On Dialectic

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This paper is the first stage of an attempt to answer the question 'What is dialectic?' I assume no prior knowledge of the subject and only a minimal prior knowledge of philosophy. I am aware that this task has been attempted many times before. But one of the things which I have found particularly confusing in accounts of dialectic is that they seem to run together, under the heading of 'dialectic', a number of different ideas. My own difficulties in understanding what is meant by 'dialectic' have consisted largely in trying to see how these different strands fit together. In this paper I shall attempt to show that, initially, we can best understand their unity by looking at the Hegelian origins of dialectic. Within Hegel's philosophy the various strands can be held together, but once we abandon his philosophical system we can no longer connect the different aspects of dialectic in the way that he does.

Marxist writers, and especially Engels, have recognised this up to a point, and have made correct and important criticisms of the Hegelian dialectic. Nevertheless I find unsatisfactory the way in which they have then described the relation between Marxist dialectic and Hegelian dialectic, and in the latter part of this paper I shall offer some criticisms of Engels' account.

I

I begin, then, with Hegel - or rather, I begin with the philosophical background to Hegel, since one needs this in order to understand the Hegelian version of dialectic. One of the basic problems of traditional philosophy has been the problem of opposites, that is, the problem of the relation between certain very fundamental opposed concepts such as mind and matter, essence and appearance, universal and particular, society and individual, freedom and necessity, and so on. We can identify two characteristic ways of dealing with this problem, which I will call Reductionism and Dualism. Reductionism is the philosophy of 'nothing but'. 'Mind', on this view, is 'nothing but' a certain kind of behaviour of matter, for example a certain kind of observable human behaviour, or perhaps certain kinds of physical processes in the brain and central nervous system. 'Universals', from a Reductionist point of view, are 'nothing but' ideas abstracted from many particulars; for example, the universal property of 'redness' is simply an idea formed by the human mind as a result of abstracting from many particular red things which have been observed. Again, so-called 'free' action is 'nothing but' a species of necessity, a certain kind of causally determined behaviour, and the only difference between 'free' and 'unfree' behaviour is in the kinds of causes which have produced it. I hope that these examples sufficiently indicate what I mean by Reductionism. I use it as a label to refer not to any specific philosophy, but to a general philosophical approach. No one historical philosopher exactly fits the picture, but typical representatives of this approach would be the Greek atomists and Lucretius, the British empiricists, and the philosophers of the French Enlightenment.

Contrast this approach with that of Dualism. Philosophers of a Dualist tendency recognise that, in these pairs of opposed concepts, one term cannot be reduced to the other; they therefore make a complete separation between the opposed terms, and apply them to two different worlds, to two separate spheres of reality. The philosophy of Plato is the classic instance of this approach. Plato starts from the opposition of 'particular' and 'universal', and takes these terms to refer to two distinct kinds of entity, which he assigns to two different worlds. On the one hand there is the material world, the world of physical particulars, and on the other hand there is the world of universal ideas. The one is the world of becoming, of change and decay, whereas the other is the world of true being, an eternal and unchanging world, outside space and time. We are acquainted with the former world through sense-perception, but all true knowledge is of the unchanging universal ideas. The human body belongs to the world of physical particulars, but the soul, though imprisoned within the body, is more akin to the world of ideas. Thus the original opposition of 'particulars' and 'universals' provides Plato with a complete dualist metaphysics in terms of which he can effect the separation of the other fundamental opposites. (1)

Plato's philosophy is but one example of a dualist approach. As other instances we could cite Descartes, or Kant, or Schopenhauer. It is clear also that a great deal of religious thought is essentially dualist, positing a dichotomy between, say, the world of the flesh and the world of the spirit; certainly this dichotomy is an important element in Christian thought.

I have provided this sketch of Reductionism and Dualism in order to suggest that Hegel's dialectic can usefully be seen as a response to these two philosophical traditions. As a first step towards understanding the nature of his response, let us consider the example of 'universals' and 'particulars'. Hegel discusses this in the first section of his Phenomenology of Mind, the section entitled 'Sense-certainty'. By 'sense-certainty' Hegel means sensory experience as characterised by reductionist and empiricist philosophers, as a direct and immediate sensory acquaintance with particulars. Sense-certainty would consist in directly seeing or hearing some one particular entity, considered apart from any relation to other entities of the same kind or of a different kind. Such experience is regarded by empiricist philosophers as the basis of all our

