De dialectisch-materialistische filosofie van Joseph Dietzgen

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SUMMARY

Joseph Dietzgen (1828-1888)

Joseph Dietzgen was a philosopher and a tanner. At the congress for the International in The Hague in 1872, Marx called him 'our philosopher', the philosopher of proletarian social democracy; he also said once that Dietzgen was one of the most brilliant workers he knew. Dietzgen was a self-educated philosopher. On the political scene, he played a part in the notorious 'Haymarket' affair in Chicago in 1886; one of the events which led to the introduction of annual First of May celebrations of the international labour movement. After his death on 15 April 1888, Dietzgen was buried next to the executed 'Chicago martyrs'.

Dietzgen was one of the first from within the labour movement to publish a review of 'Das Kapital'. It is remarkable that he should derive philosophical ideas from Marx's principal work. Dietzgen's best known publication is 'Das Wesen der Menschlichen Kopfarbeit', which was published in 1869, after he had first presented Marx and Engels with the manuscript.

In the history of Marxist thinking, Dietzgen occupies a special place. His work represents the rapidly growing class consciousness of his time. He focused his attention on Marx's work, at a time when there was no systematic development of Marx's ideas to speak of. Dietzgen was one of the few within the social democratic labour movement of the day to be immersed in the study of philosophy. Based in particular on Feuerbach, Marx, Kantianism and the development of the natural sciences, the 'self-educated manual labourer' Dietzgen advocated materialist dialectics and a dialectic-materialist epistemological theory. These, in his view, are a contribution to 'proletarian logic', a theory which expresses the system of relationships of being and thinking as the 'highest' form of philosophical awareness.

Questions regarding Dietzgen's philosophy

Dietzgen's philosophy is monistic in nature. This study is focused on the question in what way Dietzgen treats the relation between unity and diversity as an epistemological and ontological issue. How does Dietzgen formulate the unity of all that exists, and what is the place and the role of the process of gaining knowledge in this formulation? These questions serve as stepping stones to the central question: What is the position of Dietzgen's thinking with regard to the philosophy of Feuerbach, and that of Marx and Engels? This is an important question in the light of the history of the labour movement. In the early years of this century, Dietzgen's work became a subject of discussion. Some said that Dietzgen had nothing to add to Feuerbach's philosophy; others regarded him as the perfect Marxist philosopher. This discussion has not ended. The present study...
seeks to clarify the positions in this discussion by means of an analysis of Dietzgen's philosophy itself.

This raises the additional questions of its relation to Kant's epistemological theory, to scientific and Darwinist-oriented materialism, and to Dietzgen's ethical ideas and criticism of religion.

Dietzgen's philosophy

Dietzgen characterizes thought as the elevation of the specific to the universal; it is the systematization of specific facts. Systematization is the core of the process of gaining knowledge, and of science. By means of thought, a universal concept is found which defines the unity of the many sensory phenomena. Dietzgen refers to his philosophy as an epistemological theory without reducing the philosophy to a theory of the process of gaining knowledge. In a critical sense, Kant's presence is unmistakably felt in Dietzgen's epistemological theory. As a critical reaction to the Kantian 'Ding an sich', Dietzgen takes the world as it exists as a starting point for every thought and action; he formulates the fundamental attainability of unlimited knowledge of the world. This epistemological interest harbours a profound interest in issues of freedom and justice. Within the labour movement, Dietzgen was one of the first since the rise of the 'back to Kant'-trend to distance himself from Kantianism.

From 1877 onwards, Dietzgen's work expresses more clearly the need to make ontological statements. This need arises as a reaction to the rise of neo-Kantian and agnostic modes of thought. The reflection of these views within the labour movement urges him to respond more directly to the agnostic position. He also responds to Edu Bois-Reymond, who had concluded on the basis of the development of natural sciences, that certain essential philosophical issues cannot be resolved; from this he inferred that human knowledge is fundamentally limited. In a reaction to agnosticism, Dietzgen treads on dangerous metaphysical ground. If one intends to refute the idea that the extent of human knowledge is fundamentally limited, then the opposite should be argued. Dietzgen's idea of fundamentally unlimited knowledge is rooted in the world itself. 'Total coherence' ('Gesamtzuemenhang'), understood from a materialistic point of view, governs thought. The theoretical attainability of unlimited knowledge implies knowledge of infinite totality; it excludes the possible existence of fundamental limits. A historically situated state of incomprehension exists. This is part of the process of 'Conciliation' ('Annäherung'), in which modes of thought reflect a growing understanding of the world, with the proviso that in this process, it is also understood that all existing knowledge is limited.

