



Richard Turner

DIALECTICAL REASON

The concept 'dialectical reason', as used by 'marxist' theorists, contains buried within it a number of theoretical problems, problems which have significance for where why and how we may use dialectical reason. There are three issues, in particular, on which reflective clarity is both always needed and often lacking. Firstly, what precisely distinguishes 'dialectical reason' from 'analytical reason'? Secondly, how does one legitimise the use of dialectical reason - that is, are there 'laws' of dialectical reason, how are they discovered, and to what may they be applied? Thirdly, given that the central concept of dialectics is that of 'totality', and that it is therefore assumed that the observer is always part of the totality being observed, how, if at all, does one escape from historical relativism?

It is these problems that Sartre is dealing with in *The Critique of Dialectical Reason*.^{*} This important contribution to the understanding of dialectic has not been widely discussed in English-language circles, and there are certainly many 'dialecticians' who have not yet internalised it. So it seems to me to be useful to give a brief account of the Introduction to the Critique, in which he formulates the problem of the limits and the applicability of dialectical reason.

This involves a critical discussion of orthodox marxism, and in particular of its epistemological basis, and of the 'dogmatic metaphysics' of the dialectics of nature. Sartre points out that the concept of a unified and overarching dialectic of nature with its deterministic and/or teleological implications, tends to destroy the specificity of human history, and leads to Engels showing us 'men being produced by the system without making us see the system being produced by men, and reducing interhuman conflict to being no more than a symbolic expression of the contradictions of the economy'. (Situations VII p.15)

If human history is to be made the result of the working of a universal law or process, it becomes impossible to justify, in the materialist philosophy, one's claim to know that this is in fact the case. For since my thoughts are a part of the world my claim to know must itself be a result of the process, just like any other idea. Unless I can show some way in which my statement could be independently verified, by pointing to some sort of autonomy from external historical determinism, I cannot claim that it is true. Hence the importance of the 'methodological principle which makes certainty begin with reflection.' (RD-QM 30). I have to start off from the reflectively discovered fact that it is I who am doing the thinking, and trying to discover the truth, and that any theory which in principle denies me this autonomy contradicts its own basis. The difficulty with this methodological principle is that it sometimes gets confused with an ontological principle to the effect that mind or idea is 'more real' than matter, and so results in an idealist philosophy in which only reflective knowledge finds a place, and the breakthrough into the 'outside world' never gets made. So Sartre stresses that such a methodological principle 'in no way contradicts the anthropological principle which defines the concrete person by his materiality'. (RD-QM 30)

Considering the dialectic of nature on a practical

^{*} Henceforth referred to as RD. The first part: *The Question of Method*, will be referred to as RD-QM.

level leads to an analogous recognition of some sort of individual autonomy. For a materialist dialectic the future is real and personal and urgent. The individual is involved in it through his choices, and so, even if it could be shown that inorganic nature works dialectically, it would still be necessary to show independently the way in which the projects of individuals interlock to create the historical dialectic.

It is this that Sartre is trying to do in *The Critique*. Briefly, he does it by showing that a free activity is by nature dialectical, and that in the world of scarcity this dialectic loses itself in the phenomena of 'alienation' and of 'serial praxis', and so becomes subject to a necessity of which it is itself the origin. It is thus possible to speak of patterns of historical development without postulating that these patterns are the expression of laws external to and independent of human behaviour, or that they derive from some human essence.

Historically speaking, Marx and Engels's materialism began as a theory about the relations between the individual, the world in which he produces his means of subsistence, his fellows, with whom he enters into specific relationships in his productive activities, and the social, political and ideological forms which arise on the basis of these relationships. This theory was then used as an interpretative tool for the study of social forms and historical changes, and used very fruitfully. However, at some point it seems to have occurred to them that they had only *stated* this theory, and had not *proved* it by showing, from an account of the nature of the individual, why he is related to the world in this particular way. So they - or, rather, essentially Engels, is the 'Anti-Dühring' and in *Ludwig Feuerbach and the end of classical German philosophy* - tacked on the theory of the 'dialectic of nature' to fill in the gap.

Sartre argues (a) that the implications of this theory are such that it contradicts rather than complements the first theory; (b) that Marx and Engels do not use it in their social analysis; and (c) that his own account of 'being human' in fact does provide an adequate foundation for their historical theory.

