

ON THE IMPRECISION  
**OF ECONOMIC PRINCIPLES**

AND ON

**THE TEACHING OF POLITICAL ECONOMY IN COLLEGES.**

*Paper read at the meeting of December 4, 1847.<sup>1</sup>*

Gentlemen, I requested the floor last Saturday on a minor matter, because it seemed to me of such importance that the very existence of political economy depends on its solution.

Regarding the presentation of a translation of the *Economic Sophisms* of our learned colleague, M. Bastiat, M. Dunoyer, noting the importance attached in foreign countries to this work, as small in volume as it is rich in doctrines, bitterly complained of the lack of interest it aroused among certain people in France. In seeking the cause of this situation, our distinguished colleague believed he had found it in the general ignorance of economic science, an ignorance all the more regrettable as it extends, he says, to the highest administrative authorities in the country, and justifies not only the most direct opposition to the practice of economic doctrines, but also a disdainful criticism that tends to belittle these studies as tainted by ridicule and puerility.

The Honorable M. Passy, agreeing with M. Dunoyer on the general ignorance of economic principles, has here become the interpreter of the opinion that attributes this ignorance to the small number of state-funded professorships in economics.

The crucial fact presented by M. Dunoyer proves that opinions are by no means in agreement, either on the usefulness of economic knowledge or even on its relative importance, since the serious discussions that constitute them can be dismissed as childish, not by the common people, but by respectable men, highly educated in other scientific fields, and even by a large number of those whose professions and careers are aimed at practicing what economic theories claim to resolve. Thus, for example, we find many opponents of economic science among administrators, financiers, merchants, manufacturers, workshop managers, etc.

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<sup>1</sup> From the *Démocratie pacifique*, December 31, 1847 and January 1, 1848.

M. Cousin, with that clarity of vision that allows him to delve, so to speak, into the depths of academic questions, — even those that fall outside the scope of his usual studies, — did not share the opinion of the two learned colleagues I have just named. And, with his characteristic sound judgment, he has raised some doubt — *only some doubt* — whether the resistance to the general acceptance of economic principles *does not have its cause in the science itself*, rather than in the ignorance of administrators, statesmen and so on, whose good intentions it is impossible to doubt.

Our learned colleague's *doubt* is probably the result of a philosophical criterion he applied, but did not elaborate on here, and by means of which he easily demonstrates any inaccuracy in a principle. M. Cousin, moreover, confined himself to highlighting the flaws in principles that raise general opposition in the world of practical applications. This fact itself deserves our full attention. It is not limited to France; it is universal. And even when the apostles of science, the dogmatic professors, come to power, where the application of their principles would be so easy for them, they immediately abandon their theory to take sides, in practice, with the enemies of the science. And yet, M. Dunoyer's complaints were unanimous among economists. M. Blanqui, in his history, had clearly observed this:

After deploring the system generally adopted in practice, he said: “And yet the mercantile system has survived the chorus of curses heaped upon it by the economists of the eighteenth century: it still reigns today in government councils, and it maintains, under the guise of self-serving patriotism, all the monopolies from which Europe suffers and complains.”

Shouldn't the unanimity of governments in resisting the wishes of the economists have resulted, among the economists themselves, in a doubt similar to that expressed by our esteemed colleague, M. Cousin? Shouldn't they have asked themselves whether the unanimous resistance of the powers to the application of their theory stemmed from an equally unanimous conviction that, *in the present state of humanity*, this theory is false, utopian, that is to say, unrealizable? They refused, however, to entertain this wise doubt, and they refused it for the very reason that should have led them to it: *that in political economy, nothing is absolute*. Indeed, if in political economy there is nothing absolute, the unanimous resistance of the powers is relative to something, and it is this something that should have been sought, namely, whether it was the ignorance of governments or the current state of humanity.

The opinion that *there is nothing absolute in political economy* stems from the ignorance of our time, which recognizes only one *hypothetical* absolute: that of mathematics.

