

ANALYSIS

Edited by A. E. Duncan-Jones with the cooperation of L. S. Stebbing C. A. Mace and G. Ryle

Vol 5 No 5

(27 of series)

AUGUST 1938

LENIN'S THEORY OF PERCEPTION

By G. A. PAUL

“**A**RE our sensations *copies* of bodies and things, or are bodies *complexes* of our sensations?” This for Lenin is “the fundamental question of the theory of knowledge” (p. 146), and he makes it the main topic of his book *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*,¹ because he holds that as people differ in giving an “idealist” or a “materialist” answer to it so they will tend to differ in whether they take a reactionary or a progressive attitude to questions of practical importance. He is particularly concerned with three points:—

(1) It is established by scientists that inanimate matter was in existence before there were any living creatures at all; and it is inconsistent with this, he holds, to suppose that bodies are complexes of our sensations. Now if people are led by their philosophy to deny a scientific fact so well attested as this one, there will be no end to their tinkering with scientific conclusions in general with a consequent loss of respect for careful examination of things as a way of finding out about them.

(2) This loss of confidence will be most felt in any field where the facts are difficult to muster and where consequently conclusions are difficult to establish. In particular it will be felt regarding attempts to find laws according to which changes take place in the organisation of human beings in groups—laws of a kind Lenin is anxious to find and use to alter some of the existing ways of organisation.

(3) He wishes to combat metaphysical (and in particular

¹ English translation from the Russian, Martin Lawrence Ltd. I have freely italicised those parts of quotations, to which I wished to draw attention, and hope that I have not in any case altered the sense by doing so.

religious) speculation in order that people may turn rather to bettering the world about them—gaining control of it by looking for laws which it obeys, rather than spinning fancies which may persuade themselves and others that it is really other than common knowledge and science take it to be.

So he tries to find the theory of knowledge nearest to common sense and giving least ground for speculative building—a theory which by showing how our knowledge is acquired will show about what things we do know and about what things we cannot know. Thus he insists that his theory of knowledge is just that contained in the simple, robust common sense of the ordinary person—the workman, the housewife, the scientist; and that it is a plain, straightforward theory in contrast with the sophisticated, finely spun fantasies of bourgeois professors. “The ‘naïve’ belief of mankind is consciously taken by materialism as its theory of knowledge” he says (p. 47), and later he speaks of materialism as “an inference, which all of us draw in practical life and which lies at the basis of a ‘practical’ theory of knowledge.” “Its fundamental belief” he goes on (p. 78) “is that *outside of us* and independently of us there exist objects, things, and bodies: that our perceptions are *images of the outer world*. The converse theorem of Mach (bodies are complexes of sensations) is nothing but sheer idealistic foolishness.”

He is taking, we see, a representative theory of perception, and he claims that “in practical life,” this theory is *used* by “all of us”. The chief points of his theory are:—

- (1) *Outside us* there are *material things*.
- (2) They exist *independently of us*.
- (3) We can get to *know* the nature of any material thing, and sometimes we do so.
- (4) The *means* by which we get to know the nature of a material thing *outside us* is our having *inside us* a sense-perception which *represents*² the material thing.

It is not the aim of this paper to deny that these statements express a theory which gives a correct description of what and how we perceive, nor yet to agree that they do: we shall try, rather, to see whether they do play any part in ordinary life and science, and if so what it is.

² His most common expression is that inside us we have an *image* which is a *reflection* of the thing outside.

