

Marx's Dialectical Method

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This work elaborates on many of the misunderstandings of “dialectics” and of Hegel/Marx in leftist discourse, while trying to compensate for the Marx’s unfortunate inability to finish his work “Logic”. Revised version
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When the way is lost the traveller looks up to the heavens, worlds without number.

When the nightstorm wrecks the ship, the waterspouting survivor embraces dawn’s wavelapping shore.

When the gods fail and the harvest is lost, the good soul stares into the totem’s eyes.

We are searching for signs.

We are waiting for the mute and closed face of the objective to speak to us.

We desire the affirmation of external forces, let the authority of history affirm the Tightness of our actions, for are our acts not historical?

But the only sound is the winter wind singing in the wire, we are alone and rudderless. (Monsieur Dupont, *Nihilist Communism*)

Introduction

We are alone and rudderless. Karl Marx died without writing the *Logic*, an official pamphlet on his dialectical method. He spoke of writing it but he never had the time to start it. It is a shame that he did not, in light of the whole line of descent of “Marxist” Orthodoxy and its progressive obfuscation of Marx’s method. The *Logic* would have given dissident communists theoretical ammunition to use against Orthodox “Marxism”. It might have possibly reduced the integrity of Orthodox “Marxist” philosophy to some extent. (Orthodox “Marxism” is the line of pseudo-communist thought running from Karl Kautsky and Georgi Plekhanov of the 2nd International, to Vladimir Lenin, to Joseph Stalin and Leon Trotsky, to Nikita Khrushchev and Mao Zedong.)

However, his writing of the *Logic* probably would not have prevented the falsifiers from reconstructing Marx’s theories as a philosophical justification for continued class oppression, because it was material conditions, primarily the switch from formal subsumption of labor to real subsumption of labor (Marx, *Results of the Direct Production Process*) in late 19th century Europe, that decisively molded the ideologization of Marx’s ideas. In other words, the switch from capitalism in Europe as a porous social formation with subordinate modes of production merely structured by the logic of capital to capitalism* as a homogenous social formation with the real dominance of the capital relation extended into all aspects of life *led to the bourgeois co-optation of the European Social

Democratic parties, including the Bolshevik Party, and the consequent construction of “Marxism” as state ideology.

Despite not being officially embodied in a theoretical form inside the *Logic*, Marx’s dialectics exist in a practical form throughout his works. In particular, *Capital* contains Marx’s dialectical method as applied to a critique of the categories of political economy. The content and form of *Capital* thus give us clues towards reconstructing Marx’s dialectics upon a real basis. By content, I am referring to mainly Marx’s tracing of the elementary value–form through dialectical steps to the money–form, his analysis of commodity fetishism, the antithetical phases of commodity–money exchange, and his analysis of communism as the negation of the negation of individual private property. As for form, the particular way in which Marx begins *Capital*, starting with the analysis of the commodity (the theoretical, abstract origin of capitalism) instead of starting with primitive accumulation (the historical origin of capitalism), and the way in which he continues the ordering of the rest of *Capital* give hints towards understanding Marx’s dialectical logic. In addition, Marx offers scattered comments about his dialectical method in many places, including but not limited to his September 1843 letter to Arnold Ruge, the *Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, the *1844 Manuscripts*, *The Poverty of Philosophy*, the Introduction to *Grundrisse*, and the Prefaces and Afterwords of *Capital Vol. 1*.

We must return back to the source–text, go back to Marx to find his dialectics.

We have to read Marx, not the Marxists, to find what Marx really thought about his dialectical method.

We are obligated to cut out all the bullshit and lies surrounding Marx, possibly the most misunderstood thinker in history.

Basic statement: In this work, I would like to (1) state what Marx’s dialectics are not, (2) state what dialectics are, (3) analyze some of Marx’s texts that contain his dialectics in either a theoretical or practical form to uncover Marx’s dialectics, and (4) explain what exactly makes dialectics useful for communists.

My only hope is that you enjoy this piece and find something useful out of it.

