

DEFINITION. — INDEFINITION.

Selections from Ms. 18255 — Économie. [BnF]

P.J. Proudhon

This manuscript includes material on a variety of subjects, but entries of particular interest to students of Proudhon's work discuss the nature of the *economic science*, *first philosophy* and the problem of *definition*. This first selection is particularly focused on that third problem and Proudhon's perhaps unusual response to it, which shapes his writings in various ways, some of which would be hard to account for without some specific understanding of this question and his answer.

There are texts in Proudhon's body of work — and perhaps *War and Peace* is one of the most interesting examples — where key concepts seem to develop in meaning over the course of the analysis. The results are vaguely unsettling and might suggest some fundamental problems with the framework of the analysis or lack of consistency on Proudhon's part. But perhaps these texts — and others from the same sources — suggest other ways to account for a certain indefinability when it comes to key concepts.

— SHAWN P. WILBUR, translator and editor,
New Proudhon Library

The Extremes.

Avoid the extremes, and seek the happy medium, says the Wisdom of the Nations.

That aphorism is, of course, very true: but it must be well understood.

It is up to philosophy to look into it and demonstrate it.

I say that every extreme, in itself, is false and implies a contradiction; but by extreme I mean the element constitutive of every synthesis, an element without which it would not exist, which constitutes it [i.e. synthesis] that much better the more energetically it is employed.

Thus, the proprietor is a constitutive element of the social order, necessary, indispensable.

To deny it implies a contradiction.

In the common language we say: Property must be *curbed*, not pushed to the EXTREME.

I will correct that language, which lacks scientific precision, and say: property, in itself, strong or weak, as powerful or as controlled as you like, is exclusive, fraudulent, sinful, selfish, and wrong; it contains within it THEFT.

However, that same property, such as it is, is indispensable to human order; and it is because of this that it is necessary. Remove that individualist, iniquitous character, and you render it powerless....

It is not the extreme, [] property, that is to be avoided: that extreme always exists, since it is the very principle....

Here, all the happy mediums in the world are lies, pure arbitrariness.

It is necessary to balance property with a contrary principle, which is, as you prefer, collectivity or community.

(There is no moderate community: community in itself is as bad as property.... It calls, not for a corrective, shears, a gardener to fight it, a [] to geld it: it needs a balance.

The two principles must be joined, married, mutually penetrating, in a manner to form a [].... *Thus:*

Theory: Everything that can be appropriated must be appropriated; everything that can be grouped, even among the things appropriated, must be grouped.

(Similarly with *Competition, Credit, Government*, etc.; division of labor, collectivity.)

Other antinomies are subject to a different law, for example, that of *Dead weight—live weight*. It is certain that we tend, and will constantly tend, to reduce one and increase the other: that is the law of Progress. Cf. [] *Dead weight, live weight*, pages 11-12.

Unanimity.—Universal Consent

There are things, in the moral order, about which the human race is *unanimous*; there are even many of them.

So isn't it possible that all the questions of politics, economics and morals could be simplified or clarified in such a way that the response to them would be unanimous?

In this way, the *direct* government of the people would be possible.

It is according to that idea, confirmed by the testimony of the sciences, that [Pierre-Napoléon] Domenjarie [1852] has written his pamphlet, *La loi morale, loi d'unanimité*, which we have read in prison.

That philosophical thesis [reveals] the ignorance of the author, but it is nonetheless useful to clarify it.

The things about which there can be unanimity (it is not a question of *facts/deeds*) are all *definite* abstractions, whatever order of ideas they may belong to.

Thus, *is it not permitted to kill a man: Non occides.*

But the disagreements begin when it is a question of *practical cases*:

Is it permitted to kill in legitimate defense?

Is it permitted to kill in war?

Is it permitted to kill judicially?

Is it permitted to kill deserters?

Is it permitted to kill a man or woman caught *in flagrante delicto* in the act of adultery?

Is it permitted to kill a tyrant?

Is it permitted to kill the abductor of a minor child? etc.

Now, on the practical cases, there is necessary flexibility, and as the circumstances alone make the *law* or *non-law*, it follows that one cannot posit an absolute principle, and that unanimity is impossible.

Thus, on a principle of abstract mathematics, there will be *unanimity*.—But if it is a question of assessing the results of a business, of an enterprise, of an experiment, etc., opinions can vary infinitely.

