reply to Timon’s last two basic questions: What should be our attitude to things? and: What will result for us from this attitude? – only draws the conclusions from the solution of the first and most important problem concerning the nature of things.

Criticism after examining this solution: 'things are unknowable', and rejecting it as unjustified, no longer needed to investigate the negative and positive consequences of the basic viewpoint of scepticism *in isolation*, since they claim validity only presupposing that viewpoint. (p 370)

Quite so. If criticism found the Sceptics' assertion that things are unknowable to be erroneous, it must recognise as no less erroneous the belief that we should refrain from forming any judgements about things, and equally erroneous the claim that such abstention is essential for our happiness. That is all true. But since it is true, I again cease to understand Richter. He has admitted that only an 'extreme realist' would find the Sceptics' arguments irrefutable. 'Moderate realism' and even 'extreme idealism', in his opinion, refute these arguments easily. As has been already said, so far as idealism is concerned, Richter is in this case wrong. Idealism is quite incapable of refuting scepticism for the simple but fully adequate reason that it itself suffers from insoluble contradictions. However, I have no intention of returning to that subject here. I shall repeat just one thing: if the 'moderate realist' and the 'extreme idealist' are quite capable of refuting the Sceptic's arguments, neither of them requires to make any concession whatever to the sceptical mode of thought. Yet Richter himself makes some very important concessions to it. He says that 'from the very first' a dose of scepticism has been circulating in the blood of modern man (pp 348-49) and beseeches us to show some 'resignation' regarding questions of cognition (p 192). Why resignation? With what object? Well, just listen to this:

We must... whether we like it or not, learn from the sceptics and admit that the truth which is undoubtedly accessible to us is truth pertaining only to man, and that truth which we, in general, can conceive, is truth pertaining to beings similar to ourselves. We

must not, on the other hand, be carried away as a result of this to the premature conclusion that we must, for this reason, despair of ever finding the truth... But this resignation will be made much easier for us by the fact that everything we cannot in any way conceive also does not pertain to us, does not concern us, can leave us indifferent. Only he who has partaken of the apple feels the urge to do so again, and is distressed if denied this enjoyment. But he who cannot form any conception of this sensation of taste will not miss the apple. Only those who have lost their sight are unhappy; those born blind are not. As regards extra-human knowledge – if there is such a thing – we are all born blind. (pp 192-93)

Throughout all the foregoing there is a very obvious and nasty note of philistinism. A fine consolation indeed that we did not lose our sight but were born blind! Why did Richter have to drag in this ‘consolation’? ^[8] He only wished to console us because we, humans, cannot know ‘extra-human’ truth. According to him, this is not a very great misfortune. I could not agree more with him; in fact, as I see it, it is not a misfortune here at all. I shall go further: the very thought that it is misfortune, even if only a tiny one, is rooted in the mistaken theory of cognition I spoke about earlier. The process of the subject getting to know the object is the process whereby the former arrives at a correct opinion of the latter. The object becomes known to the subject only because it is capable of influencing the subject in a certain way. Therefore, we cannot speak of cognition where there is no relationship between the subject and the object. But those soft-hearted people who, like Richter, find it necessary to console us because extra-human truth is beyond us, do admit (perhaps unnoticed by themselves) that knowledge of an object is possible even where there is no subject getting to know it. They even imagine that such knowledge – knowledge independent of the subject, that is to say, that notorious knowledge of ‘things-in-themselves’ spoken of by Kant and other ‘critical’ philosophers in contemporary philosophy – is the only

real knowledge. If we could have knowledge of *that* kind we should not be born blind, and would not need Richter's proffered consolation.

Messrs Bazarov and Stolpner might, perhaps, object that their author does not admit the possibility of such a knowledge of 'things-in-themselves'. But they would not be right at all.

