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Larry Gambone
Cosmic Dialectics
The Libertarian Philosophy of Joseph Dietzgen
2010

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> The prime necessity to an advance in civilization is freedom of the people to participate in consumption . . . wealth, once the stimulator of progress, is now turning into a factor of historical stagnation . . . on the whole it must be admitted that the growth of production is kept in check by the question of consumption.[66]

But the capitalist was too concerned with immediate profit to increase wages.

> Business is at a standstill, and there is no demand for goods. The only way out of this calamity is participation of the masses in consumption; the wages must be increased and labor time reduced. But the well-fed capitalist . . . is too narrow minded to pay the producer of his wealth, the worker, well . . . Not only social democracy, but the national economics demand a larger consumption, a wider market for its products.[67]

[66] Dietzgen, Some of the Philosophical Essays, 98–99.
[67] Ibid., 178.

> future, When, Where, and How need not trouble us, it is indeed an idle 'philosophic' speculation.[62]

Dietzgen foreshadowed the IWW's idea of "New in the shell of the old": "The society we are striving for differs from the present but by modifications. The society of the future is contained in the present society as the young bird is in the egg."[63]

Positivism with its so-called Eternal Laws was rejected in politics as well as philosophy. Nor must activists do more than educate in the broadest sense. They are not military commanders:

> Social Democracy does not seek to establish eternal laws, permanent institutions or unchangeable forms; it seeks the salvation of mankind. The indispensable means . . . is mental enlightenment .[64]

Dietzgen's philosophy, founded on tolerance, could only demand a political practice that was tolerant and allowed a broad range of opinions to exist: "We must in practice be tolerant in the extreme and surely no Social Democrat would ever think of putting any Party member into a straight jacket of uniformity."[65]

Economics

There is little in English on Dietzgen's economic ideas. Th at which does exist is interesting in the way it foreshadows later developments. Unlike many socialists of his day, he saw that a well paid work force was necessary for economic development, whether capitalist or social democratic.

[62] Ibid., 191–2.
[63] From the Volkstaadt, as quoted in Industrial Worker, April 17, 1937.
[64] Dietzgen, Some of the Philosophical Essays, 225.
[65] Ibid.

Thinking About Thinking

Dietzgen began by asking the question, "What happens when we think?" He observed that the basic thinking process was essentially the same whether done by the greatest scientist or a common person. For "the simplest conception, or any idea for that matter, is of the same general nature as the most perfect understanding . . . Thought is work."[1]

By showing the common basis of thought, Dietzgen democratized science and philosophy. The belief that every person's opinion must be valued and that thinking must not be especially reserved for an intellectual elite puts him at variance with both academia and Marxist specialists in revolution. "The knowledge and study of this theory cannot be left to any particular guild . . . general thought is a public matter which everyone should be required to attend to himself."[2]

But what happens when we think? What is the innate process that underlies thought, whether thinking about plowing a fi eld, contemplating the cosmos or just plain day-dreaming? Thought requires the formation of concepts about the world, a process which involves two differing aspects:

> By means of thought we become aware of all things in a twofold manner, outside in reality and inside in thought . . . Our brain does not assimilate the things themselves, but only their images. The imagined tree is only a general tree. The real tree is different from any other. And although I may have the picture of some special tree in my head, yet the real tree is still different

[1] Joseph Dietzgen, The Nature of Human Brain Work (Oakland: PM Press, 2010), 18.
[2] Ibid., 6.

> from its conception as the specific is different from the general.[3]

One must not make the mistake of confusing one's mental pictures of the world with reality itself. The real, existing thing is not exactly like the generalization which is formed in the mind. "What abstract thing, being, existence, generality is there that is not manifold in its sense manifestations, and individually different from all other things? There are no two drops of water alike."[4]

Thought is a process of forming generalizations out of specific incidences or specific things. Th inking involves the specific and individual things of the world and our generalizations about them. Thought involves generalization.