The fact is, gentlemen, that everything *relative* relates to matter, movement, and force; the *absolute* relates to real knowledge, truth and right. To separate the absolute from truth and right is to subject right to force, which then becomes its sole interpreter and enforcer.

To justify the principle that there is nothing absolute in political economy, economists argue that *political economy is an observational science, and that its coordination must result from the experience of facts*. This is true insofar as economic sciences remain inherent to the physical sciences. But, as soon as they fall outside the domain of these sciences, as soon as they become part of the moral sciences, they are *matters of right*, and if right were to dare to assert that it is not absolute, it would be to declare that it is itself merely the expression of force.

Then, to avoid contradictions, they say that political economy is divided into *pure economics* and *applied economics*: one is the *science*, the other the *art*.

“For *pure political economy*,” says M. Rossi, “there is only one market, the universe; only one workshop, the world; only one working population, the population of the globe. It is *applied political economy* that distinguishes the English worker from the French worker, the English market from the French market, from the Chinese market, and so on.” (Volume II, Lesson 8.)

In this way, pure political economy alone is found to be the *science*, and, since this science relates only to cosmopolitanism, and cosmopolitanism is considered a *utopia*, you can understand how *pure science* is only suitable for academies; how *applied economics*, or the *art*, is the exclusive domain of statesmen and administrators; and you can also understand how political economy, as a *science*, is tainted with ridicule and puerility in the eyes of statesmen, for whom only applied economics has any importance. This is quite peculiar, but what I have the honor of presenting to you is an irrefutable fact, as I have just observed.

M. Passy attributed the diversity of opinions on certain economic problems to the incomplete state of the science, which, like all sciences, does not achieve the desired degree of accuracy in its first attempt. All of them, according to him, have had their share of aberrations, some greater than others; but economic science, he says, cannot be accused of issuing any dangerous principles.

Gentlemen, since the science is not *one*, all those who claim to be part of it are, in fact, part of it. Will anyone say that no dangerous principles have been issued under the guise of political economy? No one will deny it. Now, I am going to prove that the science is not one.

When a science has indisputable principles, it may be more or less advanced in the applications of these principles: it may be based on a larger or smaller set

of principles; but those that constitute it as a *science* must be irrefutable. For if they are variable, they are not principles, but opinions; and a science founded on opinions is only an illusory science.

“What constitutes science,” said the honorable M. Cousin, “is the elimination of all anomalies, the substitution of order for arbitrariness, *reality for appearance*, reason for the senses and imagination, particular phenomena recalled and elevated to their general laws.” (Introduction to the *History of Philosophy*, p. 255.)

In the physical sciences, the observation of facts is the starting point. Physical theory is established on this observation, and reasoning here becomes *subordinate* to the facts. But there comes a time, for the observational sciences, when the theory established on the facts serves to fill, by reasoning alone, that is to say, *a priori*, the framework of knowledge, and makes it possible to *predict* what experience will one day discover. It was by means of theory that Newton predicted that a flammable principle would be discovered in water; It is through theory that the discovery of such and such a planetary body was predicted; it is through theory that the scientist Cuvier predicted that certain beings would be discovered; it is through theory that M. Dumas predicted the discovery of numerous combinations, according to such and such a formula, etc., etc.

The physical sciences predict what *can be* discovered; the moral sciences, or rather moral science, predicts what *must be* and *will be*. And as long as it cannot say, as long as it cannot predict, what *must be* and *will be* IN AN INEVITABLE MANNER, ignorance exists.

To say that the sciences must derive from observation is a tautology; to say that they must derive from experience is another. Observation and experience are forms of reasoning. There is good reasoning and bad reasoning. How does one distinguish good reasoning from bad reasoning? That is the whole question; there is no other.

All the sciences, gentlemen, are based on observation and experience, because all are based on reasoning. All of them — that is to say, every branch of science — are collections of facts. They become theories through reasoning about these facts, reasoning that discovers the laws relating to these same facts, and reasoning makes use of reasoning already done, of theories already established, to advance the theory — in physics, indefinitely; in morals, *how far*, gentlemen? Until the discovery of truth, which M. Cousin announced as possible knowledge, as we shall see. Up to this point, the moral world is subject to force, *necessarily subject to force*, as M. Cousin also stated. Those who failed to understand this claimed he was justifying force, whereas he was merely stating a fact necessarily in harmony with the moral order, unless this order is negated.