Similarly, in the moral realm, there is unanimity on principles, because the principle expresses an ideality, an abstraction. Only do to others what you would like others to do to you: everyone is unanimous on this precept, which we find expressed spontaneously everywhere.

It is an abstract, ideal formula.

But what should I want for myself? What can I demand? What is my right? That is where unanimity ceases to exist, and it is necessarily replaced by free debate, which ends in the transaction or the Contract.

The value of a product is a common example: it summarizes all cases.

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Now, Reason asks itself:

Is there a science for undefinable things, on which unanimity will never practically exist, as there is one for definite things?...

It is this question to which the economic science responds.

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From this previous explanation, it is easy to deduce and *a priori* judgment that declares void the so-called science of Fourier, which aspires to [resolve] everything, *mathematically*, that is to say abstractly, and by means of definitions.

From this as well, the elimination of the Communist thought, which, supposing unanimity, suppresses debate, competition, contract; the very principle of conventional right!...

It is time to open the eyes of the public in that regard and especially to repress the [] presumption of these poor Devils who believe they have found the secret of the world when they have produced a [] gross naïveté.

What then is the science of indefinable things, of things on which there remains unnecessary doubt, and where unanimity is impossible?

It is the science that teaches us to know the [causes], the reason, the *laws* that rule this very variability: and how by judicious and equitable convention, we arrest that variability, and convert into something definite a thing that is not of that nature.

Sic Notion of dead weight [*poids mort*];—variable.

Notion of maximum load [*poids utile*];—variable.

Relation between one and the other;—variable.

What are the causes of these *variations*?—How do they come about?—What is their mode, their character?—What utility can we draw from them for the conduct of life? etc., etc. How are we to behave with them? etc.

Economic Science, Mother Science.

Economic Science, as the Science of all indefinable things, *precedes, follows,* and consequently ENCOMPASSES all the other sciences, which have as their object *estimated* things.

Because definitions presuppose a state of indefinition, where there is only incessant movement, change, permutation and disruption.

Likewise, definition supposes after it a return to the indefinite, to chaos: every created thing, everything defined, necessarily having an end, as it had a beginning.

Chaos, the state of indefinition, is thus the state before and after Creation;

And all that we call *Creation, or Science,* is nothing other than the introduction of the defined into the indefinite; – the manner in which indefinite things are defined, and how after having been defined, or created, they fall into indefinition, which is confusion or Chaos.

Thus the indefinition of ideas is not the absence of all ideas;

Just as chaos is not NOTHINGNESS.

We can therefore know something of chaos, of the indefinite, even if it is only this, that there is no finite law, neither number, nor measurement, nor form, nor movement, nor stability, nor division, nor grouping, etc., etc.

But what we can know above all is the way in which these same laws imbue chaos, or the indefinite, and form and extract *all beings* from it.

At base, there is no *absolute existence* except that of chaos, since the other existences, or definitions, are essentially fleeting in it, and only affect it in a transitory way; let them bring it all back, let them sink into matter, etc., etc.

We do not see, or we see very confusedly, in the world of nature, the creative operations; – we can only follow them with great difficulty.

But they are best discovered in the world of Society.....

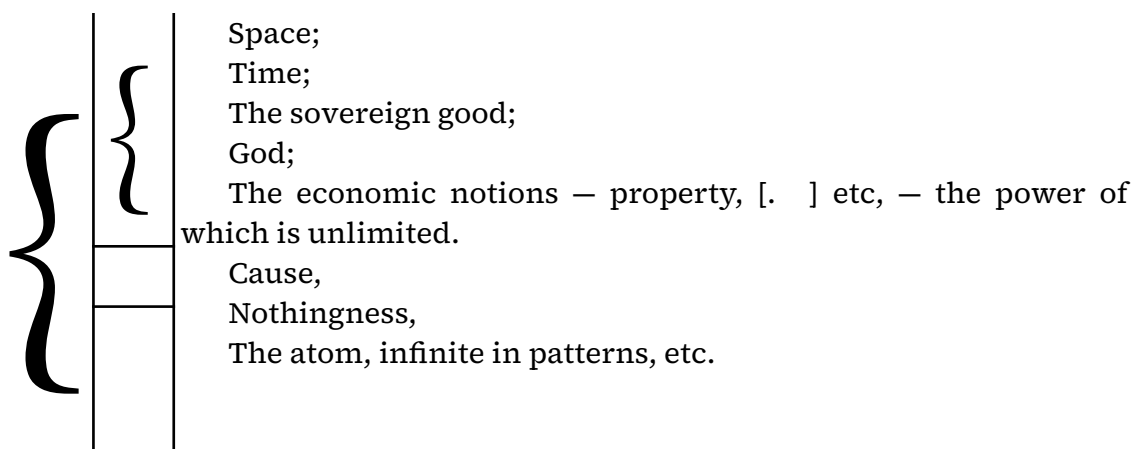
In society, everything that has a real, [], legal existence is a thing defined, or created; such are the states, institutions, customs, laws, contracts, operations of [] and exchange, etc.