What Marx’s Dialectics Are Not

All that most people have learned about dialectics from school is thesis–antithesis–synthesis, or if they are lucky, abstract–negative–concrete and being–nothing–becoming. Let me state first off that dialectics is not any of these three things. The first two triads sometimes work as *an abstract description* of the procedure of undergoing the Hegelian/Marxian dialectical method. The third triad is *a specific result* of the procedure of undergoing Hegel’s dialectical method. However, *none* of these three triads are dialectics *itself*. **Dialectics in the Hegelian and Marxian sense are decidedly not a set of formulas, laws or axioms to be applied.**

There are more misconceptions of dialectics to debunk. Most proponents of Orthodox “Marxism” (Mainly Kautskyists, Marxist–Leninists, Trotskyists, Hoxhaists, and Maoists) make some if not all of the following claims about Marx’s dialectics and “philosophy”:

- Marx was a philosopher.
- Marx created the philosophy of dialectical materialism (Or materialist dialectics, if you prefer), which consisted of the basic scientifically–verifiable laws of development of nature and human society.
- Marx’s dialectical materialism consisted of a set of formulas, laws, and axioms that were universally applicable.

- Marx's application of dialectical materialism to the study of human history created the science of historical materialism.
- Engels had exactly the same views on dialectics as Marx.
- After Marx and Engels's deaths, Karl Kautsky and Georgi Plekhanov of the 2nd International preserved and transmitted Marx and Engels's philosophy of dialectical materialism to a new generation of radicals, including Vladimir Lenin.
- Lenin later innovated upon Marx's materialism in his work *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*.
- Either Josef Stalin or Leon Trotsky (depending on the specific tendency of said Orthodox "Marxist") preserved Marx's philosophy of dialectical materialism in either *Dialectical and Historical Materialism* (Stalin) or the *ABC of Materialist Dialectics* (Trotsky) and for the most part transmitted it in a concise and accurate way to the next generation of radicals.
- For Hoxhaists, Stalin had no errors in his philosophy and was a great Marxist thinker and dialectician.
- For Maoists, Stalin made the two mistakes in his dialectics of (a) assuming that there were not any contradictions within the socialist USSR and (b) interpreting dialectical materialism sometimes in mechanical ways. However, on the whole, Stalin was a great Marxist thinker and dialectician in the face of the challenges faced by an isolated and backwards Soviet Union. On the other hand, Mao Zedong made significant contributions to philosophy in his four main philosophical essays: *On Practice*, *On Contradiction*, *Where Do Correct Ideas Come From?*, and *On the Correct Handling of Contradictions Among the People*.

Every single one of these statements is wrong. I do not have time at the moment for a full refutation of all of these claims, but in light of my brash claim that all the Orthodox "Marxists" misunderstood Marx's dialectics and that Engels had a different conception of dialectics than Marx, try not to read the conception of dialectics of any of the Orthodox "Marxists" or Engels into Marx's dialectical method. Marx is hard enough to read even without the weight of a thousand misconceptions.

Well, if you are really curious, read Chino's *Bloom and Contend: A Critique of Maoism* and Raya Dunayevskaya's *Mao Perverts Lenin* for a critique of Mao's philosophy; Cyril Smith's *Marx at the Millennium*, *Karl Marx and the Future of the Human*, and his various essays on the Marxist Internet Archive or Libcom for a critique of Stalin, Lenin, Trotsky, Kautsky, and Plekhanov's philosophies; and Pannekoek's *Lenin as Philosopher* for a critique of Lenin's reductive materialism. You can check out the other works in the "Philosophy" section of my [reading list](#), some of which are also relevant for a critique of orthodox "Marxism".

As for Engels, he was a brilliant man, but philosophy (and the critique of it) was not one of his strong areas. I would like to assert as I have done before that Marx and Engels were two separate people. As a result, they had differing views on dialectics. In particular, Engels's conception of dialectics was positivist/empiricist (Marx's conception of dialectics was critical/negative), Engels thought that there were laws of dialectics that could be derived and applied like formulas or axioms (Marx never said anything to that effect), and Engels thought that one could find examples of his laws of dialectics in the natural and social world (Marx never said anything to that effect). In the rest of this essay, I am solely looking at Marx's conception of dialectics, not Engels's. If you want to read about Engels's dialectics, feel free to read *Anti-Dühring*, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*, and *Dialectics of Nature*.

