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Introduction

Bill Leumer

In a 1858 letter written to Frederick Engels discussing important changes he was making in Capital Vol. I regarding the method of treatment of the doctrine of profit, Karl Marx mentions his having, by mere accident, been glancing through G.W.F. Hegel's Logic and commenting that it had been a "great service" to him in his efforts. Marx then goes on to state, in regard to Hegel's contribution, that, "If there should ever be time for such work again, I would greatly like to make accessible to the ordinary human intelligence, in two or three printers' sheets, what is rational in the method which Hegel discovered but at the same time enveloped in mysticism..."

Unfortunately, Marx never seems to have found the time for such an exposition of Hegel's method. Ann Robertson, in my opinion, has made with the following paper a most significant contribution to making both Hegel's and Marx's dialectical method accessible to the serious working class students of socialism. That in no way should be taken to mean that Ann's paper can be easily read. Nevertheless, even for the reader without a philosophical background Ann has attempted to make comprehensible a most difficult subject matter with truly remarkable success. As Marx said at one point, "There is no royal road to science, and only those who do not dread the fatiguing climb of its steep paths have a chance of gaining its luminous summits."

This above quote was stated in the context of an 1872 letter Marx sent to Maurice La Chatre in France praising his notion of serializing Capital Vol. 1 so as to make it more accessible to the working class, but Marx also noted the arduousness to be encountered reading the first chapters. This difficulty is an unavoidable problem in reading Marx's Capital, as with Ann's paper. Yet, it is hoped that the reader will find it helpful and thus well worth the time and effort spent reading this incredible exposition of the revolutionary dialectic.

PART I: HEGEL'S DIALECTIC

Introduction

It is of the highest importance to ascertain and understand rightly the nature of Dialectic. Wherever there is movement, wherever there is life, wherever anything is carried into effect in the actual world, there Dialectic is at work.¹

Anyone who is a serious student of social revolutions is eventually led to a diligent examination of the philosophy of Marx, who has probably wielded more influence on social transformations than any other theoretician. This endeavor in turn leads to an inquiry into the nature of the dialectic, a "method" which pervades not only all of the works of Marx but all of the works of those who adhere to the Marxist tradition. It is considered the indispensable tool, without which one simply wanders in the dark, stumbling over one misconception after another.

But a proper understanding of the dialectic itself poses a formidable challenge. Marx's explanatory comments are brief and scattered. Although he intended to provide a short exposition of the dialectic, he died before the task was accomplished. Engels' elucidations, while helpful, are often open to misinterpretation. Hence the persistent student is thrown back onto the works of Hegel who, more than any other philosopher, has placed the dialectic at the center of his philosophy and whom Marx consistently credited with illuminating the dialectic's fundamental forms, although within a flawed framework. At this point many students simply feel overwhelmed, not only because of the prodigious dimension of Hegel's writings but because of the obscurity and density of the ideas contained therein.

Nevertheless, an examination of Hegel's treatment of the dialectic is beneficial for, as we shall see, there are certain facets that are central to his account that prove crucial to a proper understanding of the dialectic, yet are nevertheless entirely ignored or obscured in later elucidations. This essay is intended as a contribution to the dialogue concerning the nature of the dialectic.

But a word of caution is in order regarding Hegel's philosophy. A mathematician can construct a theory starting with self-subsistent units, entirely comprehensible on their own, that are relatively fixed and unchanging. Each new step is then added in a thoroughly mechanical way. Hegel's philosophy exhibits an entirely different structure: it is an organic system in which the meaning of each part can only be properly established in relation to the system as a whole; the part loses all meaning or is assigned an incorrect meaning when considered in isolation. Hegel offered the following analogy to illustrate this point:

Analytical cognition deals with an object which is presented in detachment, and the aim of its action is to trace back to a universal the individual object before it. Thought in such circumstances means no more than an act of abstraction or of formal identity. That is the sense in which thought is understood by Locke and all

the empiricists. Cognition, it is often said, can never do more than separate the given concrete objects into their abstract elements, and then consider these elements in their isolation. It is, however, at once apparent that this turns things upside down, and that cognition, if its purpose be to take things as they are, thereby falls into contradiction with itself. Thus the chemist for example places a piece of flesh in his retort, tortures it in many ways, and then informs us that it consists of nitrogen, carbon, hydrogen, &c. True; but these abstract matters have ceased to be flesh.²

In the final analysis, Hegel was describing an organic reality undergoing development, and consequently his system reflects those same organic relations. Accordingly, his system must be read and reread: the beginning will undergo an alteration in meaning when considered in relation to the entire system as opposed to when it is first encountered when the reader lacks a holistic perspective. In other words, with Hegel, one cannot avoid starting on the wrong foot. For this reason he always insisted that truth cannot be adequately expressed by a proposition—it can only be captured by a system: "The science of this Idea must form a system. For the truth is concrete..."³

In addition to this structural impediment, attempts to understand Hegel have also been derailed for external reasons. Most students are quick to seek help from commentators, often to great advantage, but there are occasions when secondary sources have been misleading, at best. For example, there has been an overwhelming tendency, particularly within the Stalinist tradition, to assume that the dialectic applies both to nature and to social reality in exactly the same way. Often the commentator will begin by drawing examples of the dialectic from nature and then seamlessly shift to society, as if to suggest no gaping chasm was vaulted along the way. It is true that Hegel asserted that the dialectic permeates everything, stating, for example: "Everything that surrounds us may be viewed as an instance of Dialectic."⁴ Nevertheless, as will be explicated below, he also insisted that the dialectic assumes qualitatively and significantly different forms, depending on the subject matter.

Moreover, commentators have frequently failed to give even passing reference to the three basic categories that define the dialectic (universal, particular, and individual) where for Hegel, the universal is the abstract first step, the particular is its negation, and the individual is the negation of the negation. Instead, they have often remained content to reiterate Engels' three laws: "The law of the transformation of quantity into quality, and vice versa; the law of the interpenetration of opposites; the law of the negation of the negation," which they follow with a medley of examples. It will also be argued below that this approach is fundamentally inadequate and that reference to the universal, particular, and individual is indispensable.

In elucidating the Hegelian dialectic, one could, of course, begin with a definition, which Hegel in fact offers at one point: "But by Dialectic is meant the indwelling tendency outwards by which the one-sidedness and limitation of the predicates of understanding is seen in its true light, and shown to be the negation of them."⁵ However, while definitions may offer some vague indication of the general direction to be pursued, they remain inherently abstract, providing little sense of how exactly they are to be applied, or not applied, and hence are in need of more illumination than they themselves project.

The Triadic Structure of the Dialectic

With all these precautionary measures in mind, we have no other recourse than to follow Hegel's account and observe the unfolding of the dialectic as it metamorphoses into increasingly concrete forms. And here our initial endeavors are greatly facilitated when accompanied at least with a general idea of the sphere in which we are starting. In Hegel's logic, this beginning takes place within the sphere of cognition or thought, not with feeling or intuition or sense:

It might perhaps be objected to this procedure in the scientific sphere that, because intuition is easier than cognition, the object of intuition, that is, concrete actuality, should be made the beginning of science, and that this procedure is more natural than that which begins with the subject matter in its abstraction and from that proceeds in the opposite direction to its particularization and complete individualization. But the fact that the aim is to cognize, implies that the question of a comparison with intuition is already settled and done with; there can only be a question of what is to be the first and what is to be the nature of the sequel within the process of cognition...⁶

So we begin in the sphere of thought, and, as we will soon discover, "thought in its very nature is dialectical."⁷

Not only is our starting point thought, but it is crucial to understand that the kind of thinking exhibited at the outset of Hegel's system is a lower type of thinking, indicative of what Hegel, following Kant, termed the faculty of Understanding, a manner of thinking that will be contrasted with the higher faculty of Reason. The Understanding, because of its compulsion to analyze and dissect and always look at the world as if with static snap shots, is incapable of appreciating the positive side of the dialectic and must retire when Reason rises to the occasion. With the faculty of Understanding and its thought products as our point of departure, we will follow Hegel's account and see why this mode of thinking necessarily evolves into the higher form of Reason. In the final analysis, Hegel argued that these two faculties are not entirely distinct, as Kant assumed, since Reason is Understanding, taken to a higher level.