Everything that remains undefined (everything is originally undefined in nature; everything is capable of definition); is chaotic matter. Such is value (in general), labor, etc. etc.

Definitions

The word *nature* – which for us denotes the totality of beings that observation reveals to our senses – signified for the Romans, in accordance with its etymology, not existence itself, but rather the *birth* of beings. Such is the significance of the title of Lucretius’s famous work on the *nature* (the *birth*) of things, wherein he endeavors to establish the limits of what can come into being and what cannot. Among the Greeks, the word *physis* – which is invariably translated by the French word *nature* – reaches back further than the mere birth of beings, signifying instead the very act of *engendering*. Thus, for us, the concept of nature relates to the existence of beings; for the Latins, it related to the birth of those same beings; whereas for the Greeks, it embodied the very idea of their generation. We observe, therefore, that language – and indeed common sense – has progressively gravitated toward empiricism. But, fundamentally, how do we actually conceive of the existence of beings?

The modern French metaphysical school has wisely refrained from attempting to define the first principles of beings. If a given existence is isolated from all others – if a particular sensation is of a unique nature – how is one to define it by means of other



sensations of a different species? One might as well attempt to express a distance in kilograms, or a value in cubic meters! Thought – accustomed as it is to triumphing through the comparison of ideas and the discernment of analogies – experiences a profound humiliation when it finds itself colliding with the intimate, inner knowledge of things: with the *absolute*. At such moments, one must – or rather, one should – *know how not to know*; yet this is a resolution most painful to embrace, particularly when one is tasked with upholding an established scientific position. A certain Persian – for whom I had, to his satisfaction, clarified a few doubts regarding the system of the universe – asked me, as if it were a mere triviality, to tell him what, precisely, is the soul? Many of those who consult the organs of science are somewhat like that Persian; and philosophers – whether in their books or in their lectures – are always deeply

reluctant to say: *I do not know*. It seems to me, however, that one may boldly admit one's ignorance, provided one is certain that no one else knows any more than oneself.

As an opportunity will arise someday to revisit the subject of classification – if not the intimate essence – of material beings, I shall confine myself here to noting that, at the beginning of every treatise on physics, one finds matter, space and time listed as the primary principles of existence. Can one conceive of beings existing outside of these general properties? Can one – following Berkeley – create, through the intellect, an immaterial universe? Since physical beings are, for us, merely the idea that renders their existence perceptible to us, might not this idea arise and exist within thought – within the intellect, within the soul – without resulting from any material action or sensation? I leave all such matters to the experts; and, returning to our own world – conceived in the ordinary manner – I ask myself at what ultimate limits the intellectual notions we hold regarding matter, space and time finally come to a halt. Here, I believe, is the simplest statement one can make on this subject – without, however, flattering oneself that one has defined that which is, in fact, indefinable.

The primary perception of our intellect is that of the identity – or non-identity – of two beings. Now, the material being that acts upon our senses – by its very empirical definition – differs from our thought; this difference constitutes for it a distinct property, a separate mode of existence which, if it does not strictly *define* the material being, at least serves to render it recognizable. Thus, the material being is *distinguished* by its *non-identity* with the thinking faculty – the very faculty from which, evidently, we must take our starting point. Here, then, is the most primitive idea one can have of bodies, of material substances, of physical beings: this idea is that these beings are distinct from the thinking faculty. Let us turn to space.

Can one conceive of a body without tacitly or explicitly attributing to it extension, a place in the world, a width, a length, a thickness, sensible dimensions and, more colloquially, an above and a below, a front and a back, a right and a left? I leave all this to the dogmatic school; but, reducing everything to the accepted notion of identity or non-identity, let us say that, as soon as thought conceives of two bodies, one grasps the idea of the space separating them through the very idea of their non-identity. The more one probes this thought, the more one recognizes that, even if it does not constitute an absolute definition, it at least provides the simplest possible basis for conceiving the ideas of distance, space, and extension. Let us reiterate, then: the notion of space is the notion of that which differentiates the idea of two coexisting material entities.