The Introduction to *The Critique of Dialectical Reason* is divided into Part A - 'Dogmatic Dialectic and Critical Dialectic' and Part B - 'Critique of Critical Experience'. In these two sections Sartre attacks the inadequate theoretical foundations of the dogmatic dialectic and sketches out the form which the attempt to provide more adequate foundations must take. His two major criticisms are: (1) that a philosophical theory must at the very least justify its own existence, and this historical materialism has failed to do - "This totalising thought has founded everything except its own existence" (RD 112); (2) that the necessity of the laws of the dialectic is either taken for granted or else 'proved' empirically, both of which are inadequate approaches; and that no attempt is made to explain why the laws of the dialectic are as they are.

(1) Knowledge is universal. It always involves an escape from the particular, from the immediate given. This raises a problem: "Thought is both being and knowledge of being." (RD 122). A true statement is both a thing in the world, a particular fact, and also a truth about the world. We have to account for this dual status, and in particular we have to make sure

that any theory we are putting forward does not deny one or the other of these aspects of thought.

Hegel reduces being to thought. Marx establishes against Hegel that "being remains irreducible to knowing" (RD 121). But he appears to fail to establish that autonomy of knowing which is necessary to justify his own claim to knowledge: "Doubtless dialectical materialism has, in regard to contemporary ideologies, the practical superiority of being the ideology of the rising class. But if it was only the simple inert expression of this ascension, or even of revolutionary praxis, if it did not turn round on it to illuminate it, how could one speak of a progress in becoming conscious? How could the dialectic be presented as the real movement of History revealing itself." (RD 123) The crude materialism of contemporary marxists seems to accept that their theory is "the simple inert expression of this ascension". But at the same time they claim their theory to be universally true. This is dogmatic idealism - "an idealist materialism which is basically nothing more than a discourse on the idea of matter". (RD 126). This type of theory ends up "giving man a constituted reason, that is, making of thought a form of behaviour rigorously conditioned by the world (which it is), while omitting to tell us that it is also knowledge of the world". (RD 127)

(2) Sartre quotes Engels' account of the "most general laws of natural and social history": "They can be reduced essentially to three: 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. All three are developed by Hegel in his idealist manner as simple laws of thought.... The mistake consists in imposing these laws on Nature and History as laws of thought, rather than deducing the laws from Nature and History." (RD 127, Engels' words)

He points out that these laws, if they are to be necessary, cannot be 'deduced' or 'induced' from Nature by observation - "We know since Kant that experience gives the fact but not necessity." (RD 130). Further, if they are to be understood, rather than simply stated, it is necessary that the relation between them should be explained, which Engels does not even try to do.

Before giving an account of Sartre's own solution to these problems I shall give a brief schematic outline of what I understand by the concept 'dialectic'.

In our ordinary common-sense thinking we think of objects as separate, independent entities. As Hegel put it, the central logical category of this form of thought is the category of *identity*. The thing is what it is. It is distinct from other things. However, further analysis reveals that the thing is in fact in relation with the rest of the universe. The desk that I am writing on is only where it is and what it is because the rest of the universe has a certain configuration. If, say, the sun were suddenly to disappear the desk would cease to exist, as a desk, for one of the factors which keeps it in its present position and in its present shape is the fact that it coexists with the sun in a particular field of force. If the sun were to be annihilated the nature of the field of force would change. In a very important sense the desk *is* its relations with the rest of the universe. It is a specific, determinate, way of not being the rest of the universe. The language may be rather odd, but the thought is not. For what is being implied is that to understand any particular thing we have to unravel the ways in which it is related to other things. We have to treat it as an interdependent part of a totality, rather than as a self-sufficient Identity.

Dialectical logic is the logic of totalities, and dialectical reason is the attempt to make sense of totalities. "Each of these so-called laws of dialectics becomes perfectly intelligible if looked at from the point of view of totalisation." (RD 137)

Let me now attempt to state this with a little more rigour. To speak of dialectical *logic* is to imply that the 'laws' of the dialectic are formal, rather than substantive laws. They are what Kant terms *categories*. The statement "All events must have a cause" is a formal law, in that it makes no attempt to specify the cause of any particular event. "Germs cause disease" is a substantive law, in that it specifies the cause for a particular class of events. If dialectical laws are laws of logic, they are of the first type. And only if they are formal laws can it be claimed that they are also *necessary*. For empirically discovered laws can never be necessary. They must always be held open for possible falsification.