How, then, does thought, in the mode of Understanding, originally produce its object? What exactly is its first step "within the process of cognition"? According to Hegel, the Understanding necessarily begins with the thoroughly simple, abstract universal:

The universal is in and for itself the first moment of the Notion because it is the simple moment, and the particular is only subsequent to it because it is the mediated moment; and conversely the simple is the more universal, and the concrete, as in itself differentiated and so mediated, is that which already presupposes the transition from the first. This remark applies not only to the order of procedure in the specific forms of definitions, divisions, and propositions, but also to the order of cognition as a whole and simply with respect to the difference of abstract and concrete in general... Magnetism, electricity, the various gases, and so forth, are objects, the specific character of which is ascertained by cognition only by apprehending them in isolation from the concrete conditions in which they appear in the actual world.⁸

The beginning, the principle, or the Absolute, as at first immediately enunciated, is only the universal. Just as when I say 'all animals,' this expression cannot pass for zoology, so it is equally plain that the words, 'the Divine,' 'the Absolute,' 'the Eternal,' etc., do not express what is contained in them; and only such words, in fact, do express the intuition as something immediate.⁹

When we engage in thought, we begin with an abstract universal simply because this is the most accessible element to thought. For example, if we pointed up into the sky and asked, "What is it?" then the answer might be something of the order, "It is a star." But the term "star" is entirely abstract, lacking any particular stipulations regarding its nature. This abstract universal reappears on various levels of sophistication in Hegel's system, but when we are operating with the Understanding, it assumes definite characteristics. To begin with, as an abstract universal, it has been torn apart from the surrounding context and therefore stands alone, isolated and disconnected:

The action of the Understanding may be in general described as investing its subject-matter with the form of universality. But this universal is an abstract universal: that is to say, its opposition to the particular is so rigorously maintained, that it is at the same time also reduced to the character of a particular again."¹⁰

In other words, one assumes that with the term "star" we are actually dealing with something of substance, apart from any particular properties it might possess:

The notion is generally associated in our minds with abstract generality, and on that account it is often described as a general conception. We speak, accordingly, of the notions of color, plant, animal, etc. They are supposed to be arrived at by neglecting the particular features that distinguish the different colors, plants, animals from each other, and by retaining those common to them all. This is the aspect of the notion which is familiar with understanding...¹¹

At this stage, the Understanding simply produces a universal as a kind of "abbreviation" of "the multitudes of particular things which are vaguely present to intuition and pictorial thought"¹² or as representing what is "common to them all," and which is regarded as something fixed and permanent.¹³ Although producing entirely static categories, the Understanding plays an indispensable role in the ultimate process of acquiring truth: "It must be added, however, that the merit and rights of the mere Understanding should unhesitatingly be admitted. And that merit lies in the fact, that "apart from Understanding there is no fixity or accuracy in the region either of theory or practice."¹⁴

In creating these universals, the Understanding labors under the assumption that it, as the knowing subject, stands in opposition to an external world so that its constructions are mere mental creations, lacking objective reality:

In the theoretical idea the subjective Notion, as the universal that lacks any determination of its own, stands opposed to the objective world from which it takes to itself a determinate content and filling.¹⁵

It [the perspective of the Understanding] believes thought to be a mere subjective and formal activity, and the objective fact, which confronts thought, to have a separate and permanent being.¹⁶

In this characterizing the universal, we become aware of its antithesis to something else. This something else is the merely immediate, outward and individual, as opposed to the mediate, inward and universal. The universal does not exist externally to the outward eye as a universal... the laws of the celestial motions are not written on the sky. The universal is neither seen nor heard, its existence is only for the mind.¹⁷

In other words, the Understanding regards these abstract universals as purely mental creations, as, for example, when we consider a number of diverse red objects and abstract from them the concept of red. The Understanding assumes a fundamental gulf divides the world of mind and all of its mental creations from the external, material world.

To briefly recapitulate: the Understanding commences thinking about the world by isolating out, through a process of abstraction, a simple universal concept, thereby severing it from any relation to the surrounding context, and proceeds to treat it as a permanently fixed, purely mental creation. As the dialectic unfolds, we will discover that for Hegel, in order to attain genuine truth, all of these features must be negated since he is convinced that in order to know anything, it must be placed in an organic context where its relations with everything else become explicit.

In any case, the second step in the cognitive process, once the Understanding has created a universal, is to assign predicates to it because the abstract universal, in and of itself, lacks content and therefore substance. So, for example, if one learned that an object in the sky was a star but lacked any knowledge of stars, one would have virtually nothing with respect to knowledge.

But the objects of consciousness should not remain simple, should not remain such representations or abstract thought determinations; on the contrary, they should be comprehended, that is to say, their simplicity should be determined with their inner difference.¹⁸

... [T]he subject as such is, in the first instance, only a kind of name... In the question: what is this? or: what kind of a plant is this? what is often understood by the being enquired after, is merely the name and when this is learned one is satisfied and now knows what the thing is... But the Notion, or at least the essence and the universal in general, is first given by the predicate... Consequently, God, spirit, nature, or whatever it may be, is as the subject of a judgment at first only the name; what such a subject is as regards its Notion is first enunciated in the predication.¹⁹

In other words, the abstract universal, although an indispensable starting point, does not get us very far. We must begin to attach predicates or properties to it in order to be able to say more specifically what it is. Here the Understanding essentially engages in a kind of analysis since for it, "Cognition ... can never do more than separate the given concrete objects into their abstract elements and then consider these elements in their isolation..."²⁰

Intent on assigning everything to an isolated category, the Understanding conceives these particular attributes as entirely separate from the original abstract universal as well as separate from, and external to, one another. A table, for example, as a universal concept, might be square or it might be rectangular, but it remains a table regardless of the particular shape. In this respect the universal and the particular characteristics seem to stand in entirely accidental relations to each other. And its shape is considered entirely separate from its color.

For Hegel, this style of thinking, thoroughly typical of the Understanding, characterized both common sense and the kind of thinking employed in the natural sciences, as well as metaphysics and the philosophical school of empiricism. Newton, for example, observed a variety of particular examples of natural bodies in motion and, through a process of reflection, was able to identify a single law, the universal law of gravity, which captured the common feature in this diversity. Here this law stands counterposed to, and separate from, its instances that occupy the natural world. As a mental creation, it contains no necessary connection between itself and the movement of objects it describes in the sense that objects fell to the ground long before Newton ever formulated his law, and the law exists whether this particular book falls to the ground or not.

The work of the finite sciences lies to a great extent in the application of these categories [of the Understanding], and the phrase 'scientific treatment' generally means no more than the method which has for its aim comparison of the objects under consideration.²¹

Common Sense, that mixture of sense and understanding, believes the objects of which it has knowledge to be severally independent and self-supporting, and when it becomes evident that they tend towards and limit one another, the independence of one upon another is reckoned something foreign to them and to their true nature.²²

In other words, the world of common sense is populated by static, disconnected entities. Children, for example, assume their grandparents have always been old and that their own existence is entirely independent of them. Young adults understand abstractly that people grow old, but fail to connect this fact to themselves, and they are even slower to acquire the realization that they themselves are products of their surrounding world with its particular culture.

Because the operations of the Understanding coincide with common sense and are antithetical to the dialectic, Hegel's next step is difficult to digest and is frequently encountered with hostility. But if his argument is examined closely, we will discover that it does in fact rest on a rational basis.

The dialectic takes this form: Hegel argued that the various characteristics that have been separated out as particular attributes not only stand in contradiction to one another but to the original abstract universal. The resolution of this contradiction then necessarily leads to a higher, more sophisticated concept that combines the contradictory elements on this lower level into a more complex unity.

Before we can marvel at the resolution, however, we need to understand exactly in what sense the Understanding has entangled itself in contradictions. But before this question can be addressed, we must say a few things about Reason, since it provides the fuel that ignites the process.

Hegel maintained that the faculty of Reason incessantly strives towards absolute knowledge: "But with the rise of this thinking study of things, it soon becomes evident that thought will be satisfied with nothing short of showing the necessity of its facts."²³ If something happens, we want to know why. Reason is always pushing the limits of our scientific grasp of the world further, seeking an answer to all questions and being satisfied with nothing short of absolute certitude. It seeks for the hidden connections underlying the diverse phenomena so that in the

final analysis every element is rationally connected with every other element. Reason's insistence on necessity serves as the driving force of Hegel's dialectic, a force that is finally satisfied only with the full development of Mind itself. While Kant argued that Reason was doomed to failure in this endeavor, Hegel relentlessly insisted that it was destined to succeed.