Do they play, for example, the part of a simple description of how something works? Do they act as a description of how the human perceiving apparatus works? Let us compare them with some such simple description or theory and see how alike or different the two are. We might choose to compare them with a simple theory of how certain areas of Britain come to be so much wetter than others, how lack of sun brings about ill-health, how grain goes into a mill at one end and comes out as flour at the other, and so on: but it will be more useful to compare it with an explanation of an occurrence very similar in important respects to this one which Lenin puts forward of how people manage to see things outside themselves—so similar in fact that the two can be expressed in almost the same words. Just as Lenin asks “How do people see things outside themselves?” so one may ask “How do people see things out of submarines?” People from time to time move about some distance below the surface of the sea in an opaque container: their activities are made possible by a contrivance which enables them to look out while the container is submerged and see what is above the surface of the sea for some distance round. The nature of the contrivance needs some explanation; and one may be told that they see out of a submerged submarine “by having in a mirror inside the submarine an image which is an accurate reflection of the things outside it”, just as Lenin would explain that we see material things outside us “by having inside us an image which is an accurate reflection of the things outside us”. We often see things by their reflections in mirrors, so we know what this is, and it has now been explained that seeing out of submarines is a case of it: we now understand, for example, that they do not see out by having a window through which they look directly, and that they do not have an electrical arrangement whereby a sensitive instrument floating on the surface is connected only by wires to the submerged submarine and a picture produced on a fluorescent screen, and so on. Further, we could demand a more particular account of the arrangement of the parts of this mechanism, and, if we were at all in doubt of its being as described, we could go and examine the mechanism for ourselves, see whether it did contain a mirror, whether the mirror was so placed that it would in fact reflect the things above to a person below, and any other matter we cared. We could also assure ourselves, quite

independently of examining the mechanism by which an accurate view of the things is achieved, that it *is* achieved : we could do this, for example, by looking at the view produced by the instrument and comparing what we see there with what we see on coming immediately to the surface.³

Now compare Lenin's account of how we see things outside of us with this account of how people in submarines see things on the surface of the water. We have, he says, inside us an *image* ; compare, " they have inside the submarine an *image in a mirror* " : and this image inside us is a *reflection* of things outside us ; compare, " and this image in the mirror inside the submarine is a *reflection* of things outside it " : and, whether in a given case this reflection (in the mind) is an *accurate* representation of the things outside us, *we can find out* ; compare, " and, whether in a given case this reflection (in the submarine) is an *accurate* representation of things outside it, *we can find out* : " that is, we see material things outside us *indirectly*, as distinct from directly ; compare, " that is, people see things outside the submarine *indirectly*, as distinct from seeing them directly (e.g., through a glass port-hole) " .

Let us examine the points of comparison.

Lenin says we have inside us an *image* which represents the object. What kind of image does he mean ? He does not mean that it is an *image in a mirror* inside us : for who would wish to say there is a mirror in the mind ? and certainly no one has ever found one there. Nor does he mean an image as when we say " Conjure up an image of Jones coming through that door over there," i.e. a *mental image* : for Lenin does not wish to say that having a mental image of Jones is just the same as seeing Jones ; nor yet that whenever I see Jones I must also be having a mental image of him. He is not claiming to have noticed that my seeing Jones is made possible by another familiar process going on in my mind at the same time, viz. my having a mental image of him, as it is claimed that seeing out of submarines is

³ It is of great importance to notice this point that we can, and commonly do, find out whether a reflection or a picture is an accurate reproduction of a thing without knowing at all the working of the process by which it was produced. For example, we need know nothing of the laws governing the behaviour of light to be able to tell whether a reflection of a given thing in a mirror is a good one or not; and we can find out that my camera takes distorted pictures and yours good ones without knowing what is wrong with mine but not with yours, and in fact without having any notion at all of the physical and chemical processes involved in photography.

made possible by there being in the submarine a mirror-image of what is outside. For he does not wish either to say there is no difference between having a mental image of Jones and seeing Jones, or to say that when I see Jones I must also be having a mental image of him.⁴ In any ordinary use of the word "image" we know how to tell whether a person has an image in his mind or not ; but Lenin uses it without saying how we are to tell whether when we see a material thing we do have an image in our mind or not : he, who insists that everything be found by investigation, gives us no hint of how by investigation we are to find out *this* simple fact. Thus, so far, by contrast with our explanation of seeing out of submarines, we do not even know how to find out whether it is a true description of how we see, and it is of no use to us as the other might be—the other gives us directions for making, and repairing (etc.) contrivances for seeing out of closed bodies, but this gives us no idea at all of what we should have to do to see out of closed minds.

Again, we tell whether what we see is a *reflection* or the thing itself by seeing how it alters in appearance as we move or as it moves, by finding whether on touching it we touch a smooth reflecting surface or an object of the sort we take ourselves to be looking at, and so on. The usefulness of the submarine explanation lies partly in our being able to find the reflecting surface, and see that the image is a reflection as distinct from, say, an image on a fluorescent screen produced electrically. But, again, Lenin's words, though similar in appearance, grammatical form, context, way of being said, etc., to the submarine explanation, differ in that they lack this usefulness. It is not their purpose to direct us, if we wish, to a reflecting surface in the mind.