Also, I would like to address the word “dialectical materialism”. While it is true that Marx was generally a “dialectician” and a “materialist”, the word “dialectical materialism” or “diamat” has unfortunate connotations of being the official state philosophy of Marxism–Leninism (ML) and ideologies inspired by ML. “Dialectical materialism” is just a Stalinist buzzword that refers to a particularly muddleheaded mishmash of mechanical materialism, a simple quasi–religious teleology of nature and society, a reductionist account of how material things get directly reflected like a mirror in conscious perception, and various meaningless law–like aphorisms that were heavily simplified and decontextualized derivatives of some quotes from Hegel, Marx, Engels, and Lenin. There is nothing particularly profound about “dialectical materialism” and it is fairly easily discreditable, even by people completely untrained in philosophical methods. I will leave the disproof of “dialectical materialism” to you as something you can do after you finish reading this article.

What are Dialectics?

“Dialectics”, according to Wikipedia, “is a discourse between two or more people holding different points of view about a subject but wishing to establish the truth through reasoned arguments.” This definition of dialectics stretches back millennia to the Ancient Greeks and still remains essentially true today. Dialectics, in the most broad sense, is a sustained dialogue between two or more people with contradictory viewpoints about a subject matter in an effort to find the truth about said subject matter. However, dialectics in the Hegelian or Marxian sense is a strange sort of “dialogue” in that there are not really any other people and thus the “dialogue between persons” is completely abstract. **Dialectics for Hegel and Marx are a kind of sustained inquiry into or ruthless criticism of a subject matter from its own internal logic** that *lays bare the internal contradictions manifested within said subject matter*. By locating the internal contradictions, the dialectician is able to do a contextual analysis, revealing *the origins of said internal contradictions* as well as their fate, i.e. *how they might be resolved* and lead to a qualitative transformation of the subject matter in question.

As a consequence of undergoing the dialectical method, the dialectician discovers that the two poles of any internal contradiction exist as a *unity of mutually interpenetrating opposites*, that the existence of one pole, its concept and definition, must necessarily include the existence of the other pole. For example, the unity of the interpenetrating opposites of wage–labor and capital inside bourgeois society is that wage–labor cannot exist without its foil, capital, and capital cannot exist without its opposite, wage–labor. The same goes for use–value and exchange–value inside the commodity.

What exactly does mutual interpenetration mean? Because Ruthless Criticism reveals that each of the individual two poles of any internal contradiction is one–sided and restricted by itself, each pole must undergo self–sublation (sublation is a translation of the technical German word *aufheben*, which means both to cancel and to preserve something) and pass into its negation, the opposite pole. The opposite pole contains the original pole in its definition, hence preservation. In addition, the opposite pole is the negation of the original pole, hence negation. Again, the opposite pole is one–sided and restricted in itself and self–sublates into the original pole. In this way, opposites of an internal contradiction engage in mutual interpenetration, in other words, pass into each other constantly.

The only way for Ruthless Criticism to break this continuous passing into the other of opposites is to grasp the two poles of the internal contradiction as a logical whole and criticize the unity of the opposites, causing the unity of the opposites in its one–sidedness and restrictedness to self–sublate again. This second self–sublation is the sublation of the sublation, the supersession of the supersession, *the negation of the negation*. It

generates a new concept that both preserves and cancels out both the two poles of the original internal contradiction. The negation of the negation of a concept does not reduce back to the original concept itself, but in fact is a novel concept that contains within its definition the original concept and its negation. Through the negation of the negation, the dialectic method starts with the criticism of simpler concepts and eventually leads to criticism of larger and more complex, higher order concepts, which contain the simpler concepts within them as well as their negation.

However, the unity of mutually interpenetrating opposites and the negation of the negation are not themselves dialectics (or, *shudder*, laws of dialectics...), but rather results discovered through the dialectical method.

Dialectics can also be called **negative science**, as opposed to positivist science. (Under the category of positivist science, I include the bourgeois social sciences, which are 80% ideology and 20% dead facts, as well as the natural sciences.) Instead of the cycle of (1) forming hypotheses according to one's categories for reality, (2) collecting facts about the world and putting them into one's categories for reality, (3) testing said hypotheses against the collected facts about the world, and (4) formulating an empirical trend of the world, negative science is about theoretically tearing apart the reality in which one lives in and criticizing everything, including the categories in which one approaches reality.