The laws of the dialectic are, then, an attempted formulation of those categories which necessarily have to be used in describing any totality or whole. Justifying the application of these laws therefore always involves two steps, (a) showing that these categories are logically implied by the concept 'totality' and (b) showing that the phenomenon to which they are being applied is in fact a totality.

For something to be experienced by me it must enter into some relationship with me, and thereby also directly or indirectly into some relationship with all the other things which I may or do experience. If there was something in this room which had no effect on me or on any other thing in the room, then it would not be meaningful to say that it was *in* the room. It would be in a different universe. To say that something is in the room is to say that it is in interaction with every other thing in the room. That is, for something to be experienced by me, it must be part of a totality of which I am myself a part. And the first law of this totality is the law of interconnectedness, or what Engels here calls "The law of interpenetration of opposites". There are no polar opposites within a totality, no entities which can be understood other than in terms of their relations to other entities.

But this interdependence is not undifferentiated. If every thing in the universe affected me in the same way as every other thing affected me then experience would collapse into total uniformity. The concept of interconnectedness of things implies that different things are connected in different ways - that is that what is involved is an interconnectedness of *different things*, rather than a simple Oneness. The totality is *structured*. To say it is structured is to say that it is made up of substructures. This fact is formulated in terms of a law of change. A substructure has a relative independence, in that certain changes can occur within it without affecting its relationship to other substructures. However, if changes within it go beyond a certain point, then changes in its relations with other parts can ensue. If changes have occurred within these relations then the nature of the totality has changed. It has become a qualitatively different entity. This is formulated in the "law of the transformation of quantity into quality". Quantitative changes are changes *within* a substructure, changes which can occur independently, but which if they go beyond a certain limit, change the qualitative nature of the structure as a whole.

So far we have seen that the individual is necessarily a part of a totality of interconnected substructures. Our experience is temporal, and therefore the totality of which we are a part is itself temporal as well as spatial, diachronic as well as synchronic. Here we encounter a problem. The structure of a totality is a structure of *interdependence*. Causal relationships within a totality are always two-way, rather than unidirectional. In what sense, then, can the past and the future be part of a totality? For we usually see the temporal sequence as an unidirectional causal process. What happened in the past is the cause of what is happening now. What is happening now is the cause of what will happen in the future. Only if we can show that the future affects the present can we meaningfully speak of a temporal totality.

It is here that we can draw on Sartre's phenomenological account of being human in *Being and Nothingness*, where he shows that human reality is temporally three-dimensional. Consciousness is a project. The specific way in which a human reality interacts with the whole of which it is a part is by projecting a future and acting in terms of that future. That is, consciousness makes temporality into a totality. My present is a particular way in which my past is organised in relation to my future. The for-itself is its past in the mode of not being it. In Hegelian terms, the for-itself is the determinate negation of its past.

The temporal law of totality is the "law of the negation of the negation". In dialectical terms the negation of a negation is an affirmation, and the law of the negation of the negation asserts (a) that change occurs through a process of successive 'negations' and (b) that the end result is an 'affirmation', or a positive development in relation to the initial state. This only makes sense if the initial state is a 'consciousness-world' totality. In such a totality change occurs through action, which is the negation of the given in terms of a projected future. Each action is incomplete and its result is inadequate in terms of the goal. It therefore has to be negated once more by a further action which gets a little closer to the goal. Each negation is an affirmation in that it integrates what is being negated into a new totality. Thus the concept of the "negation of the negation" is an attempt at a formal description of the ambiguous relationship which human reality has to its past and to the natural world. As Marx wrote in *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*: "Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly found, given and transmitted from the past." (Tucker, 437). That is they are both conditioned by their history and free to make something new of their condition. They are both in a situation and free to give that situation their own meaning. In the *Critique* Sartre describes this as "the perpetually resolved and perpetually renewed contradiction of man the producer and man the product". (RD 158). Each new human transcendence dialectically supercedes the previous historical given.

Thus the totality of which the experiencing (and hence acting) consciousness is a part is a structure of interdependent subsystems in which development takes place as a result of the 'negating' character of the experiencing consciousness itself.

I began the analysis of the concept dialectic by pointing out that in the application of dialectical logic we had to know whether the class of events to which it was being applied was in fact a totality. Our explication of the concept has itself revealed one element which must be present in any process for it to be dialectical - the element of negation. Negation is part of the structure of the experiencing consciousness. 'Nature', considerably completely independent of human reality, is not a diachronic totality. We cannot say that there is development in Nature, for nature is always simply what it is. States succeed one another. Only a consciousness can relate them to one another and evaluate them.

