

## THE CONCEPT OF DIALECTIC

GEORGE J. STACK

The conception of dialectic has had a long and checkered career, one which, in some recent forms of philosophy, has by no means come to an end. Although there have been no recent attempts to provide a comprehensive history of the evolution of the concept of dialectic, in the last century Rudolf Eisler attempted to compile a series of uses of, and references to, the term in his *Wörterbuch der philosophischen Begriffe*, 'Dialektik'. Since then, there have been a number of independent surveys of the various modes of dialectic in the context of the thought of Plato, Hegel, Marx and Engels, and Kierkegaard that indicate that the notion has not had and still does not have a universally accepted meaning. It is my purpose here to sketch some of the central uses of the concept of dialectic and to delineate its fundamental forms. Bracketing discussion of Engels' often criticized and philosophically vulnerable *Dialectic of Nature*, it will be argued that the concept of dialectic, as a hermeneutic instrument, is not by any means useless or outmoded nor solely confined to its employment in traditional, dogmatic, or revisionist Marxism or even post-Marxian analyses. The notion of dialectic has specific and illuminating application to basic aspects of human experience and functioning that no other conception seems to serve in precisely the same way.

### ***Meanings of Dialectic***

In the history of Western thought the notion of dialectic has undergone a considerable number of transformations. Generally speaking, the concept has tended to pass from a designation of certain specifiable forms of thinking (or reasoning) to a metaphysical or

ontological conception of the nature of social and physical processes and thence on to yet another modality of thinking or reasoning.

For Socrates, dialectic seems to have been a form of argumentation that was in the service of the clarification of concepts or the precision of definitions. The Socratic method was described as dialectical in order to distinguish it from the eristic of the Sophists. By means of question and answer interrogation Socrates tried to show that the views of his opponents rested upon premises that were not clearly understood and which were contradicted by attempts to defend them against his attacks. By coaxing his opponents into qualifying their original theses or seeing their ultimate negative consequences, Socrates undermined or nullified their initial standpoint. The use of *elenchus* is both destructive and constructive. In his ironic interrogation of others Socrates appears to have sought to discover truths in the form of definitions and to stimulate them to see the contradictions in their positions and to seek truth for themselves. The logical aim of Socrates, insofar as this can be known, seems to be to reveal internal contradictions in the views of his opponents. Thus, dialectic, in Socrates' hands, is primarily a critical method of reasoning or argumentation. His method of *elenchus* has sometimes been identified simply as dialectical reasoning or, more generally, as philosophical reasoning *per se*.

Socrates' psychological aim (which is closely related to his irony) seems to have been to show others that they do not truly believe what they have argued for or that they have not thought out the implications of their positions in regard to their own lives or the lives of others. Insofar as he was concerned with "soul-building" or the stimulation of reflective self-consciousness in others, Socrates' critical reasoning was in the service of a psychagogic purpose. In the use of what Kierkegaard aptly called his "dialectic of reflection" Socrates invariably had a moral aim and ultimately sought a conversion of 'the other.' Socrates' dual purpose seems to have been to stimulate critical thinking as well as to generate a subjective concern for the awakening of a potentiality for ethical self-consciousness in others. The moral purpose of dialectic even seems to be present in the linkage between knowledge (not only of the good, but of the self) and ethical existence insofar as there is an implied dialectical relationship between reflective self-consciousness and an "examined" (hence, morally self-conscious) existence. While Socrates was a masterful practitioner of dialectic, it was Plato who first attempted to formulate a theory of dialectical thinking.

For Plato, dialectic (διαλεκτική) is a kind of reasoning that seeks the ultimate first principle of all things, a movement of thought that appeals neither to imagination nor sense-perception and which presumably would lead to absolute or evident principles. Dialectic is also the scrutiny of the indefinables and indemonstrables of the various 'sciences.' The constructive phase of such a mode of dialectical thinking would be the deduction of the consequences that follow from ultimate principles. Dialectic is said to lead to the direct comprehension of "the Good" as the ground of being and value. In later philosophical terminology, it may be said that, for Plato, dialectic is a form of *a priori* reasoning that seeks the ultimate conditions for the possibility of knowledge, value, and intelligible existence. The dialectician seeks to find the basis for diverse forms of knowledge in principles having a self-evident necessity.