Let us assume that, indeed, Richter does not admit this possibility. But why? Precisely because, and only because, he thinks that it is inaccessible to man. He does not realise that *knowledge*, independent of the person knowing it, is a *contradictio in adjecto* – a logical absurdity. One person is convinced that the creature which the Greeks called a chimera does not and cannot exist. Another thinks that there is such a creature but we cannot know anything about it owing to the special way our bodies are constituted. What do you think, can one assert that both these men have the same view of the unknowability of the chimera? It is clear that they have not. If I think that the chimera does not and cannot exist, I can only laugh at those who are worried because it is inaccessible to their cognition; all talk of resignation would here be an insult to common sense. And yet Richter considers it necessary to preach such resignation. How is it possible to avoid feeling that he resembles the man who admits the existence of the chimera, but believes it to be inaccessible to his cognition?

IX

Richter's inclination to extreme idealism in his teaching on the criterion of truth arises out of his inability to shed his idealist prejudices in the theory of cognition. According to him, it would appear that truth for man is truth of some kind of secondary, lower category. Hence his recommendation that we should show 'resignation', that is to say, be reconciled with the impossibility of knowing higher truth, truth of the first category. We have seen that his teaching on the criterion of truth must be rejected as utterly

unsound. Truth is related not only to the subject but also to the object. That opinion of the object, which corresponds to its real state, is a true opinion. That which is true for man is also true in itself, precisely because a correct opinion truly depicts the actual state of things. ^[9] Therefore there is no point in our talking of resignation.

If we throw a man into the fire, he will be burnt; that is truth for him. And if we throw a cat into the fire? It too will be burnt. That is truth for the cat. Does truth for the man in this case resemble truth for the cat? They are as like as two peas! What does that mean? It means that truth for man has an objective significance that is not confined to the human race. Naturally, there are truths which are applicable only to the human race. These truths are the judgements that correspond to the actual state of all particular human feelings, thoughts or relationships. But this does not affect the main point. The important thing is that true judgements regarding the natural laws are true not only for man, although man alone is capable of forming such judgements. Systematic cognition of the natural laws became possible only when 'social man' emerged, having reached a certain level of mental development. A natural law which man has got to know is truth for man. But natural laws were operating on the earth before the appearance of man, that is to say, when there was no one capable of studying these laws. And only because these laws were operating at that time did man himself appear, bringing with him the systematic cognition of nature.

No one who understands this will accept, as Richter does, the legitimacy of that dose of scepticism which, he says, from the very first has been circulating in the blood of modern man. Modern man in a 'certain social position' has indeed a good dose of scepticism. But this is adequately explained by the state of modern society.

X

That brings us to the question: *what is the source of scepticism?*

Richter rightly says that the Sceptics of antiquity were, in the majority of cases, passive people, of ‘tired, enfeebled, broken will’ and devoid of passion (p 377). He is no less correct in linking these traits of the sceptics of antiquity with the course of development of ancient Greek society, and in looking on Greek scepticism as the fruit of the decay of that society. Well, if that is the case, it is quite natural to assume that the dose of scepticism which, he says, circulates in everyone’s blood may also be explained by social decay. True, we have no ground for saying, as the Slavophiles ^[10] used to say, that the advanced countries of the civilised world are now falling into decay. Taken as a whole, any one of the present-day civilised nations represents not a regressing but a progressing society. But what may be right in relation to the whole may be wrong in relation to its parts. Richter points to the scepticism that was widespread at the end of the eighteenth century, and reiterates that it is just as widespread today as it was then. But what explains the spread of scepticism in the eighteenth century? The explanation is that the system of social relations that had for long held sway in European society was then rapidly falling into decay. Taken as a whole, society at that time was also progressing, not regressing. But this cannot at all be said of the then upper class, the temporal and spiritual aristocracy. This class had long outlived its best days, and existed only in the form of an unwanted and therefore harmful relic. Something quite like this we see today. Only now the declining class is not the aristocracy, but the bourgeoisie. ^[11] Our century, like the eighteenth, represents the eve of a great social upheaval. All such periods of decline of the old ruling class provide exceptionally fertile soil for the development of scepticism. This is what explains that dose of

