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MATERIALISM
or
KANTIANISM



by
Georgi? Valentinovich Plekhanov

Forgotten Books

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Materialism or Kantianism

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Moscow Editor's Note: 'After the publication of Plekhanov's article "Conrad Schmidt Versus Karl Marx and Frederick Engels," Schmidt printed his "Some Remarks on the Last Article by Plekhanov in *Neue Zeit*," *Neue Zeit*, no 11, 1898. Plekhanov was indignant at Schmidt's attacks against Marxism and materialism, which revealed such ignorance, and at his neo-Kantian reasoning, so he made a reply in his article "Materialism or Kantianism" which was published in *Neue Zeit* in February 1899. Plekhanov's correspondence with Karl Kautsky which is extant shows the latter's striving to tone down the sharpness of Plekhanov's arguments and his desire not to offend Conrad Schmidt, giving Plekhanov no more space in *Neue Zeit* than to Conrad Schmidt. The article appeared in Russian in 1906, in the collection of Plekhanov's works *A Critique of Our Critics*.'



Was für eine Philosophie man wählt, hängt davon ab, was für ein Mensch man ist. - Johann Gottlieb Fichte ^[1]

I

The reader may remember that Eduard Bernstein has awarded Doctor Conrad Schmidt the easy ‘though not quite pleasant task’ of revealing my contradictions and disproving my false philosophical conclusions. Conrad Schmidt attempted to deal with this task in issue no 11 of *Neue Zeit* (1898). Let us see whether his efforts have been crowned with any success.

Conrad Schmidt’s article falls into three sections: a fairly ironical introduction, a most wrathful conclusion, and the main part. I shall begin from the beginning, that is, with the ironical introduction.

My opponent has assumed a stance of surprise, declaring that he fails to understand why I have taken up his articles, the last of which was published over a year ago. Yet, that is quite easy to understand.

I read his articles as soon as they appeared, finding them extraordinarily weak, and decided that they could not exert the slightest influence. That was why I had not the least desire at the time to enter into a polemic with their author. After all, so many poor articles do appear, to disprove which is not worth the trouble. But last spring, Herr Eduard Bernstein announced *urbi et orbi* ^[2] that Conrad Schmidt’s feeble articles had given him an ‘immediate impetus’. That made me realise the erroneousness of my former opinion about the possible impact the articles in question could have, and saw that disproving them would not mean any labour lost. To subject Conrad Schmidt to criticism means, at the same time, taking a measure of the moral force of Herr Eduard Bernstein who, as is common knowledge, is out to revise the Marxist theory. Guided by such considerations, I wrote an article entitled ‘Conrad Schmidt Versus Karl Marx and

Frederick Engels'.^[3] Consequently, that article is not so much lacking in interest as my opponent asserts.

And now I shall deal with the main section of the esteemed Doctor's article.

The best refutation of Kantianism, Engels said, is provided by our daily practical activities, and especially by industry. 'The proof of the pudding is in the eating', he went on to say.^[4] Conrad Schmidt has found, not only that Engels' reasoning is poor but - what is far worse - that he *evades* any consideration of the matter. In my article, I came out against that opinion, and showed that Conrad Schmidt had been unable to digest Engels' pudding. I had not the least intention of pleasing my opponent, so it is not surprising that neither in form nor in content did my article meet with his approval. As for the form, I shall deal with that at the end of the present article, and shall dwell on the content forthwith.

When Marx and Engels said that people's practical activities daily provide the best refutation of Kantianism, they were emphasising the strange contradiction that underlies the Kantian doctrine. That contradiction consists, on the one hand, in Kant considering a thing-in-itself the cause of our representations, while, on the other, he finds that the *category of cause* cannot be applied to it. In revealing that contradiction, I incidentally wrote the following:

What is a phenomenon? It is a condition of our consciousness evoked by the effect on us of things-in-themselves. That is what Kant says. From this definition, it follows that anticipating a given phenomenon means *anticipating the effect that a thing-in-itself will have on us*. It may now be asked whether we can anticipate certain phenomena. The answer is: of course, we can. This is guaranteed by science and technology. This, however, can only mean that we can anticipate some effect that the things-in-

themselves may have on us. If we can anticipate some effect of the things named, then that means that we are aware of some of their properties. So if we are aware of some of their properties we have no right to call them unknowable. This ‘sophistry’ of Kant’s falls to the ground, shattered by the logic of his own doctrine. That is what Engels meant by his ‘pudding’. His proof is as clear and irrefutable as that of a mathematical theorem. ^[5]

First and foremost, Doctor Conrad Schmidt has attempted to disprove this passage in my article.

‘If that were true’, he states with the delicate irony that pervades his article, ‘things would be in a bad way with the irrefutability of mathematical proof.’ He goes on to rebuke me for an impermissible confusion of notions. ‘What are those things that act on us, and thereby enable us to learn some of their properties?’ he asks. ‘They are things materially determined in time, and space, that is to say, the fundamental definitions and properties of such things are themselves of a purely phenomenistic character.’ Since that is so, it is perfectly natural for our learned Doctor to regard with contempt both Engels’ pudding and the conclusions I have based on that pudding:

Consequently, if ‘Kant’s invention is shattered by the logic of his own doctrine’ - and we shall think so at least until we are provided with other proofs - it is evidently because an alien non-logic is brought into that logic by means of a play on words (‘thing’ and ‘thing-in-itself’).