1 Hegel's own interpretation of Plato is rather different. In his Lectures on the History of Philosophy he interprets Plato as less of a Dualist and, in effect, as more of a Hegelian. The account which I have adhered to is the traditional one. I believe that it is also the correct one, but do not need to argue the point here. All that matters for present purposes is that it is a coherent philosophical position and is a representative example of philosophical Dualism which provides the required contrast with Hegel's philosophy.

knowledge, the rest of knowledge being built up by the accumulating of sense-experiences, and by comparing them with one another and abstracting universal ideas from them. Hegel's response to the empiricist account is to say that there cannot be such experiences unless we presuppose also the possession of universal concepts. One cannot be directly acquainted with sensory particulars unless one is also able to apply universal concepts to the objects of such experience. There are several stages in Hegel's account here, but the most telling point which can be extracted from it seems to me to be the following. Suppose that I take myself to be directly acquainted, in sense-perception, with some one particular. How do I identify, either for myself or for others, which particular entity is the object of my awareness? Suppose that I point it out - 'What I am aware of is this'; or suppose that I don't physically point it out but, as it were, mentally focus on it and say to myself 'This is what I mean'. Does the word 'this', or does my pointing or my mental focussing, successfully serve to identify a particular? It does not in fact identify anything. My pointing, for example, could indicate indiscriminately this building, this room, this wall, this point on the wall, this colour, and so on. Only by characterising what I am pointing to in one of these ways can I identify which particular I mean. That is to say, it is only by using a universal term such as 'wall', or 'colour', or whatever, that I can identify a particular as an object of my acquaintance.

Hegel, then, is showing that one can have sensory acquaintance with particulars only insofar as the particular is also a universal and is characterised by means of some universal concept, that is, only insofar as it is connected with other particulars of the same kind and contrasted with particulars of other kinds. Now notice what Hegel is doing here. He is not replacing Reductionism with Dualism. He is not saying that we have acquaintance with particulars and also have knowledge of universals. He is saying that we have acquaintance with particulars only insofar as this is at the same time a knowledge of universals. And unlike Plato he would add, I think, that these universals can themselves exist only insofar as they are embodied in particulars. Thus, in place of both the reduction of universals to particulars and the separation of universals from particulars, he is asserting the mutual interdependence of particular and universal. He speaks of this also as the identity of opposites, meaning thereby not that the distinction between the opposed concepts disappears, but rather that, though the concepts are distinct, the applicability of the one is a necessary precondition for the applicability of the other, and vice versa.

Here, then, we have a first implication of what Hegel means by 'dialectic'. It is the breaking down of the opposition between concepts which have traditionally been treated by philosophers as polar opposites. It is the attempt to demonstrate the interconnection of opposites. I have taken the example of particular and universal from the Phenomenology of Mind, but Hegel's systematic treatment of the philosophical opposites is in the Logic. He there discusses such pairs of concepts as: being and nothing, quantity and quality, one and many, essence and appearance, identity and difference, form and matter, form and content, thing and property, inner and outer, freedom and necessity. Each pair can be treated, and has been treated by philosophers, in the manner of reductionism and in the manner of dualism. And in each case Hegel is concerned to show how either term depends for its intelligibility upon its necessary connection with the other.

In the light of these examples, we can now explain some of the vocabulary with which Hegel typically refers to the dialectic - and first, the word 'contradiction'. The relevance of this should now be apparent. To discover that one and the same thing is both a particular and a universal is, for Hegel, to recognise the existence of contradiction. Hegel sometimes seems to imply that to recognise the existence of contradictions is, quite literally, to accept that logically self-contradictory propositions can be true. He claims, at any rate, that there can be, and are, logical contradictions in reality. This, I think, is unnecessary and misleading. Let me take an example. Hegel refers with approval to the paradoxes formulated by the Greek philosopher Zeno, who claimed to have shown that motion is impossible because it is self-contradictory. Perhaps the simplest of Zeno's paradoxes is that of the Flying Arrow. If we consider a flying arrow at any moment it its flight, it must, at that particular moment, be in one particular location. But if a thing is located in just one position in space, it is at rest. Therefore, at every moment of its flight, the flying arrow is at rest. Zeno concludes that, since we have arrived at the contradiction that something which is moving is always at rest, we have shown motion to be impossible. Hegel's comment, reiterated by Marxists from Engels onwards, is that though motion does indeed involve a contradiction, this doesn't make it impossible, it merely confirms that there are contradictions in reality. Now to respond to Zeno's assertion of the self-contradictoriness of motion simply by saying 'Oh well, that's all right then', is to abandon rational argument altogether and to forfeit the possibility of understanding the real nature of motion. The appropriate response to Zeno's argument is to assume that since he has arrived at this contradiction there must be something wrong with the way in which he talks about motion, time and space. And indeed there is. Zeno's mistake is to suppose that we can understand time by seeing it as the sum of an infinite number of moments of time, and similarly to suppose that we can understand the change and movement of a thing by adding together an infinite number of states of the thing at particular moments. This is in fact impossible. We cannot construct change and motion out of static elements. We have to start from the fact of change, we have to start with the idea of motion over a period of time, and only then can we identify a