scepticism which, in Richter's words, circulates in the blood of modern man. It is not a question of extra-human truth being inaccessible to man, but of social revolution approaching, and of this approach, realised instinctively by the bourgeoisie, arousing in its ideologists a feeling of profound discontent, taking the form of scepticism, pessimism, etc. This discontent is, however, noticeable only among the bourgeois ideologists. The proletarian ideologists on the contrary are full of hope for the future. All of them are ready to repeat with Ulrich von Hutten his well-known exclamation: 'How good it is to be alive in our times!' ^[12] And that is why they are sceptical only, say, when it is a question of the advantages of the present-day social order or of certain beliefs which have grown up on the basis of this social order and others preceding it in historical development, or perhaps, when the bourgeoisie begins to extol its own virtues. Then scepticism is perfectly legitimate. Generally speaking, however, there is no room for scepticism in the mood and world-outlook of the proletariat. It is not consciousness that determines being, but being that determines consciousness.

Richter has grasped this incontestable truth very badly indeed, although, as has been remarked already, he understands fairly well that Greek scepticism was brought about by the decline of ancient Greece. How muddled he is here may be seen from the following.

He repudiates the Sceptics' principle of *isostheneia*, that is to say, the proposition that to every *thesis* on the nature of things there can be opposed an equally well-founded *antithesis*. ^[13] He is willing, however, to acknowledge that *isostheneia* is an incontrovertible fact in relation to much 'sham knowledge', ^[14] both in daily life and in science. He instances the question of parties to prove his point, and his example is worthy of attention:

Here [he argues] they unconditionally accept and jealously insist upon a whole series of solutions to the latest questions, that are still not theoretically ripe for discussion. Here the right and left often really confront each other, like thesis and antithesis, like 'yea' and 'nay'. But he who desires to take an objective decision will often enough have to say to himself that the liberal is no less justified than the conservative, the modernist in aesthetics no less than his classic opponent, the atomist no less than the energeticist, that, to use the language of the Sceptics, it's a complete isostheneia. (p 178)

And so, if one wishes to be objective, one must agree fairly often that the conservative is as right as the liberal, the modernist in aesthetics as the classicist, etc. Here our critic of the Sceptics has himself become a sceptic.

The Sceptics held that we have no way of knowing truth. Richter says the same about this sort of questions. It was not without good reason that he recognised that modern man has a good dose of scepticism in his blood.

XI

However, let us see with what criterion of truth we have to judge, for example, who is right: the 'conservative' or the 'liberal'. Let us suppose that it is a question of electoral rights. The 'liberals' demand their extension. The 'conservatives' are against it. Who is right? Richter says that both are right. Indeed, this is partly true. The 'conservative', *from his point of view*, is quite right; the extension of electoral rights would, generally speaking, be harmful to his interests, since it would weaken the political power of those of his own circle. The 'liberal' is no less right *from his point of view*. If implemented, the reform of the electoral system which he

demands would strengthen the power of the social group he represents and thus enable him to promote its interests better. But if everyone is right from his own point of view, is there really no sense in asking who should be judged more correct? Richter believes that this question is, in many cases, insoluble. That is not to be wondered at. Actually, he should have said that this question is insoluble in general, and not just fairly often. In his view, truth is relative only to the subject. Consequently the question of truth must be decided by him sceptically whenever the contesting subjects *are each right from their point of view*. But his decision is not binding on us. We consider that Richter's criterion of truth is basically wrong. Therefore we argue differently.

