THE PROBLEM OF EPISTEMOLOGY [1936] *

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The fundamental error in many discussions from the field of epistemology is the (more or less open) manipulation of the symbolic epistemological subject, known as 'human spirit', 'human mind', 'research worker' or simply 'man' ('John', 'Socrates'), which has no concrete living position, which does not basically undergo changes even in the course of centuries and which represents every 'normal' man regardless of the surroundings and the epoch. Thus it is to be absolute, unchanging and general.

One says for instance that a man's sources of knowledge are empirical experiences, but one does not think that, for a very long time, the source of almost the entire knowledge of every man was, in Europe, simply book and school. Now these books and schools also spring from books and schools, etc. Now even if we admit that this path is ultimately derived from somebody's empirical experiences, up to now we lack serious studies whether the transmission of the knowledge itself, its migration from man to man, from a scientific journal to a textbook, does not change its content, and particularly whether this change takes place in a specially directed way. Hence do there exist by chance any elements of knowledge whose genesis is neither empirical nor speculative, but exclusively sociological, i.e., which arise during, and as a result of, migration within the society? We also lack studies which would explain in what way a certain definite store of information affects the act of further cognition. Does cognition undertaken by a specialist from some domain of knowledge take place basically in a different way from the cognition by a layman? Does there exist any tuning up of new elements of cognition of the nature, the style of the old elements? Perhaps a developed branch of knowledge grows in accordance with other laws than a branch which only

* Przegląd Filozoficzny (1936).

sprouts? Perhaps there exist elements of knowledge whose genesis is purely historical, i.e., which originated exclusively due to a historical coincidence?

These are fundamental problems. That symbolic ‘human spirit’ is an asocial and ahistorical being: being the only one, unique, hence solitary, it has no communication with anybody, it does not enter into discussions, does not cultivate the art of imitation, has no companions, friends or enemies. Hence the neglect of the sociology of cognition. The ‘human mind’, this fictitious representative of the minds of men, is moreover said to be, in its ‘logical structure’, everywhere and always the same, even in general the only possible one. Hence the neglect both of studies of the historical development of thinking and of the comparative science of thinking: all forms of archaic and exotic thinking are simply disregarded as being unworthy of being studied. There exists a narrow-minded fiction of a ‘normal mind’; what is different is, to all intents and purposes, not capable of being studied, and it can be only adored as genius, or else treated with pity as madness.

One speaks too much about what cognitive thinking ought to be like, and too little about what it really does look like. Yet do we really know that much about what it ought to be? Do we know at least one example of perfect thinking, a thinking that would deserve fixing once for all, so as to prevent any further change? I cannot resist comparison with the speculative anatomia imaginabilis of the epigones of the Middle Ages, which consisted of a few poor traditional schemas and a large number of complementing speculations, and which tested not the real structure of the body, but rather what it ought to look like to satisfy the requirements of science: the traditional epistemologia imaginabilis is very similar to that anatomy.

The embryo of the modern theory of cognition is found in the studies of the school of Durkheim and Levy-Bruhl on the sociology of thinking and on the thinking of primitive peoples. Also Gumplowicz, Jerusalem et al. stress the “social conditioning of thinking and of its forms”. However, these embryos lack consistency, because they did not succeed in extricating themselves from the prejudice that modern European scientific thinking presents a basic exception, being ‘objective’ and not subjected to the principle of social conditioning. Levy-Bruhl believes, e.g., in the objective features of phenomena, upon which he automatically directs attention, as soon as the mystical elements of thinking disappear. Similarly Jerusalem writes about the possibility of a purely ‘objective’ ascertaining of facts which is allegedly attainable by the individual once he is liberated from complete social dependence.

However, particularly striking is the almost complete absence of studies — even of the possibility of studies — of the archaic forms of thinking. We only