The difference I have just established between the physical sciences and the moral sciences, or rather between physical science and moral science — a difference whereby the former progresses from knowledge to knowledge through the observation of facts, while the latter has no real knowledge, no real starting point until it has arrived at the truth — this difference, I say, constitutes what essentially characterizes these two orders of science. The physical order encompasses apparent or real beings (this is not the question at hand.) Its starting point is the phenomena, the appearances it presents, and its end is the knowledge of the law that governs it. The moral order, if it exists, and what is to be sought (despite what so-called physical science, which dares to deny it, says), the moral order, I say, encompasses real beings, if there are beings other than physical beings. And the knowledge of this order, of the law that governs these beings, no longer relates to the observation of what is, but to what reason says **SHOULD BE, WHEN AND HOW.**

The physical order has as its criterion *what is*; the moral order must have as its criterion what *must be*, what must be *in an absolute manner*, independently of force; which, you see, gentlemen, can only exist when force becomes incapable of serving as the basis for the existence of order, and which is the case in our time. If political economy is to avoid conflicting with the actual moral order, then all its principles must, under penalty of ignorance, **BE ABSOLUTE.**

But political economy, the professors will say, possesses nothing absolute. That is true, gentlemen, and that is precisely what I accuse it of.

Forgive me, gentlemen, for this digression; it was necessary. To excuse it would be an insult to you. Let us leave that aside and grant, for a moment, that political economy can only be a science of observing what is, and not what must be. Is there any other science of this kind that offers so much uncertainty in its principles?

Consider, gentlemen, the series of forms of knowledge, and in all of them you will recognize generally accepted principles; principles initially deduced from the observation of facts, and which, in the more advanced stage of science, obtain the sanction of a demonstration that is, so to speak, mathematical. What remains outside this demonstration stays in the realm of opinion, and only leaves this realm to enter that of science proper when any opinion contrary to the one that becomes scientific would be considered madness. Do we, gentlemen, have a single scientific point in political economy? We shall see that, in what the masters present as principles of science, one finds only inaccuracy, contradiction, vagueness, indeterminacy, and even absurdity.

The Honorable M. Cousin, who only expressed *doubt* about the flaws in science, was more assertive when he addressed the place it should occupy in

state-provided education. According to him, political economy should only be taught in higher education institutions, and not in secondary schools. M. Cousin did not elaborate on the reasons for this remarkable exclusion, reasons which I cannot find in the vast number of other subjects already taught to students. For if knowledge of political economy were truly necessary, it should be taught, unless the scope of other, less useful studies were restricted. M. Cousin, with the profound insight that distinguishes him, revealed the true reason for this exclusion by uttering these remarkable words:

*“If economic knowledge were taught in colleges, there would necessarily result, given the freedom of education, such confusion in minds that a reaction would soon NECESSARILY follow, against the science itself.”* — I have taken note of this serious assertion, which was supported by M. Giraud.

Another very serious, but fleeting, accusation has been leveled against the economists: that of having favored anarchic doctrines against property. This accusation, although it has raised strong contradictions, is not as inaccurate as it first appeared.

In what I am about to say, gentlemen, I will never stray from the opinions expressed by M. Cousin the Saturday before last; I will confine myself to developing and supporting them with my own reasoning. Animated by the desire to find the truth, I declare myself an enemy of error, while respecting the eminent men whom I will have to contend with. I cannot conceive of approving the *tolerance of opinions* when it concerns matters on which there must be a community of ideas, under penalty of social death.

*Tolerance*, in matters of science, should only be an admission of one's ignorance, of one's lack of knowledge; just as, in matters of faith, tolerance can only be an admission of one's doubt, that is to say, of one's lack of faith. He who knows does not tolerate error; he pities it, and it is his duty to destroy it in the unfortunate person afflicted by it, *when, however, the truth has become necessary*.