particular moment within that period of time and enquire into the condition of the thing at that particular moment. And the more general point is this. We cannot just accept that motion is logically self-contradictory. If we do want to assert that what is in motion is also in some sense at rest, we cannot just stop there. We have to elaborate the assertion in such a way as to remove the logical contradiction. We have to find some way of distinguishing between the sense in which, or the respect in which, it is in motion and the sense in which (respect in which) it is at rest. Similarly with the other pairs of opposites. If every thing is both a universal and a particular, there must at any rate be some way in which we can distinguish between the respect in which it is a particular; and so on. (2) I therefore suggest that, Hegel's own assertions notwithstanding, we can best make sense of his notion of 'contradiction' if we take it to be something weaker than strict logical contradiction. The interconnection of opposites involves contradiction in this sense, that the two opposed terms can both be applied to one and the same entity, and the possibility of applying the one term depends upon the possibility of applying the other.

Another prominent element in Hegel's vocabulary for talking about dialectic is the stress on flux, change, movement, process, and so forth. What is meant by this? Consider again Hegel's philosophical method in The Phenomenology of Mind. I have said that he begins with an examination of 'sense-certainty'. 'Sense-certainty' provides the starting-point because it appears to be the simplest and most immediate form of experience. But when one examines this form of experience one is necessarily led beyond it; we have seen how, according to Hegel, acquaintance with particulars necessarily involves also knowledge of universals. Accordingly we now need to give an account of this 'knowledge of universals', considered as a new aspect of experience. Hegel calls it 'perception' in contrast to 'sense-certainty', and describes it as the experience of things in the world considered now as the bearers of universal properties - for example the perception of a block of salt, considered not as an isolated particular but as possessing the universal properties of whiteness, cubic shape, pungent taste, etc. Hegel shows that when we examine 'perception' we are in turn led on to posit yet another new form of experience, and so on throughout the Phenomenology. We finally arrive at what Hegel calls 'absolute knowledge', and this is simply the completed system of all the forms of experience through which we have passed. A similar development takes place in the Logic. We begin there with what is apparently the simplest concept, that of 'being'. Hegel argues that this concept is necessarily connected with its opposite, 'nothing', and then claims that to recognise the interconnection between 'being' and 'nothing' is to employ the concept of 'becoming', since 'becoming' is a change from not-being to being and from being to not-being. Thus, starting from the concept of 'being', we are led on to the concept of 'nothing', then to that of 'becoming', from that in turn to another concept, and so on. The point is, then, that we cannot consider any of these concepts just by itself, in isolation. In coming to understand it, we are led to posit another concept, and then led on from this to a further concept. This is what Hegel means by saying that what we have to understand is, not static concepts, but a process, a constant change and transition from each concept to the next. Herein lies the essence of Hegel's philosophical method - the fact that we can start with one concept and from it generate a complete sequence.

It is important to remember that when, in this context, Hegel emphasises the fact of change and movement, he is not referring to a process of change in the literal sense. Hegel himself sometimes seems to be rather carried away by this vocabulary. Here are some typical remarks from the Phenomenology:

> We have to think pure flux, opposition within opposition itself, or contradiction... This ... may be called the ultimate nature of life, the soul of the world, the universal life-blood, which courses everywhere, and whose flow is neither disturbed nor checked by any obstructing distinction, but is itself every distinction that arises, as well as that into which all distinctions are dissolved; pulsating within itself, but ever motionless, shaken to its depths, but still at rest... This absolute unrest of pure self-movement (is) such that whatever is determined in any way, e.g. as being, is really the opposite of this determinateness. (pp206-9)

In passages such as this, Hegel's metaphors take over. We need to remember therefore that they are metaphors. Hegel is describing a logical progression, the process of development of a philosophical system. When he says that, for example, the particular 'becomes' the universal, he of course does not mean that a particular tree or a particular house somehow turn into Platonic universals. He means that in considering the tree as a particular we are necessarily led to recognise its character as a universal.