What contempt, and what an annihilating conclusion! The materialists (Marx, Engels and the humble mortal who is writing these lines) are playing with words and are bringing their own non-logic into the logic of Kantianism. This can be evidently explained by the materialists - in their capacity of dogmatists and

‘metaphysicians’ - failing to possess the faculties necessary for an understanding of Kant’s doctrine. A ‘critical thinker’ would never, never say what we poor ‘dogmatic’ materialists make so bold to state.

But... but are you quite sure of what you are saying, most esteemed opponent? Let us consider the question we are concerned with, in the light of the history of philosophy.

As far back as 1787, Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi reproached Kant, in the supplement to his dialogue ‘Idealismus und Realismus’, with the contradiction I am referring to. Here is what he wrote on the score:

I ask how one can combine, first, an assumption of objects which produce impressions on our senses and thus give rise to representations, and, second, a postulate which seeks to destroy any foundation for that assumption? If one takes into consideration... that space and all things in space, according to the Kantian system, exist nowhere except in ourselves; that all changes and even changes in our own internal condition... are nothing but forms of our representation, and are indicative of no objective actual change or processes; that such changes are not indicative either of the external or internal sequence of phenomena; if one takes into consideration that all the fundamental laws of the mind are merely the subjective conditions which are the laws of our thinking, not of Nature as such... if one thoroughly weighs all these propositions, then one is bound to ask: is it possible, side by side with these propositions, to assume the existence of objects which produce impressions on our senses, and thus give rise to representations? ^[6]

What you see here, Herr Doktor Schmidt, is that very ‘*non-logic*’ which has so greatly displeased you in the writings of the

materialists. Does that surprise you? Bear with me a little: you will hear things that are even more surprising.

As I have already remarked the dialogue ‘Idealismus und Realismus’ came out as far back as 1787. In 1792, Gottlob Ernst Schulze, who was then a professor at Helmstedt, proved, in his book *Änesidemus*, that Kant and his pupil Reinhold did not themselves realise the conclusions that logically stemmed from their doctrine:

A thing-in-itself [he wrote] is claimed to be a necessary condition of experience, but, at the same time, it is allegedly quite unknown. But if that is so then we cannot know whether things-in-themselves exist in reality and whether they can be the cause of anything. Therefore, we have no grounds to consider them conditions of experience. Further, if we assume, together with Kant, that the categories of cause and effect are applicable only to objects of experience, then it cannot be maintained that the action of things that exist outside of our representations yields the content of the latter [etc - GP].^[7]

Again the same ‘*non-logic!*’ The author of *Änesidemus* thinks - just as I do today - that, *according to Kant*, a thing-in-itself *is the cause* of our representations. We both have one and the same point of departure, the difference being that GE Schulze makes use of Kant’s inconsistency so as to arrive at *sceptical* conclusions while my own conclusions are of a *materialist* character. The distinction is no doubt a great one, but it does not interest us here, where we are speaking only of an understanding of Kant’s doctrine of a thing-in-itself.

It was not only Schulze and Jacobi who understood Kant in this fashion at the time.

Five years after the publication of *Änesidemus*, Fichte wrote that the Königsberg philosopher was understood in that sense by all the Kantians... with the exception of Beck. Fichte went on to rebuke the popularisers of Kant for that very contradiction on which Engels based his refutation of critical philosophy. ‘Your globe rests on an elephant, and the elephant stands on the globe. Your thing-in-itself, which is a mere thought, is supposed to act on the subject.’^[8] Fichte was firmly convinced that the ‘*Kantianism of the Kantians*’, which he considered nothing else but an *adventurist blend of the grossest dogmatism and forthright idealism*, could not have been the Kantianism of Kant himself. He asserted that the real meaning of the Kantianism was expressed in the *Wissenschaftslehre*. Do you know what took place after that, Herr Doctor?

In his well-known *Erklärung in Beziehung auf Fichtes ‘Wissenschaftslehre’*, Kant did not at all live up to the great idealist’s expectations. He wrote (in 1799) that he considered Fichte’s *Wissenschaftslehre* a totally groundless system, and rejected any solidarity with that philosophy. In the same *Erklärung*, Kant said that his *Critique of Pure Reason* should be understood literally (*nach dem Buchstaben zu verstehen*), and quoted the Italian proverb: ‘Heaven save us from our friends; we shall cope with our enemies ourselves.’ In a letter to Tieftrunk which he wrote at the time, Kant expressed his thought even more clearly. Lack of time had prevented him from reading through Fichte’s *Wissenschaftslehre*, but he was able to read a review of the book ‘written’, Kant added, ‘with a great deal of warmth for Herr Fichte’, and he found that the latter’s philosophy resembled a spectre. At the moment you think you have been able to lay your hands on it, you discover you have grabbed nothing but your own self, with that self possessing nothing except the hands stretched out for the capture.^[9]

Thus, the question was settled once and for all and with no ambiguity. Kant showed that the ‘Kantianism of the Kantians’ coincided with his own ‘Kantianism’. This was clear but it did not rid Kantianism of the contradiction indicated by Jacobi, Schulze and Fichte, and criticised by them. On the contrary, the explanation given by Kant in 1799 bore out the existence of that contradiction.