> The common feature of all separate thought processes consists in their seeking the general character or unity which is common to all objects experienced in their manifold variety.[5]

But generalization isn't all we do when we think, nor is it without inherent problems. If we take our generalizations to an extreme, we can easily get lost in what are essentially our own mental constructions. We trap ourselves by thinking our productions are reality. This is what happens to people who get caught up in extreme religious or political cults. To bring ourselves back down to reality, it is necessary to never forget the individual and specific aspects of things.

> Mere generalization is one-sided and leads to fantastical dreams. By this method one can transform anything into everything. It is necessary to supplement

[3] Ibid., 20.
[4] Ibid., 44.
[5] Ibid., 27.

How was the co-operative commonwealth to come about? Certainly not through the manipulations of a gang of academic know-it-alls or New Bosses. It was necessary to

> emancipate the working class through the workers themselves . . . a more equitable and popular distribution of economic goods can be realized by a democracy only [not] the rule of a clique under the pretense of intellectual superiority.[60]

Social change would not come about through missionary work, nor utopian schemes. Salvation comes not from religious, political and social enlightenment, but grows organically out of the development of social economy. (Dietzgen, like all the Marxists of his day, was overly optimistic about the demise of capitalism.)

> We don't look for salvation in subjective schemes, but we see it growing as a sort of organic product out of the inevitable course of actual development. All we do is facilitate its birth. . . . which emancipates us from striving for an illusory absolute ideal, for some "best world"[61]

And also:

> We too demand the restoration of our human rights . . . this . . . is no idle speculation, but is the natural outcome of present material wants . . . [the cooperative economy is] . . . quite in keeping with the nature of the present system: it must come: its materials are being produced and multiplied daily. Th e capitalists are the real silk-worms . . . Th e premature question about the

[60] Ibid., 127–131.
[61] Dietzgen, Some of the Philosophical Essays, 179.

our sins in a great book. The Absolute is far beyond anything so earth-bound and anthropomorphic as personification, or as Dietzgen stated, "the infinite, eternal, is not personal, but objective."[55]

Orthodox religion had become overly transcendental and had forgotten immanence—the Absolute had been removed from the world and this was wrong.

The relative and the absolute do not lie so far apart as it is painted to man by that uncultivated sense of Infinity called Religion . . . The Absolute and the Relative are not separated transcendentally, they are connected with each other so that the Unlimited is made up of an infinite number of finite limitations and each limited phenomenon possesses the nature of the Infinite."[56]

One final quote shows attitudes reminiscent of the Sermon On Th e Mount: "Never be harsh in your judgments of others . . . In order to act courteously, you must think courteously. Virtue and faults are combined. Even the rascal is a good fellow and the just sins seven times a day."[57]

Dietzgen's Politics

While living in Germany, Dietzgen was a member of the Social Democratic Party. This did not mean he was a State Socialist. What he proposed was a system of co-operative production and not State ownership: humanity's "savior can only be found in cooperative, brotherly work."[58]

A cooperative society was one without class division. "Only from the abolition of class rule, from the transformation of the selfish capitalistic organizations into co-operative instruments of production will issue the true brotherhood of man."[59]

[55] Ibid., 437.

[56] Dietzgen, Some of the Philosophical Essays, 288–289.

[57] Industrial Worker, April 17, 1937.

[58] Dietzgen, Some of the Philosophical Essays,108.

[59] Ibid., 160.

> generalization by specialization . . . the general must be conceived in its relation to its specific forms, and these forms in their universal interconnection.[6]

Contradiction Inherent in Thought

Thought is a process which involves a relationship between two opposing aspects: the aspect of generalization and the aspect of specialization. To think means to always be engaged in a contradictory process.

> For consciousness generalizes differences and differentiates generalities. Contradiction is innate in consciousness and its nature is so contradictory that it is at the same time a differentiating, a generalizing and an understanding nature. Consciousness . . . recognizes that all nature, all being, lives in contradictions, that everything is what it is only in co-operating with its opposite.[7]

As with generalization, here is a trap we must avoid. One can get so caught up in the contradictions confronting us that it becomes impossible to make decisions. However, it is possible to achieve some sort of balance or synthesis between opposite views and the contradictions can, at least in part, be overcome.