I want finally to mention a third element in the vocabulary which Hegel uses to describe dialectic, namely his stress on system. I have mentioned that the process of the Phenomenology culminates in 'absolute knowledge', and that this is equated with the system of all the possible forms of human experience which have been encountered in the course of the work. Similarly the Logic culminates in the 'absolute idea', this being the totality of all the basic concepts or categories by which reality is ordered. Since each form of experience encountered in the Phenomenology, and each concept in the Logic, is only a particular phase in the total process, it follows that each one is properly understood only when we understand its location within the completed system. The typically Hegelian terms which are employed to make this point are the terms 'totality' and 'moments'. The 'moments'

2 Hegel himself would deny this. Cf. Phenomenology of Mind trans J. Baillie p175

of a 'totality' are not simply the parts of a whole. The parts of a whole can each be known and understood separately, in isolation from one another, and the whole is simply the collection of the parts. The moments of a totality, on the other hand, can be known and understood only if we know the relation of each to all the rest, and and it is this systematic structure of relations which constitutes the totality. Thus 'system' or 'totality', and 'dialectical process', are the same thing considered from a static and from a dynamic point of view.

The ideas which I have been outlining - the unity of opposed concepts, and the related ideas of 'process' and 'system' - are what I take to be the heart of the Hegelian dialectic. They are not the whole of it, as I shall show in a moment. But they are its most characteristic aspect, and the aspect with which we need to start. Notice that it takes the form of a conceptual dialectic. The dialectical process is the transition from one concept to its opposite, and the progression from one pair of concepts to another and thence to another, and so on to the completed system of concepts. Now insofar as Hegel's dialectic is to be viewed as a conceptual dialectic, Engels and other Marxists tend to repudiate it. Engels says:

> According to Hegel, dialectics is the self-development of the concept ... going on from eternity, no one knows where, but at all events independently of any thinking human brain. This ideological perversion had to be done away with. We comprehended the concepts in our heads once more materialistically - as images of real things instead of regarding the real things as images of this or that stage of the absolute concept. Thus dialectics reduced itself to the science of the general laws of motion... Thereby the dialectic of concepts itself became merely the conscious reflex of the dialectical motion of the real world and thus the dialectic of Hegel was placed upon its head; or rather, turned off its head, on which it was standing, and placed upon its feet. (Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy pp386-7, in Marx and Engels: Selected Works Vol. II)

So Engels distinguishes between a 'dialectic of concepts' and a 'dialectic of the real world' which can be known empirically, through the sciences. He regards the former as incompatible with materialism, and considers that as materialists we must abandon it and replace it with the latter.

This I believe to be a mistake. Engels is right to make the distinction between two kinds of dialectic, and the passage which I have quoted makes a legitimate and important criticism of Hegel, as I shall indicate presently. But Engels is, I think, wrong to suppose that a conceptual dialectic is incompatible with materialism. This I shall now try to show.

I must first emphasise that, in saying that Hegel's dialectic is a conceptual dialectic, I am not saying that it is about concepts as distinct from being about things in the material world. Such a view would be a regression to a Platonic dualism of the kind which I have mentioned previously. I do not accept this Platonic division between the material world and a separate world of concepts. I do, however, accept the traditional philosophical distinction between conceptual truths and empirical truths, and it is by reference to this distinction that I wish to describe Hegel's dialectic as a conceptual dialectic. Consider a standard philosophical example of a conceptual truth: the statement 'All bachelors are unmarried'. The truth of this assertion is not something which we have to discover empirically. We do not have to go round questioning all the bachelors we can find in order to determine whether or not they are married. We know that the statement is true simply in virtue of the connection between the concept 'bachelor' and the concept 'unmarried'. Part of what we mean by the term 'bachelor' is 'someone who is unmarried'. But this is not to say that the statement 'All bachelors are unmarried' is a statement about concepts as distinct from being about the real world. It is a truth about actual bachelors, in the real world - but it is true of them in virtue of the way in which the relevant concepts are used.

This is of course a much more trivial conceptual truth than any of those which make up the substance of Hegel's philosophy. If it seems too trivial to bear the weight of the comparison, we could invoke another standard example, the statement 'One and the same thing cannot at one and the same time be both red all over and green all over.' This again is not an empirical truth. It is true in virtue of the connections between concepts. The connections this time are more complex, involving more than a simple identity of meaning between two terms. Nevertheless the fact remains that the statement is true in virtue of the way we use colour concepts, that is, in virtue of the way we use the language of colours. And again, though this is what makes the statement true, the statement is not a truth about a separate realm of concepts but about actual coloured things in the real world.