Conrad Schmidt thinks that my understanding of Kant’s doctrine does not resemble the way it is understood by all the historians of philosophy. Even if that were so, that would not disturb me in the least. The indisputable historical facts I have quoted above fully bear out the correctness of my understanding of Kant. Were the historians of philosophy to disapprove of that understanding, I would have every right to say: so much the worse for the historians of philosophy. But Doctor Schmidt is mistaken in this respect just as badly as he is in everything, throughout his article.

Indeed, listen to what has been said on this score by Friedrich Ueberweg, for instance. In the opinion of this historian of philosophy, one of Kant’s contradictions is that ‘things-in-themselves, on the one hand, are supposed to affect us, which involves time and causality; on the other hand, Kant recognises time and causality as *a priori* forms only within the world of phenomena, but not beyond it’.^[10]

Have I not said the same thing?

Now let us see what Eduard Zeller has to say:

We must of course [he writes] assume that a reality distinct from our subject corresponds to our sensations. Kant tries to show that in the second edition of his *Critique of Pure Reason*, in his struggle against Berkeley’s idealism.

Eduard Zeller is not satisfied with Kant's arguments against Berkeley but that does not prevent him from understanding the real meaning of the Kantian doctrine, and saying: 'Kant always asserted that our sensations are not merely a product of the thinking subject but refer to things that exist independently of our representation.'^[11] In his criticism of Kant's philosophy Zeller, incidentally, says the following:

If he [Kant - GP] accepted the concept of causality as a category of our intellect, a category which, as such, is applicable only to phenomena, he should not have applied it to the thing-in-itself; in other words, he should not have considered the thing-in-itself the cause of our representations.^[12]

Here we see the same understanding of Kant that Engels held and which I hold. Had Doctor Conrad Schmidt learnt it, he would, of course, never have declared that it was contradicted by all the historians of philosophy.

Erdmann, too, for whom a thing-in-itself was merely an ultimate concept, was obliged to acknowledge that Kant's thing-in-itself is a 'condition' of phenomena that is '*independent of us*'. But if that thing-in-itself is a *condition* of a phenomenon, then the latter is conditioned by it, and we again have the contradiction that came in for so much discussion by people of understanding throughout the nineteenth century, a contradiction that only the profoundly penetrative mind of our doctor *irrefragabilis* could have failed to notice.

I am, of course, well aware that some historians of philosophy turn Kantianism into idealism pure and simple. But *some* does not mean all, in the first place; secondly, if Doctor Schmidt is in agreement with these historians, he should try to prove to us that they are right. He has chosen an easier path by limiting himself to

calling the interpretation of Kantianism held by Marx and Engels an absurd invention of ignoramuses.

We have seen that, according to Conrad Schmidt, it is not things-in-themselves that affect us, but things that are determined in time and space. I would not set about disputing that were my opponent to say that such is the actual meaning of his own philosophy. However, he claims that such is the meaning of Kant's philosophy, and that is something to which I must object most emphatically.

I would ask Conrad Schmidt to open *Metaphysische Anfangsgründe der Naturwissenschaft* and read, in the second main section, the second note to the fourth theorem. In this passage, Kant sets forth the view of a certain geometrician, which he fully shares; it consists in the following:

Space is in no way a property inherent as such in any thing, outside us; it is merely the subjective form of our sensual perception, a form in which the objects of our external senses appear to us; we do not know those objects as they are in themselves, but we call their appearance matter...^[13]

What is referred to here - things-in-themselves, or things determined in space and in time? Obviously, things-in-themselves. And what does our Kant say about these things? He says that we do not know what they are in themselves, and that they appear to us only in the subjective form of space. What is needed for them to appear? They must affect our senses. 'The effect of an object upon the faculty of representation, so far as we are affected by the said object, is sensation.'^[14] Conrad Schmidt may again try to salvage the position he holds and to convince us that Kant is speaking here of things that are determined in space and time, that is, *phenomena*, which, as stated in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, 'exist, not by themselves, but only in us'. To preclude all

such attempts, I shall cite another passage in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, which reads: ‘Because we have to deal only with our representations; what things-in-themselves are (irrespective of the representations through which they affect us) is something quite outside the sphere of our cognition.’ ^[15]

This, I think, is clear enough: *things-in-themselves affect us through the representations* they give rise to.

Conrad Schmidt speaks, in his article, of ‘comical misunderstandings’. He is perfectly right, only he has forgotten to add that *all these misunderstandings are of his own making*.