> Reason develops its understanding out of contradictions. It is in the nature of mind to perceive . . . the nature of things by their semblance, and their semblance by their nature . . . or in other words to compare the

[6] Joseph Dietzgen, The Positive Outcome of Philosophy, trans. Ernest Untermann (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr, 1906), 357.

[7] Ibid., 33.

> contrasts of the world with one and other, to harmonize them.[8]

The Limitations of Our Knowledge

It should be obvious by now, that this contradictory process of generalization or concept formation gives us only a limited understanding of the world. That ten people witnessing a traffic accident might have ten different versions of what happened is perfectly understandable. What we are doing is forming our concepts about the world through our thinking processes, resulting in a viewpoint which approximates reality, but is not reality itself. Hence, and this should be engraved on stone in letters two feet high, there is no perfect knowledge or truth.

> Our brain is supposed to solve the contradictions of nature. If it knows enough about itself to realize that it is not an exception from general nature . . . then it also knows that its clearness can diff er but moderately from the general confusion . . . Th e contradictions are solved only by reasonable differentiation . . . extravagant differences are nothing but extravagant speculations . . . and it is a relic of untrained habits to differentiate in an absolute manner.[9]

> The rule [is] not to make exaggerated, but only graduated distinctions. Compared to the wealth of the Cosmos, the intellect is only a poor fellow.[10]

Given the difficulty of attaining a clear understanding of reality, it comes as no surprise that Dietzgen regarded truth in relative

[8] Ibid., 88.
[9] Ibid., 350.
[10] Ibid., 430.

> alongside of it, is the first postulate of a skilled and consistent mode of thinking.[51]

Religion had both positive and negative aspects. "History shows us not only the negative and ridiculous side of the religions, customs, institutions and ideas of the past, but also their positive, reasonable and necessary side . . . when religion was a more serious affair, it was also less dualistic."[52]

> The devil was but a tool, the earthly life but a transitional term of probation for the eternal life. Th ere was a centre of gravity and system. In comparison with modern half-heartedness . . . religion did encompass the whole in a monistic manner.[53]

While cruelty, superstition and control of the lower classes are major elements of religion it could not be written off as just this. Like everything else, religion has a rational core. He did not blush at being called an atheist, but religion didn't terrify him.

> If he is an atheist who denies that perfection can be found in an individual, then I am an atheist. And if he is a believer in God who has the faith in the "most perfect being" with which not alone theologists, but also Cartesius and Spinoza have occupied themselves, then I am one of the true children of God.[54]

According to Dietzgen, the problem with religion was that it personified God as symbol such as the Father or the Divine King, and the symbol came to be taken for the reality. Th us, we have the childish view of God as an old man on a cloud writing down

[51] Ibid., 274.
[52] Dietzgen, The Nature of Human Brain Work, 96.
[53] Dietzgen, Some of the Philosophical Essays, 148.
[54] Dietzgen, The Positive Outcome of Philosophy, 244.

Unlike some anarchists who think it possible to completely abolish power, Dietzgen recognized that existence is power. The "weak" he refers to are undoubtedly the laboring classes, who in their struggle for recognition of their needs, overcome their weakness. That "the world is always right" seems appalling in an era which has seen the likes of Pol Pot and Hitler. However, this restatement of Hegel's oft quoted and always misunderstood "Real is Rational" is not a whitewash of the crimes of history. It merely states that history is a process in which events have causes—in the limited sense of cause and effect that Dietzgen uses. Hitler, for example, did not fall from the sky, nor were the German people seized by temporary madness; his rise to power was caused the racism and authoritarianism of European society, the punitive Versailles Treaty, the destruction of the middle class, their fear of social revolution etc.