Hegel's 'conceptual dialectic' consists of conceptual truths in this sense. The Hegelian claim that all particulars are also universals is not something to be discovered empirically. It is true in virtue of the relations between the concept 'particular' and the concept 'universal'. But it is a truth about all particular things in the real world, about particular trees, particular houses, etc etc; it asserts of them that they can be identified as particulars only insofar as they are also known as universals. And to say that it is true in virtue of the relations between concepts is to say that it is true in virtue of the way in which the relevant terms are used in the language. Thus the recognition of such conceptual truths is not incompatible with materialism.

This is indeed too negative a claim. More positively, I would say that any adequate philosophy within the general perspective of dialectical materialism would have to recognise and incorporate this conceptual dialectic. The classic Marxist expositions of dialectic invoke what are in fact examples of the conceptual dialectic, even if this is not properly recognised. Lenin, for

example, in his 'On the Question of Dialectics', discusses the identity of universal and particular, and refers approvingly to Hegel's assertion of this identity. Again, we have seen that Engels, in the passage which I have just quoted, speaks of the need to formulate certain general scientific laws of dialectics, and when, elsewhere, he comes to state them, they turn out to be the Law of the Interpenetration of Opposites, the Law of the Negation of the Negation, and the Law of the Transformation of Quantity into Quality; but his attempt to present these as empirical, scientific laws seems tome to be entirely unsuccessful. They are all best understood as instances of the conceptual dialectic. To demonstrate this, however, and to identify the possible role of the conceptual dialectic within dialectical materialism, would require further argument, which I shall attempt to provide in a further paper. For the time being I hope to have shown what this conceptual dialectic is, that it is compatible with a materialist philosophy, and that it is important in its own right; and I have tried to give some indication of its importance by counterposing it to the Reductionist and Dualist traditions in philosophy.

II

This conceptual dialectic is not, however, the whole of dialectic, even in Hegel. I have said that when Hegel talks about dialectic as involving change and process, he does not normally mean change in the literal sense. Sometimes, however, he does mean that. He does so, for example, in the following passage:

> We must not suppose that the recognition of (the) existence (of dialectic) is peculiarly confined to the philosopher. It would be truer to say that Dialectic gives expression to a law which is felt in all other grades of consciousness, and in general experience. Everything that surrounds us may be viewed as an instance of Dialectic. We are aware that everything finite, instead of being stable and ultimate, is rather changeable and transient. (The Logic of Hegel, trans. W. Wallace pp149-50)

And he goes on to instance such changes as the movement of the planets, and changes in the fortunes of an individual or of a state. We have therefore to ask why Hegel should suppose that there is any connection between literal material changes of this sort and the conceptual dialectic which I have been discussing.

The fact of change in the natural (non-human) world plays only a limited role in Hegel's philosophy. Though he does indeed emphasise the fact of natural change, his assertion of it tends mainly to take the form of a quasi-religious insistence on the transitoriness of finite things. He specifically denies that nature as a whole exhibits a development:

> The changes that take place in Nature - how infinitely manfold soever they may be - exhibit only a perpetually self-repeating cycle; in Nature there happens 'nothing new under the sun', and the multiform play of its phenomena so far induces a feeling of ennui; only in those changes which take place in the region of Spirit does anything new arise. (The Philosophy of History, trans J. Sibree p54)

This means, in particular, that Hegel rejects the idea of the evolution of natural species:

> It is a completely empty thought to represent species as developing successively, one after the other, in time. Chronological difference has no interest whatever for thought. If it is only a question of enumerating the series of living species in order to show the mind how they are divided into classes, either by starting from the poorest and simplest terms, and rising to the more developed and richer in determinations and content, or by proceeding in the reverse fashion, this operation will always have a general interest... But it must not be imagined that such a dry series is made dynamic or philosophical, or more intelligible, or whatever you like to say, by representing the terms as producing each other... The land animal did not develop naturally out of the aquatic animal... (Philosophy of Nature, trans A. V. Miller p20f)

Given that, as we shall see, the Darwinian theory of evolution has been claimed as a vindication of dialectic, it is ironic that Hegel rejected Darwinism before the event.

Much more important than natural change, for Hegel's philosophy, is change in the human world, that is to say, human history. It is important in two main guises.

1 As the history of thought, and especially as the history of philosophy. Hegel sees the history of philosophy as the progressive elaboration of the complete philosophical system, with each historical philosophy providing a particular element in the system. Thus, in addition to the elaboration of the system in works such as the Phenomenology and the Logic, Hegel thinks that it can also be elaborated in another way by recapitulating the history of philosophical thought and retaining the contributions of each past philosophy.