Although Plato characterizes dialectic as the "keystone" of philosophy, it seems to be the case that it is a method of reasoning that provides the basis for the *beginning* of philosophy, as Plato understands it. As the 'science of knowledge,' dialectic is ostensibly a presupposition-less pursuit of synoptic or unifying principles of intelligibility as such. In this sense, it is as much at the base of Plato's metaphysical pyramid as at its apex. For it is the means by which the principle of intelligibility (the condition for the possibility of any knowledge whatsoever) is discovered or, more cautiously, postulated.

What Plato seemed to be seeking in his use of the logic of dialectic was both the ultimate, irreducible, logically primitive notions without which philosophy would not be possible and the ultimate, unifying principles of all of the sciences. While the precise nature of dialectic is by no means transparently clear in Plato's writings, it is clear that it is not a form of inductive or deductive reasoning. It appears to be a kind of rational intuition that later emerges as a speculative use of reason (*Vernunft*). What complicates matters is that Plato, in his later dialogues, uses the term dialectic to refer to a method of division or διαίρεσις.

Platonic dialectic cannot be applied to empirical phenomena or to the phenomenological specificity of individuals. In this sense, it must be sharply distinguished from the concept of dialectic found in the thought of Hegel, Kierkegaard, and the Marxist. As a mode of thinking, Platonic dialectic is the "giving and receiving of a rational account (λόγος) of things," an analysis of the relationship among the forms (as, for example, in *The Sophist*). In *The Sophist* Plato employs dialectic as a means of arriving at logically primitive concepts (e.g., the "greatest kinds" that are

suggested as candidates—being, rest, motion, same and other). The purely logical use of dialectic is shown in the attempt to classify according to kind (γένος). However, insofar as dialectic is also concerned with the search for the ultimate principles of being, it is a method that is in the service of ontology, even though the separation of logic from ontology is, strictly speaking, precluded in an account of Plato's metaphysics. As Plato describes it (and employs it) dialectic appears to be a form of thinking by which one is led to a comprehension of logico-ontological primitive concepts as well as universal synoptic principles of intelligibility. Paradoxically, considering Plato's varying uses of dialectic, it is both a logically reductive form of reasoning as well as a speculative use of reason in quest of holistic first principles.

In Aristotle's thought dialectical reasoning underwent something of a devaluation. It is said to proceed from premises that are merely probable or which are based upon the common opinions of men or, at least, of some distinguished men. Dialectical reasoning is a tool of rhetoric for Aristotle, but it is not without value in certain forms of rational discourse. Thus, Aristotle himself displays dialectical thinking in his treatment of the laws of contradiction and the excluded middle in Book Gamma of the *Metaphysics*. Dialectics deals with those subject-matters in which there is no obvious apodictic demonstration. Dialectical reasoning is, to some extent, tentative, problematic, and experimental. In the *Topics* Aristotle describes the aims of dialectic as (1) a method of cognitive exercise, (2) an art of argumentation by which one can dispute an opponent on his or her own grounds, and (3) as a process of criticism that leads to the principles of all inquiries. The last characteristic of dialectical reasoning is an echo of Plato's composition of the method of dialectic. It is a form of reasoning, Aristotle holds, that does not lead to logical proof, but terminates in an intuition of principles. As a kind of informal mode of syllogistic reasoning dialectic, in a sense, resembles inductive rather than deductive reasoning. Although the premises of such reasoning do not rely on sensory experience per se, they may be derived from commonly held opinions or beliefs. Thus, dialectical reasoning may be concerned with the "thesis" of a prominent philosopher (specifically, a paradoxical opinion) or with a hypothetical "thesis" for which plausible arguments can be presented.