Dietzgen and the Spiritual

We have seen in Dietzgen's philosophy that human knowledge is limited and that the only Absolute which exists is the Totality of Existence or the Universe. (By Universe, he did not mean what astronomers mean by it, rather he meant Existence—all that has ever happened, all that is happening now, all that will happen). He observed that if the anthropomorphism, superstition and hocus pocus were stripped away from religion what was left was the Absolute. God is another word for the Absolute or the Totality of Existence,

> the all perfect Being, with the conception of God, with the Substance of Spinoza, with the "thing in itself" of Kant, and with the Absolute of Hegel, has its good reason in the fact that the sober conception of the Universe as the All-One with nothing above or outside or

terms Th ere could be no such thing as absolute truth. "A perfect understanding is possible only within limits."[11] While truth with a capital "T" is unattainable, this should not stop us from trying to get as near to the goal of absolute truth as possible. "Th e improvement in the method of thinking is like every other improvement, a limitless problem, the solution which must always remain unachieved. This, however, must in no way keep us from striving after it."[12]

The Importance of Error

For Dietzgen, no absolute separation existed between truth and error. All truths contain some amount of error, and all errors contain some amount of truth. "Truth and error diff er only comparatively, in volume of degree . . . like all other opposites in the world . . . Everything, every sense perception, no matter how subjective is true, a certain part of truth."[13]

Aside from fanatics and dogmatists, it is not very difficult to admit a truth might contain some element of error, but what about the idea that truth can be found in error? This is not such an off beat concept when you realize even the wildest dreams are based upon material ultimately taken from the real world, in the manner that the fantasy of the unicorn is constructed by mentally attaching a narwhal's horn upon the head of a horse. Error results from universalizing or absolutizing some aspect of limited applicability, or as in the case of the narwhal horn, placing something, which would otherwise be real and true, where it does not belong.

> Error . . . arises when the faculty of thought . . . inadvertently or short-sightedly and without previous experi-

[11] Dietzgen, The Nature of Human Brain Work, 47.

[12] Joseph Dietzgen, Th e Positive Outcome of Philosophy, (Chicago: Kerr, 1906), 265.

[13] Dietzgen, Th e Nature of Human Brain Work, 43.

> ence concedes to certain phenomena a more general scope.[14]

In a nutshell, "unwarranted assumption is the nature of error."[15] Dogmatism is to be avoided.

> All distinctions are only quantitative, not absolute, only graduated, not irreconcilable . . . Instead of realizing the limited applicability of its rules by the existence of opposing practices, convention seeks to establish an absolute applicability of its rules by simply ignoring the cause of the opposition. This is a dogmatic procedure.[16]

One of the problems which Dietzgen does not deal with is error that disguises itself as truth. In this situation, arguments may be logical and contain obvious truths, yet often result in dangerous falsehoods. The false syllogism, such as contemporary far-right media's assertion "Terrorists oppose the US occupation of Iraq; socialists, too, oppose this occupation, therefore socialists are terrorists," is one example of this.

Thought Must Have an Object

Dietzgen made the observation that thought must have an object, i.e., one must think about some thing, even if this consists only of thinking about thought itself. Hence, there are no disembodied thoughts—thoughts without an object. Th ese objects of thought are taken from the external world (and also from the psyche, a point not known by the pre-Freudian Dietzgen). Therefore, the world ultimately precedes human thought. In this manner, the Proletarian

[14] Ibid., 47.
[15] Ibid., 48.
[16] Ibid., 83

> acquirements of the past. Evolution is as much conservative as it is revolutionary, and it finds as much wrong as right in every law.[48]

Dietzgen, like most Marxists, thought that class society was a necessary stage in human history.

> I am even inclined to admit that the task of developing our labor power to that degree of prodigious fertility which we see today, has necessitated a privileged governing class as well as the exploitation of the masses. I am ready to acquiesce patiently in the misery of the past, and bear it no grudge or malice.[49]

Social evolution is not nihilistic, no clean-slate wiping away of the past and as much is retained as is rejected. Both the radical and the conservative are necessary. Nor is there a need to have someone to blame for the world's ills, history just IS and we are all part of it.