Dietzgen's work is sometimes interpreted from a Spinozistic perspective, because of the emphasis on universal dialectic coherence of all that exists. In places where he gives a positive assessment of Spinoza's philosophy, it is not so much the Spinozist Dietzgen who idolizes his source, but rather a nineteenth-century self-educated monist who recognizes the way in which a philosophical predecessor struggles with the same issues in his own way.
In Dietzgen's materialism, thought is governed by 'total coherence'. This presupposes the existence of objective dialectics which encompass subjective dialectics. This recognition of objective dialectics, however, is problematic in its formulation. Objective dialectics as the determining factor in the process of gaining knowledge is insufficiently emphasized. As a result, Dietzgen's epistemological theory underscores the subjective aspect. Reality seems almost entirely to play a passive part in the process of gaining knowledge. On a more concrete level - for instance the explanation of ethical views - Dietzgen, on the basis of Feuerbach's philosophy and Marx's historical materialism, does show an interest in the way in which the manifestations of objective reality govern the content and development of thought.

In his rejection of limited materialism based on natural science, Dietzgen also emphasizes the need for further development of philosophy. He recognizes the topicality of critical philosophical materialism, a form of materialism in which Kant's philosophy is critically incorporated, instead of silently neglected. The subjective aspect should be fully recognized, especially in a materialistic philosophy.

Dietzgen's theory of knowledge harbours an epistemological and an ontological perspective. According to Dietzgen, the process of gaining knowledge is a process of reflection as well as an activity of thought. In thought, everything is reproduced subjectively, after which it, as it were, leads a new and subjective existence. Every abstraction by the faculty of thought is based on a reflection of reality. Thought reunites everything which appears to have been separated in the sensory perspective; in this way it is possible to reconstruct totality. Thought transcends direct empiricism, and is in this respect 'metaphysical', a term which Dietzgen does not often use in this positive sense.

Dietzgen refers to the faculty of knowledge as a 'spiegelartiges Instrument' ('a mirror-like instrument'). His monism emphasizes the total coherence of all that exists. This coherence in reality presupposes an all-embracing unity. Every part of nature in its own specific way is an expression of nature in its entirety. This is also true for thought, which in its own specific way also expresses reality. Each particular object represents itself or individuality, but is at the same time an expression of the cosmos which is in a state of constant development. Viewed from this ontological perspective of universal relationality, the epistemological view of reflection is a specific instance of the general relation between the specific and the universal, in which the specific and the universal are reflected in a particular way.

Dietzgen is one of the first of the 'Marxists' who theoretically begins to think through ethical issues. He explains morality, without formulating his own practical ethics. Feuerbach's philosophy and Marx's basis-superstructure thesis ring through: material existence governs life and thought. Dietzgen has been reproached for taking a utilitarian position. The question is whether or not in the end he excludes a utilitarian approach. Dietzgen recognizes the basis of ethics in the materially governed human needs and emotions. These needs have to be fulfilled in order to make general human progress possible. He rejects an abstract morality which is not based on actual human needs and emotions. In order to
encourage general human moral progress, the way in which ethical concepts actually evolve and on which they are based must be understood.

In Marx's work, theory and practice are more closely related than in Dietzgen's analysis. Dietzgen appears primarily to be interested in finding an adequate method of gaining knowledge, which can subsequently be applied in practice. Both instances of the relation between theory and practice, however, are not studied in relation to one another. But there are also places where Dietzgen follows Marx's ideas more closely. Religion has cultivated the mind, he says; but based on thought, this culture should cultivate the real world, and in doing so change it. In Feuerbach's philosophy, the idea is explained from a materialistic perspective, but in the development of his conclusions, Feuerbach is ambivalent; he chooses the reformulation of thought in particular as primary objective. In Marx's view, reformulation of thought is not possible without reformulation of the world, without a revolutionizing reality. And for that reality, subjectivity should be understood from a materialistic perspective. Dietzgen seems to share this view in some of his statements, even though these have not been worked out in a philosophical sense. In his epistemological theory, reality is not developed into an explanatory concept. In this respect, Dietzgen's philosophy only partially corresponds to Marx's view as reflected in Marx's criticism on Feuerbach. In the epistemological sense, Dietzgen's philosophy is predominated by a view in which the subject has a sensory, reflective relation to a reality which seems to be only passively present. It is possible that Marx's first Feuerbach-thesis refers to Dietzgen's thinking.