Because of its relatively free, speculative nature or form, dialectic can easily slide into sophistry. However, it is still thought of as a specific kind of reasoning that has a legitimate and useful function in philosophical

discourse even though it is not, strictly speaking, the proper or ideal method of philosophical reasoning. Insofar as dialectic is a means by which first principles may be discovered or elucidated, it is obvious that it is a form of reasoning that plays a prominent role in Aristotle's constructive metaphysics itself. It is perhaps for this reason, among others, that Abelard considered Aristotle to be the greatest authority on dialectic.

By the time of the period of Roman philosophy, with the notable exception of the prevalence of dialectic in Stoic logic, *dialectic* came to refer, as, for example, in the writings of Cicero, to "discussion" or to one who was a "logician." Clearly, its previous specific meanings had been lost and only a rather vague and general conception of dialectic remained.

With the exception of its use in Stoic logic and in the numerous disputations of medieval thinkers, dialectic did not become central to the work of any major thinker before Hegel gave it its distinctive modern form. Dialectical reasoning or argumentation was revived in medieval philosophy and was frequently employed in discussions of subtle theological issues. Thirteenth century commentators on Aristotle's logic generated the idea that dialectic was of fundamental importance, especially in regard to argumentative technique. The growing concern with logic and language or the 'logic of language,' especially in later medieval thought, was linked to a reliance upon probable reasoning (essentially dialectical reasoning) and generated a tendency to deal with theological and philosophical questions as disputed questions that may not, or perhaps could not lead to apodictic conclusions. The fundamental mode of argumentation and reasoning (especially after its endorsement by Peter of Spain in the thirteenth century) in medieval philosophy was dialectical. With the emergence of the philosophy of Hegel and its profound impact on Western thought, dialectical reasoning became, for a time, *the* method of philosophical thought and inquiry.

### ***Hegelian Dialectic***

For Hegel, dialectic is the distinguishing characteristic of speculative thought or the speculative use of reason (*Vernunft*). Whereas Kant held that dialectic deals critically with the specific difficulties (e.g., the antinomies and paralogisms) that arise out of the "transcendental illusion" that one can apply the categories of the understanding beyond

the realm to which they are appropriate (i.e., the realm of phenomena), Hegel, ignoring Kant's warning, thought that dialectical thinking entails "the self-supersession of the finite determinations of the understanding (*Verstand*)," the development of notion beyond the limited one-sidedness of the categories of the understanding. In an ironic way, Hegel did remain faithful to Kant's treatment of the speculative uses of reason as dialectical and to his view that there is a natural tendency of reason to seek to go beyond the domain of empirical phenomena, to seek a comprehension of a "self-subsistent whole." To be sure, Kant himself held that a dialectical, speculative use of reason could only be in the service of the "practical" interest of reason and, hence, ultimately dealt with the realm of the theoretically possible. In a sense, Hegel retrieved reason from its restricted use in Kant's thought (in terms of its employment in *praktische Vernunft* and the projection of "ideals") and reinstated it as the crown jewel of philosophical thinking.

In Hegel's thought dialectic is not only a mode of thinking in terms of oppositions, contrary tendencies, polarities, or antitheses that leads to speculative reflection which unites and synthesizes the oppositions that dialectic discloses. Rather, it is a pervasive ontological trait of "the world." It is the primary principle of all movement, all activity in actuality (*Wirklichkeit*). "Wherever there is movement," Hegel tells us, "wherever there is life, wherever anything is carried into effect in the actual world, there dialectic is at work" (*Lesser Logic*, 81). There is a dialectical process at work even in shifts of mood, in the psychological development of the individual. Actuality, for Hegel, is entirely paradoxical and the finite world is pervaded with mutability and transitoriness. All later forms of dialectical theory are derived from, or are variations of, this Hegelian notion of universal dialectical processes. The ultimate dialectical process, for Hegel, is the "spiritual dialectic" that is construed as immanent in history, the temporal manifestations of the objective teleology of the Absolute.