The contradiction confronting the Understanding, then, is basically this: While the abstract universal initially appeared as a firm grasp of the content of knowledge, it is an empty victory since, "Where there is no definite quality, knowledge is impossible."²⁴ We are compelled to attach properties to it in order to supply it with content. But it is here that the problems emerge. First, the Understanding, because of its inclination to regard everything in isolation, is incapable of providing us with any kind of rational way of conceiving the relation between the universal and the particular. The claim that properties "inhere" in substances, for example, tells us virtually nothing. The highest form of necessity the Understanding is capable of providing is in terms of categories such as causality, but the connection between cause and effect remains fortuitous. The heat of the sun melts ice, but the universe might have been constructed in such a manner that this law did not hold. Second, the particular attributes that define the universal lack any sort of absolutely necessary connection in relation to one another. The color is independent of the shape, for example, and both differ from the texture. However, "All this multiplicity again excites a craving to know these different forces as a single whole..."²⁵ Third, in so far as particular attributes are ascribed to the universal, the Understanding must necessarily make reference to what the thing is not: "The former reflection [concerning the universal] involves distinction from an other; from this standpoint, the universal possesses a particularity..."²⁶ We understand what a floor is, for example, by understanding how it differs from walls, roofs, etc.

Hegel was the first to admit that normally we refuse to concede that any of the above problems amount to a contradiction. But he provides an explanation for our refusal:

Because the first or the immediate is implicitly the Notion, and consequently is also only implicitly the negative, the dialectical moment with it consists in positing in it the difference that it implicitly contains. The second, on the contrary, is itself the determinate moment, the difference or relationship; therefore with it the dialectical moment consists in positing the unity that is contained in it. If then the negative, the determinate, relationship, judgment, and all the determinations falling under this second moment do not at once appear on their own account as contradiction and as dialectical, this is solely the fault of a thinking that does not bring its thoughts together... But formal thinking makes identity its law, and allows the contradictory content before it to sink into the sphere of ordinary conception, into space and time, in which the contradictions are held asunder in juxtaposition and temporal succession and so come before consciousness without reciprocal contact.²⁷

In other words, the Understanding is accustomed to thinking pictorially where everything can be neatly separated into various spatial and temporal slots and does not concern itself with how things interrelate, but reason is intent on establishing the logical relations among all of the elements and presses forward.

Basically, the idea behind Hegel's reasoning is this: Suppose one wanted to understand what feudalism is. Simply pointing to a feudal society and saying "feudalism" does not take us very far. We need to know its defining characteristics. And these qualities or properties might include

reference to serfs, to a landed aristocracy and nobility, etc. But to understand what a serf is, one must understand the difference between a serf and, for example, a slave: a slave can be sold; a serf cannot. This is what Hegel meant when he argued that to truly understand something, it cannot be understood in isolation; one must also grasp what it is not, and consequently he described this step of particularization and limitation as the first negation: "As negativity in general or in accordance with the first, immediate negation, the universal contains determinateness generally as particularity..."²⁸ So feudalism, in order to be understood, must be understood in relation to contrasting economic formations.

At this point Reason steps in and raises the question of the relation of feudal societies to slave societies, etc. One might think, for example, that they cannot all be valid formations. But instead of casting them against one another, Reason takes what were considered self-subsistent entities, negates their independence, and places them as members of a higher totality. So, for example, one could unify the concept of feudal society with the concept of slave society and end up with the concept of historical development where each of these societies is relegated to being a step in human development, one in which the members of society become increasingly free. In this case the concept of history represents a qualitatively richer concept than that of particular social formations. Here the Understanding has risen to the level of Reason:

It is the stage of this connecting of the determinations that their conflict emerges. This connecting activity of reflection belongs in itself to reason and the rising above those determinations which attains to an insight into their conflict is the great negative step towards the true Notion of reason. But the insight, when not thorough-going, commits the mistake of thinking that it is reason which is in contradiction with itself; it does not recognize that the contradiction is precisely the rising of reason above the limitations of the understanding and the resolving of them.²⁹

Each new stage in Hegel's conceptual framework results by unifying the contradictory elements contained in the previous stage. For example, the concept of becoming embraces the two previous concepts that seemed to stand in stark contradiction—being and nothing—since becoming implies that something comes into being while something else recedes into nothingness. As increasingly higher stages unfold, we witness the emergence of more sophisticated or complex concepts since they represent a "resolution in a higher universal"³⁰ of what appeared on the previous step. For example, in the sphere of Being, the concept of becoming involves one thing becoming something entirely different so that the relation of each to the other is "to an other." But in the sphere of Essence, which comprises the sphere following Being, essence contains relation to an other within itself. That is, essence, by its very nature implies a relation to the inessential or to mere appearance: "Therefore, what reflection does to the immediate, and the determinations which issue from reflection, are not anything external to the immediate but are its own proper being."³¹ And when we advance to the next higher sphere of the Notion, elements are encapsulated in a thoroughly rational structure since the Notion is structured as an organic whole where each member logically correlates with the others: "In respect of its externality the organism is a manifold, not of parts but of members."³² For example, the Notion includes the category of life which represents an organism, and in the final analysis the Notion, "when it has developed into a concrete existence that is itself free, is none other than the 'I,' or pure self-consciousness."³³

This unification of terms in a higher universal, referred to by Hegel as individuality, is the third step in the dialectical triad. Here, instead of things standing in external relations to other independent things, they are united in a rich, internally structured, organic whole. Therefore when Hegel argued that each new stage represents a higher universal, this is not to be interpreted as higher in a merely quantitative mode in the way, for example, that the category of mammal includes more species than the category of canine. Rather, Hegel was arguing in terms of a qualitatively higher universal where the members are related in a more sophisticated formation, as, for example, when we move from the category of life to the category of mind.

Individuality consequently results from the negation of the negation in that the negating force of the second step has in turn been negated so that unity has been restored. It amounts to "the sublation of this otherness."³⁴ The elements of the previous step have been preserved and maintained, but now assume a different meaning in light of the new universal or totality in which they are embedded. More specifically, the internal elements stand in a higher relation of necessity to one another.

While the Understanding produces abstract universals and then proceeds to give them content by externally connecting them to particular characteristics, Reason, when fully developed, rises to the highest stage of human consciousness which itself contains a synthesis of the universal and particular. It is "the universal which particularizes itself," meaning that a free subject engages in self-determination which in turn requires particularization.³⁵ For example, consciousness entertains an abstract, universal goal and then proceeds to implement that goal in reality. It sets an end for itself, gathers together particular means to achieve this end, and then reorganizes reality to conform to this goal so that all of these factors are brought together in a new totality. In the hands of Reason, the universal is no longer the lifeless generality of the Understanding but "...the universal, to be truly apprehended, must be apprehended as subjectivity, as a notion self-moving, active, and form-imposing."³⁶ In other words, the dialectic culminates in human freedom.

In the final analysis, Hegel believed that human freedom can only be fully realized as a collective enterprise. Not only are isolated individuals incapable of fundamentally transforming the surrounding society, whereas vast numbers of people, acting in concert, have proven themselves entirely capable of such feats, but rationality, for Hegel, was not something individuals possess simply as individuals in the same way that they possess arms and legs. On the contrary, rationality is a collective product, secured only by people coming together, discussing their differences, and reaching an agreement. This undertaking in turn becomes possible only when individuals recognize their inherent equality and appreciate that each one has a contribution to make. Only at this stage is the antithesis between subjectivity and objectivity, which the Understanding assumes is insurmountable, finally overcome as people collectively alter the world in order to realize their shared goals. Spirit or Geist, as humanity's collective consciousness that gradually acquires not only a scientific understanding of the surrounding world but a consciousness of its own inherent rationality, becomes capable of both manipulating nature and creating social institutions that conform to rational principles, as opposed to those based on coercion, for example. It is in this sense that, for Hegel, in the end, Reason ruled the world, but it only succeeds at the expense of the Understanding: "The battle of reason is the struggle to break up the rigidity to which the understanding has reduced everything."³⁷ Here humans, for example, come to the realization that the surrounding social institutions and

relations are not products of nature, but are human creations and can consequently be altered according to entirely rational principles.