> At the same time we are thus reconciled with the world as it really is, because we no longer regard it as the unsuccessful realization of that which cannot but be. The world is always right. Whatever exists, is right and is not fated to be otherwise until it changes. Wherever there is existence, which is power, there is also right without further condition, because it is right in a formative stage. Weakness has no other right than striving for supremacy . . . forcing a recognition of its long denied needs.[50]

[48] Dietzgen, The Nature of Human Brain Work, 95.
[49] Dietzgen, Some of the Philosophical Essays, 97.
[50] Ibid., 109.

ian. One person may know more than another, but the differences between individuals are only quantitative, not qualitative. To be human is to have the capacity for reason. Such a viewpoint has a high regard for the individual, since each person's opinion, and therefore each person, is seen as having intrinsic value.

An essential concept of individuality also exists within his philosophy, shown by his belief that each drop of water differs from every other. And if water drops are individuals, consider the individuality of that complex creature, Homo sapiens, or as he stated, "humanity is an idea, while man is always some special person."[45]

Dietzgen's Concept of History

Dietzgen's concept of history is related to his evaluation of the individual. "It is only the consciousness of individual freedom which creates sufficient unconcern for the rules made by others to permit a brave advance, which emancipates us from striving for an illusory absolute ideal, for some "best world."[46]

Th is unconcern for the rules made by others allowed him to break with the SLP and go to the aid of the beleaguered anarchists. At a time when a highly determinist view of history virtually expunged the factor of human will, the Tanner noted that "humanity revolutionizes its highest standards, in short, it makes history."[47] His holistic view of man, history, and nature protected him from falling into both the utopian trap and its opposite, the sort of despair we see so much of today. Nor did he have a blind belief in progress like so many of his contemporaries.

> Progress picks up the child and then pours the water out of the bathtub . . . Th e present wealth of civilization is due only to the economic administration of the

[45] Dietzgen, Th e Nature of Human Brain Work, 107.
[46] Ibid., 96.
[47] Dietzgen, Some of the Philosophical Essays, 113.

Philosopher declared himself to be a materialist, but he was not satisfied by the usual meaning of the term.

> We . . . must not be satisfied with simply following the example of the old materialist who reduced everything to ponderable atoms. Cosmic matter has not only gravity, but aroma, light and sound—and why not also intelligence? Th e conception of matter must be given a more comprehensive meaning. To it belongs all phenomena of reality.[17]

Idealism vs. Materialism

Dietzgen attributed the dispute between idealism and materialism to the absolutizing of the differences between the two concepts.

> The idealist regards reason alone as the source of all understanding, while the materialist looks upon the world of sense perceptions in the same way. Nothing is required for a solution of this contradiction but the comprehension of the relative interdependence of these two sources of understanding . . . But these distinctions belong to the one common genus which constitutes the distinction between the special and the general.[18]

Both idealists and materialists had an unreal conception of the world.

> The idealist overestimated the idea, the materialist matter, both were dreamers . . . both distinguished

[17] Joseph Dietzgen, Some of the Philosophical Essays, trans. M. Beer and Th . Rothstein (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr, 1906), 221.
[18] op cit., 69.

> mind and matter in fantastic, unreal way. Neither of them raised themselves to the consciousness of unity and monism . . . of Nature which is not either material or mental, but one as well as the other.[19]
>
> The old materialists dealt in irreconcilable opposites just like the idealists.[20]

The world contains both mental and material, both are real and all that is real is what makes up the material world. Everything that has an effect upon the world is real, ie., material.

> We distinguish between the object of sense perception and its mental image. Nevertheless the intangible idea is also material and real. I perceive my idea of a desk just as plainly as the desk itself. True, if I choose to call only tangible things material, then ideas are not material . . . Mind is as real as the tangible table . . . While the idea of these things is different from the things themselves, yet it has that in common with them that it is as real as they are.[21]

The division between our ideas and the "real material reality" is not absolute. Consider the effect of the imagination. Our imaginary creations are both non-real (not existing) and yet have some reality since they are based ultimately upon the objectively existing world. Th ese fantasies can also have a major impact upon us, think only of the insane ideas of Hitler or Stalin. According to Dietzgen, "there is only a moderate distinction of degree between purely imaginary things and so-called real things."[22]

[19] Dietzgen, Some of the Philosophical Essays, 294.
[20] Ibid., 298.
[21] Dietzgen, The Nature of Human Brain Work, 19.
[22] Dietzgen, The Positive Outcome of Philosophy, 367.