Although Hegel's conception of dialectic is both a particular mode of thinking and a metaphysics of actuality, he often appeals to empirical data in order to illustrate the workings of dialectical processes. Often he seems to conceive of physical or empirical event-processes as signs or symbols of the hidden presence and operation of a spiritual process. In general, Hegel assumed a correspondence between dialectical thought-processes and concrete actuality (an identity not so much of thought and being as thought and becoming). This correspondence is repeatedly

affirmed by Marxist thinkers even though they insist upon the independent existence of genuine material dialectical processes and has been reaffirmed in Sartre's *Critique de la raison dialectique* in a somewhat less dogmatic form. In both the process of dialectical thinking (in which one notion invariably leads us to the thought of its opposite and to a mediating notion) and the dialectic of actuality it is assumed that there is a kind of immanent necessity.

What had formerly been conceived of as a mode of argumentation or probable reasoning was transformed into a conceptual process that "moved" from notion to notion in an ostensibly necessary sequence. Although Hegel himself never seems to have expressed his formula for dialectical thinking precisely as the transition from thesis to antithesis to synthesis, this pattern of thought that has been frequently attributed to him is, ironically, an appropriate model for his conception of dialectical thinking. A particular thesis or "Idea" gives rise to or generates an antithetical notion and then both "Ideas" are *aufgehoben* (preserved and nullified or "sublated") in a higher synthesis. In "What is Dialectic?" (1940), Karl Popper acknowledges the validity of this formula in regard to the history of philosophy and, indeed, one can find some interesting analogies there. Rationalism becomes a "dominant Idea" that, in time, gives rise to its opposite, empiricism, and Kant, in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, creates an *aufgehoben* of both in his new synthesis. But there are also many anomalous progressions of philosophical thought and one may question whether, for example, rationalism inevitably produced an antithetical empiricism out of itself. And what is one to make, according to the supposed Hegelian formula, of the recent continental "movement" of thought from existentialism to structuralism to post-structuralism to post-modernism? Could Rorty's eclectic synthesis of Heidegger, Wittgenstein, and Dewey be easily accounted for by applying a thesis-antithesis-synthesis formula?

In Hegel's use of dialectic, he often seems to guide and direct the "movement" of thought in terms of relationships that are sometimes questionable, if not, on occasion, arbitrary. Strictly speaking, he cannot justify the necessity of the relationship among notions as a relationship of entailment. Hegel is concerned, in his broader view of dialectic, with transitions of thought as manifested in the history of philosophy. For example, he explicitly refers to the transformations of thought from the pre-Socratics to his own concept of "the Idea" as self-conscious spirit in his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*. He seems to present his own

thought as the grand synthesis, the ultimate *aufgehoben* that preserves and nullifies all previous thought in the history of Western philosophy.

As Hegel actually employs it, dialectic is a kind psychologistic logic of impressionistic conceptual relations. Quite often he characterizes dialectic as a process of inner conflict. Even though dialectical processes are immanently present in the natural world, and especially in human history, Hegel construes dialectic primarily as a spiritual (*geistiges*) phenomenon. In this sense, it is not only a specific mode of thinking insofar as spirit is the dynamic, self-conscious *nisus* characteristic of an individual or a people.

In the *Phenomenology of Spirit* Hegel was concerned with a description of the spiritual development of man (as “rational subject”) as it evolved through stages representing various historical world-orientations. Spiritual evolution, as presented in Hegel’s phenomenology, is concerned with how men (and entire peoples) experienced consciousness, with the cognitive-emotive orientations or ideational commitments of historical epochs.

Because Hegel incorporates emotive and, *a fortiori*, valuational elements into his ingenious phenomenology of the various “forms of consciousness,” there is a clear and strong psychologistic component in his conception of dialectical spiritual processes. For it is not only in his philosophy of history that Hegel believes that “Nothing great has been achieved without passion.” Even the opposition (*Entgegensetzung*) that he contends is generated by a one-sided notion is not merely conceptual; it is psychological as well.

Although Popper discerns the “metaphorical” nature of Hegel’s idea of dialectic (and is completely unsympathetic to it), he tends to ignore or put aside the impressionistic and psychologistic aspects of Hegel’s use of dialectic. In “What is Dialectic?” Popper hammers away, with considerable effect, at the questionable notion of a “logic of contradiction.” His critique of Hegel’s conception of dialectic is focused on this point and attacks the disastrous effects that the admission of literal contradiction would have on “logical inference.” Even granting the validity of this criticism, there is a sense in which Popper, by bracketing the “metaphorical” aspects of Hegel’s understanding of the nature of dialectic, slides past the novel and imaginative nature of the psychologism that Hegel incorporates into what might otherwise be “bloodless’ abstractions.