We may learn from the present discussion the mistake of regarding the antithesis of subjectivity and objectivity as an abstract and permanent one. The two are wholly dialectical... Any one who, from want of familiarity with the categories of subjectivity and objectivity, seeks to retain them in their abstraction, will find that the isolated categories slip through his fingers before he is aware, and that he says the exact contrary of what he wanted to say.³⁸

In Defense of the Dialectic

The "moments"—universal, particular, and individual—constitute the triad of Hegel's dialectic. But one might wonder why these "moments," and not others? In other words, it might seem as though Hegel is simply imposing an arbitrary, foreign structure on the surrounding world and our thinking about it. Of course, he would respond that the necessity of this schema is only confirmed by a careful study of his entire system, since each step is shown to be the next logical step and where every element fits together in a thoroughly rational system. But short of taking up the arduous task of perusing his entire system, three points can be raised on behalf of his account.

First, one can note that Hegel's dialectic simply describes the way in which thinking itself proceeds. Hegel remarked, for example, that "the method is this knowing itself,"³⁹ meaning that it represents the forms traversed by mind in its pursuit of knowledge. When we think about a particular subject matter, for example, we commence with a general, rather vague, idea. Then, and this occurs particularly in the process of discussion, we are often confronted with criticisms, objections, etc., to our initial thesis. If one were to remain chained to the level of the Understanding, then these objections, if well taken, would signal the end of our inquiry. The thesis would have been proved wrong and consequently rejected. This particular mindset is accompanied with the conviction that arguments are essentially either "won" or "lost." But when reason, armed with a dialectical approach, takes up the challenge, it modifies the original idea in such a way as to accommodate the objections that have been raised and in this way produces a more accurate, nuanced or "concrete" conception.

Plato's Republic displays just this kind of structure. The initial attempt to describe a good person included the stipulation that such a person always pays back his debts. But Socrates pointed out that if one borrowed a weapon from a friend and in the interval the friend went insane, it would be wrong to return the weapon. So the next definition of a good person was one who gives everyone their due, meaning that help is given to one's friends and harm to one's enemies. This new definition accommodates the original objection by stipulating that if the person from whom the weapon is borrowed were a friend, it would be wrong to return the weapon out of fear that they might harm themselves or someone else; however, if the person were an enemy, the weapon would be returned with the hope the owner might inflict harm on himself. Hence it provides a more complex definition in place of the original one.

There is a second point we can make in defense of Hegel's philosophy. Hegel followed Kant in believing that in order for consciousness to operate at all, it must exhibit a fundamental, organic unity. If one moment of consciousness were entirely disconnected with the next, there would be no consciousness at all. We are ordinarily completely unaware of the interconnections of our

concepts, but they necessarily underlie all of our thinking. After all, when we create new concepts, we create them by means of the concepts already at our disposal so that each one is internally linked to all the others. Hegel considered this notion of the necessary unity of consciousness to be Kant's greatest achievement:

It is one of the profoundest and truest insights to be found in the Critique of Pure Reason that the unity which constitutes the nature of the Notion is recognized as the original synthetic unity of apperception as unity of the I think, or of self-consciousness... [I]t demands that we should go beyond the mere representation of the relation in which the I stands to the understanding, or notions stand to a thing and its properties and accidents, and advance to the thought of that relation. An object, says Kant, is that in the notion of which the manifold of a given intuition is unified. But all unifying of representations demand a unity of consciousness in the synthesis of them. Consequently it is this unity of consciousness which alone constitutes the connection of the representations with the object and therewith their objective validity and on which rests even the possibility of the understanding.⁴⁰

Consequently, when we assume things in the world are isolated and independent, we have failed to reflect on the underlying connection supplied by the activity of consciousness itself—that is, we lack self-consciousness:

Usually we regard different things as unaffected by each other. Thus we say: I am a human being, and around me are air, water, animals, and all sorts of things. Everything is thus put outside of every other. But the aim of philosophy is to banish indifference, and to ascertain the necessity of things. By that means the other is seen to stand over against its other. Thus, for example, inorganic nature is not to be considered merely something else than organic nature, but the necessary antithesis of it. Both are in essential relation to one another; and the one of the two is only in so far as it excludes the other from it...⁴¹

The world of sense is a scene of mutual exclusion: its being is outside itself. That is the fundamental feature of the sensible. 'Now' has no meaning except in reference to a before and a hereafter. Red, in the same way, only subsists by being opposed to yellow and blue... But thought, or the 'Ego,' occupies a position the very reverse of the sensible, with its mutual exclusions, and its being outside itself. The 'I' is the primary identity—at one with itself and all at home in itself. The word 'I' expresses the mere act of bringing-to-bear-upon-itself: and whatever is placed in this unit or focus, is affected by it and transformed into it... This is the process which Kant calls pure apperception in distinction from the common apperception, to which the plurality it receives is a plurality still; whereas pure apperception is rather an act by which the 'I' makes the materials mine.'

This view has at least the merit of giving a correct expression to the nature of all consciousness. The tendency of all man's endeavors is to understand the world, to appropriate and subdue it to himself: and to this end the positive reality of the world must be as it were crushed and pounded, in other words, idealised. At the same time we must note that it is not the mere act of our personal self-consciousness, which introduces an absolute unity into the variety of sense.

Rather, this identity is itself the absolute. The absolute is, as it were, so kind as to leave individual things to their own enjoyment, and it again drives them back to the absolute unity.⁴²

In other words, all of our concepts have meaning, not because of some correlation to the external world, but because of their relation to one another. Hegel's dialectic of universal, particular, and individual provides us with a way of understanding this unity.

A third justification can be raised in defense of Hegel's dialectic: the triadic structure of the dialectic mirrors the structure of consciousness itself. Humans are conscious of a variety of things during an interval of time. One's attention might be captured by a landscape, then shift to the sky, and then follow a bird in flight. These various contents constitute particular states of consciousness, but they all belong to a single consciousness or ego which is the all-encompassing universal and which remains the same throughout these variations. However, consciousness operates in such a way that it distinguishes itself from these assorted contents so that the latter constitute something opposed to it. We distinguish our experience of something from the thing that we are experiencing. And because of this capacity to make this distinction, we are in a position to reflect on the contents of our experience and acquire a rational understanding of them. To the degree that we succeed, we convert something that was foreign into something that is ours, because we understand it. This unifying of subjectivity and objectivity constitutes Hegel's concept of individuality.

Examples of the Dialectic at Work

Before concluding the discussion of Hegel's dialectic, it might be instructive to compare some examples of thinking conducted by the faculty of Understanding with examples conducted by Reason in which the dialectic is clearly operative.

When Understanding conceives of free will, it posits freedom in opposition to necessity. That is, in order to be free, the will must be self-determined as opposed to being causally determined by external factors operating with inexorable necessity. Here freedom of the will simply means free choice, regardless of the content. Purchasing one car rather than another or watching one TV program rather than another would constitute genuine examples, according to this perspective, provided that the choice emanated from within the individual as opposed to from outside, as, for example, if it resulted from the manipulation of clever advertising, peer pressure, etc.

Hegel argued this is only the first step in the direction of genuine freedom, not that it is completely false. It is flawed because a contradiction emerges between the form and the content, or its universal claim to represent freedom and the particular examples it assumes. The form is constituted by the claim of freedom, but the content is defined by options over which the subject has no control. In other words, the subject stands over and against a world that is opposed to it. Consequently, it might be the case that all the available options are undesirable. But for the Understanding, choosing here would nevertheless qualify as a genuine choice. But Hegel pointed out: Here, "the matter of choice is given, and known as a content dependent not on the will itself, but on outward circumstances."⁴³

In contrast to the Understanding's version of freedom, Hegel defended the thesis that genuine free will must incorporate necessity, specifically in relation to the content that is chosen: "The genuinely free will, which includes free choice as suspended, is conscious to itself that its

content is intrinsically firm and fast, and knows it at the same time to be thoroughly its own." ⁴⁴ In other words, instead of choosing among given options over which one has no control, the free subject determines the range of options themselves. This would amount to, for example, creating new social institutions as opposed to simply choosing among existing ones. Consequently, "the mind is in its own home-element and therefore free: for freedom means that the other thing with which you deal is a second self—so that you never leave your own ground but give the law to yourself." ⁴⁵ One does not choose between alternatives from an alien world but reconfigures the world itself in conformity with one's own rational principles.