> knowledge of the peasant, the dyer or the smith. Scientific agriculture is, however, only insofar ahead of usual farming that its rules or knowledge of the so-called natural laws are generalizations of a more comprehensive kind. They but diff er from each other in degree and not in essence . . . we want to overcome the claims of the aristocracy of intellect.[42]

Natural science had not yet abandoned the old mechanical materialism. "Modern science is even today still animated by the bias of the materialists of the 18th Century."[43]

The ultimate science was philosophy.

Positive science can give us knowledge of many aspects of the world, but it is left to another form of thinking (or science) to understand the world. Natural science is subordinate in one sense to philosophy—the science which investigates those basic questions that natural scientists usually take for granted—questions such as, "What is thought?", "What is truth?" and "Why Existence when there could be nothing?" Positivist science refuses to even allow such questions to be asked, a rather unscientific and illogical approach to say the least.

> Natural science in its narrower sense cannot give us the monistic conception of the world . . . [this] is investigated by a separate science some call Logic, or Epistemology or Dialectics.[44]

Dietzgen's Individualism

Rooted in the concept that all thought is in essence similar, Dietzgen's philosophy is from the beginning democratic and egalitar-

[42] Ibid., 128.
[43] Ibid., 299.
[44] Ibid., 220.

Science vs. Scientism

Like virtually all nineteenth-century thinkers, Dietzgen considered his works to be scientific. By this time, (the 1870s) the term "science" began to change meaning. Previously, any organized body of knowledge was considered a science and there was nothing smacking of pretentiousness or scientism in speaking about the "science of cookery" or "scientific socialism." With the rise of Positivism and materialism came a new and more restricted use of the word. The term "science" was now reduced to those areas of inquiry which applied the methodology of the natural sciences. Positivism engaged in a search for the immutable laws of nature which supposedly existed independently of the observer. Any other approach was deemed unscientific or pseudo-science and condemned in language similar to that used by sixteenth-century heresy-hunters. Science had become a new absolutism and a new superstition. Th is was too much for the Tanner to stomach.

> There are among us a good many people who, instead of regarding science as a handmaid to civilization, idolize and worship it . . . They are like the barbarians who turned the natural and social law into a divinity . . . It is incumbent upon social democracy to destroy both religious and scientifi c superstition.[41]

He reproached scientists and academics for their elitism and considered them as idealistic (in the philosophical sense) as the materialists whose philosophical off spring they undoubtedly were.

> Having materialized everything spiritual, there remained nothing for the professors but to spiritualize their own profession, science. They assume academic knowledge to be of a different type than say, the

[41] Ibid., 103.

Dietzgen also valued the imagination. Fantasy has certainly a positive power, and speculative intuition "very often precedes empirical and inductive understanding."[23]

Dietzgen's Critique of Bourgeois Materialism

Dietzgen attacked materialism as being itself a kind of idealism.

> Inasmuch as the materialist speaks ironically of formless matter and matterless forms, in the same breath with perishable forms of imperishable matter, it is plain that materialism is not any more informed than idealism as to the relation of content to form, of a phenomenon to the essential nature of its subject. Where do we find such eternal, imperishable, formless matter?[24]

Dietzgen had no patience for the argument that reduced ideas and the supposedly non-material to mere derivatives of "matter".

> Matter is to the old materialists the exalted subject, all other things subordinate prejudices . . . an antiquated, narrow thinking which has taken no notice of the work of German dialecticians. It must be understood that subjects are composed exclusively of predicates.[25]

There was a difference between the old materialism and the new which formed the philosophical basis of Social Democracy.