It is impossible to do an positivist/empiricist study of society from within the standpoint of society because of things like fetishism/reification in which the alienated social relations of the society the researcher is located in creates a particular appearance of reality that seems objective, a specific organization of the categories of reality that masks the alienated social relations that generated it in the first place. For example, with the fetishism of commodities, value, which in reality is a social relation between producers in capitalist society, comes to appear as an objective property of the commodities they exchange. As a result, vulgar economic analysis, which does not penetrate the mists of the commodity fetish, creates an entire economic theory based on the seemingly ahistorical and eternal commodity and the supposed objectivity and intrinsicity of its value. We can surmise from this particular example and the likelihood that there are many fetishized/reified forms that have so far escaped our analysis that it is impossible to objectively have knowledge about a society dominated by fetishism from within said society, because very many of the categories in which one approaches reality are themselves generated by one's society, though unconsciously and with the effect of masking the true nature of one's society. Instead, one has to do a dialectical analysis (which is necessarily critical, self-critical, and negative) that ruthlessly criticizes the categories of fetishized society to reveal the internal contradictions between the form and content of society to possibly see a way out of fetishization.

Moreover, dialectics can also be called **immanent critique** (internal critique, critique from within), because it consists of the critique of a subject matter *from the internal logic of said subject matter itself*.

Finally, insofar as there is a difference between the Hegelian and the Marxian dialectic, it is not the dialectical method (the method of ruthless criticism and immanent critique) itself, but the starting point of the dialectical method. Hegel begins in the world of universals and abstractions (starting with the simplest universal, the concept of Being), while Marx takes "the real individuals, their activity and the material conditions under which they live, both those which they find already existing and those produced by their activity" (*The German Ideology*) as the beginning point of his ruthless criticism.

Now, let us start with the textual analysis of Marx.

September 1843 Letter to Arnold Ruge

In 1843, Marx exchanged several letters with his friend Arnold Ruge, which they would later include in the first and only edition of *Deutsch–Französische Jahrbücher*, a radical leftist magazine. Marx's September 1843 letter to Ruge specifically includes a surprisingly understudied exposition of his future method and world outlook. Let us take a look at this:

Not only has a state of general anarchy set in among the reformers, but everyone will have to admit to himself that he has no exact idea what the future ought to be. On the other hand, it is precisely the advantage of the new trend that we do not dogmatically anticipate the world, but only want to find the new world through criticism of the old one. Hitherto philosophers have had the solution of all riddles lying in their writing–desks, and the stupid, exoteric world had only to open its mouth for the roast pigeons of absolute knowledge to fly into it. Now philosophy has become mundane, and the most striking proof of this is that philosophical consciousness itself has been drawn into the torment of the struggle, not only externally but also internally. **But, if constructing the future and settling everything for all times are not our affair, it is all the more clear what we have to accomplish at present: I am referring to ruthless criticism of all that exists, ruthless both in the sense of not being afraid of the results it arrives at and in the sense of being just as little afraid of conflict with the powers that be.**

The most famous sentence in this entire letter is the last one in this passage, which I have bolded. This sentence brings out a lot of what is important about Marx's dialectical method: the fact that his method does not seek to "construct the future" and create "an ideal to which reality [will] have to adjust itself" (*The German Ideology*), the fact that his method is that of "ruthless criticism of all that exists", and the fact that his method is "ruthless both in the sense of not being afraid of the results it arrives at and in the sense of being just as little afraid of conflict with the powers that be." Besides that sentence, Marx also states that he "want[s] to find the new world through criticism of the old one." This fragment is important, because it underscores that Marx's method is historical: "the new world" comes out of "criticism of the old one." He also writes that all previous philosophy thought that it could solve all the questions of the world and attain "absolute knowledge" from their "writing–desks", abstractly and speculatively, detached from "the stupid, exoteric world". However, now that "philosophy has become mundane", "philosophical consciousness itself" is drawn into the struggles of the world and cannot return back to its speculative, abstract origins.

And the whole socialist principle in its turn is only one aspect that concerns the reality of the true human being. But we have to pay just as much attention to the other aspect, to the theoretical existence of man, and therefore to make religion, science, etc., the object of our criticism. In addition, we want to influence our contemporaries, particularly our German contemporaries. The question arises: how are we to set about it? There are two kinds of facts which are undeniable. In the first place religion, and next to it, politics, are the subjects which form the main interest of Germany today. We must take these, in whatever form they exist, as our point of departure, and not confront them with some ready–made system such as, for example, the *Voyage en Icarie*.