These are my principles, gentlemen. I ask for no tolerance in their favor. I submit them to the full rigor of your examination. I know that you will grant me the same right on the question discussed at our penultimate meeting.

I will now begin.

What characterizes man?

Language.

What characterizes a science?

A language common to those who cultivate it.

And what is the first word of every possible language?

It is the one that expresses *what it is*. Does political economy *know what it is*?

The question may seem peculiar. Let us nevertheless see what it is.

“The good,” says Aristotle (*Politics*, vol. 1, book 5, chap. 8, p. 215), “is the end of the arts and sciences. The first of goods is therefore the end of the first of sciences. Now, this science is *social economy*. The first of goods is thus found in the political order. This good is justice, that is to say, general utility.”

“The science of political economy,” says Viscount Alban de Villeneuve, “following the logic of language and thought, has as its object the organization and government of society.”

These two assertions are valid, but they determine nothing regarding the essential point, which is the character of justice in relation to the general utility, which must serve as the basis of science.

Dupont de Nemours is respected by economists; here is what he said to J. B. Say:

“You have narrowed the scope of political economy too much by treating it only as the science of wealth. It is the science of natural right.”

If we were to limit ourselves to the science of wealth, I could show you that there are not *two* economists who agree on the word *wealth*. But we will see shortly that Say sided with Dupont de Nemours.

Here is what J. B. Say said to Ricardo: “I received with your letter a copy of the 5th edition of your work. Please accept my thanks. I see in it further proof that matters of political economy are prodigiously complicated, since, even while seeking the truth in good faith, and after we have both devoted entire years to delving into *fundamental questions*, there are several points on which we disagree.” (July 19, 1821. *Posthumous Works*.)

Baron von Morogues shares this opinion: “Despite,” he says, “the number of distinguished men who have devoted themselves to the study of political economy, the science is still imperfect; its main aim has been, until now, the creation of wealth and not its distribution among the masses; so that the result has been the progressive increase in the misery of the lower classes, concurrent with the creation of new wealth concentrated in the upper echelons of the social order.” (*Politics*, etc., Book 6, Chapter 1.)

M. Blanqui is even more emphatic. Speaking of Adam Smith's economic doctrine, that is to say, the fundamental principles of the science, he accuses it of “bearing bitter fruit. It has created immense wealth alongside appalling poverty. It has enriched the nation while often treating a portion of its citizens quite cruelly. Is this,” he asks, “the social goal of the increase of wealth, or, rather, is it not an unfortunate deviation from the social path?”

And elsewhere: “Humanity demands that we cease sacrificing masses of people who do not benefit from it to the progress of public opulence. Thus it is dictated by the laws of justice and morality, too long disregarded in the social distribution of profits and punishments.” (*History of Political Economy.*)

The accusation against the science is serious. Let us see what our learned colleague, M. Dunoyer, says:

“Political economy, which has a certain number of established principles, which rests on a considerable mass of accurate facts and well-deduced observations, nevertheless still *seems far from being an established science*. There is no complete agreement either on the extent of the field to which its research should extend, *or on the fundamental object* it should pursue. There is no agreement on the totality of the work it encompasses, nor on the means to which the power of this work is linked, nor on the precise meaning that should be attached to most of the words that make up its vocabulary; and the science, rich in truths and details, leaves everything to be desired as a whole; and, as a science, it still seems far from being established.” Much evidence could be given of all this. (Meeting of the Academy, January 17, 1846, *Journal des économistes.*)

Does such a collection of facts, — all more or less accurate, lacking unity and precise language, — deserve the name of *science*? — And do not those who distrust the supposed axioms of such a science demonstrate good sense when its practical application can lead to the ruin of a country or the misery of large classes?

Let us listen to a man whose knowledge no economist would dispute, M. Ganhil: “I am far from sharing the opinion of a writer who thinks we possess science because Adam Smith, M. Buchaman, Malthus, Ricardo and Say agree on what constitutes wealth, and on the means that multiply and destroy it.