> We see the distinguishing mark between the mechanical materialists . . . and the Social Democratic mate-

[23] Ibid., 9.
[24] Dietzgen, Th e Nature of Human Brain Work, 34.
[25] Dietzgen, Some of the Philosophical Essays, 295.

> rialists . . . in that the latter have extended the former's narrow conception of matter as consisting exclusively of the Tangible to all phenomena that occur in the world.[26]

It was wrong to separate mind and matter in an extreme fashion. Th e only way to come to an understanding of reality is to see the mental and physical in their unity. "Matter" is a mental construct, but "mind" cannot exist without the material world of objects and forces.

> Mind is material and things are mental. Mind and matter are real only in their interrelations.[27]

The word "matter" was not sacred for Dietzgen and he was not afraid to abandon it for a more inclusive term and thereby do away with the dualism of idealism vs. materialism.

> Solid and liquid, wood and metal are quite correctly summed up under the notion 'matter.' Why should we not be justified in summing up all things under the term 'empirical truth' or empirical phenomenon? . . . Through the common origins all antagonisms are reconciled and bridged over. Diversity is but a form: in their essence all things are alike . . . we find what is more and more being proved by natural science, that seemingly essential differences are but differences in degree . . . Th e cause effects and the effect causes.[28]

> And those who dislike this generalization of the word "matter" may instead, speak of "phenomena" . . . the

[26] Ibid., 298.
[27] Dietzgen, The Nature of Human Brain Work, 21.
[28] Dietzgen, Some of the Philosophical Essays, 5.

should not glorify our discoveries, ideas or concepts, for these are all demarcations of reality we have made. Our knowledge is more than likely to be gray and fuzzy rather than sharply outlined in black and white. Not that our mental toil results in complete untruth or everything is subjective fantasy, but our constructs are merely an approximation of reality. As the millions of victims of twentieth-century arrogance can attest, our knowledge is always limited, partial knowledge, and to think otherwise is to fall into a deep and dangerous error.

The Problem of Language

Dietzgen realized that many problems of philosophy arose with the inadequate use of language. In this manner, he foreshadowed Wittgenstein and the analytic philosophers.

> The inertia which has prevented the one-sided idealists on the one hand and the one-sided materialists on the other from coming to a peaceful understanding may be traced to one of those slips of the tongue. We lack the right terms for designating the relationship between spiritual phenomena . . . and the tangible . . . things on the other.[39]

He did not take words as reality, as do so many intellectuals, but regarded them as symbols. "Words are names, which do not, and cannot, have any other function than that of symbolic illustration."[40]

[39] Ibid., 361.
[40] Dietzgen, Some of the Philosophical Essays, 103.

(We are told that germs cause disease.) Th e problem for both the metaphysician and the scientist is that we rarely find THE cause of something and our discoveries often give rise to more questions. (If germs cause disease, why are we not sick all the time, since we are continually surrounded by germs?)

> Thus things become mutual causes and mutual effects. Th e entire world of phenomena, of which thought is but a part, is an absolute circle, in which the beginning and end is everywhere and nowhere, in which everything is at the same time essence and semblance, cause and effect, general and concrete. Just as all Nature is in the last instance one sole general unity . . . so this same Nature . . . is the final cause of all things.[37]

Reason, and not sense perception, are the ultimate means through which we arrive at the notion of "cause."

> Causes are, in the last instance, not noticed and furnished by means of . . . the sense perceptions. They are supplied by the faculty of thought . . . not 'pure' products of the faculty of thought, but are produced by it in connection with sense perceptions . . . Causes are mental generalizations of perceptible changes . . . Th e speculative cause creates its effects. But in reality the effects are the material out of which the brain, or science, forms its causes. Th e cause concept is a product of reason . . . married to the world of sense perceptions.[38]

Thus Dietzgen once more combats arrogance, the sort one finds with the technocrat and his interminable "scientific plans," the dogmatic Marxist, or neo-liberal and his inflexible "economic laws." We

[37] Dietzgen, The Nature of Human Brain Work, 58.
[38] Dietzgen, The Positive Outcome of Philosophy, 438.