The psychologistic nature of dialectical thinking may be illustrated by a striking paragraph in Hegel's *Science of Logic*. Concerning what he construes as the negativity of finitude, he maintains that

When we say of things that they are finite, we mean thereby... that non-being constitutes their nature and their being. Finite things are; but their relation to themselves is that they are related to themselves as something negative, and in this self-relation send themselves on beyond themselves and their being. They are, but the truth of this Being is their end. The finite does not only change... it perishes; and its perishing is not merely contingent... It is rather the very being of finite things that they contain seeds of perishing as their own Being-in-Self, and the hour of their birth is the hour of their death.

Aside from the fact that there is more than an anticipation of Heidegger's description of the *Endlichkeit* or finiteness in the being of *Dasein* in this passage, it shows that Hegel's dialectical analysis is not, in a strict sense, logically correct (i.e., from a purely logical point of view it makes no sense to state that non-being "constitutes" the nature and *being* of finite entities), but is a psychologistic reflection upon the being of the obvious paradigm for all finite beings, man. The ostensible "non-being" in the being of non-human beings is not something (as far as we know) that such entities are aware of in self-reflection. Rather, it is attributed to them by a human being. As capable of a self-reflective relation to himself or herself, man discovers a negativity at the heart of his or her being. This disclosure of what a human being "is not" reveals a limitation in his or her being. In Spinoza's terms, determination entails negation and negation entails determination. The other aspect of this self-reflection, the one that Hegel emphasizes, is the anticipation of the possibility (and inevitability) of one's death, the finitude disclosed in the knowledge that one is, as Heidegger later expresses it, "being-unto-death." In both Heidegger's stress on *Sein-zum-Tode*, as well as in Hegel's emphasis upon the relation between birth and death, one can detect the philosophical appropriation of a fundamental Christian preoccupation.

Hegel's dialectical analysis of finitude is neither contradictory nor unintelligible. From a subjective standpoint we understand quite well what he is saying even though it does not fit too neatly into a standard deductive argument. Hegel's originality lies precisely in his unorthodox practice of projecting psychological (or, for that matter, "existential") reflections into modes of discourse that many contemporary philosophers

would insist must be non-psychologistic. Of course, this raises the question whether it is possible to strip philosophical discourse of the psychological accretions that have been attached to language in its diachronic development or to neutralize the emotive effects of language-use in a particular cultural ambience. An analysis of the logic of language does not necessarily disclose the immanence of the psychic meaning of discourse.

### ***Dialectic in Kierkegaard and Marx***

For Hegel, human existence is a process of spiritual self-transcendence, a teleological movement entailing conflict. Freedom is possible only on the basis of the interaction of thought and impulse, reflection and feeling. Absolute freedom, which is merely a theoretical or conceptual possibility, would require the unimpeded expression of the "subjective will." For Hegel, as well as for Kierkegaard, human existence itself is conceived of as dialectical. The central difference between Hegel and Kierkegaard in regard to the idea of dialectic is that, for Kierkegaard, there is no necessity either in the dialectic of reflection or the dialectic of life, only contingency. Although Kierkegaard does suggest that the past is immured in the domain of necessity (insofar as what has been is immutable) and that there is necessity in the being of man (inherited traits, conditions of our existence that were not chosen, all that one has already thought, experienced, and done, etc.), he persistently denies that transitions from possibility to actuality are necessary and insists that the future is a realm of indeterminate possibility. In addition, he denies that there is an immanent (knowable) objective teleology in history or a universal spiritual dialectic governing all events even to the point of calling attention, in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, to the ambiguity of the 'evidence' in actuality for the operation of divine providence.