It is therefore possible and legitimate to treat certain elements of the totality "human reality - Nature" non-dialectically. The changes of state inside a distant star cannot of themselves be subjected to dialectical analysis. It is only insofar as they are experienced and integrated into an individual's consciousness that they become a part of the process of development by changing both the ideas and eventually the actions of a person in the world.

It is important to notice here that the 'categories' of the dialectic do not have exactly the same status as Kantian categories. For Kant, the categories are applied to phenomena from outside by a 'noumenal' consciousness which does not seem to be itself in any way part of the process. Here, however,

the knowing consciousness is itself an integral part of the dialectical process. Consciousness is essentially creative action, rather than simply observation. We are "referred from *doing* to *knowing* and from *knowing* to *doing* in the unity of a process which (is) itself dialectical." (RD 135)

The intelligibility of the dialectic comes from the fact that "the so-called 'laws' of dialectical Reason are each all the dialectic: it could not be otherwise, or else dialectical Reason would cease to be itself a dialectical process, and thought, as the praxis of the theoretician, would necessarily be discontinuous. Thus the fundamental intelligibility of dialectical Reason - if it is to exist - is that of a totalisation. Or, to return to the distinction between being and knowing, there is a dialectic if there exists, at least in one ontological sector, a totalisation which totalises itself ceaselessly in its very comprehension of the totalisation from which it emanates and which makes itself its object." (RD 137).

Thus fully dialectical relations occur only in the human world. But we still need to ask in precisely what regions of the human world they occur. And this is Sartre's essential problem in the *Critique*. The praxis of the individual is necessarily dialectical, and each individual's personal history is a dialectical whole. But can we go beyond this? Can we, as Marx does, treat society and the history of society as dialectical wholes?

Each individual consciousness is a totalising process. But history is made up of millions of individuals totalising separately. If Marx's application of the dialectic to society is to be shown to be valid, we must be able to show that history is in some sense one single totalising process. Sartre formulates the problem as follows:

It is not a question of rewriting the human adventure, but rather of carrying out the critical experience of connections of interiority, or, in other terms, of grasping in respect of whatever real enterprises, structures or events, the answer to this question of principle: what are, in the human adventure, the respective roles of interiority and of exteriority? If in this total experience, which is, in sum, that of my whole life insofar as it is dissolved in all history, and of all history insofar as it is gathered up within a life, we show that the relation of exteriority (analytical and positivist reason) is itself interiorised by practical multiplications and that it only acts on them (as an historical force) to the extent that it becomes internal negation of interiority, we shall find ourselves situated by this research at the very heart of a totalisation in progress. (RD 146-7)

That is "we have seen that the universe vanishes in a dream if man submits to the dialectic from outside as his unconditional law; but if we imagine that each individual follows his own whims and that these molecular collisions produce a collective result, we shall find average or statistical results, but not a historical development." (RD 131)

If we are to understand history as a dialectical process, rather than as a mere succession of states, we must, starting from individual praxis "follow with care the thread of Ariadne which, from this praxis, will lead us to the various forms of human ensembles; we must seek, in each case, the structure of these ensembles, their real modes of formation from their elements, and then their totalising action on the elements which have formed them." (RD 153)

When we describe social events are we doing anything other than describing the sum of a collection of atomic behaviours? When Marx speaks of 'classes' and 'class-struggles' what does he mean? What does it mean to say of an individual that he or she belongs to

a class, to speak of classes 'struggling', and to speak of history as the result of the class struggle? One could treat the term 'class', or any similar term, in one of three ways:

- (1) It is a mere name - a word which can be used to classify people in a particular way, without saying anything about the relations between the people. This is the nominalist or 'sardine-tin' use - sardines in a tin have no relationship to one another other than the fact of being in the same tin. They are related *externally*, rather than *internally*.
- (2) It is a real entity, and the individuals who make up the class are simple by-products of the class - secondary and derived beings.
- (3) The class is not a real entity, but neither is it a mere name. It is a set of internal relations between people. Marx, following Hegel, distinguished between a class-in-itself and a class-for-itself. The latter is a class in which the members are reflectively conscious of themselves as belonging to a class. In this case the relations between them are necessarily internal. But if Marx's use of the term is to be justified we must also be able to show that the relations between members of a class-in-itself are internal. We must be able to show that even in this case the praxis of each member involves the totalisation of his or herself as member of the class.