Conrad Schmidt assures us that the passage I quoted from *Prolegomena* bears out my proposition only at first glance, and only because it has been ‘torn out of the general context’. That is not true, and I leave it to the reader to judge for himself:

‘Things are given as existing outside of us, but we do not know what they are in themselves...’ What things does this refer to? Things-in-themselves. That is clear, but let us see what comes next: ‘But we know only their appearances.’ Appearances of what? Of things already determined in space, time and so on, or of things-in-themselves? What a strange question. Who will fail to see that Kant is speaking here of things-in-themselves? But let us proceed: ‘These are representations which are caused by the effect of things on us.’ What things cause representations in us? Things-in-themselves, of which we cannot know anything. But in what way do these things evoke representations in us? ‘Through their affecting our sensual perception.’ The conclusion is: things-in-themselves affect our sensual perceptivity. How many doctoral mortarboards must be worn out to become so incapable of understanding ‘things’ that are so clear ‘in themselves’?

As for the 'link' between the passage I have quoted and the general context, I would ask the reader to judge for himself after reading the first paragraph of *Prolegomena*, particularly the second note to that paragraph. Besides, I would draw the reader's attention to Paragraph 36 in the same book, where we read the following:

In the first place: how is Nature in the material sense, that is, in contemplation, as the essence of phenomena - how are space, time and what fills them both; how is the object of perception at all possible? The answer is: thanks to our senses which, in keeping with their specific nature, receive impressions from objects which are unknown by themselves and are quite distinct from those phenomena.

Now tell us, Doctor Schmidt, what objects affect our senses?

My opponent asserts that, in my articles, I treat him almost as though he were a schoolboy; speaking for myself, I have not the least desire to act the schoolmaster towards him, yet I cannot refrain from offering him some good advice. Mein theurer Freund, ich rath' euch drum zuerst Collegium logicum. ^[16]

But let us hark back to Kant:

His assumption of the existence of the thing-in-itself - though he hedged it about with various reservations - is based on a deduction from the law of causality, that is, on empirical contemplation, or, more precisely, the sensation in our organs of sense which it derives from, having to possess an external cause. But, according to his own and quite correct discovery, the law of causality is known to us *à priori*, that is, it is a function of our intellect, and consequently is subjective in origin.

The 'non-logic' in these lines belongs to Arthur Schopenhauer; ^[17] that 'non-logic' is so strong that our Doctor's feeble 'logic' smashes against it like a bottle against a stone. Whatever Doctor Conrad Schmidt and his ilk may say, there can be no doubt that a strange contradiction underlies the Kantian system. But a contradiction cannot serve as a foundation; it is indicative only of groundlessness. Consequently, the contradiction must be eliminated. How is that to be done?

For that, there are two roads: one of them consists *in development towards subjective idealism*, the other *in development towards materialism*. Which road is the right one? That is the gist of the matter.

According to subjective idealism - for example, that of Fichte - a thing-in-itself is located within the *I* (*das im ich gesetzte*).

Consequently, we have to deal only with consciousness. That is what Fichte says frequently and unambiguously: any being, that of the *I*, just as that of the *not-I*, is merely a certain modification of consciousness. But if that is so, if 'genuine and real being is that of the spirit' as is asserted by the same Fichte, then we arrive at strange and unexpected conclusions. Indeed, I shall be obliged to acknowledge, in that case, that all the people who seem to me existent outside of my *I* are *only modifications of my consciousness*. Heine once wrote of several Berlin ladies who indignantly asked whether the author of *Wissenschaftslehre* recognised at least the existence of his own wife. This jest, which contains a true thought, reveals the Achilles' heel of subjective idealism. At any rate, Fichte himself sensed this and endeavoured, as much as he could, to eliminate this weak point in his system. He explained that his *I* was *not an individual* but a World *I*, an Absolute *I*:

It is clear that my Absolute *I* is not an individual [he wrote to Jacobi] in the sense that I have been interpreted by offended courtiers and importunate philosophers, so as to impute to me the shameful doctrine of practical egoism. But the individual must be deduced from the Absolute *I*. My *Wissenschaftslehre* will deal with that in the doctrine of natural law.

However, we meet, in his natural law, arguments only such as the following: 'A rational being cannot posit itself to possess consciousness of self as such, without considering itself an *individual* among other rational beings existing outside of him.' This is a very feeble '*deduction*'. The entire force of the proof rests on the emphasis placed on the word *individual*. A rational being cannot see itself as such without being aware at the same time of the *not-I in general*, that is, of *people* and *things*. Is this proof of the existence of things outside the consciousness of this rational being? It is not. Consequently, neither is it proof of the existence of other individuals.

Instead of 'deducing' (*deduzieren*) the existence of people, Fichte makes their being a *moral postulate*. But that means bypassing the obstacle, not surmounting it. Until we have surmounted it, we have not got rid of the absurdities to which any philosophical system must lead, which denies the existence of things outside of us and their effect on *our* external senses. If the existence of other individuals is only in the spirit, then my mother is merely a *phenomenon*, and, as a phenomenon, she exists only in me.^[18] Consequently, to say that I am born of woman is absurd. It is with just as little confidence that I can say that I shall die sooner or later. I know only that other people die, but since they are nothing but representations, I have no right to assert that I am just as mortal as they are; in this case, a logical conclusion on the basis of analogy is not valid.

One can easily realise the bewildering maze of absurdities we shall enter should we begin to consider and study the history of mankind and our Universe from the viewpoint of idealism.