The dialectic of reflection is central to Kierkegaard's concept of the dynamic nature of the self, its capacity for objective and subjective consciousness, as well as to the ability to relate paradoxical notions. Even though subjective reflection is paradoxical (because the "ideality" of language and conceptual thought is related to the existential actuality of the self), Kierkegaard contends (in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*) that the self-conscious individual is the only truly known reality insofar as only such a being can apprehend himself or herself in immediate actuality. Every other entity is known only in relation to the reflective,

conceptual activity of the individual. That is, every other entity is comprehended via conceptual or imaginative possibility. Perception is a dialectical interaction of subject and object. Hence, empirical knowledge is an "approximation process" that is based upon factual judgments that are construed as probabilistic. When Sartre later says that man understands dialectical processes because they are manifested in his being and thought processes, he is closer to Kierkegaard than to Marxist thinkers. For, unlike Hegel's theory of an objective dialectic at work in actuality, Kierkegaard's conception of dialectic is primarily anthropomorphic.

Although Marx claimed that he had turned Hegel's spiritual dialectic right side up and had conceived of dialectic as the direct opposite of Hegel's notion of dialectic, it is difficult to discern precisely what Marx's concept of dialectic was. To be sure, he did stress the dialectical relationship of interaction and conflict between classes, a conflict he considered "the motive force in history." And, in general, he agreed with Hegel that dynamic change is the central characteristic of actuality, that nothing exists in isolation, that the being of every entity is relational.

Marx held that history is an intelligible process subject to ineluctable "laws" of socio-historical development. He focused his attention primarily on the internal dialectical process of capitalist development. Dialectic, for the most part, pertains to socio-historical phenomena, not all phenomena. The basic ingredient of Marx's concept of dialectic is what Marcuse (in *Reason and Revolution*) called "the negative character of reality."

The interpretation of the negative in actuality is a transference to the socio-historical world of Hegel's conception of *Negativität* or negativity as the subjective, destructive principle determining the process of knowledge. Thus, the negative character of history is rooted in a general social condition that is associated with a specific historical form of society. Just as Hegel held that thought "moves" by way of negativity, so, too, did Marx claim that significant historical change occurred by virtue of the negative in socio-historical actuality. This notion becomes somewhat ambiguous in its looser usages in the sense that one could claim that *all* historical situations are subject to change and, hence, there is, in Hegelian terms, a "negativity" in all history. For, whatever is prevalent at any given period of history may eventually be negated. But this loose sense of the term "negativity" does not require that one embrace a Marxian standpoint since it can be generally admitted that there are such

'negations' in the historical process. Change, by its very nature, entails what may legitimately be characterized as 'negation.'

Where Marx's conception of dialectic is applied most typically, most directly, and most effectively is in regard to the supposed evolution of capitalism in general and capitalist societies in particular. But even in this regard, his predictions about the outcome of the internal transformations of capitalism and its eventual 'negation' (i.e., the "negation of the negation" within the capitalist system) showed him to be a poor prophet. Of course, it could be argued that by creating a strong theoretical opposition to nineteenth century capitalism Marx, in an ironic way, served (because of the threat, which existed for a century or more, that modern communism and socialism posed to capitalist systems until recently) as a stimulus to the modification of, and relative reform of, capitalism. Hence it contributed to the paradoxical counterfinality of its continuation and recrudescence. Many contemporary critics of Marxism fail to acknowledge the *positive* historical effects that its antithetical threat and powerful critiques had on the reformation of the very economic system whose demise it predicted and sought to hasten. One might say that in this instance there was a curious kind of dialectic at work, a paradoxical counterfinality that neither Marx nor Marxists envisioned.

Reducing Marx's idea of dialectic to its essence, it is most apparent in the description of the conflict between classes in the economic and social history of man and in the inevitability of socio-historical change that is fueled by class conflict. Because he focused on the dominant social classes in each historical epoch Marx did not concern himself with multiple, coeval social classes or sub-classes and barely said anything about microsociology. The conception of the relationship among the material conditions of life, the modes of production, and social relations is not described as a dialectical one, but a causal one. And the relation between the material and economic substructure and the ideological or theoretical superstructure in societies at a stage of their history is causal, not (as it has been characterized by others to have been and to be) dialectical. This is somewhat surprising since, especially in the *Grundrisse der Kritik der politischen Ökonomie*, Marx is keenly aware of the impact that (theoretically, conceptually, and ideationally produced) technological innovations have on the "modes of production" in a given society. Invention and applied science require the evolution of human thought and knowledge (which, for Marx, are superstructural factors) *before* they are embodied in material and, *a fortiori*, economic form.