What are the topics to be criticized? Marx includes not only criticism of the practical existence of man (such criticism would be "the socialist principle") but also the "other aspect" of "the reality of the true human being", namely "the theoretical existence of man": "religion, science, etc." In other words, he emphasizes that not only must everything be criticized, but that such criticism should focus on "the reality of the true human being", both

its practical existence and its theoretical existence. Marx's dialectic is not only a full-sided critique of the world, it is a full humanism, a critique of the abject condition in which the human being finds itself (See Marx's previous letter to Ruge of May 1843 for more on the sorry state of humanity under class society).

Reason has always existed, but not always in a reasonable form. The critic can therefore start out from any form of theoretical and practical consciousness and from the forms peculiar to existing reality develop the true reality as its obligation and its final goal. As far as real life is concerned, it is precisely the political state – in all its modern forms – which, even where it is not yet consciously imbued with socialist demands, contains the demands of reason. And the political state does not stop there. Everywhere it assumes that reason has been realised. But precisely because of that it everywhere becomes involved in the contradiction between its ideal function and its real prerequisites.

“Reason has always existed, but not always in a reasonable form.” In other words, the truth has always existed, but it has often existed in an illogical, absurd integument that hid it. As a result, the critic can go from “any form of theoretical and practical consciousness”, “from the forms peculiar to existing reality”, and “develop the true reality as its obligation and its final goal.” In other words, the critic starts from the unreal reality, in which reason exists in an unreasonable form, and works to uncover “the true reality”. In addition, the last sentence of this passage reveals the first time in this letter that Marx mentions an internal contradiction inside a subject matter. In this case, the internal contradiction is between “ideal function” and “real prerequisites” and the subject matter is “the political state”. Why is there an internal contradiction between the “ideal function” and the “real prerequisites” of “the political state”? This is because “the political state” holds within it “the demands of reason” and yet “everywhere it assumes that reason has been realized.” The full implications of this will be shown in the next passage:

From this conflict of the political state with itself, therefore, it is possible everywhere to develop the social truth. Just as religion is a register of the theoretical struggles of mankind, so the political state is a register of the practical struggles of mankind. Thus, the political state expresses, within the limits of its form *sub specie rei publicae*, [as a particular kind of state] all social struggles, needs and truths. Therefore, to take as the object of criticism a most specialised political question – such as the difference between a system based on social estate and one based on representation – is in no way below the *hauteur des principes*. [Level of principles] For this question only expresses in a political way the difference between rule by man and rule by private property. Therefore the critic not only can, but must deal with these political questions (which according to the extreme Socialists are altogether unworthy of attention). In analysing the superiority of the representative system over the social-estate system, the critic in a practical way wins the interest of a large party. By raising the representative system from its political form to the universal form and by bringing out the true significance underlying this system, the critic at the same time compels this party to go beyond its own confines, for its victory is at the same time its defeat.

Marx states that it is possible to tease out the social truth from the internal contradictions of the political state. This is because the state expresses within its form “all social struggles, needs and truths.” By exacerbating the contradictions inside the political state, by “raising the representative system from its political form to the universal form and by bringing out the true significance underlying this system”, the critic is able to bring the internal contradictions of the political state to a boiling point and shatter the inhuman, unreal integument of the political state to bring out the social truth hidden underneath.

Hence, nothing prevents us from making criticism of politics, participation in politics, and therefore real struggles, the starting point of our criticism, and from identifying our criticism with them. In that case we do not confront the world in a doctrinaire way with a new principle: Here is the truth, kneel down before it! We develop new principles for the world out of the world's own principles. We do not say to the world: Cease your struggles, they are foolish; we will give you the true slogan of struggle. We merely show the world what it is really fighting for, and consciousness is something that it has to acquire, even if it does not want to.

Criticism of politics is “the starting point of our criticism”, because as said in the previous passage, “the political state is a register of the practical struggles of mankind.” Criticisms also need to identify with the “real struggles”. However, such a criticism should not be a dogmatic imposition of a new principle, but rather a development out of the principles already held by people. The next part of the passage is a quote that Lenin himself misquoted some 70 years later, but is very subversive in its original form. The world is already fighting for something, to resolve its internal contradictions, to throw off its unreal, illogical shell, and to uncover the social truth. Our purpose as critics is merely to “show the world what it is really fighting for” and to show it specifically that it must acquire consciousness of its existing struggle.