Thus, the development from Kantianism towards idealism, though it does eliminate the contradiction underlying the Kantian system, leads to most patent and ridiculous absurdities.

II

Let us now see what the development from Kantianism towards materialism will lead us to. But in the first place we must agree on the terminology. What kind of materialism do we have in mind? Is it the materialism which has existed in the minds of philistines, who are noted far more for a fear of God than for philosophical talent? Or perhaps, the reference is to *genuine* materialism, that is, that materialism whose fundamentals are contained in the writings of the leading materialists? *Materialism* has been slandered no less than *socialism* has. That is why, when we hear arguments on materialism, we must sometimes ask ourselves whether this doctrine is not being distorted.

My esteemed opponent is among those who set about refuting materialism without going to the trouble of making a thorough study of it and trying to understand it. He says, for instance: 'The materialists should affirm that this essence [that is, the essence that corresponds to phenomena - GP] is identical with phenomena.' This is not only erroneous but an error that is indeed delicious in form.

We materialists are to affirm that the essence of things is *identical* with phenomena! Why should we make a statement that is just as preposterous in form as it is in its 'essence'? Perhaps

we should do that so as to make it easier for Herr Conrad Schmidt to cope with the 'easy task' of refuting us? Materialists are kindly people no doubt, but to demand such excessive courtesies from them means going too far.

The Herr Doktor goes on to say that the materialists accept an existent reality as one wholly *independent* of human consciousness *in sich* and *an sich* (?), that is, those most general definitions which are of necessity perceived by our senses, or, more correctly, by our mind processing the impressions received by our senses as the basis of phenomena about us. Above all, space and time, and the matter that is in motion in them, are seen by the materialists as a reality that is totally independent of the properties of human consciousness, and exists in itself. Conrad Schmidt goes on to say:

Consequently, materialism is a philosophy of identity because even where it notes the... distinction between our representations and what exists in itself, thus emerging from the confines of naive realism, it nevertheless considers it possible to cognise... the thing-in-itself through an analysis of phenomena.

Is that so? Indeed, it is not. To realise that, let us see what Holbach has to say:

If of all the substances that strike our senses we know nothing but the effects they produce on us, after which we ascribe certain qualities to them, then at least these qualities are something definite and give rise to distinct ideas in us. However superficial the knowledge our senses provide us with, it is the only kind of knowledge that we can have; constituted as we are, we find ourselves obliged to rest content with such knowledge... ^[19]

I would ask the reader to peruse these lines with particular attention and grasp their content. It is worth the trouble because the passage provides an extraordinarily clear idea of eighteenth-century French materialism as the apex of the development of *pre-Marxist* materialist philosophy. ^[20]

According to Holbach, that is, the authors of *Système de la Nature*, which Holbach did not write alone, there are things outside of us and independent of us, things that have an actual and not merely 'spiritual' existence. These are things *whose nature is known to us* and which affect us, producing impressions on our senses; *in keeping with the impressions produced on us by their action*, we attribute certain properties to things. *These impressions are the sole knowledge* (superficial and very limited knowledge) that *we can have of things-in-themselves*:

We do not know the essence of any *être*, if by the word essence one is to understand what constitutes its nature; we know matter only by the sensations and the ideas it gives us. It is only then that we form correct or wrong judgements... ^[21]

Does this mean stating that the essence of things and phenomena are '*identical*'? Obviously, it does not. Why then does our doctor *irrefragabilis* ascribe that assertion to the materialists? Why does, he think that they '*must*' defend that view without fail?

Inasmuch as [he goes on to say] by materialism is understood merely a striving to everywhere find the causal link in natural phenomena and to establish the dependence of spiritual processes on the material, then such 'materialism' is in no way opposed to Kant's *theoretical philosophy*: on the contrary, it pursues an aim which is quite understandable and even necessary from the viewpoint of that philosophy. The oppositeness between them is revealed only when that so-called 'materialism' becomes a

consistent, that is, metaphysical, or, more correctly, metaphenomenalistic materialism; when it pronounces the elements of the world of phenomena to be 'things-in-themselves'.

Consequently, materialism is *either* phenomenalistic - and then it in no way deviates from Kant's theoretical philosophy - *or* else it is *metaphenomenalistic* - in which case it leads us to metaphysics, since it declares that the elements of phenomena are things-in-themselves. Apart from the question of whether Conrad Schmidt has expressed himself well, we can say that his *either-or* is a blend of all possible advantages, with the sole exception that it is not in keeping with reality.

Kantianism is also *metaphenomenalistic* in the sense that it acknowledges that *things-in-themselves affect us*. It is *Fichteism* that is a genuinely and purely phenomenalistic philosophy. But Kant waged a struggle against Fichte's philosophy. It goes without saying that materialism is a *metaphenomenalistic* doctrine because it questions neither the existence of things outside of our consciousness nor their effect on us. But since it at the same time acknowledges that we cognise things-in-themselves only thanks to the impressions *caused by their effect on us*, it has neither the need nor the logical possibility to regard phenomena as things-in-themselves. In this respect, it in no way deviates from Kantianism, despite its *metaphenomenalistic* nature. The difference between materialism and Kantianism comes to light only subsequently. By considering things-in-themselves the *causes* of phenomena, Kant would assure us that the *category of causality* is wholly inapplicable to things-in-themselves. On the other hand, materialism, which also considers things-in-themselves the causes of phenomena, does not fall into contradiction with itself. That is all there is to it. If, on the basis of this distinction, we would assert

that materialism is a *metaphysical* doctrine, we would first have to acknowledge that the essence of ‘*critical*’ philosophy lies in its inner contradiction.