The 'conservative', *from his point of view*, is fully justified in opposing the extension of electoral rights. ^[15] But what arguments does he advance against it? He asserts that it would be harmful to the whole of society. Here is the logical error made by the conservative who is *right from his point of view*: he identifies his own interests with the interests of society. And the 'liberal'? Oh, he does exactly the same. He, too, identifies his interests with those of society. But if they are both wrong *in one direction*, it does not follow that they are both wrong *to the same extent*. In order to judge which of them is committing the smaller mistake, it suffices to determine whose interests are less at variance with the interests of society. Is there really no objective criterion by which such a question could be solved? Will the historian never be able to decide who was right in Russia on the eve of the peasant reform: the conservatives who did not wish to abolish serfdom (there were, of course, such people) or the liberals who sought for this change? In my opinion, the historian will have to record that the liberals were right, although they, too, did not forget their own interests at the time. The interests of their party were less at variance with the interests of society than were the conservative

interests. To prove this, it is sufficient to recall the harmful influence of serfdom on all aspects of social life at that time. History is the process of social development. In its development society finds advantageous all that promotes this development and rejects as harmful all that retards it. Stagnation was never useful to society. This incontestable fact provides the objective criterion by which to judge which of the two disputing parties is less mistaken, or not mistaken at all. ^[16]

It seems as though our author suspects nothing of this, becoming a sceptic where there is no sufficient reason at all for scepticism. He writes:

A motivation in favour of a cause with which we sympathise 'convinces' us more than one differently oriented but no less conclusive. The instinct of life compels the urge for knowledge to serve it and obscures its view to such a degree that it cannot take cognisance of the logical isostheneia of arguments and counter-arguments. Otherwise, how would it be possible that, for example, in adopting a political position which theoretically presupposes a decision in respect of most delicate questions of sociology, political economy, ethics and the understanding of history, the parties by and large coincide with the social classes? Does the same solution of the questions raised occur, so to speak, by chance to people who by chance belong to the same circle? Their motives here are certainly not their motives. Just count the Social-Democrats among the aristocracy and the convinced conservatives among the factory workers, the supporters of the sharing out of fortunes among the capitalists and of the centralisation of fortunes among the poor! They all represent not the interest of truth, but of their own person. (p 179)

Richter is vexed because people who belong to different classes defend their own interests, and not the interests of truth. But did he not say that truth always relates to the subject? Now he wants a truth which is independent of the subject. He is inconsistent. Further. The fact that the limits of acceptance of varying political convictions, by and large, coincide with class limits is by no means an argument in favour of the sceptics' principle of isostheneia. It proves only that being determines consciousness. It is only by grasping this truth that one is able to understand the course of development of the various ideologies. Richter is hopelessly bewildered by it. The reason for this is that it is difficult for anyone who does not take his stand solidly on the proletarian point of view to understand and fully to assimilate this truth at the present time. Richter himself rightly says that the instinct of life often compels the need for knowledge to serve it and considerably obscures its view. He who is convinced that it is not consciousness that determines being, but being that determines consciousness, thereby recognises that the ideas formed and feelings experienced by a particular class in the period of its domination have at best the significance only of temporary, transient truths and values. And it is not easy for one belonging to that class to realise this. That is why the best people of the modern bourgeoisie are more easily reconciled to the idea that the domain of disputed social problems is dominated by the sceptical principle of isostheneia than they are to the assertion that the viewpoint of the class of 'factory workers' *is becoming* the truth just when the viewpoint of the capitalists *is ceasing* to be truth. ^[17] Richter, too, cannot reconcile himself to this idea. Hence his scepticism in social questions. The position of people of this way of thinking is a very unenviable one. Just as Buridan's ass could not make up its mind which of the two bundles of hay to eat, neither can such people attach themselves to one of the two great classes of our time struggling with each other. This creates a special

psychological mood, in which it is necessary to seek the explanation of all the trends now prevailing among the ideologists of the upper classes: both the latest aesthetical theories to which Richter alludes and the subjective idealism with which he is infected. It is not consciousness that determines being, but being that determines consciousness.

This is what I thought it essential to tell the reader in recommending Richter's interesting book to him. I am very sorry that the translators of this interesting book did not see the need for such a warning. However, the explanation for this is that they themselves are strongly influenced by those very ideologies which spring from the psychological mood I have just mentioned.