For Hegel, this higher conception of freedom amounted to a synthesis of free will and necessity, but these terms necessarily undergo a transformation in meaning when combined: "...freedom and necessity, when thus abstractly opposed, are terms applicable only in the finite world to which, as such, they belong." However, according to Hegel, "This ... is a merely external necessity, not the real inward necessity which is identical with freedom." ⁴⁶ The inward necessity is the necessity of consciousness that recreates the surrounding world according to its own principles of rationality.

In the Social Contract Rousseau offered another example of the contrast between the approach of Understanding and Reason when he distinguished the "general will" from "the will of all." The latter simply amounts to the mechanical addition of the wills of each member of society, taken in isolation, where each individual wills his or her private interest. Such a procedure is exhibited in contemporary society when citizens ritually descend on voting booths to register their private desires, entirely independent of one another. The general will stands on a higher plane since it aims at what is good for society as a whole, a vision which can only be adequately ascertained through public discussion and debate, i.e. through rational argumentation, not through impulse or instinct. Hegel captured this distinction in the following terms:

It is as 'all' the universal is in the first instance generally encountered by reflection. The individuals form for reflection the foundation, and it is only our subjective action which collects and describes them as 'all.' So far the universal has the aspect of an external fastening that holds together a number of independent individuals, which have not the least affinity for it. This semblance of indifference is, however, unreal: for the universal is the ground and foundation, the root and substance of the individual... The individual man is what he is in particular, only in so far as he is before all things a man as a man in general. ⁴⁷

In other words, the Understanding assumes that society is merely the sum of the individuals who compose it, and these individuals are conceived as autonomous and independent units. But Hegel insisted that individuals are inherently social creatures and can no more retain their identity as humans when considered apart from society than a finger could maintain its identity separated from the hand. One could also add that when citizens engage in rational discourse, their opinions no longer are simply those of an isolated individual. In the course of discussion, vague ideas become clarified, positions become more sophisticated as they are required to take into account objections that have been raised, etc. Hence, Rousseau's general will truly deviates from the image of the Understanding and enters the realm of Reason where the constituent parts now belong to a new organic whole.

Since the contrasting approaches of the Understanding and Reason pervade everyday life, this section will conclude with some more mundane examples. For instance, when evaluating the

results of elections, the Understanding considers the votes each candidate wins in isolation. If one candidate receives 60 percent of the votes and the other 40 percent, then it is assumed that 60 percent of the electorate favors the former candidate. But what this analysis fails to consider is the entire spectrum of choices made available to the electorate. For example, if the spectrum consists of only two candidates and both are unappealing to the overwhelming majority of the population so that voters feel compelled to choose the "lesser evil," then the fact that one candidate receives 60 percent of the vote says little about the true preferences of the electorate. In other words, the winners must be judged on the basis of the totality from which they were selected, as Reason counsels. And when the approach of Reason is adopted, one is in a position to understand why two political parties can enjoy a monopoly on political power for decades but abruptly be unseated when a new option arises on the political horizon, as happened recently in Venezuela. Moreover, when a particular candidate is placed into office as a result of the mobilization of the masses, dialectical relations become intensified. The candidate is pushed to the left since he or she is indebted to the masses for their governmental position and must respond to the demands of the masses in order to remain in office. In turn, the masses, which are quick to sense the power they wield, are emboldened to press their needs even further.

Finally, with respect to human interactions, some individuals arm themselves with their abstract moral principles whenever they come into contact with strangers. They assume, often incorrectly, their own moral principles are universal and use them to bludgeon anyone who commits an infraction. Here the Understanding is entirely at home. But another way of comporting oneself in relation to one's fellow human beings is to adopt a posture of openness in relation to their values and principles. In this way one can attempt to achieve a common perspective where both participants acquire broader horizons. This can only be accomplished by Reason.

Hegel's Commentators

We are at last in a position to return to some of Hegel's commentators and argue why their accounts are deficient. When one restricts one's elucidation of the dialectic to Engels' three laws (which Engels did not do), one is basically operating on the level of Understanding, which for Hegel was incapable of proceeding dialectically. For example, the laws are enumerated in isolation and independent of one another with no attempt to derive one from the other or ground them in some common foundation, with the result that they appear arbitrary and fortuitous. Why these laws and not others? The virtue of Hegel's triadic concepts is that they are internally and essentially linked. The universal necessarily implies its opposite in the form of the particular, so in this way the "interpenetration of opposites" is explained, and individuality results by synthesizing these two opposed elements, resulting in "the negation of the negation."

Then there is the additional problem that these three laws are treated as if they were on the same level as Newton's laws of physics. That is, still operating on the level of the Understanding, their meaning, for example, is treated as invariant, regardless of the content, thereby eradicating the profoundly different forms the dialectic assumes in relation to inorganic nature as compared to human consciousness that is embedded in a specific historical context. In the case of nature, human consciousness stands opposed to it and draws out the dialectical conclusions that our categories of nature logically imply. Consciousness, for example, derives becoming from being and nothing; being and nothing do not do this for themselves. And at the end of this derivation, consciousness and nature remain opposed to one another, and nature remains exactly as it was

before. But when the dialectic unfolds in relation to mind, particularly in relation to the collective consciousness of humanity, in its highest form it represents the exercise of freedom itself. When humanity is in a position to act rationally, an accomplishment that has required the contribution of many generations, we are then able to reshape reality so that it conforms to what we collectively have determined to be rational, a determination which results from discussion and deliberation and which is necessarily a conscious process. This is our highest destiny, and this is what the dialectic ultimately signifies: the transcendence of the abstract opposition between subjectivity and objectivity and the realization of human freedom. However, in so far as the dialectic is treated as a natural law, identically applicable to nature and humanity, we are implicitly being discouraged from becoming aware of our potential freedom, a result that entirely suited the political agenda of Stalin and his defenders. For decades, the Soviet Union, under Stalin, put the brakes on world revolutions, subordinating all other struggles to the supreme goal of defending "socialism" in one country, and more specifically, the privileges of the Soviet bureaucracy. Under such conditions it was imperative to sedate the masses throughout the world and quell their revolutionary aspirations. By making dialectical, revolutionary transformations look as if they were something that happened to the masses rather than something they undertook, a subtle suggestion was being transmitted to the masses that they were to remain passive so that events could unfold according to their own logic, which, in fact, was aimed at maintaining the status quo.

PART II: Marx's Dialectic

Turning to the tradition of Marxism, we will discover that both Marx and Engels retained the essential Hegelian dialectical structure of universal, particular and individual. In *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, for example, Engels offered the following popularization of the dialectic:

When we consider and reflect upon Nature at large or the history of mankind or our own intellectual activity, at first we see the picture of an endless entanglement of relations and reactions... We see therefore, at first the picture as a whole with its individual parts still more or less kept in the background...⁴⁸

This stage corresponds to Hegel's abstract universal, divorced from the particular. Engels continued:

But this conception, correctly as it expresses the general character of the picture of appearances as a whole, does not suffice to explain the details... The analysis of Nature into its individual parts, the grouping of the different natural processes and objects in definite classes, the study of the internal anatomy of organic bodies in their manifold forms—these were the fundamental conditions of the gigantic strides in our knowledge of Nature... But this method of work has also left us as legacy the habit of observing natural objects and processes in isolation, apart from their connection with the vast whole; of observing them in repose, not in motion...⁴⁹

Thus far Engels has been describing the Understanding that starts with the abstract universal and then analyzes it into its particular attributes. He concluded with the dialectical moment contributed by reason in which elements are combined into a new, richer totality:

In the contemplation of individual things, it [the preceding analysis] forgets the connection between them...

Further, we find upon closer investigation that the two poles of an antithesis, positive and negative, e.g., are as inseparable as they are opposed, and that despite all their opposition, they mutually interpenetrate...

None of these processes and modes of thought enters in the framework of metaphysical reasoning [i.e. the Understanding]. Dialectics, on the other hand, comprehends things and their representations, ideas, in their essential connection, concatenation, motion, origin and ending.⁵⁰

In this particular exposition, when Engels proceeded to provide examples of the dialectic, he restricted them to natural phenomena with the proclamation that "nature is the proof of dialectics."⁵¹ He mentioned, for example, the problem of determining at what point an animal is dead or alive and the examples of positive and negative charges. Even though Engels' account is perfectly true, such examples give the impression that the dialectic is most appropriate for natural scientific inquiry, which is just the opposite of what Hegel argued, and which fails to

include the most important application of the dialectic, namely where the gulf between subjectivity, or human consciousness on the one hand, and objectivity, or the external world on the other hand, is overcome.