But then, what is metaphysics? What is its object of study? The object of study for metaphysics is the *Absolute*. It wishes to be the science of the Absolute, the unconditioned. But does materialism concern itself with the Absolute? No, it does not; its object of study is *Nature* and *human history*:

People are always in error when they sacrifice experience for the sake of philosophical systems born of fantasy [says Holbach]. Man is a work of Nature; he exists in Nature; he is subject to its laws; he cannot emerge from it even in thought. It is in vain that his spirit wishes to escape from the boundaries of the visible world; he is always forced to return to that world.

These lines, which are introductory in *Système de la Nature*, from which I have so frequently quoted, comprise the ‘*canon*’ of materialism, and it is quite incomprehensible how one can call metaphysical a doctrine which has never parted company with that ‘*canon*’.

But what does the materialist understand by the word ‘*Nature*’? Is it a metaphysical concept to him? We shall now see whether that is the case.

The materialist understands by Nature the sum of things comprising the object of our sensual perception. Nature is the sensuous world in all its entirety. It was that sensuous world that the French eighteenth-century philosophers spoke of. To this concept of Nature they were constantly contraposing ‘*phantoms*’, that is, imaginary and supernatural beings:

It is being incessantly repeated to us [we read in *Système de la Nature*] that our senses show us only the *outside of things*... it is acknowledged, but our senses do not show us even the *exterior of the Divinity* that our theologians have defined to us, to which they have awarded attributes, and over which they have never ceased from disputing, while to this day they have never arrived at any proof of His existence...^[22]

The human mind gropes in the dark as soon as it emerges from the confines of the sensuous world or, which is one and the same thing, the confines of experience. In this the materialists are in full agreement with Kant, only the materialists understand *experience* somewhat differently than does the author of the *Critique of Pure Reason*.

According to Kant, Nature is the existence (*Dasein*) of things inasmuch as that *Dasein* is determined by *general laws*. These general laws (or the pure laws of Nature) are the laws of our mind. 'The mind does not draw its laws (*à priori*) from Nature; on the contrary, it dictates its own laws to Nature', Kant explains to us. Consequently, these laws have no *objective* significance; in other words, they are applicable only to phenomena, not to things-in-themselves. But since phenomena exist *only in us*, it is obvious that the Kantian theory of existence is ultimately quite subjective in character, and in no way differs from Fichte's idealistic theory.^[23] We have already seen what a maze of absurdities anyone will inevitably find himself in, who takes that theory in earnest and is not afraid to draw all the ultimate conclusions stemming from it. And now let us take a closer look at the *materialist* theory of experience.

According to that theory, Nature is, first and foremost, the sum of phenomena. But since things-in-themselves are the necessary

condition of phenomena - in other words, since phenomena are caused by the effect of an object on a subject - we are obliged to recognise that the laws of Nature have not only a *subjective* but also an *objective* significance, that is, that the mutual relations of ideas *in the subject* correspond - whenever one is not *in error* - to the mutual relations between things *outside of one*. Of course, Conrad Schmidt will say that this is a 'philosophy of identity' and that it considers the 'elements of phenomena things-in-themselves'. He is wrong. To prevent him from falling into greater error, I shall ask my opponent to recall the geometrical figure with whose aid Spencer tried to make it easier for his readers to understand 'transformed realism'. Let us imagine a cylinder and a cube. The cylinder is the subject, the cube the object. The cube's shadow falling on the cylinder is a representation. The shadow does not quite resemble the cube, whose *straight* lines are bent on the cylinder, and whose *flat* surfaces are *convex*. Nevertheless, any change in the cube will bring about a corresponding change in its shadow. We can assume that something similar takes place in the formation of representations. The sensations caused in the subject by an object's effect on it are, quite unlike the latter, just as they are unlike the subject, yet *to every change in the object there corresponds a change in its effect on the subject*. This is in no way the crude and vulgar philosophy of identity which Conrad Schmidt ascribes to us. This theory of experience, which takes Nature as its point of departure, enables us to avoid both the inconsistencies of Kantianism and the absurdities of subjective idealism.

It may be objected that Herbert Spencer's 'transformed realism' is one thing, and materialism is another. Lack of space prevents me from giving consideration here to the main distinction between these two doctrines. All I can say in this article - incidentally, enough for my purpose - is the following: Spencer's theory of knowledge - *within the borders I am making use of it here* - is

merely a further development of the ideas of the eighteenth-century French materialists. ^[24]

‘Without *thou* there is no *I*’ (*ohne Du kein Ich*), said old FH Jacobi. For my part, I shall say: without *thou* there is no *I* that is free of certain very strong pangs of conscience. Here, is a convincing example: if no Herr Conrad Schmidt existed *as a thing-in-itself*; if he were merely a phenomenon, that is, a representation existing only in my consciousness, I would never forgive myself for my consciousness having brought forth a doctor so awkward in the field of philosophical thinking. But if an actual Herr Conrad Schmidt corresponds to my representation, then I am not responsible for his logical blunders; my conscience is clear, and that is a good deal in our ‘vale of tears’.