The reform of consciousness consists only in making the world aware of its own consciousness, in awakening it out of its dream about itself, in explaining to it the meaning of its own actions. Our whole object can only be – as is also the case in Feuerbach's criticism of religion – to give religious and philosophical questions the form corresponding to man who has become conscious of himself. Hence, our motto must be: reform of consciousness not through dogmas, but by analysing the mystical consciousness that is unintelligible to itself, whether it manifests itself in a religious or a political form. It will then become evident that the world has long dreamed of possessing something of which it has only to be conscious in order to possess it in reality. It will become evident that it is not a question of drawing a great mental dividing line between past and future, but of realising the thoughts of the past. Lastly, it will become evident that mankind is not beginning a new work, but is consciously carrying into effect its old work. In short, therefore, we can formulate the trend of our journal as being: self-clarification (critical philosophy) to be gained by the present time of its struggles and desires. This is a work for the world and for us. It can be only the work of united forces. It is a matter of a confession, and nothing more. In order to secure remission of its sins, mankind has only to declare them for what they actually are.

The purpose of our criticism is to analyze and demystify the mystified forms in which consciousness becomes unreadable to itself, the forms of religious and philosophical questions. Such a demystification will reveal that the world “has long dreamed of possessing something of which it has only to be conscious in order to possess it in reality.” It will be clear that “mankind is not beginning a new work, but is consciously carrying into effect its old work.”

So far Marx has explained his method but he has not used the word “dialectics”. Yet these passages, all cut from the same letter, essentially describe the heart of Marx's dialectical method.

We can list out 14 key characteristics of Marx's method identified in this work:

1. It is **the ruthless criticism of all reality** (which necessarily includes self-criticism as the critic is embedded inside their reality), without fear of the conclusions such criticism might draw or retribution from the powers that be.

2. It seeks to criticize the old world to find the new world.
3. Yet it does not seek to fabricate the new world itself, because no reformer in fact can tell what the future should be like.
4. Philosophical consciousness itself has been drawn into the struggles of the world and cannot return back to its speculative, abstract origins.
5. Criticism must focus on the human being, both in its practical existence and its theoretical existence, including on the current sorry state of both modes of its existence. In other words, such a criticism is necessarily a humanism.
6. Marx's method is the search for the truth, the real world, which has always existed, but up to now hidden inside the integument of its appearance as illogical unreality.
7. It is a criticism that seeks to draw out and exacerbate the internal contradictions within the particular manifestations that reality takes so as to draw out the truth of the world.
8. The world of politics, of real needs, is the starting point of our criticism.
9. Criticisms need to identify with the real struggles of the people.
10. Criticisms should not be the dogmatic impositions of a new principle but rather a development of the principles already held by the people.
11. Our purpose as critics is to show the world what it is already fighting for, to give light to existing struggles.
12. The purpose of our criticism is to demystify the way in which consciousness becomes unintelligible to itself, to therefore make clear religious, political, and philosophical questions, which are merely alienated forms of real consciousness.
13. The demystification of consciousness will reveal that humanity has yearned for something that it needed to be conscious of to obtain in reality.
14. The demystification of consciousness will reveal that humanity is merely carrying out its past tasks at hand into the future.

Compare these 14 points to my original definition of the dialectical method and you will see that Marx does in his letter to Ruge exactly what he meant to do in his *Logic*, which would be to tell us his method of analysis!

The 1844 Manuscripts

The last section of the Third Manuscript of the Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 also provides some information about Marx's dialectics and his relation to "philosophy".

Feuerbach is the only one who has a serious, critical attitude to the Hegelian dialectic and who has made genuine discoveries in this field. He is in fact the true conqueror of the old philosophy. The extent of his achievement, and the unpretentious simplicity with which he, Feuerbach, gives it to the world, stand in striking contrast to the opposite attitude [of the others]. Feuerbach's great achievement is: **(1)** The proof that philosophy is nothing else but religion rendered into thought and expounded by thought, i.e., another form and manner of existence of the estrangement of the essence of man; hence equally to be condemned; **(2)** The establishment of true materialism and of real science, by making the social relationship of "man to man" the basic principle of the theory; **(3)** His opposing to the negation of the negation, which claims to be the absolute positive, the self-supporting positive, positively based on itself.