Marx did not hold that there is an immanent dialectical process manifested in *all* phenomena. Rather, he claimed that the concept of dialectic should primarily be applied to socio-historical phenomena and processes. For this reason, he did not develop a metaphysics of dialectical materialism. That was more a product of the writings of Engels (especially *Dialectics of Nature*), V. I. Lenin, Stalin, and a host of official explicators of the doctrine of DIAMAT.

In Marx's historical materialism there is projected a dialectical process of reciprocal interactions between man and man across material conditions that are transformed by economic practices, as well as by social *praxis* and crystallized institutions. Only in the most primitive conditions of life does man confront nature directly. As early as his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* (1844) Marx maintained that the nature that confronts man is already an *anthropomorphische Natur*, a nature that has already been shaped by man, by his modes of production, by his social being.

Ironically, despite his avowed materialist theory of history, Marx did not concern himself primarily with those societies that were limited in their development by virtue of the actual, material, environmental conditions of existence. What Toynbee called "arrested" societies interest him not at all. It is only a mature, highly productive capitalist system that could provide the materio-social conditions for the possibility of the development of Marx's socialist and communist communities. Perhaps this is why the attempt to graft communism onto the agrarian economies of the U.S.S.R. and China was doomed from the start.

Marx's view that as soon as an ostensible classless society could be formed the dialectical forces that had stimulated socio-economic change would no longer be operative generates an internal contradiction in relation to the goal of Marxism. For, it undermines its own basic principles, to say nothing of the utopian nature of idealized communist societies in which individuals will possess a pure communal consciousness, eschew self-interest, renounce the desire for private property, and labor voluntarily outside the constraints of the division of labor.

Despite the constant conjunction of dialectics and Marx's thought, it is not Marx himself who developed an all-encompassing, consistent theory of dialectical processes. However, it is the case that in his *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* he did elucidate the dialectical interplay among social groups and social forces with greater lucidity and more

empirical references than he did in his later works. The other instance in which one might say that Marx adopted a clear dialectical interpretation of social phenomena is in his analysis of the contradiction between the material productive forces of society and the existing relations of production (which entail broadly conceived social relations) in nineteenth century capitalism.

There is no doubt that there are some dialectical interactions between forces of production and relations of production in a limited sphere of social existence. But there is not and cannot be, in any strict sense, any *contradiction* in regard to such large-scale phenomena. That is, the so-called contradiction is not inherent in the economic system itself, but can only arise if one covertly introduces a universal, humanitarian (if not moral) principle. For example, that 'All the value or profit of the total productive activity in a society ought to be equally distributed among those who engage in that productive activity.' Aside from the fact that Marx (despite his literary, economic, and philosophical knowledge and valuation of creativity) had a somewhat prejudicial concept of "productive activity" —capitalists or "owners of the means of production" and the emerging class of managers are usually caricatured as parasitic exploiters of workers—, and had no provisos for the ineluctably "unproductive" members of society (infants and very young children, the elderly and the feeble, the physically and mentally ill, etc.), the principle cited is obviously meta-empirical and not derived from a 'scientific' analysis of any socioeconomic system. The notion that any social or economic system has genuine contradictions immanent in it is a myth, a notion which has no factual basis. As a "scientific" account of socioeconomic dynamics this aspect of Marxist thought is more ideological than, in any strict sense, 'scientific.

Curiously enough, Lenin (who more typically refers to "contradictions" in actuality and society) occasionally refined his position, especially in his *Notes on Hegel's Logic*, by maintaining that in examining dialectical development we should search for "the inner contradictory tendencies" in entities, phenomena, and events. This was an important qualification, one which, since it was already acceptable to historians and sociologists, would have made Marxist theoretical claims more generally acceptable. To be sure, Lenin's efforts to describe the correspondence between dialectical thinking (which was never adequately defined) and external dialectical interactions led him to formulate an easily refuted "picture" theory of knowledge.