“How far we are from this fortunate agreement with which M. Say flatters us! This new edition will show that the five writers are *entirely divided on all the points* on which M. Say claims they agree. It is a fact that Buchaman, the new editor and annotator of Adam Smith's work on the wealth of nations, argues against him on a host of fundamental points; that M. Malthus's doctrine differs from M. Ricardo's; that M. Ricardo refutes M. Say, and that M. Say, in his notes on M. Ricardo's work, strives to mitigate that writer's attacks. May I be permitted to say so? — The science of political economy has made immense progress, but the genius who is to solidify it has not yet appeared. The scepter so gloriously won by Adam Smith is gloriously contested, but it does not yet belong to anyone, and the honorable pentarchy to which M. Say defers it undoubtedly has the greatest right to it; but as long as this pentarchy remains divided, *what homage can it claim*? From this I conclude that we still only have systems of political economy

or more or less valuable writings on this science.” (Ganhil, *Des Syst. d'Econ. pol.*, preface.)

That is to say, politely, that we know nothing.

M. Rossi, whom no one here will accuse of not knowing what he is discussing, will tell you the same thing. “Even if it were to shame the science,” says M. Rossi, “the economist must admit that the first question to examine is still this: *What is political economy; what are its object, its scope, its limits?* — On the one hand, it would be difficult to choose the most important questions of political economy to make the subject of our work if we were not, first and foremost, in agreement on the object and scope of the science itself; on the other hand, it is only too clear that this agreement *does not exist among economists. Its definition is still one of the most controversial questions in science.*”

You see, gentlemen, that the science does not yet know what it is. M. Rossi himself asserts this; and, certainly, never was a statement more in accordance with the truth.

M. Rossi believes he has not yet said enough, and he adds: “The place that political economy should occupy in the field of social sciences is still a subject of doubt and dispute for economists, and *nothing seems to herald a forthcoming and universally adopted decision.*” Is this, gentlemen, the proof of our ignorance that we wish to give to the youth? Alas! They will receive it all too soon!

“In perusing the writings of eminent men in the science,” continues M. Rossi, “one would be hard-pressed to name *two* who agree on its nature and its limits.”

M. Rossi then says “that political economy can be summed up in the words value, wealth, labor, land, capital, direct or indirect production, population, exchange, market, outlet, distribution, wages, rent, profit, tax, income.”

“These words,” he says, “the science has adopted. But there is not yet perfect agreement on the meaning and scope of these expressions. In other words, the science itself, in *its fundamental principles*, is not yet definitively settled, for the first sign (you see, gentlemen, the first sign) of any science *is a nomenclature that is accepted, recognized, and henceforth beyond all dispute.*” (M. Rossi, *Course in Political Economy*)

This is as undeniable as can be. Without this condition, political economy can only be logomachy. Is it, gentlemen, a course in logomachy that one would want to introduce into colleges? — Certainly, this is not M. Rossi’s opinion.

“Any imprecision in the fundamental concepts,” he says, “obscures the *entire science*. The mind takes a false direction, the effects of which are felt in questions of application.”

This is perfectly true; from anarchy in ideas, anarchy in practice is always the inevitable consequence. Certainly, gentlemen, none of you wishes to hasten this transition.

And does M. Rossi truly agree with himself on the nature and limits of political economy? Let us see: "Smith," he says, "obviously brought the science back within the limits indicated, rather than drawn, by Aristotle."

Gentlemen, I beg M. Rossi's pardon, but in the quotation I just had the honor of sharing with you from the clearest passage of Aristotle on political economy, you saw that the prince of philosophers was defining social economy, the science that encompasses them all.

"These limits (wealth) set by the head of the School," M. Rossi continues, "were soon transgressed; they were even transgressed by his most zealous disciples. I will mention here only three names that are rightly famous... and first of all, my illustrious predecessor, M. Say, although, in his treatise, he comes close to the idea that political economy is properly only the science of wealth; what does he say in his complete course on political economy? He expresses himself thus: 'Political economy is nothing other than the economy of society. The study that has been made of the nature and functions of the different parts of the social body has created a set of concepts, a science to which the name of political economy has been given, and which perhaps would have been better called *social economy*.' And he adds:

"The object of political economy seems to have been restricted until now to the knowledge of the laws that govern the distribution and consumption of wealth."