> name of the general species, to which everything belongs, the ponderable and the imponderable, body and soul.[29]

Nonetheless, he was willing to accept the name "materialist," but with a proviso:

> But now we Social Democrats accept the name [of materialists] with which our opponents think to abuse us, because we know that 'the stone which the builder refused is become the head corner stone.' We would equally be justified to call ourselves idealists, inasmuch as our system is based on the final results of philosophy, on the scientific investigation of ideas.[30]

In rejecting the materialism which reduced all phenomena to "matter," Dietzgen also rejected the theory of knowledge know as "reflection theory." Th is concept, developed by Lenin in Materialism and Empireocriticism, saw concepts and ideas as mere copies or reflections of the "material world," in the manner that a camera reproduces an image.

> Nothing more insipid has been said of truth and knowledge than . . . that truth is the conformity of our knowledge with its object. How can a picture "conform" to its model? Approximately it can . . . But to be altogether alike, quite the same as the original, what an abnormal idea! Th us we can only know Nature and her parts relatively, since even a part, though only a relation of Nature, possesses again the characteristics of the Absolute, the nature of the ALL- EXISTENCE which cannot be exhausted by knowledge.[31]

[29] Ibid., 218.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Ibid., 140.

The Essential Unity of the World

Dietzgen called his philosophy monist, which refers to the view that all existence is ultimately unified.

> Consciousness is in itself consciousness of the infinite. Our settled conviction of the unity of the universe is an inborn logic. The unity of the world is the supreme and most universal category. A closer look . . . reveals the fact that it carries its opposite, the Infinite multiplicity.[32]

The unity of existence is innate in the human mind. "With our hands we grasp only the tangible, with our eyes only the visible, but with our conception we grasp the whole Nature, the Universe."[33]

The absolute separation of any aspect of existence from another, while not the ultimate truth about reality, was also a creation of the mind.

> Consciousness signifies the knowledge of being. It means having at least a faint inkling of the fact that being is the universal idea. Being is everything; it is the essence of everything . . . the human intellect knows of no absolute separation of any two things, although it is free to separate the universe into its parts for the purpose of understanding.[34]

Existence is the only absolute.

> Perfectly true, perfectly universal, is only the general existence, the Universe, the absolute quantity. But the real world is absolutely relative, absolutely perishable, an infinity of manifestations . . . All truths are simply parts of this world, partial truths . . . The general mark of truth is existence.[35]

[32] Dietzgen, The Positive Outcome of Philosophy, 410.
[33] Ibid., 45.
[34] Ibid., 361.

Reality cannot be reduced to either ideas or matter, (both being human constructs) but the one "thing" it can be resolved into is the Universe or the Totality. Here, Dietzgen believed, was the only solid place to anchor a philosophy, for all finite concepts proved ultimately illusory. Upon this firm ground, Dietzgen was able to reconcile the classical problems of philosophy, such as free will vs. determinism, matter and force, cause and effect, and materialism vs. idealism. Th ese opposites were not as opposed as people thought, or as he stated, "We do not conceive the forces as mere predicates of matter. Our conception of matter and force is, so to speak, democratic. One is of the same value as the other; everything individual is but the property . . . of the entire Nature."[36]

We assume the underlying unity of the world in our everyday actions, hence the Tanner's a priori is indeed a most basic assumption of our consciousness. We would not be able to function for any length of time without the associated concepts of the existence, coherence and oneness of the world. Science is based upon this essential idea and would be impossible without it. And if the world was dualistic, and there was another truly separate existence, we would not be able to know about it. Hence absolute separation is meaningless.

Cause and Effect

Dietzgen dealt rather extensively with the problem of cause and effect. Science searches for the reasons for events and it is considered an important discovery when a causal link is discovered.

[35] Dietzgen, The Nature of Human Brain Work, 42.
[36] Dietzgen, Some of the Philosophical Essays, 301.