This does, I think, offer a valuable way of looking at the history of philosophy. One often hears people expressing scepticism as to the value of studying philosophy on the grounds that, in the whole of its history, philosophy has made no progress; one philosopher refutes another, so that the history of philosophy takes on the appearance of a series of discarded theories, and nothing seems to have been achieved. Such scepticism ought not to be simply dismissed; it deserves an answer, and Hegel seems to me to have been the only philosopher to offer one. He claims that, even though no past philosophy can be accepted if it is treated as final and complete in itself, each such philosophy represents a positive principle which needs to be retained within a completed system of philosophy. Thus

by identifying this positive principle and discovering how it is to be related to and reconciled with the positive elements of other apparently opposed philosophies we can make progress in the elaboration of a satisfactory philosophical system. Past philosophies may be untenable, but they are not wholly negative in significance.(3)

Hegel would however want to say more than this. He would claim that the chronological progression from one past philosophy to another is also a logical progression, that it evinces a logical relationship between the content of the one philosophy and that of its successor. Past philosophies are not only to be treated as elements in a total philosophical system, but their temporal order is to provide the logical ordering and structure of the system. Hegel can then assert that the conceptual dialectic is also exhibited in the chronological process of development which constitutes the history of philosophy. (4). This is, I think, too strong a claim. Certainly any philosopher will be in some way or other responding to his predecessors, and consequently the temporal succession of philosophies can often also be seen as a logical development. The major philosophies of the 17th and 18th centuries, for example, can be viewed in this way, with the development of the rationalist tradition, the response of the empiricist tradition whose implications are progressively unfolded by Locke, Berkeley and Hume, and then the philosophy of Kant as a synthesis of the two tendencies. But to see the whole of the history of philosophy as a single logical development is to impose on it too neat a pattern, and one which does violence to the facts. There is, in the history of philosophy, regression as well as progress, there are blind alleys as well as positive advances.

2 I imagine that Hegel would not entirely disagree with what I have just said; the difference is largely one of emphasis. What is much more seriously questionable is Hegel's view of the history of social and political life. Again, there is great value in his approach. Hegel recognises that social and political institutions require to be understood in terms of their historical development, and that there are no timeless truths about the necessary and inevitable structure of human society. (I shall say more about this when I come to consider the Marxist version of dialectic.) But here too the trouble is that Hegel identifies the historical development of social life with the logical progression of the conceptual dialectic. Chronological change comes to be seen as simply a manifestation of the conceptual dialectic. In the Phenomenology, for example, Hegel divides history into three epochs: (a) the ancient world, flourishing at its best in the Greek city-states; (b) the feudal world, brought to an end by the French Revolution; (c) the modern world which the French Revolution inaugurates. But when Hegel sets out to give an account of the relations between these three epochs and the transitions from one to another, he appears to see these as deriving from the logical relations between the concepts 'universal' and 'particular'. In the Greek city-states, the individual is absorbed in the universal life of the community, he is completely identified with the life of the nation, and finds the substance of his own life in the social substance. The feudal world is characterised by Hegel as the 'Self-estranged World', in which individuals exist only as isolated particulars. In place of the previous all-embracing social life, social relations now consist simply in ties between particular individuals, such as the relations between lord and vassal and between the feudal lords and the monarch. Consequently the social world as a whole is experienced by individuals as something external and alien, as the power of the state and as the power of economic wealth; according to Hegel this is the case both in the feudal world itself and in the world of Absolute Monarchy to which it leads. The third epoch is that of a world in which these opposed aspects are synthesised; the individual once more finds himself at home in the universal life of society, not however, as in the Greek world, by being simply absorbed within it but rather by rationally accepting it and identifying with it as a free and particular individual. Thus the three epochs represent the principles of 'the universal', 'the particular', and their synthesis. And Hegel seems to suppose that it is because of the logical relations between universal and particular that a society which emphasises one must necessarily pass into a society which emphasises the other, and this in turn into a society which synthesises the two. For Hegel, it is just because the Greek world represents the universal to the exclusion of the particular that it must change into the self-estranged world, and it is just because the self-estranged world represents the particular to the exclusion of the universal that it must pass into the modern world.