Now, it may be said, you must not take what Lenin says too literally : the point of his remarks is not to tell one the mechanism by which human beings perceive what is outside them, but to bring out *just one particular likeness* between an entity in the mind which enables us to see outside it, and mental images and

⁴ It might be thought that Lenin could be defended in this matter on the grounds that his real point is that both when we have a mental image and when we see a thing we have in the mind an entity—let us call it a sense-datum—which is in itself neither a mental image nor a material thing ; and that whether we are at that moment having a mental image or seeing a thing is dependent not on that sense-datum alone, but also on what comes before and after it. But this view is not expressed by Lenin.

reflections, viz. the fact that just as mental images and reflections are *representations* (as it were, *pictures, likenesses*) of what is imaged or reflected so the sense-perception is a representation, a likeness of the thing seen. We may, for example, just before meeting Smith, whom we have not seen for some time, have an image of him as we expect to see him; and on his entrance be able to decide whether it was a good or a bad representation. Similarly with an image in a mirror, or with a painted picture of a thing, or with a photograph, we can compare it for likeness with the original. Now Lenin asserts not only that our sense-perceptions⁵ of things are likenesses of them, but, also that we can (if we care to) get to know in which cases the likeness is a good one and in which cases bad : i.e., he asserts that we are able to compare the sense-perception with the thing it purports to represent to us. So let us now consider the notion that in perceiving material things what we are face to face with is not a part of thing or of its surface, but an entity which, *though not part of it, is comparable with it*. This gives us chiefly the idea of comparing as in comparing a photograph with the original, a reflection in a mirror with the thing reflected, a portrait with the sitter, a mental image of Jones with Jones, etc., and the idea of holding a picture up beside the thing pictured, i.e. holding the sense-perception up beside the material thing perceived. Here again, as in the earlier cases of *images* and *reflections*, we cannot press the analogy : we do not hold sense-perceptions up beside things in order to compare them ; but Lenin does not think we do, and it will again be said : You are being too crude ; you have taken only the most obvious way of comparing two things ; there are other ways of comparing than by holding the one thing beside the other (for example there is comparing two things by memory, two heights with a footrule, and so on), and it will be some way not so crudely inapplicable that Lenin is meaning. We can soon see if this is so, for by good fortune we have Lenin's answer to this general objection that we can never, on his theory, get to know what the characteristics of a material thing are because we have no way of comparing it with a sense-perception. It is also Engels' answer, for Lenin quotes from him (p. 83) : “. . . this line of reasoning seems hard to beat by mere argumentation. But before there was argumentation there was action. And

⁵ This is the word used in the translation of his book.

human action had solved the difficulty before human ingenuity had invented it. The proof of the pudding is in the eating. From the moment we turn these objects to our own use, according to the qualities we perceive in them, *we put to an infallible test the correctness or otherwise of our sense-perceptions.* If these perceptions have been wrong, then our estimate of the use to which an object can be turned must also be wrong, and our attempt must fail. But if we succeed in accomplishing our aim, *if we find that the object does agree with our idea of it, and does answer the purpose we intended it for, then that is positive proof that our perceptions of it and its qualities, so far, agree with reality outside ourselves.*" Lenin now remarks "The materialist theory then, the *reflection of objects by our mind*, is here presented with perfect clearness: things exist outside of us. Our perceptions and representations are their images. The verification of these images, *the distinction of true and false images, is given by practice.*"⁶ He then continues the quotation from Engels: ". . . whenever we find ourselves face to face with a failure, then . . . generally . . . we find that the perception upon which we acted was either incomplete and superficial, or combined with the results of other perceptions in a way not warranted by them. . . . So long as we take care to train and to use our senses properly, and to keep our action within the limits prescribed by perceptions properly made and properly used, so long shall we find that the result of our action PROVES the conformity of our perceptions with the objective nature of the things perceived. Not in one single instance, so far, have we been led to the conclusion that our sense-perceptions, scientifically controlled, induce in our minds ideas respecting the outer world that are, by their very nature, at variance with reality, or that there is an inherent incompatibility between the outer world and our sense-perceptions of it." Now we see what Lenin's method of comparing is: it is, he says, by getting nearer a thing of whose nature we are uncertain, by touching it, and trying to use it in various ways that we compare our original sense-perception with the thing. But will this do? There is in it something which most of us who disagree with Lenin would not think of denying, viz.