Our doctor *irrefragabilis* avers that he is no Kantian, that rather he is *sceptical* of Kant. But I have never asserted that he may become a genuine adherent of any kind of philosophical system; I have always said that he prefers a *broth of eclecticism*. Yet, his eclecticism has not prevented him from waging a struggle against materialism, while making use of arguments borrowed from the Kantians. That, incidentally, is the way the eclectics always behave: they grapple with a doctrine with the aid of arguments they have borrowed from another one, to which they contrapose arguments borrowed from the former. Yet, Herr Bernstein, to whom Doctor Schmidt’s miserable article has given an ‘*immediate impetus*’ (poor Herr Bernstein!) has gone as far as Kant in his retrogression. True, he has reached Kant only ‘up to a certain point’. *But the parishioners always take after the priest*, as the Russian proverb says. The eclectic disciple ‘takes after’ the eclectic teacher. In any case, it is noteworthy that Conrad Schmidt’s articles make some readers inclined to return to Kant, not to any other philosopher.

Finally, I shall go over to the highly wrathful conclusion of Herr Conrad Schmidt's article.

I have affirmed that the bourgeoisie are interested in resurrecting Kant's philosophy because they hope that it will help them to lull the proletariat into quietude. It is with his customary elegance of style that Conrad Schmidt replies to me:

Whatever opinion we may have of the bourgeoisie's intellect, they are not so crassly stupid as to harbour such absurd 'hopes'. What boundless schematism; what lack of all and any criticism and any original and lively attitude towards reality lies concealed behind such devices of construction [etc, etc].

May I be allowed to interrupt the wrathful doctor, and ask him several questions:

1. Are the bourgeoisie interested in 'edifying' the proletariat and countering atheism, which is spreading more and more in that class?
2. Do they need a strong spiritual weapon for that 'edification' and that struggle against atheism?
3. Has Kantianism not been considered a weapon most suited for that purpose, and is it not considered as such to this day? ^[25]

Conrad Schmidt is evidently very poorly acquainted with the history of philosophy. If he knew it, he would be aware that *Kantianism was greeted, when it first appeared, as the best weapon for the struggle against materialism* and other 'shocking' doctrines. Carl Leonhard Reinhold - that first vulgariser of Kantianism - already saw as one of the chief merits of that system its '*obliging natural scientists to abandon their groundless claims*

to knowledge'.^[26] He wrote that atheism, which is now so widespread:

... under the guise of *fatalism, materialism and Spinozism*... is presented by Kant as a phantom that deludes our minds, with an effectiveness beyond the reach of our modern theologians, who engage in exposing the Devil; if there still remain fatalists, or if they will appear in due course, they will be people who have either ignored or failed to understand the *Critique of Pure Reason*.^[27]

Crassly stupid! No, believe me, it is not the bourgeoisie that are marked, in this respect, by stupidity:

If I, like all those indirectly attacked by Plekhanov, were inclined to Kant's philosophy in imitation of the bourgeoisie [says Herr Schmidt], then it is surprising that we are interested precisely in its theory of knowledge, that is, that part of Kant's philosophy which, in any case, has nothing in common with the practical interests of the bourgeoisie.

To this I shall reply in the words of Reinhold, as quoted above: you have either ignored the *Critique of Pure Reason*, or failed to understand it.

Kant, who, it may well be imagined, had a better understanding of his own theory of knowledge than Conrad Schmidt has, says the following in the Preface to the second edition of his *Critique of Pure Reason*:

Thus, I cannot even *make the assumption of God, freedom and immortality*, as the practical interests of my mind require, if I *do not deprive* speculative reason of its pretensions to transcendent insight... I must, therefore, abolish knowledge, to make room for belief.

No, and again no! ^[28] The bourgeoisie are far from being stupid! A few words more before I conclude.

Conrad Schmidt accuses me of resorting to ‘the most arbitrary combinations of ideas so as to undermine the political credibility of those who permit themselves to think differently from Plekhanov in the sphere of philosophy’.

This is thrice wrong:

1. Everything said above has shown in sufficient measure that the ‘combinations of ideas’ to which I have ‘resorted’ are in no way ‘arbitrary’.
2. In my polemic, I have always pursued the *truth* and have been little concerned with anyone’s political *credibility*. It is highly ‘arbitrarily’ that Conrad Schmidt has interpreted what he has read in my heart.
3. In my articles, which have so angered our Herr Doktor, I have defended, not the ‘view held by G Plekhanov’ but that of Engels and Marx. The only thing which G Plekhanov can and does lay claim to is a correct understanding of that view. I defend and shall always continue to defend that view with ardour and conviction. And if some readers ‘shrug their shoulders’ at my being so ardent in a polemic that is concerned with the most important questions of human knowledge, and, at the same time, deal with the most vital interests of the working class - inasmuch as it is very harmful for that class to feed on what Engels called the pauper’s broth of eclecticism - then I shall shrug my shoulders in my turn, and say: *so much the worse for such readers*.