"He acknowledges," continues M. Rossi, "that he himself had envisioned it thus in his treatise." He concludes, however, by saying:

"However, one can see, even in this work, that this science is intertwined with everything in society, *that it encompasses the entire social system.*"

You see, gentlemen, here is Say speaking like Aristotle and like common sense. But the solution of Aristotle's and M. Say's science is still held in reserve by common sense. Is it this ignorance of what common sense will one day reveal that we wish to reveal to the youth? — It is, at the very least, pointless. If I were now to cite all the men of merit who accuse political economy of *knowing nothing*, it would be endless. Here is a passage from an author whose work has been awarded a prize by yourselves:

"The internal and external economy of societies is destined to undergo a profound transformation in this century. The old political economy has had its day... What was only yesterday called political economy is dead, well and truly

dead. The attempts now being made to resurrect it will be as powerless as anything attempted to bring a corpse back to life!" (M. Pecqueur, *Theory of Social and Political Economy*; INTRODUCTION.)

Let us now see if M. Rossi's successor has resolved what his predecessor left unresolved.

"In our time," says M. Michel Chevalier, "societies have to resolve a problem whose terms, at first glance, are *contradictory*, equally opposed: that of low prices for products combined with a good wage for producers."

Here is political economy reduced to the solution of a contradiction. In an earlier work, M. Chevalier had said: "If the price of bread were to fall by five centimes per kilogram, with the current structure of industry, it would not take six months for wages to have undergone a reduction of almost the same magnitude."

Is this the second approach to the question?

It is evident that, according to the professor at the Collège de France, there is a permanent reason why wages do not increase, even though the means of subsistence are abundant. It is also evident that current science does not provide a way to change this fatal relationship.

"Modern political economy," said the same learned professor, "must adopt as its motto this thought of Bacon: 'He who rejects new remedies prepares for new calamities!' I will spare no effort, believe me, to remain faithful to it." (M. M. Chevalier, end of the first opening address, 1841).

Thus, gentlemen, political economy, until 1841, found itself without a useful remedy, since it needs new remedies, under penalty of new calamities. Certainly, the learned professor is perfectly right. But since then, has a new and useful remedy been presented?

From the foregoing, we might imagine that M. Chevalier attaches great importance to political economy; let us judge for ourselves:

"It is not reserved for political economy to pose social questions. It accepts them as they are determined by politics, and elaborates them in accordance with the supreme ideas it finds in the government of souls." (Opening address of the 1841-42 course.)

You see that political economy is thus reduced to nothing. In Aristotle's time, the professor would have had to accept that slaves have no soul. This is to limit science to adorning the idol of the day, whatever it may be — even Moloch, if, in the era in which he teaches, Moloch holds the government of souls.

“Political economy,” continues M. Chevalier, “is not the eldest daughter of the house; on the contrary, it has several elder sisters whose precedence and authority it recognizes.” (Ibid.)”

Therefore, if the elders sacrifice to Moloch, she too must submit to venerating the idol, despite all that reason might command.

“She is assigned her task,” the professor continues, “and, an eager worker, she devotes herself to it with zeal. A humble assistant, she applies material facts to the solution of the problems indicated to her according to the needs of the times, coordinating and interpreting them according to the supreme principles she finds established around her.” (Ibid.)

This is as clear as can be. Political economy, in Aristotle’s time, had to *interpret* the doctrine of the absence of a soul in slaves, in the sense indicated by Alexander’s tutor. And such is its *eternal* duty.

Certainly, if there had been a better path to economic knowledge and to expound the duties of political economy, M. Mich. Chevalier would have recommended it; for, most certainly, he has gone through them all, and, as much as anyone, he is capable of judging them.