Notes

Notes are by Plekhanov, except those by the Moscow editors of this edition of the work, which are noted 'Editor', or the MIA, which are suitably noted.

1. '*Petitio principia*', literally, 'request of the beginning'. Where the proposition to be proved is implicitly or explicitly assumed in one of the premises – MIA.
2. What is true is that, as we have just seen, not the concept but the opinion may be true or false: but this does not change the essence of the judgement. All the same Richter's proposed criterion of truth is quite untenable.
3. The philosopher Khoma Brut, the theologian Khalyava and the rhetorician Tiberiy Gorobets, mentioned below – all seminarists – are characters from Gogol's story *Viy* – Editor.
4. An individual in a deep swoon does not exist in his own consciousness but, as long as he is alive, he exists 'in himself'. Thus, there is certainly a distinction here too, between existing '*in oneself*' and existing *in consciousness*.

5. Robert Flint noted long ago, in his *Philosophy of History in France and Germany*, that of all varieties of idealism Hegel's system was the closest to materialism. In a certain sense this is true. It is only one step from the absolute idealism of Hegel to the materialism of Feuerbach. This is more or less clearly recognised by present-day German thinkers and is one of the causes of their invincible dislike of Hegel. They find various forms of *subjective* idealism more to their liking. Hegel is too *objective* for them.

6. With his customary depth and clarity of thought Hegel said: 'Ein Ding hat die Eigenschaft dieses oder jenes im Andern zu bewirken und auf eine eigenthümliche Weise sich in seiner Beziehung zu äussern. Es beweist diese Eigenschaft nur unter der Bedingung einer entsprechenden Beschaffenheit der andern Dinge, aber sie ist ihm zugleich eigenthümlich und seine mit sich identische Grundlage.' ['A Thing has the property of affecting this or that in another, and of disclosing itself in a peculiar manner in its relation. It manifests this property only under one condition – the other Thing must have a corresponding nature: but it is also peculiar to the first Thing, and is its own self-identical foundation.'] (*Wissenschaft der Logik*, Volume 1, Book 2, p 149)

7. Author's italics.

8. The word 'consolation' is in English in the original – Editor.

9. It is raining. If this is indeed true, it is a truth for man. But it is truth for man only because, and solely in the sense that, it is indeed true.

10. Slavophiles – a trend in Russian social thought of the mid-nineteenth century. The Slavophiles put forward the 'theory' of a special and exceptional road for Russia's historical development, based on the communal system and Orthodoxy as inherent only in the Slavs. Maintaining that Russia's historical development precluded any possibility of revolutionary upheavals, they strongly opposed the revolutionary movement in Russia and in the West – Editor.

11. For the benefit of Russian readers with a certain way of thinking: I am speaking here of countries with a *fully*

developed capitalist economy. [Plekhanov's idea that the bourgeoisie in Russia, a country of not 'fully developed capitalist economy', was allegedly not a 'declining class' testifies to his Menshevik conception that Russia still lacked the conditions for the socialist revolution – Editor.]

12. The German humanist, opponent of scholasticism and theology Ulrich von Gutten (1488-1523) finished his 'Address to Nuremberg Patrician and Humanist Pirkheimer' with the words: 'O seculum! O literae! Juvat vivere, et si quiescere nondum juvat!' ('O age! O science! How good to be alive, although it is no time to give up to peace!')

13. Recall the question as to whether honey was sweet or bitter.

14. My italics – GP.

15. Bismarck, although a conservative, introduced universal suffrage in Germany. This was of advantage to the interests he was defending. But such cases are exceptional, and we are not going into them here. Neither shall we deal with the case when liberals do not support an extension of the franchise. What is important for us at the moment is not the sociological but the logical aspect of the matter.

16. There are cases when the interests of a particular class coincide with the interests of the whole of society.

17. There is no need to prove here that the class-conscious factory workers of our time have no intention of 'sharing out all property'. Richter thinks this only because he is very badly acquainted with their aspirations. I trust that in this case, at least, his translators will agree with me.