Similarly, if we are to speak of History, we must be able to show that the totalising activity of each individual praxis includes within itself a totalisation of all other praxes. Can we steer between the ideas of History as a super-human process, on the one hand, and history as a meaningless and accidental succession of events on the other hand? In both these cases people are mere products of the historical process, whether it be super-human or subhuman. If we can steer between them, we can show how history might become a completely self-conscious human process, in which humans can take control. Freedom is a cultural product, and unless this can happen we shall have to conclude that freedom only emerges by accident.

We can clarify this problem by looking at Sartre's concepts of *intelligibility* and *necessity*. "If dialectical Reason exists, it must define itself as the absolute intelligibility of an irreducible novelty *insofar* as this is irreducibly new. It is the opposite of the positivist attempt to illuminate new facts by reducing them to old facts." (RD 147). For 'analytical reason' explanation consists in showing that some new observed event is an example of some previously observed class of events. When Newton explained the fall of the apple he merely pointed out that its fall was one particular example of the way in which bodies move in relation to one another. That is, in the positive sciences to explain an event is to show that it is an exemplification of a particular descriptive generalisation. What do we do if we find something new? The tendency of the positive sciences is to reformulate the descriptive generalisation to show that it is not new in itself, that it is not qualitatively different from what was previously observed. As a result of the Michelson-Morley experiment Einstein reformulated Newton's generalisation to include the behaviour of bodies approaching the speed of light, and showed thereby that the result of the experiment was not something radically new, but a phenomenon of a class of which the phenomena which act in accordance with Newton's generalisation are also members.

However, Sartre, and all dialectical theorists, are arguing that historical 'novelties' are not of this kind. As he showed in *Being and Nothingness*, consciousness is free, and this means that it can give new meanings to situations in its projection of itself towards the future. Human praxis is a continuous invention of new meanings, but these meanings are nevertheless intelligible to the actor. "This

dialectical intelligibility rests on the intelligibility of each new determination of a practical totality, insofar as this determination is nothing other than the maintenance and the totalising transcendence of all the anterior determinations, insofar as this transcendence and maintenance are illuminated by a totality to be realised." (RD 150) As I write these words I am creating something irreducibly new which is nevertheless only intelligible in terms of what I have already written. My present writing *both* maintains and transcends what I have already written. My present act embodies the intelligibility (to me) of my past. That is, it is the determinate negation of my past.

Sartre formulates this as follows:

If the dialectic exists, we must submit to it as the insurmountable rigour of the totalisation which totalises us, and grasp it in its free practical spontaneity as the totalising praxis which we are; at each degree of our experiment, we must find, in the intelligible unity of the synthetic movement, the contradiction and the indissoluble link of necessity and freedom ... necessity as the apodictic structure of the dialectical experience lies neither in the free development of interiority nor in the inert dispersion of exteriority. It imposes itself, as an inevitable and irreducible moment, in the interiorisation of the exterior and the exteriorisation of the interior. (RD 157)

The concept of 'determinate negation' formalises the general relationship between freedom and necessity. Sartre's problem now is to spell out what is implied by this in the field of social relations. To follow his argument closely any further is impossible within the limits of an article, so I shall just refer to the central concept which he develops to handle the tions between internal and external relations in society: this is the concept of the *series*.

To say that history is purely made up of internal relations is to imply that history is a 'hyper-organism' with a consciousness of its own. To say that history is the arithmetical sums of purely external relations is to make it unintelligible. The concept of the series, and of serial praxis, is designed to describe the way in which external relations between people become internalised. To do this it is necessary to show that I always act in terms of any relationships of externality which exist between myself and other people, and that these relationships then become internal relations of a special kind - relations of impotency. The market is of course the paradigm of the serial relationship. 'The market' is the serial summation of the acts of each individual producer, consumer or worker, and each individual internalises it as his/her relationship to all the others, and at the same time as the impotence of all of them to effect the outcome. However, in the necessity to internalise externality before it becomes a historical factor lies the possibility of moving beyond the impotence of serial praxis to self-conscious group praxis.

"Nothing prevents us, therefore, from starting our criticism with criticism of politics, with taking sides in politics, hence with actual struggles, and identifying ourselves with them. Then we do not face the world in doctrinaire fashion with a new principle, declaring, 'Here is truth, kneel here!' We develop new principles for the world out of the principles of the world. We do not tell the world, 'Cease your struggles, they are stupid; we want to give you the true watchword of the struggle.' We merely show the world why it actually struggles..." (Marx)