My esteemed friend, M. Blanqui, drawing a parallel between the various political economies, declares that there are many. "There is therefore not so great a distance," he says, “from the cruel, insatiable, inexorable political economy of Greece and Rome to the political economy of more than one European country.” (*History of Political Economy*)

The honorable M. de Villeneuve compared English and French political economy. The two are in opposition. Which of the two is correct? Or rather, is neither correct? What would we say to young people about this opposition if we wanted to make political economy a subject taught in schools?

“Political economy,” my respectable friend adds, “is nothing but the economy of nation to nation.”

This is as clear and as true as can be. But what can we conclude from this truth? — That there are as many political economies as there are national interests, and that the *great master* of political economy *is the cannon*. Is this, gentlemen, what we wish to instill in young people? — And isn't M. Cousin perfectly right?

Regarding political economy in secondary education, I cannot pass over in silence the opinion of one of our colleagues whose intentions I revere:

“It is astonishing,” says M. Droz, “that the University of France does not offer courses in political economy. Those who fear for young people the teaching of moral and political sciences seem to me to know little of their country and their

century. The system of education must be in harmony with the form of government; now, the study of these sciences is indispensable for forming peers, deputies, administrators, and enlightened citizens. Such, moreover, is the disposition of minds that these sciences will necessarily be studied, and the only question is whether they will be studied well or poorly. It would be a grave imprudence to leave the decision of this question to chance; a wise government must resolve it by providing young people with skilled teachers.” (Political Economy, Book IV, Chapter 4.)

Our illustrious colleague does not believe, no doubt, that there can be skilled teachers to teach *what is not yet known*. Unless, of course, the name “skill” is to be applied to eloquence that attempts to make what is still in question accepted as truth. If this were his thinking, the practice would be no less perilous, for, in matters of instruction, the power of eloquence diminishes daily; and the danger of having young people discuss important, *unresolved* points increases proportionally.

We have also discussed, in this chamber, the relationship between political economy and morality. The former has been presented as free from all blemish, and even championed as a support for morality. I will not dwell on refuting such an assertion and on demonstrating, through numerous quotations, the principles — I will not say immoral, but atrocious principles — established in works of political economy from Aristotle to the present day. Moreover, all aberrations of the mind are excusable if this assertion by the leading figure of the French school is true:

“*Morality considers nations from a different perspective than political economy.*” (J.-B. Say, Course in Political Economy)

Let us return to the question of property, which has been raised here, albeit incidentally. I will also address it briefly.

Gentlemen, property is the expression of reasoning and, consequently, of humanity. Any attack on property is as absurd as an attack on light. But property is often confused with the *organization of property*, as our esteemed M. Giraud has pointed out, and this is very often the fault of both the economists and their adversaries.

As for attacks on the organization of property, they existed before Moses; they passed through Christ, the Church Fathers, Bossuet, and have reached the current Pope. In the temporal realm, they existed before Plato: all of philosophy has resounded with them since that time. Political economy is full of them from Rousseau to the present academy.

Property is unshakeable, but what is shaky is the organization of property, which was already overturned in 1789, and those who undermine this

organization are precisely the economists, by asserting *that wealth and poverty grow along two parallel lines*, which, incidentally, is true.

Gentlemen, when we have arrived at such a result in the observation of social phenomena, the immense peril threatening society dictates the abandonment of all secondary discussions, in order to concern ourselves exclusively with saving humanity. Otherwise, we would resemble the Greeks of the Late Roman Empire discussing mysteries when the barbarians are at the gates. Barbarity, gentlemen, is *pauperism*, and if we wish to repel it, it will not be with fallacies.

*Pauperism*, gentlemen, must be the terror of both governments and the wealthy classes. It must make them tremble all the more because it is not only because its growth is proportional to that of wealth that it must be formidable, but also *because it is intimately linked to the current social organization. As long as this same organization exists, it is impossible to eradicate it from a nation without utterly ruining it.* This assertion may, at first glance, seem paradoxical. Well! Let us suppose that pauperism is instantly eradicated in England. Let this nightmare of the rich vanish, let the beautiful dream of science appear, and *I assert* that, with pauperism persisting in other countries, within two years the industrial and commercial power of Great Britain will be completely destroyed.