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. 'The philosophy a man chooses depends on the kind of man he is.' - Editor.
2. Literally: 'To the City of Rome and to the World.' Originally used to open Roman proclamations, subsequently used in Papal addresses; here it is used ironically: 'To all and sundry.' [MIA]
3. See Georgi Plekhanov, 'Conrad Schmidt Versus Karl Marx and Frederick Engels', *Selected Philosophical Works*, Volume 2 (Moscow, 1976), pp 379-97 - MIA.
4. These words are in English in the original - Editor.
5. See Georgi Plekhanov, 'Conrad Schmidt Versus Karl Marx and Frederick Engels', *Selected Philosophical Works*, Volume 2 (Moscow, 1976), p 381 - Editor.
6. *Jacobis Werke*, Volume 2, p 308.
7. Since I have been unable to obtain Schulze's works, I am quoting from Zeller's *Geschichte der deutschen Philosophie* (München, 1873), pp 583-84.
8. 'Zweite Einleitung in die Wissenschaftslehre', which appeared first in *Philosophischen Journal* for 1797 and then formed part of Volume 1 of Fichte's *Works*.
9. *Kants Werke*, Volume 10 (von Hartenstein's edition), pp 577-78.
10. *Grundriss der Geschichte der Philosophie*, Part 3 (Berlin, 1880), p 215.
11. *Geschichte der deutschen Philosophie*, p 436.
12. *Ibid*, p 514.
13. *Kants Werke*, Volume 8, p 432.
14. *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, 'Der transzendentalen Elementarlehre', Part 1, 'Der transzendentalen Aesthetik', Section 1.

15. *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, 'Elementarlehre', Book 2, Chapter 2, Section 3B, Second Analogy: Proof.

16. My dear friend, I therefore advise you, first of all, to go through the school of logic - Editor.

17. *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, Volume 1 (Leipzig, 1873), p 516. It is superfluous to add that I see Kant's 'revelations' in a different light than Schopenhauer does.

18. 'But, as phenomena, they cannot exist of and by themselves, but only in us.' (Kant)

19. *Système de la Nature*, Part 2 (London, 1781), p 127.

20. Incidentally, my preceding articles contained quotations from many materialists, showing that Conrad Schmidt has an entirely false idea of the 'essence' of materialist philosophy. In his reply, Conrad Schmidt has called the materialists I have quoted from Enlighteners. That is very adroit, if not pedantic, of him because readers unfamiliar with the history of philosophy may ask themselves why Mr Plekhanov should have had to refer to Enlighteners when the discussion was about the materialists! To reassure such readers, I must add that I was quoting from Holbach, or, more precisely, from the authors of *Système de la Nature*, among whom were both Diderot and Helvétius. As for Holbach, *Système de la Nature* is often called a code of materialism (see Lange, *History of Materialism*, Volume 1 (Second Edition), p 361). As for Helvétius, this Enlightenment was one of the most talented and original materialists who ever lived. Anyone who does not know these two Enlightenmenters is not familiar with the highest and most remarkable stage in the development of eighteenth-century materialism.

21. *Système de la Nature*, Part 2, pp 91-92. It is interesting to compare this passage with what Herbert Spencer has to say: 'Thus we are brought to the conclusion that what we are conscious of as properties of matter, even down to its weight and resistance, are but subjective affections produced by objective agencies that are unknown and unknowable...' (*The Principles of Psychology*, Volume 1, Part 2, Chapter 3 [The Relativity of Feelings - Editor], § 86, [p 206 - Editor])

22. *Système de la Nature*, Part 2, p 109.

23. 'The system of experience is nothing but thinking accompanied by a sense of necessity.' (*Fichtes Werke*, Volume 1, p 428) It goes without saying that the Kantian theory of experience

is *subjective* only in the measure in which it questions the applicability of categories to things-in-themselves. But since things-in-themselves are seen by Kant as the *cause* of our perceptions, that theory - as I have so often repeated - presents a howling contradiction.

24. In his striving to dissociate himself from the 'vulgar philosophy of identity' of matter and thinking, Plekhanov is mistaken here, as in some other places, when he asserts that sensations are 'quite unlike' the objects that cause them; this is a concession to agnosticism. As a result Plekhanov was uncritical of Herbert Spencer, stating that the latter had developed the theory of the French materialists, while in actual fact he was an agnostic and an adherent of religion -Editor.

25. It goes without saying that the bourgeoisie have no need to address Kantianism directly to the workers. It is sufficient for that philosophy to become the vogue, thus providing some people with the pretext to spread among the working class the ultimate conclusions stemming from it.

26. *Briefe über die Kantische Philosophie*, Volume 1 (Leipzig, 1790), p 114.

27. *Ibid*, p 116.

28. It should be borne in mind that interest in the practical 'part' of Kant's philosophy is today ever more gaining the upper hand over the interest in its theoretical part, in circles that are interested in that philosophy.