Why should Hegel have held such a strikingly implausible view of historical change? The answer lies in his philosophical idealism, and in fact in the worst and least plausible aspect of his idealism, that aspect in which it becomes a kind of pantheism. Hegel thinks that the structure of reason which he is unfolding in works such as the Logic is not just the structure of human thought. Reason is itself an independent and autonomous force, a force at work in the world. It is the creative force behind the natural world, and it is the propelling force of history. This 'reason' is in fact to be identified with God. Human history is the unfolding of reason, it is the self-revelation of God in the world. This is why he is able to identify the conceptual dialectic and the temporal dialectic.

It is also why he is wrong to do so. If it is his idealism that enables him to identify the two, then in rejecting his idealism, as indeed we must, we have to recognise a distinction between the two kinds of dialectic. We have to

3 See the Introduction to the Lectures on the History of Philosophy pp223-7 and pp239-244 (in G. W. F. Hegel, On Art, Religion and Philosophy, ed. J. Glenn Gray)
4 Ibid p237

treat them as independent of one another. We have to recognise that the fact of literal change in the world, and the form it takes, cannot be simply derived from the conceptual dialectic, but have to be established empirically. All this is stated by Engels, in the passage from which I quoted earlier, and in this respect Engels is absolutely right. In deriving temporal change from the self-development of the concept, Hegel is standing the dialectic on its head, and it does need to be stood right side up again. But, as we have seen, Engels then supposes that we have to reject the conceptual dialectic. I am saying that we don't - we simply have to recognise that the conceptual dialectic and the temporal dialectic are distinct.

III

What then are we to make of the 'temporal' or 'empirical' dialectic which Engels and other Marxists would want to retain, once it is separated from the conceptual dialectic? We might say that where the conceptual dialectic is the claim that concepts change into one another, the empirical dialectic is the claim that things change into one another. But this by itself looks incredibly banal. No one would deny that things change (no one, that is, since Parmenides and Zeno). So, in an attempt to understand what is significant in the empirical dialectic, let us forget the general statement and look at some of the particular examples which Engels uses to illustrate the empirical dialectic. There are certain cases which he regularly invokes as examples of how, by empirical scientific discovery, it has been shown that what was thought to be static is actually something changing. These are: (a) the view of modern physics that the physical universe is to be comprehended fundamentally as a complex of processes rather than of things; (b) the discovery that our solar system is not a set of unchanging planetary movements but arose out of an original nebular mass; (c) the Darwinian theory of evolution, which replaces the conception of a timeless classification of plant and animal species; (d) the recognition that social institutions (such as wage labour, capital, the family, the state) are historically specific institutions which arose in a particular social context and can likewise disappear.

What is important about these examples? In cases (b), (c) and (d), at any rate, the point is clearly that a set of phenomena may become intelligible once it is seen not as static and timeless but as the product of a process of development. A situation which defies understanding when viewed simply in terms of its present state may become intelligible when we look at its past development. Darwin's intellectual breakthrough, for example, was to explain apparent purposive adaptation in living organisms. This is to be seen not as a massive coincidence, nor as evidence of benevolent design on the part of a divine creator, but is to be understood by postulating a past development of living species involving random genetic mutations, the inheritance of these mutant characteristics, and the elimination of less successfully adapted organisms. Similarly, in the case of human society, the Marxist claim is that in order to understand contemporary capitalist society, we have to understand it as a historically specific form of social life, one which has developed out of an earlier and different kind of society. What is more, it has to be understood in terms not only of its past development but also of its future development; we have to look not only at its present actuality but also at the potentialities within it, the social forces which are an essential part of that society but which at the same time are likely to grow to the point where they destroy it and change it into a radically different kind of society.

This dialectical way of looking at social life is opposed both to common sense and to intellectual theory, both of which tend to generalise historically specific features of social life into a timeless 'human condition'. We are familiar with the common sense view which says that 'you can't change human nature', that 'human beings are naturally competitive, naturally aggressive, etc', and which fails to see how the dominance of certain kinds of behaviour in our society is required by and produced by the prevalent kinds of social relations. But we must add that the same failure of historical awareness is to be found in major social thinkers - for example Hobbes falsely generalises the relations of a market society and presents them as a supposed state of nature; he and Locke and others found all human social life on contractual relations; Hume equates justice with the protection of private property; the classical political economists suppose economic laws such as the laws of supply and demand or 'the iron law of wages' to be the laws of all economic life as such. In all these cases the failure is a failure to think historically, that is, dialectically.

