The Knower and the Known

Roger Holmes

University of London

In this paper, I address a dilemma in the theory of knowledge and argue that this dilemma can be overcome by invoking the work of two well known social scientists—Marx (here considered as a sociologist) and Piaget (a psychologist). The dilemma considered is that of the relationship between what are here called "independent" (i.e., non-circular) and "relational" definitions; each form of definition has been the basis of a particular approach to the knowable (the independent definition being the basis of empiricism and the relational definition being the basis of Hegelianism) and each of these approaches can be shown to be unsatisfactory: empiricism, brilliantly successful in practice, runs itself, at the theoretical level, into the circular and the relational; while Hegelianism, although impregnable in logic, gains such impregnability at the cost of any delimitation and, hence of precision and refutability. It is argued that Marx (a follower of Hegel) as adapted by Piaget, can indeed overcome these difficulties and so present us with a theory of knowledge that makes possible an approach that is both successful in practice and reputable in logic.

The title of this paper needs some explaining: it is concerned with the relationship between the knower and the known, and the central question is whether there need be one. This is an important question, for it involves that form of inquiry we call epistemology (or the "theory of knowledge"). Some aver—I shall call them empiricists—that the known can be discussed independently of the knower (except—and it is an important exception—as a recorder through his senses of what is "there"). Thus, for empiricists, the known can wholly be discussed in its own terms—and science, including psychology and the social sciences, need not concern itself with abstract problems of epistemology. But modern social science can not avoid having that concern.

For the epistemologist, the relationship between the knower and the known is the object of concern; working out the implications of the known having a knower is the task he sets himself. In this paper I want to discuss the relationship between these two positions. Put bluntly, I want to consider whether epistemology is necessary and to do this with
reference to the influence of Marx and the importance of psychology (psychology being represented by that critical figure Piaget). I shall pre-fix my discussion of Marx and Hegel (Marx cannot be discussed independently of Hegel) by a brief self-serving historical sketch. First of all, though, I will make a definition and a distinction.

The term I will define is "identity." By identity I will mean anything that can in any way be recognized independently of its context, whether the "thing" be concrete or abstract, value free or value laden, of this world or the next. Chairs, the number 3, God, social groups, and "the spirit of Verdun" are all identities in this wider sense: they can all be referred to on their own.

Now for the distinction: I make a distinction between two kinds of identity—"independent" and "relational" identities. By an independent identity I mean an identity that can be defined independently of its context. (In psychological terms, the figure can be defined independently of its ground; sociologically, a group can be defined independently of its environment.) Thus a chair is an independent identity; so is a table, a person, a typewriter or, indeed, any "thing." By a relational identity, however, I mean an identity that can only be defined in relation to its context. (In psychological terms, the figure cannot be defined independently of its ground; sociologically, the group cannot be defined independently of its relations to other groups, or of the individuals composing it.) An example here is the number 3. The number 3—although it can be recognized on its own and so is an identity in my terms—can only be fully defined in relation to other numbers. Another example is an uncle—a full definition of an uncle, I believe, involves bringing in the further identities of kinship.

The concern of this paper can now be rephrased: Can the known be defined independently of the knower? Or must the known and the knower be related in their definition?

In classical times this problem would not have arisen. It was taken for granted (at least after Plato) that there was a relationship between the knower and the known. Socrates, as Plato tells us, elicited knowledge by "dialectic." The known, it was assumed, was dormant in the knower; what was needed was a "maieutic" approach. (Maieutic means pertaining to midwifery; good teachers evoke what is latent in the student.) The knower is at the center of the known. So it was, too, with Christianity. With Christianity we know through that personal quality—faith. This link between the knower and the known lasted until the seventeenth century when Galileo appeared on the scene and all that was changing had, at last, changed. What came of Galileo was the approach now known as "empiricism"; with empiricism, the knower was banished from the known.

The beginning of modern empiricism might be dated, not too ar-