Although Marx's references to the dialectic are both scattered and brief, nevertheless his famous postface to the second edition of *Capital*, Volume One, at least provides a glimpse into his evaluation of Hegel's dialectic. The last three sentences are crucial:

I criticized the mystificatory side of the Hegelian dialectic nearly thirty years ago, at a time when it was still the fashion. But just when I was working at the first volume of *Capital*, the ill-humoured, arrogant and mediocre epigones who now talk large in educated German circles began to take pleasure in treating Hegel in the same way as the good Moses Mendelssohn treated Spinoza in Lessing's time, namely as a 'dead dog.' I therefore openly avowed myself, the pupil of that mighty thinker, and even, here and there in the chapter on the theory of value, coquetted with the mode of expression peculiar to him. The mystification which the dialectic suffers in Hegel's hands by no means prevents him from being the first to present its general forms of motion in a comprehensive and conscious manner. With him it is standing on its head. It must be inverted, in order to discover the rational kernel within the mystical shell.⁵²

When Marx credited Hegel with having been the first to present "the general forms of motion" of the dialectic, this refers to the forms of universal, particular, and individual, where the particular represents the first negation, and the individual is then the negation of the negation. In his discussion of method in his *Introduction to the Grundrisse*, although he did not use the terms "universal," "particular," and "individual," the concepts are nevertheless present:

When we consider a given country from a political-economic standpoint, we begin with its population, its subdivision into classes, location in city... It seems to be the correct procedure to commence with the real and the concrete, the actual prerequisites... Yet on closer consideration it proves to be wrong. Population is an abstraction if we leave out for example the classes of which it consists. These classes, again, are but an empty word unless we know what are the elements on which they are based... If we start out, therefore, with population, we do so with a chaotic conception of the whole, and by closer analysis we will gradually arrive at simpler ideas; this once attained, we might start on our return journey until we finally came back to population, but this time not as a chaotic notion of an integral whole, but as a rich aggregate of many determinations and relations. The former method is the one which political economy had adopted in the past at its inception... The latter is manifestly the scientifically correct method. The concrete is concrete because it is a combination of many determinations; i.e., a unity of diverse elements.⁵³

In other words, we begin with a vague, abstract, universal concept such as population and proceed to analyze it into its particular attributes of classes, etc. We then take these isolated elements and combine them into a new, complex whole, "a combination of many determinations; i.e., a unity of diverse elements."

The mystical side of Hegel's dialectic does not refer to these specific forms but the structure within which they are embedded in Hegel's system. This structure is constituted by a single subject—conceived as Spirit or humanity's collective consciousness—undergoing a process of self-development so that history amounts to humanity conquering increasingly higher levels of rationality and self-consciousness. In this respect, history conforms to a single, unfolding continuity, and the concepts, as they develop, become increasingly richer and more sophisticated as opposed to the abstract, simple starting point of mere "Being," for example.

Marx displaced Hegel's single subject in favor of the concept of "production," which in turn assigns different subjects to various roles, thereby undermining the theme of a single subject:

To regard society as one single subject is ... to look at it wrongly; speculatively... The important thing to emphasize here is only that, whether production and consumption are viewed as the activity of one or of many individuals, they appear in any case as moments of one process, in which production is the real point of departure and hence also the predominant moment.⁵⁴

While both Marx and Hegel agreed that truth is represented by a system which is "concrete because it is the concentration of many determinations, hence unity of the diverse,"⁵⁵ and they agreed that this system is the product of thought, Marx insisted that the logic of thinking that produces this truth cannot be identified with the course of history itself, as Hegel believed:

In this way Hegel fell into the illusion of conceiving the real as the product of thought concentrating itself, probing its own depths, and unfolding itself out of itself, by itself, whereas the method of rising from the abstract to the concrete is only the way in which thought appropriates the concrete, reproduces it as the concrete in the mind. But this is by no means the process by which the concrete itself comes into being.⁵⁶

Rejecting Hegel's account of history as a continuous process of simple forms metamorphosing into more complex versions, Marx embraced a vision of a somewhat discontinuous array of competing structures. For example, the category of exchange, which occupies a dominant position in modern capitalist society, simply did not exist in communal societies at all, not even in a simpler, more abstract form: "...it is simply wrong to place exchange at the centre of communal society as the original, constituent element."⁵⁷ On the other hand, some very "primitive" societies have at times included the more sophisticated forms of economic activity, such as a highly developed form of division of labor. For Marx, history simply failed to conform to a single logic.

For this reason, Marx did not display his theory of capitalism by following the development of economic categories throughout various historical formations, beginning with the dawn of history:

It would therefore be unfeasible and wrong to let the economic categories follow one another in the same sequence as that in which they were historically decisive. Their sequence is determined, rather, by their relation to one another in modern bourgeois society, which is precisely the opposite of that which seems to be their natural order or which corresponds to historical development.⁵⁸

In other words, each historical epoch must be understood in its own terms and not as the next logical step in a progression: "In all forms of society there is one specific kind of production which predominates over the rest, whose relations thus rank and influence all the others." ⁵⁹ It is in this sense, therefore, that Marx noted, "My dialectic method is not only different from the Hegelian but is its direct opposite." ⁶⁰

Turning to the presence of the dialectic in *Capital*, Marx gave us a general sense in which it operates:

In its rational form it [the dialectic] is a scandal and abomination to bourgeoisdom and its doctrinaire professors because it includes in its comprehension and affirmative recognition of the existing state of things, at the same time also, the recognition of the negation of that state, of its inevitable breaking up; because it regards every historically developed social form as in fluid movement, and therefore takes into account its transient nature not less than its momentary existence; because it lets nothing impose upon it, and is in its essence critical and revolutionary. ⁶¹

With respect to the more specific operations of the dialectic in *Capital*, it should be noted that Marx did not commence with an abstract, universal concept of capitalist society, for example, with population, since his predecessors have previously traversed this stage. Rather, *Capital* begins with the particular, the commodity which has already been distilled "through analysis" by other economists. The commodity, as a theoretical category, serves as the special key that unlocks all the hidden mechanisms of capitalist society. Like a cancerous cell that penetrates every organ in a living body, the commodity, especially in its money form, penetrates every domain of capitalist society. Starting with this abstract particular, he proceeded to construct capitalist society as a living, not dead, organic whole. This means that the various elements are not treated in isolation, but as they mutually interact and conflict with one another: "Mutual interaction takes place between the different moments. This the case with every organic whole." ⁶² More specifically, Marx highlighted the contradictory and antagonistic relations within this organic whole in order to demonstrate its transitory nature.

For example, the commodity itself contains a "unity of differences" in so far as it embodies both use value and exchange value. ⁶³ In the final analysis, all of the contradictions implied by the commodity—use value versus exchange value, private labor versus direct social labor, the personification of things (for example, the conviction of many people that "money rules the world") versus the representation of persons by things—led Marx to argue that "all these antitheses and contradictions, which are immanent in commodities, assert themselves, and develop their modes of motion, in the antithetical phases of the metamorphosis of a commodity. These modes therefore imply the possibility, and no more than the possibility, of crises." ⁶⁴

Of course, the central theme of *Capital* is the antagonistic relation between capitalist and worker. The former is required to maximize profit in order to survive while the latter seeks to maximize wages and benefits in order to live. Each is successful only at the other's expense, and hence arises "the unavoidable antagonism between the exploiter and the living and laboring raw material he exploits." ⁶⁵

Hence throughout Capital Marx did not construct universal laws analogous to the law of gravity, which will be with us as long as the universe survives, but rather illuminates the contradictory tendencies within capitalism that will ultimately lead to its demise.

Perhaps one of the most direct references to Hegel's dialectic appears towards the end of Volume I of Capital:

The capitalist mode of appropriation, the result of the capitalist mode of production, produces capitalist private property. This is the first negation of individual private property, as founded on the labor of the proprietor. But capitalist production begets, with inexorability of a law of Nature, its own negation. It is the negation of the negation. This does not reestablish private property for the producer, but gives him individual property based on the acquisitions of the capitalist era: i.e., on cooperation and possession in common of the land and of the means of production.⁶⁶

In other words, we begin with people working for themselves, scattered throughout society in small shops and owning the product of their labor. The first negation amounts to the swallowing up of these isolated individual producers into a single conglomerate, such as the factory. Here the factory, owned by a private individual or individuals, employs numerous workers who, by working in closely coordinated cooperation, produce a highly complex, sophisticated product that could never be produced by an isolated individual. The negation of the negation is represented by socialism that retains the progressive element of capitalism, namely the intricate system of social cooperation, but abolishes private, individual ownership of enterprises in favor of "possession in common of the land and of the means of production,"⁶⁷ that is, socialized ownership that coincides with the underlying socialized form of production.