⁶ Notice how Engels notices no difference between: (1) "the correctness of our sense-perceptions," on the one hand, and (2) "the agreement of the object with our idea of it," "the agreement of reality outside us with our perceptions of it" on the other. And how Lenin in turn marks no difference between (2) and: (3) "the reflection of objects by our mind", "our perceptions are their images."

that the way to find out whether one has seen a thing right, if one is in doubt, is to get nearer and try to touch it, pick it up, use it, etc. E.g., there may be a dish of fruit before me : my hosts are known practical jokers : are those real apples or not ? I cannot tell by looking only, or even by picking one up, but must try biting one. (I can only find out their nature through practice.) Or again, is that a pen on my desk or just a shadow ; I tell by what I feel on putting out my hand.

I.e., by further activity I tell whether I was right or wrong in taking there to be a pen there, or the apples to be real ones. But this is a very different thing from saying—as Lenin and Engels do—that by this I tell whether my original perception was an accurate or inaccurate “ reflection ” of the thing, a “ true or a false image ”. Instead of saying only that by further activity we prove our original perception correct or incorrect, they try to give an explanation of what a perception’s being correct or incorrect consists in, viz. in its being an accurate “ reflection ”, or a “ true image ” of the thing ; and this theory, they say, though difficult to prove by “ mere argumentation ”, is in fact *believed* by everyone and constantly *used* by them. Compare it now with the explanation that people see out of submarines by a reflecting mirror : this may be *used* to build a similar instrument, to enable one to repair one’s submarine if one ceases to be able to see out of it, to know where to damage a submarine to prevent the people seeing out of it, and so on ; but no one can repair anything, or build anything, or prevent anything with the help of the assertion that, when practice shows that we are seeing rightly, we do the seeing by having in the mind a reflection of the thing seen.

Again in the submarine case there is both what we shall call a *direct* and an *indirect* method of comparing the reflection with the thing reflected. We can compare it by looking from the one to the other, or, indirectly, by cruising about on the assumption that the two would be alike *if* we compared them directly : if this cruise is successful in that we reach our destination having circumvented the things seen by means of the periscope, let us say that they and the image in the mirror have been shown to be *indirectly comparable*. Now Lenin’s account of perception allows only of *indirect comparison* of the reflection and the thing : there is no mention of any direct comparison of them. So what is the use of saying : “ Success in practice shows us that in this case our

perception was a reflection of the thing" when there is no independent way of finding whether there is a reflection or not? It is as if someone were to say: "So their success in the manœuvres shows that they had a periscope," but were using "had a periscope" in such a way that it was to be true that they had a periscope if they succeeded in the manœuvres, and that they had none if they didn't, and no further investigation was to be relevant to whether they had or not; i.e., if they were using it in such a way that it would still be true that "they had a periscope" even if on looking we could see that they had none. Lenin's use of the phrase "he has a reflection in his mind" is such that, no matter what one suggests (other than the "indirect" test of success in practice), it is not to be accepted as a direct test for whether he has one (cf. there is an image in a mirror in the periscope), or as a direct test for the likeness of the image to the thing (cf. I observe, by looking from one to the other, that the image in the mirror is a good likeness of the things mirrored).

What ordinary people—housewives, workmen, scientists, and even philosophers—need for "success in practice" is to be able to distinguish when there is a material thing in their way from when there isn't, to distinguish a thing of one colour from a thing of another, a hallucination from really seeing a thing, and so on; but to be told that, when they see something, what is happening is that they have in their minds a reflection of the thing, will help them in no way—it will neither guide them in making this or destroying that, or in finding this or avoiding that, or in any other practical activity. What Lenin requires of philosophy is that it should deny neither established facts of science nor plain facts of common sense: but there are more ways of avoiding these than he was aware of, and certainly it is not necessary in order to do so to utter, as a theory believed by all and necessary to the success of their activities, what is little more than a figure of speech. And in doing so he can hardly claim the merit of not going beyond "the naïve realism of any healthy person, who is not an inmate of an insane asylum, or in the school of the idealist philosophers" (p. 47).