Finally, time itself – ordinarily regarded as so resistant to any definition – can easily be reduced to the simplest notions of identity and non-identity. Let us conceive of a single object and think of it twice; the notion of time will be the notion of that which differentiates these two ideas of the same object. It is evident that these two ideas of the same object possess no distinction other than their successiveness. The notion of time is, therefore, the notion of the non-identity of two ideas of the same object.

These definitions – or rather, these *quasi*-definitions – of matter, space, and time, which are, fundamentally, empirical, that is to say, grounded in observation, will serve as a model for other definitions or delimitations of beings within nature. And, first of all, nothing is more renowned than the classification of beings into three kingdoms or divisions: the mineral kingdom, the vegetable kingdom and the animal kingdom. More recently, attempts were made to reduce these three kingdoms to two – namely, the kingdom of beings devoid of life, or the inorganic kingdom, and the kingdom of living beings, vegetables and animals, designated as the organic kingdom. By reasoning according to the strict tenets of empirical philosophy – which posits that any object that cannot be experimentally reduced to identity with another possesses a distinct existence and embodies a unique principle – we are led to identify four orders of beings of diverse natures, four kingdoms of nature: specifically, the three traditional kingdoms – mineral, vegetable and animal – plus the *human kingdom*, characterized by the soul, intelligence and thought – defined empirically as that which is possessed by any human being, regardless of race, to the exclusion of the animal.¹

A few further words on this important question: In the observational sciences, mechanics, physics and chemistry reveal to us the properties that distinguish purely material bodies – for instance, motion, velocity, impact, hardness, weight, extension, heat, color, elemental composition and mutual reactions. There, there is no life, no reproduction, no spontaneity, no organization and no voluntary movement.

It is not the same if we observe a plant: we immediately recognize within it an organization that defies all the laws of mechanics, physics and chemistry applicable to purely material bodies. And since we cannot reduce the phenomena of organized beings to those of inanimate bodies, we must recognize within the plant a new principle – life, the organism, or whatever name one chooses to give it – provided it is clearly understood that the plant comprises two distinct principles: matter and life. Furthermore, whereas the mineral kingdom contains only a single principle – matter – subject to physical laws, the plant kingdom contains two: matter and the vital principle, subject to entirely different laws.

By the same reasoning, we must acknowledge that – given the existence in animals of characteristics utterly foreign to plants – including, among others, movement, spontaneity, and will, which preclude their being confused with plants – we must posit within them a new principle, which I shall term spontaneity, will or instinct. This principle serves to establish the animal kingdom as distinct from the other two, a distinction that will remain valid until such time as one succeeds in creating an animal from a plant, or in endowing a tree with senses and will. Thus, within the animal kingdom, there exist three distinct elementary principles: namely, material substance, life and instinct.

Does a fourth kingdom exist? Obviously, yes. Indeed, man – through his thought, his intelligence, and his soul – distinguishes himself from the animals; and this is not

¹ M. de Humboldt rightly accepts the unity of the human species.

merely a difference of degree — of more or less — as is the case with affections, passions, sensations, memory and judgment — faculties that man shares with the animal and experiences only in a higher degree or within a more extended sphere. Everyone senses and agrees that, within the thinking faculty, there resides a principle that man alone possesses, to the exclusion of all animals. And — reiterating what I have just stated regarding the difference between the plant kingdom and the animal kingdom — until such time as we succeed in endowing the brute with intelligence, we must acknowledge a distinct principle within man: a principle we shall term intelligence, the thinking faculty or the soul, which will establish the entirety of humanity as a fourth kingdom of nature — one comprising four distinct principles: namely, material substance, life or organization, instinct and, finally, the soul.

We need not, for the present, insist further upon the metaphysical aspects of M. von Humboldt's book — nor, for instance, attempt to define the precise boundaries encompassed by each branch of the observational sciences. These are questions that demand separate study; for our purposes, it has sufficed to set forth a few of the essential principles that underpin this theoretical section of *Cosmos* — a work whose objective is clearly articulated in the following lines: "I believe," states M. von Humboldt, "that I have traced — across seven chapters forming a series of distinct tableaux — the *history of the physical contemplation of the world*; that is to say, the progressive evolution of the very concept of the *Cosmos*. Have I succeeded in mastering such a vast accumulation of material? In capturing the character of its principal phases? In charting the pathways through which various peoples have acquired new ideas and a loftier morality? That is a question I dare not presume to answer..."