Marx is decidedly *not* a philosopher; he is a critic of philosophy. Just as he said in his letter to Ruge that his purpose was to demystify philosophical questions to give them “the form corresponding to man who has become conscious of himself”, he cites Feuerbach approvingly for proving that “philosophy is nothing else but religion rendered into thought and expounded by thought, i.e., another form and manner of existence of the estrangement of the essence of man; hence equally to be condemned”. Why is philosophy an example of the alienation of human essence? Perhaps, because philosophy thinks it can solve all the questions it ponders detached from the real world (Letter to Ruge, September 1843), detached from the world of “the social relationship[s] of ‘man to man’” and because the human essence is merely “the ensemble of the social relations” (*Theses on Feuerbach*), therefore detached from “the essence of man”. By jettisoning speculative philosophy and making human relations as they are in actuality the starting point of his theory, Marx therefore returns to “true materialism” and “real science”.

Feuerbach explains the Hegelian dialectic (and thereby justifies starting out from the positive facts which we know by the senses) as follows: Hegel sets out from the estrangement of substance (in logic, from the infinite, abstractly universal) – from the absolute and fixed abstraction; which means, put popularly, that he sets out from religion and theology. Secondly, he annuls the infinite, and posits the actual, sensuous, real, finite, particular (philosophy, annulment of religion and theology). Thirdly, he again annuls the positive and restores the abstraction, the infinite – restoration of religion and theology.

Again, Marx criticizes the approach of the speculative philosophers, including Hegel, which starts from “the estrangement of substance”, i.e. “from religion and theology”, “from the infinite, abstractly universal”. This is because dialectics that starts from the ideal necessarily ends up back in the ideal as a result of undergoing the dialectical process, as shown in the passage. Hence, it can never actually escape religion and theology but merely restores them.

In Hegel, therefore, the negation of the negation is not the confirmation of the true essence, effected precisely through negation of the pseudo-essence. With him the negation of the negation is the confirmation of the pseudo-essence, or of the self-estranged essence in its denial; or it is the denial of this pseudo-essence as an objective being dwelling outside man and independent of him, and its transformation into the subject.

As stated before, beginning the negation of the negation from Hegel’s starting premise of the world of ideal forms ends up confirming the pseudo-essence, the abstracted and self-estranged world of ideal forms, instead of rejecting it. In addition, Hegel’s dialectical process that starts from the ideal denies the false nature of the pseudo-essence and transforms it into an alien subject above and beyond the human being.

A peculiar role, therefore, is played by the act of superseding in which denial and preservation, i.e., affirmation, are bound together. Thus, for example, in Hegel’s philosophy of law, civil law superseded equals morality, morality superseded equals the family, the family superseded equals civil society, civil society superseded equals the state, the state superseded equals world history. In the actual world civil law, morality, the family, civil society, the state, etc., remain in existence, only they have become moments – states of the existence and being of man – which have no validity in isolation, but dissolve and engender one another, etc. They have become moments of motion.

Hegel’s dialectic causes the progressive supersession of concepts, supersession in the sense that “denial and preservation ... are bound together” (self-sublation, *aufheben*). In Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*, for example, civil law is superseded by morality, morality by

the family, the family by civil society, civil society by the state, the state by world history. The actual things that these concepts refer to “remain in existence” despite their supersession. However, they “have become moments of motion”, having “no validity in isolation”. In fact, they “dissolve and engender one another”. As seen by my description of dialectical method in Part 1, this is simply a description of the results of engaging in dialectical process. Ruthless Criticism causes the progression from simpler concepts to more complex concepts by criticizing “one-sided” and “restricted” concepts and forcing their supersession, their “denial and preservation”, into higher orders of concepts.

We can list out 3 key characteristics of Marx’s dialectical method identified in this work:

1. **The basic starting principle of his method is “the social relationship[s] of ‘man to man’”,** contrary to Hegel and the speculative philosophers, who start in the realm of universals and abstractions.
2. As the dialectical method progresses, **simpler concepts are superseded** (denied and preserved at the same time) **by higher order concepts**. Simpler concepts continue to remain in existence despite this, but they dissolve and imply/create higher order concepts, they are “moments of motion”, and are thus contained in the logic of higher order concepts.
3. His method is not that of philosophy (Marx is *not* a philosopher), but as **a critique of all speculative philosophy**.