Similar judgments can be made about all possible means of social improvement, proposed or to be proposed by economists, and adopted or to be adopted by governments. For all of them, without exception, instead of curing the evil, will complicate it and increase anarchy. This horrific social condition, gentlemen, does not stem from a more or less general ignorance of existing economic knowledge; it has its source in the *errors of the science itself*, in the *falsity of its principles*.

After the quotations I have just given, which could have filled volumes, and which confirm what I have just said, I dare to hope that henceforth, within this Academy, the *doubt* expressed by our illustrious colleague, M. Cousin, will become a truth. But, this truth accepted, the Academy cannot stop there. Having declared the indeterminacy and inaccuracy of economic principles, it becomes its duty to discover their source and to substitute for these indeterminacies the irrefutable demonstration of the true economic principles that must cure the social body of the terrible ills that are consuming it. But this study, requiring high-level investigation and an indisputable logic, should not be judged by political economy alone. Placed in the dock, it will have enough difficulty defending itself. Its judge, therefore, is not the economics section; it is the entire Academy. And it is only from its wisdom that we can expect the solution to the problems facing humanity. These problems, gentlemen, which the various schools of political economy have tried in vain to solve, are connected to the

very principles of the social order; and this lofty origin is easily recognized by precisely determining the meaning of the sacramental words of so-called economic science. Let us take, for example, the word LABOR. Well, gentlemen, since labor is the defining characteristic of humankind, everything connected with labor, whether as a condition of existence or as a condition of wealth, depends so intimately on the existing kind of social organization that it is impossible to separate anything from it.

*The organization of labor is therefore resolved exclusively within the organization of society.* And to usefully address questions relating to labor, it is necessarily also necessary to examine all the social conditions of labor. But no sooner have we taken a step on this civilizing path than we find ourselves confronted with the totality of science, as Aristotle, Say, M. de Villeneuve, and all others have said. Then you have before you not only the question of wealth, which it is absurd to try to address independently of morality, philosophy, law, history, indeed everything else, but you also have before you, as Aristotle succinctly puts it, JUSTICE, GENERAL UTILITY. If all these points, gentlemen, and their essential relation to labor, that is to say, to humankind, are not irrefutably resolved, the death of society, faced with the inescapable nature of this examination, becomes inevitable.

I will conclude, gentlemen, but first allow me a simple observation.

What you are asking for, many will tell me, is the truth, the absolute truth, and this truth *does not exist, cannot exist.*

That it does not yet exist, gentlemen, is undeniable. As for the denial *that it can exist*, allow me, in this regard, to rely once again on M. Cousin.

“The day,” he says, “when absolute truth appears in the world, there will be no more contradiction or struggle; all fighting will cease, for it is the virtue of truth to rally all minds to it.” (*History of Philosophy in the 19th Century*, vol. 2, p. 23.)

You see, gentlemen, that M. Cousin believes in the possibility of discovering the truth. And what M. Cousin proclaims possible cannot be considered ridiculous.

Supported by such authority, I dare add: Given the incompressibility of the examination, given, I repeat, gentlemen, an examination that it is now *utterly impossible* to squash, the truth, recognized as possible by M. Cousin, must emerge, or society will perish. For, outside of truth, only opinions are possible. Now, to want to base society on opinions, and this given the incompressibility of the examination, is to condemn it to expire amidst all the horrors of which the anarchy of opinions is the inevitable source.

I conclude, gentlemen.

I took advantage of the discussion of the Saturday before last to draw two conclusions that seem to me crucial: **1. THE NECESSITY OF A LOGICAL REVISION OF ECONOMIC KNOWLEDGE; 2. THE DUTY OF THE ACADEMY TO PROCLAIM THIS NECESSITY.**

As an introduction to this important research, I have formulated some ideas, the fruit of long study. I request the Academy's permission to submit them to it at the following sessions.

Paris, December 4, 1847.

**RAMON DE LA SAGRA.**