We now turn to the purely descriptive exposition of the celestial realm of the universe. Here we shall have observational science — and, to the great credit of the author of the *Cosmos*, more complete than in any other work, even a specialized one, on astronomy.

(From Jacques Babinet, "Journey in the Heavens,"
Revue du Deux Mondes, October 1853)

Definition. – Indefinition.

Everything that is *finite* can be defined;

Everything that is not finite cannot be rigorously defined;

In particular, the INFINITE is essentially indefinable.

This is how we can give a clear meaning to these terms, which are so often confused...

That is why the continuous is indefinable: it excludes by itself the idea of the *finite*.

The infinite can be DIVIDED: however, each part *is infinite*.

Which contradicts the axiom of the mathematicians, that *every part is less than the whole*. In appearance, yes; in quality, no.

I mean, by division of the infinite, the distinction of several entities, or qualities, to which are applied the notion of infinity:

All these things, taken together, for the *infinity of infinities*; when distinguished, they divide infinity, as a series of infinities.

Definitions.

The whole world rests on hypotheses; and the best of hypotheses is, whatever we say and whatever we do, only a hypothesis.

It is characteristic of economic science to unfold on this mobile and changing basis, unlike mathematics, which relies solely on *definitions*.

– M. de Maistre has written: Nothing afflicts dialectics like the use of these vague words that present no circumscribed idea.

Definitions.

What is a definition?

We must not let ourselves be too frightened by this word, which has so often killed the scientists and philosophers.

It seems the the definition is a phoenix, which bears with it all light; a proposition so happily chosen that it grasps the principle at its origin and shows it so well to the mind that without the definition, it would not conceive of it at all, or conceive it very badly.

It is a very serious prejudice.

Every definition is in the mind before being in words. The spoken definition can be more or less fortunate in its expression. If the *known* definition is exact, the [first] will do. It serves no other purpose than to call the attention to a pure and *a priori* conception of the understanding.

Let us explain this for example:

The straight line is the shortest path from one point to another.

Is that a definition?

One can contest it.

That proposition indicates clearly a property of the straight line; it is possible that it does not give them all. It would thus be incomplete. We can conceive in fact that the straight line is that which is traced by a moving point, which moves forward without ever deviating to either side; etc., etc. etc.

However, that general definition is sufficient; one does not risk every going astray by adopting it. Why?

Because in reality it is not the words that define; it is the mind that, on hearing words, knows immediately the thing as defined.

Although we can then discover other advantages of the straight line than such [], other properties, other ways of presenting it, it is certain at least that what we have said about it will never be found false; that it will be this in all circumstances; that the definition does not bend any more than the straight lines themselves.

This is what a definition is, what it is worth, when it applies = a truly definable thing.

As soon as we hear the words, although the words do not say everything and sometimes say it badly, the idea is given; the mind itself defines it.

Everything defined is identical.

What do I mean after this by things or notions that cannot be defined?

These are things that the mind cannot conceive in the entirety of their being without conceiving them at one time as variable, without at the same time denying them identity.

Are there any of these things? — Q.E.D.

Until now, the sciences have proceeded by defined notions; metaphysics, or science of sciences even has the pretension of commencing everything by definitions.

This error is the most serious of all those which could affect philosophy; because it infests it from its origin and makes impossible, illogical, inextricable, half of the sciences, all the sciences of *facts*.

Axioms.

An axiom is a proposition that states, in the simplest manner possible, a relation, either of nature or of the understanding.

An axiom is for that very reason indisputable.

Such is this one:

Nothing is produced from nothing.

This is why axioms are called *indemonstrable*; it would be better to say IRREDUCIBLE.

The axiom supposes the *definition*, which serves to state, in the simplest manner possible, the fact or first principle, either of nature or of man.

In reality every definition is a *tautology*, since the first fact cannot be defined by another fact. Such is the idea of CAUSE: *Everything that makes another thing happen.*

Now, the idea of cause enters into the mind; it soon leads to the axiom: *Nothing is produced from nothing, or, Everything that happens has a cause.*