PART III: Some Historical Examples

Before we examine particular applications of the dialectic within the Marxist tradition, in contrast to the far more ubiquitous analyses conducted by the Understanding, it will be helpful to outline the general approaches adopted by these competing camps in slightly more concrete terms.

The Understanding is at home not only in the realm of common sense, which pervades most of our endeavors, but also in many of the sciences, including Newtonian physics. The common thread throughout these domains is the isolated subject, armed with abstract concepts, who confronts an alien, external world of particular things and events that he or she seeks to understand, evaluate, or simply accommodate him or herself to. Newton, for example, formulated the abstract law of gravity that described a pattern of particular events. In everyday activity people attempt to accomplish the same goal on a more informal basis by formulating such universal precepts as, "Unguarded fires can be dangerous." When people engage in moralizing, they applaud or condemn various actions according to whether they concur with or violate our abstract moral principles. But in the end, the isolated subject remains opposed to the "objective" world.

Marx and Hegel together insisted on the limitations of the Understanding's general approach. The abstract universal is simply too abstract and inflexible to be of service in grasping social transformations. For example, the moralist begins with the conviction that murder is always wrong, but in time of war murder becomes an acceptable mode of behavior. Or one can make generalizations about human behavior, for example, that people always want revenge when wronged, but then one is confronted with more mature individuals who exercise compassion. The abstract universal is helpless when contending with a changing world. Moreover, the moral condemnation of a state of affairs does not, in and of itself, indicate how this situation can be remedied. For example, one might conclude that capitalism violates moral precepts because of its inherent relations of exploitation, but this judgment offers no prescription regarding how capitalism might be replaced by a more humane society. And while the natural scientist deserves credit for unlocking the secrets of nature with abstract laws, the object of his or her investigation is a static world: objects fall to the ground today, for example, in the same way they did thousands of years ago so that, at least on the most basic level, the laws of nature remain the same, unlike those governing human societies which are constantly undergoing change.

In contrast, the Marxist dialectical analysis, operating on an entirely different axis, surmounts the shortcomings that are lodged in the operating assumptions of the Understanding. It commences with the premise, based on extensive historical observation, that humans have always been engaged in the creation of new social relations or structures so that human reality resembles an organism in the process of development. Moreover, these forms have been generated through a struggle among classes: new productive forces have spawned new classes which have in turn led humanity to a higher, social stage. The bourgeoisie, for example, defeated the feudal aristocracy but now confronts its mortal enemy, the proletariat. Marx identified several tendencies within capitalism that lead in the direction of revolutionary transformation. In the early stages of capitalism the proletariat is scattered and weak, but as more efficient capitalists swallow up their

less efficient competitors, enterprises become increasingly larger. This tendency then dramatically increases the number of workers in any single enterprise, thereby facilitating their ability to communicate with one another, discuss common problems, and unify themselves in a trade union, soviet, or any similar organization. At the same time, the laws of capitalism have relentlessly asserted themselves by assigning a progressively miserable lot to the proletariat. In order to survive, capitalists must maximize profits; otherwise, the capitalist with the higher profit margin can afford to undersell the competitors and force them out of business. But in order to maximize profits, labor costs must be reduced to a minimum, a goal easily achieved (in the short run) by replacing workers with machines. And when machines shoulder the burden of the work, workers are relegated to the position of mere "appendages," a role that requires reduced skill with correspondingly reduced wages. Other workers are simply thrown out of work altogether. So, as the working class becomes potentially more powerful, its existence becomes increasingly more precarious, creating the possibility of an explosive upheaval.

Socialism, in Marx's analysis, represents neither an arbitrary alternative nor a disconnected moral imperative. Rather, he argues that, given the conditions of the working class within capitalist society, socialism represents the logical result of workers struggling to liberate themselves. For example, power for them is only acquired through organizing themselves according to principles of solidarity where the more unified the workers are, the more power they can wield. But unity can only be maximized if every member is convinced he or she has a voice in determining the collective policy. Hence, workers, as direct beneficiaries, are compelled to promote thoroughly democratic procedures. Moreover, since they do not own the means of production but suffer at the hands of those who do, and because they work cooperatively with one another at each enterprise, their interests lie in the direction of abolishing private ownership in favor of a cooperative society with socialized ownership so that the principles governing society reflect their own experiences. In other words, a socialist society is born from the ruins of capitalism and includes that heritage within itself. This is what Hegel meant by the "determinate negation."

Several features included in Marx's analysis of the dialectic require highlighting. First, because a new form is developing out of an old form, there is a contradictory relation between the two as the new struggles to assert itself at the expense of the old while the old clings on desperately. Second, because this is an organic process, the constituent parts reciprocally interact with one another. The proletariat is not only strengthened as a result of its own internal organizing efforts but is emboldened when the bourgeoisie begins to falter and lose confidence, etc., a point that eludes the Understanding which insists on maintaining all elements in isolation. Third, in the process of a revolutionary upheaval where the working class dedicates itself to the construction of a new society, transitional steps must necessarily be traversed before an entirely new edifice can be constructed. Fourth, this approach contains a crucial dialectic between the subject, the working class, and the object, which here is constituted by capitalist social institutions, in which both undergo corresponding transformations. Initially, when the proletariat is scattered and weak, it adopts the perspective of the Understanding. At this stage the isolated worker, apathetic and demoralized, submits to a hostile world, convinced that a humanistic society is a mere phantom of one's imagination. But when huge numbers of workers are organized and adhere to the principle of solidarity, coordinating their struggle in pursuit of their common interests and insisting on the principle that an injury to one is an injury to all, because they constitute the vast majority of the population, the significance of the surrounding world and its social institutions undergoes a dramatic shift, even before any actions are undertaken: what previously appeared to

be an unalterable reality is now perceived as malleable, and the working class is overtaken by the conviction that it can confidently alter "objective reality" to conform to its collective interests.

The approaches of the Understanding and the dialectician consequently rotate on different axes and define fundamentally different realities. The Understanding, taking the isolated individual as its point of departure, is prepared to condemn certain features of our world, and demands, usually unsuccessfully, that the world conform to its principles. The dialectician, with economic classes as the point of departure, notes that human societies have always been in a state of historical change, although imperceptibly slowly at times. Here one constructs a general idea of the direction in which things are evolving in order to effectively influence the course of events. In other words, one must accommodate oneself to the objective flow if one wants to exercise an impact. In this sense the individual is subordinated to a larger whole as opposed to standing alone in the center of one's own universe.

Turning now to some historically specific analyses, we can see how precisely the dialectic comes into play. For example, the ongoing conflict between anarchists and Marxists concerning the proper relation of the working class to the state is lodged in their conflicting methods. The anarchists, with at least one foot in bourgeois philosophy because of their exaltation of the isolated individual, have never developed a consistent, dialectical approach. Instead, they make recourse to an underlying, permanent human nature in which people are viewed as naturally good. Accordingly, class societies such as capitalism are seen as suppressing this nature, primarily through the institution of the state, which not only frames legislation guaranteeing the right of the capitalists to exploit the workers, but also enforces this legislation through the raw brute force of a military and police apparatus. Hence, from the anarchists' perspective, the logical response is to smash the state so that people can automatically revert back to their naturally good selves, in the same way that a rubber band assumes its natural state when no longer stretched.

But a dialectical analysis leads to a contrary conclusion. For Marxists the challenge is to create a new society with an entirely new human nature, a task that cannot be accomplished immediately but requires many intermediary steps, or, as Hegel would say, requires mediation. Hence the state cannot simply be abolished but must be maintained during a transitional period, although in a fundamentally altered form. On the one hand, the workers' state preserves the function of coercion, a defining feature of all states. That is, workers will use it to suppress the bourgeoisie, which tenaciously and desperately struggles to regain hegemony by every means at its disposal. In this respect there is continuity with the past since, as Marx noted: "What we have to deal with here is a communist society, not as it has developed on its own foundations, but, on the contrary, just as it emerges from capitalist society; which is thus in every respect, economically, morally and intellectually, still stamped with the birth marks of the old society from whose womb it emerges."⁶⁸ On the other hand, the state is fundamentally restructured so that workers can wield power democratically among themselves, a mode that is completely absent in the bourgeois state. In other words, a tiny elite would no longer dictate from the pinnacle of power but the working class as a whole would collectively discuss, debate, and implement the decisions of the majority. As a workers' state, this new formation deviates dramatically from the past and consequently represents a step in the direction of an entirely new society. The dialectic, by capturing the logic of this organic development, unveils this underlying dynamic that entirely escapes the static assumptions of the Understanding, which can only conceive of capitalism as being opposed to socialism, not as leading to socialism through a revolutionary upheaval.