We can also list out 3 key characteristics of his critique of speculative philosophy:

1. The starting point of the estranged speculative philosophers is abstracted away from the real world of real people and as a result all speculative philosophy ends up still estranged from the real world.
2. As a result, **speculative philosophy alienates itself from the human essence**, “the ensemble of the social relations”.
3. Speculative philosophy reifies the abstracted and self-estranged world of ideal forms as an alien subject above and beyond the human being, even though ultimately the abstracted and self-estranged world of ideal forms is a creation of real human beings. It therefore cannot break the spell of mystification, but in fact engenders it.

As we can see, through his criticism of speculative philosophy, he implicitly describes his dialectical method in relation to it!

Dialectics: Unprovable but Useful

Some people may believe that it is possible to “prove” dialectics. A portion of the people with this conception of dialectics may ask if it is possible to rationally prove the validity of dialectical reasoning. Another portion may ask if it is possible to study the dynamics of the natural world to furnish a “proof” of dialectics as a fundamental law of reality. The former portion is quite mistaken, as it is impossible and quite incoherent to “prove” a deductive rule. How would one go about rationally “proving” dialectics? Or formal logic for that matter? One would have to justify dialectics using either (1) dialectics itself, which is muddled circular reasoning, or (2) another system of logic, which has the two problems of (a) leading to infinite regress as that other system of logic would itself have to be grounded in yet another system of logic and so on, and (b) making dialectics completely reducible to that other system of logic and hence completely negating the unique usefulness of the dialectical method. As for the latter portion, there is absolutely no evidence whatsoever that the laws of physics, from which all the other laws of the hard sciences are abstracted from, operate dialectically. The models we have of quantum physics,

general relativity, and string theory do not require any conception of the dialectic, and in fact, dogmatically trying to shoehorn physical laws and facts about the universe after-the-fact into “dialectical” analysis leads to bizarre results, such as Trotskyists Ted Grant and Alan Wood’s denial of the Big Bang and black holes on the basis of them contradicting “dialectical materialism”.

The fact that dialectics cannot be proven is not an indication that they are not useful, as formal logic cannot be proven either, but is clearly useful for all kinds of mathematics, analyses of reality, and everyday thinking. But what exactly makes dialectics useful? Why did Marx use dialectics?

The simplest answer is that without dialectics, there would be no *Capital*. In other words, Marx would not have been able to write his critique of the categories of political economy or his analysis of commodity fetishism without dialectics. The positivist/empiricist method leads down the route of marginal economics, which says nothing of the social relations and internal contradictions within the capitalist mode of production but can only see reality on the level of fetishized appearances/categories. It definitely does collect facts about the world, but can only organize these facts into the fetishized categories of “common sense” intuition, and as a result, is imprisoned by these “common sense” categories. As I mentioned earlier, dialectics are useful for how they can help their user interrogate “common sense” categories and see past their walls. It is impossible to understand *Capital* well without first understanding dialectics and the value of the dialectical method. Trying to understand *Capital* under a positivist framework inevitably leads to concluding that value theory is metaphysical nonsense, that commodity fetishism is a load of Hegelian bunk, that Marx should be rejected because he’s supposedly often empirically wrong, and that Marx was just trying to assert a better science of political economy, instead of what he was really trying to do, which is write a critique of political economy altogether.

Even outside of *Capital* and the critique of political economy, dialectics serve as a useful heuristic (only a heuristic, and not a law of nature) for understanding many aspects about the social world. There is a great deal of interplay between subject and object, and between theory and practice in human efforts to understand and interact with the social world, and as a result, dialectics can be used for the study of categories, developments, transformations, internal contradictions, correspondences, inversions, simple concepts, complex concepts formed from simpler concepts, etc. Dialectics can give us the chance to dispel a lot of the mystifications of the social world, such as certain material or mental constructs seeming eternal, ahistorical, or self-justified, as well as the mysteriousness and inexplicability of social reality when only seen as a rigid totality consisting of a composition of atomic facts.

I hope you enjoyed this presentation on dialectics and found it to be useful!

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