Engels rightly stresses that all these theories of change in apparent stability (the Darwinian theory of evolution, the Marxist theory of society, etc) have to be established empirically. They cannot be deduced from some general law of dialectic. Each case has to be considered separately and independently, on the basis of the relevant empirical facts. The theory of the origin of the solar system, the theory of evolution, the Marxist theory of society, are all independent of one another and involve separate sets of empirical facts. But what Engels does seem to suppose is that when we have established each of these theories in their separate domains, they can all be regarded as providing empirical support for some further very general thesis, a sort of super-scientific empirical support for some further very general thesis, a sort of super-scientific law, a claim that reality as a whole is dialectical. This further move is, I think, misleading and unnecessary. What could be meant by the claim that 'reality is dialectical'? Not that 'things change', for,

as I have already said, this seems too banal and obvious. Hopefully not that 'everything is always changing', since this is false. There is stability within change. We cannot describe change except by talking about 'things which change', and to say that a thing is changing is to imply that within the process of change there is sufficient permanence and continuity for us to identify the 'thing' which has undergone the change. If for example we speak of a change from feudal to capitalist society, we are saying that a certain identifiable society has changed from being feudal to being capitalist, and in that case there must be sufficient continuity for us to be able to say that it is the same society which has undergone the change. The only way in which we could make plausible the claim that everything is always changing would be in terms of the first of the four examples which I quoted from Engels - the example of theories of modern physics, theories of the ultimate constitution of matter which make use of some basic concept such as 'energy'. But if we accept that 'everything is always changing' in this sense, this would be perfectly compatible with the denial of change at other levels. It would for example be compatible with a completely unhistorical view of human society. This cannot be the kind of thesis we are looking for.

The empirical dialectic, then, is not to be identified with any single general thesis which could be either true or false. Rather, the notion of an empirical dialectic points us to the value of a certain kind of explanation - developmental explanation. 'Dialectic' in this sense is not a super-scientific law about the whole of reality, but a way of looking at particular areas of reality, a way of understanding them. It is an immensely fruitful way of looking at things, but how fruitful it will be in any particular case can be determined only by examining the particular case.

IV

In this paper I have been concerned to distinguish between the 'conceptual' dialectic and the 'temporal' or 'empirical' dialectic; to give an account of each; to show that they do not stand or fall together, but that each is valuable in its own right. The enterprise has itself been a non-dialectical one, an example of what Hegel calls the exercise of 'Understanding', whose function is to analyse and make distinctions, separating one thing from another. That a discussion of dialectic should itself be undialectical is not as inappropriate as it sounds. Hegel himself recognises the need for 'understanding' in this sense, describing it as 'the most marvellous and mighty, or rather the absolute power'. I would myself be content with a more modest description of what I have been doing; but, more seriously, I would also recognise with Hegel that the role of understanding is a preparatory one. Having made the distinctions, we then need to make the connections. I have criticised Hegel's way of connecting the conceptual and the temporal dialectic, which takes the form of identifying them. But if this is unacceptable, we should not be content merely to leave the matter there. We need to work out an alternative account of the connections between the two kinds of dialectic. I shall try to do this in a further paper, and in the process I shall take up some of the points raised in Sean Sayers' paper in this issue and Roy Edgley's paper on dialectic presented to the Radical Philosophy Conference at Oxford.

The Marxist Dialectic

Sean Sayers

> "Wherever there is movement, wherever there is life, wherever anything is carried into effect in the actual world, there dialectic is at work. It is also the soul of all knowledge which is truly scientific."
> Hegel, Logic, trans. Wallace, p148

The law of contradiction in things is the basic principle of dialectical materialism, the philosophy of Marxism. In Mao's words:

> "Marxist philosophy holds that the law of the unity of opposites is the fundamental law of the universe. This law operates universally, whether in the natural world, in human society, or in man's thinking. Between the opposites in a contradiction there is at once unity and struggle, and it is this that impels things to move and change."
> (Mao, OCH, p91)

This doctrine, which is the fundamental basis of Marxist thought, is easy to state and no doubt already familiar, but it is not easy to grasp and understand.

This difficulty is due, in part, to the inherent difficulty of the subject-matter; for dialectical logic sums up the laws of motion of things at their most general level and provides the most universal of all the principles of thought. But there is also another difficulty to be overcome; for the dialectical way of seeing things seems to fly in the face of all traditional philosophy and commonsense. The idea of contradictions existing in things seems absurd and impossible - a metaphysical and mystical extravagance and the very opposite of scientific and rational thought. And thus, despite the ever-increasing influence of Marxism, its philosophy is frequently rejected as violating the most elementary laws of logic and preconditions of rational thought. The philosophy of dialectics is rejected and the attempt is made to revise Marxism accordingly.