The SWP Debate 1939-40

One final instructive historical debate that highlights the role of the dialectic occurred within the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) in 1939 and 1940. Up until that time the generally accepted position of the party called for the "unconditional support of the Soviet Union." This orientation flowed from an analysis that concluded that the Soviet Union was a "workers' state," meaning that the economy had been nationalized so that capitalists could no longer operate. However, the Soviet Union was also categorized as a "deformed" workers' state because Stalin had crushed all democratic impulses, instituted a totalitarian regime, and stifled dissent. In a genuine socialist society workers as a class control the state so that the majority truly rules, and with that crucial stipulation absent, the SWP was not prepared to designate the Soviet Union a "socialist" society. The concept of a "workers' state" signified that a crucial step had been taken in the direction of socialism with the nationalization of the economy, but only a step. Consequently, the SWP defended the Soviet Union with respect to its nationalized economy but at the same time called for a political revolution to overthrow the Stalinist bureaucracy and institute a state democratically controlled by the working class.

But in 1939 the SWP was convulsed by internal debate, prompted by the Hitler-Stalin pact, which included the division of Poland between Germany and the Soviet Union. This historic event triggered the creation of a minority within the SWP led by Shachtman, Burnham, and Abern, who challenged the party's established position on the Soviet Union on several different fronts. Their position demanded that, because of Stalin's pact with the devil, as it were, the party must cease defending the Soviet Union, despite the nationalized economy. This conclusion was also based on the conviction that the Soviet Union had become "imperialist." However, they disagreed among themselves on the question of whether it was still a workers' state. Burnham argued that it was not, on the grounds that genuine workers' democracy was absent. Shachtman was prepared to retain the designation of "workers' state," but with the attached provision that it was imperialist.

Trotsky, who was very close to the party, vigorously defended the established line of the SWP. In the course of the debate he accused the opposition of failing to approach the questions at hand dialectically. His opponents countered that dialectics was either irrelevant or inimical to a scientific analysis. It will be instructive to examine these charges and counter charges more closely. As we shall see, although both sides appear to be using the same words, they were speaking two fundamentally different languages.

Trotsky's position rested on the conviction that the achievement of socialism is a protracted struggle. Burnham, demanding instant results, refused to applaud even partial steps in a progressive direction, and in this respect his analysis was undialectical. Because the Soviet Union was not a consummate socialist society, it was not one at all. But profound transformations are never linear. The construction of a revolutionary society with a new culture at times will encounter setbacks, especially when the bourgeoisie is struggling desperately to regain power and the world imperialist powers are threatening at the gates. In fact, the Soviet Union had already been invaded by western imperialism, with the United States in the lead, shortly after the revolution, contributing to a bitter civil war. The west also slapped an economic embargo on its revolutionary enemy that at times paralyzed the economy. Having lost many of its most dedicated revolutionaries during the civil war, the Soviet Union could not help but falter as it staggered forward toward the dawn of a new historical period. Burnham, however,

remaining blind to this larger context, was content to dispense judgments as if the course of the revolution flowed directly and exclusively from the moral fiber of its leaders.

Shachtman, while maintaining that the Soviet Union was a workers' state, argued persistently that it was nevertheless implementing an imperialist agenda and for this reason should not be defended with respect to these kinds of adventures:

It is entirely correct, in my opinion, to characterize the Stalinist policy as imperialist, provided, of course, that one points out its specific character, that is, wherein it differs from modern capitalist imperialism... Stalin has showed himself capable of pursuing imperialist policy. That is the fact... Like every bureaucracy, the Stalinist is interested in increasing the national income not in order to raise the standard of living of the masses but in order to increase its own power, its own wealth, its own privileges." ⁶⁹

In order to understand why this is not a dialectical analysis, one must return to the classic Marxist theory of imperialism, which Trotsky championed. Marx argued that because capitalists compete with one another, each must strive to minimize production costs. This means procuring the cheapest labor and raw materials available. When these assets are located in less developed countries, capitalists from advanced industrialized nations readily resort to military force to seize control of them, thereby assuring their survival in the face of intense competition. In other words, the contradictory interests among capitalists propel them onto the road of imperialism, making imperialism the logical consequence of capitalism.

Shachtman conceded that what he called Soviet imperialism was fundamentally different from all other examples of modern imperialism since it was not linked to capitalism. But when it came to giving this designation some kind of historical footing, Shachtman was at a complete loss. He could only explain it in terms of psychological impulses, such as the bureaucracy's desire to "increase its own power, its own wealth, its own privileges," impulses that could conceivably arise at any time in history. There was no grounding of this analysis in a historically specific economic base. There was no attempt to organically link it to other social domains. Instead, the term dangled alone, detached, and so simply became another way of referring to the greed of specific individuals, which hardly amounts to an analysis at all. In this respect, the approach was entirely undialectical.

Like Burnham, Shachtman seemed incapable of understanding the Soviet Union in light of the larger imperialist context. Although the major western capitalist countries were prepared to fight among themselves over the acquisition of colonies, they were united in their determination to destroy the Soviet Union. Even the best of Soviet governments would have been compelled to play one capitalist government off against another, simply in order to stall for time in the hope that other revolutions would break out in advanced industrialized countries, enabling it to escape its isolation. Stalin's pact with Hitler for the division of Poland was certainly in part an effort to keep German imperialism from taking all of Poland, which would have brought it flush with the Soviet border. It was as if the minority was intent on condemning an individual for running a few stop signs while failing to take into consideration the car had been hijacked and a gun was pointed at the driver's head.

Trotsky's analysis, consistent with the Marxist emphasis on the economic foundation of society as the propelling force of historical change, placed the primary contradiction between western

capitalist-imperialist countries on the one hand and the Soviet Union with its nationalized economy on the other, the fundamental historical struggle was being waged between these antagonists. Although Trotsky condemned the Hitler-Stalin pact, he nevertheless situated it within, and subordinated it to, this broader context and was thus still prepared to defend the Soviet Union in relation to imperialist aggression. The Shachtman opposition, however, ignored this broader historical struggle in favor of a moral condemnation of the Soviet Union's foreign policy. Hence the Hitler-Stalin pact offered sufficient grounds in the eyes of the minority for abandoning the defense of the Soviet Union altogether. In this way the minority failed to provide any analysis of the fundamental contradictory forces at play at this historical conjuncture, including any indication of the direction in which events were likely to unfold. In fact, they viewed calls for consideration of this historical context as a kind of dodging the question of the significance of the Hitler-Stalin pact, upon which they launched their attack. For them, the crucial question was posed in these terms: "What is the character of Russia's role in the present war—not the war as it was foretold on this or that occasion, and not the war into which this one may or will be converted, but the present war?"⁷⁰

So the members of the minority, instead of viewing themselves as part of a historical process, withdrew themselves from the collective struggle and assumed the role of the spectator on the sidelines, dispensing moral pronouncements as they pleased. Although many have found such a role to be egotistically gratifying, they seldom, if ever, contribute to the advance of history. Here the isolated ego becomes the point of departure for all judgments, not humanity in the process of creating a better world, and for this reason the chasm between Trotsky and the majority on the one hand and the minority on the other became unbridgeable. The latter soon split altogether.

Conclusion

While the dialect can be employed as a means to understanding the processes of nature, Marx and Hegel were convinced that such applications did not exhaust its potential. A natural scientist scrutinizes nature and discovers dialectical relations. In the end, the subject, in the role of the scientist, and the object, or nature, remain unaltered. But when the dialectic is placed in the hands of a community of people who democratically define their common interests through a process of discussion and debate and then proceed to revolutionize society's institutions so that these institutions may serve those interests, here the dialectic is fulfilling its highest calling: the dualism between subjectivity and objectivity is to one degree or another overcome and humanity achieves its liberation. Today, only the working class is capable of this historical mission.

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