Dietzgen's argument can hardly be called logically sound; it shows gaps and sometimes allows for various interpretations. By taking Feuerbach's concept of sensory perception as a starting point, Dietzgen makes it possible to philosophize materialistically and at the same time to do justice to the individual subjective process of thought as an activity in which concepts are developed. At the same time, the concept of sensory perception uncovers a weak spot in Dietzgen's thinking: the possibility of a naive, empiricist interpretation of it. Feuerbach's emphasis on sensory perception implies the risk of ignoring Kant's epistemological criticism. Even though Dietzgen links up closely with Feuerbach's concept of sensory perception as a concept on the basis of which important philosophical problems can be analyzed, he makes a critical analysis of the process of thought.

The dialectics of the specific and the universal in the process of gaining knowledge and the development of general concepts, Dietzgen's 'subjective' criticism of mechanical and scientific materialism and his monistic criticism of subjective idealism and agnosticism are three ways of approaching the development of dialectic-materialistic epistemology and ontology. In his view, a dialectic ontology is the fruit of an epistemological formulation of the problem. The epistemological perspective offers Dietzgen access to a basic analysis of the material unity of all that exists.

From an overall view of Dietzgen's work, it can be said that as far as the formulation of materialistic dialectics is concerned, Dietzgen occupies a position 'in-between' Feuerbach and Marx, but with a theoretical link to Marx.

Dietzgenism as revisionism

At the time of the Second Int'l of Dietzgen's work. These disc interpretation. Besides other re- arose, of which Dietzgen's son 1 represents one of the views th that his work lacks a sound Dietzgen's work pre-eminently The contribution from the Ne significant. H. Roland Holst A. Pannekoek shows many sig includes that a characterization Pannekoek, however, did cont materialism and dialectical ma Dietzgen's contribution to sc Dietzgen was one of the first 'scientific socialism'. He was al 'materialism' to refer to the Feuerbach', Engels writes that rediscovered by Marx and hi them and from Hegel. The pr not made entirely independent Since the dramatic develop ideological discussions are rev the theoretical-political image is ex of socialist ideals. This also imp the work of those who contrib dietzgen can be interpreted own thinking; in times when so and age-old humanist ideals.
At the time of the Second International, discussions arose on the interpretation of Dietzgen's work. These discussions, however, did not produce an unambiguous interpretation. Besides other revisionist schools of thought, so-called ‘Dietzgenism’ arose, of which Dietzgen's son Eugen was one of the leading figures. Dietzgenism represents one of the views that take as a starting point the proposition that Marx's merits are limited mainly to the formulation of historical materialism, and that his work lacks a sound philosophical basis. Dietzgenism suggests that Dietzgen's work pre-eminently provides the philosophical foundation to scientific socialism.

The contribution from the Netherlands to the Dietzgen-discussion is relatively significant. H. Roland Holst is sometimes referred to as a Dietzgenist, while A. Pannekoek shows many signs of Dietzgen-reception. The present study concludes that a characterization of Roland Holst as a Dietzgenist is unwarranted. Pannekoek, however, did contribute to the promotion of Dietzgen's thinking as pre-eminent Marxist philosophy. Pannekoek places Marx and Engels on the one hand and Dietzgen on the other in the two separate domains of historical materialism and dialectical materialism, respectively.

Dietzgen's contribution to scientific socialism

Dietzgen was one of the first to refer to socialism which is focused on Marx as 'scientific socialism'. He was almost certainly the first to use the term 'dialectical materialism' to refer to the philosophy of social democracy. In 'Ludwig Feuerbach', Engels writes that oddly enough, materialist dialectics were not only rediscovered by Marx and himself, but also by Dietzgen, independently from them and from Hegel. The present study shows that Dietzgen's rediscovery was not made entirely independently from them.

Since the dramatic developments in Eastern Europe, all topical political and ideological discussions are reviewed from a new perspective. A new consistent, theoretical-political image is called for, if one is to acknowledge the significance of socialist ideals. This also implies the need for an open-minded interpretation of the work of those who contributed to socialism and communism. In this respect, Dietzgen can be interpreted as an original and self-conscious member of the working class. As a socialist, he based his ideas on Marx, but he never slighted his own thinking; in times when socialism was under pressure, he adhered to socialist and age-old humanist ideals.