In regard to the relationship between the individual and his or her social class, Marx prescinded a dialectical interpretation. In *The German Ideology* he remarks that the development of individuals, in typical reductionist manner, is “predetermined” by their class membership. Although sensitive to the supposed dialectical relationship of conflict between the dominant social classes, Marx has little to say about the dialectical relationship between individuals, between individuals within a social class, or between the individual and his or her social class.

The often cited idea of the ‘negativity’ of the dialectical process of history emerges from Marx’s view that all social forms are “fluid,” transient, subject to inevitable transformation. This general Hegelian notion is one that is shared by a variety of thinkers and particularly by philosophers of ‘becoming’ such as Nietzsche. While he denies that dialectical processes are logical, Marx insisted that they conform to universal ‘laws’ of development. In effect, chance factors are excluded from the historical process. However, the denial of chance occurrences seems odd in a dialectical conception of history insofar as one would suspect that if there are complex dialectical interactions (particularly on a global scale), then these would generate numerous chance-like or stochastic socio-historical phenomena. Here Marx was inclined to retain the Hegelian idea that there is necessity in the historical process. For he certainly held that every social system is characterized by an in-dwelling, inherent (necessary) negativity. Otherwise, change would not, according to his theory of historical materialism, occur.

For Marx, as well as Hegel, a dialectical mode of understanding is appropriate whenever one is dealing with “movement,” wherever there is life, wherever dynamic effects are produced. Whereas Hegel thought that he could create a logic of contradiction that could be used to describe such dynamic processes, Marx (and Kierkegaard in regard to personal existence) endeavored to provide descriptions of socioeconomic phenomena that were at least related to actual empirical phenomena. The empirical data that Marx focused upon were related to history, social change, social classes and the interrelations of classes, productive human activity in general, and the development of institutions, organizations, and economic systems. In regard to primitive communalism, he relied heavily on the detailed studies of the economy and tribal kinship relations of Iroquois Indians in the writings of the American anthropologist Lewis Morgan. Since Morgan anticipated by a century the kinship studies of Lévi-Strauss, it is curious that Marx did not seem to

notice that Morgan described (particularly in his *League of the Iroquois*) a clearly delineated social structure in which social roles, functions, status, social differentiations, and social bonds flourished in what he construed as a primitive *communist* society. If he had attended to this aspect of Morgan's studies, it may have given him pause or made him wonder whether his vision of a future, post-capitalist "classless" society composed of socially undifferentiated people living in non-dialectical, de-structured communal harmony was a chimera.

In his earlier writings, particularly in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, Marx appeals to the notion that modern man, living under an unjust socio-economic system, has been alienated from his essence, his "species-essence" (*Gattungswesen*). He projects this essence back into the remote past, but offers the promise of its retrieval. But insofar as this notion is emphasized, Marx is positing a mythological condition of freedom, one which his own account of socio-economic development undermines. For it is in industrialized, technologically advanced, highly organized civilizations that the kind of essential freedom of man's "species-essence" that Marx projects would be possible or conceivable.

The extension of freedom to more and more groups and individuals has coincided not only with the rise of democratic values (which, as Hegel and Nietzsche claimed, are indebted to the ideals of Christianity), but with an enormous increase in technical and economic power. The more primitive the conditions of life, the more degraded the material conditions of life, the less individual freedom man has. The more people are subject to the vicissitudes of the natural environment (in the absence of technology, communication, emergency plans, and medical services), the less free they are. When men are ignorant of the forces of nature, of the cause and prevention of disease, of basic science, when they are radically dependent upon the fruits of nature in their immediate environment, there is not so much a dialectical relation between them and the natural world as a one-directional causal dependence. It is only as people become relatively free from radical dependence on the natural world or their local material environment that the dialectical nature of individual and group development becomes manifest.

Primitive, communal societies are not generally conducive to the development of individuality or individual freedom. Ironically, Marx himself believed this. For, in his *Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations*, he contended that as man transcends his spontaneous natural evolution (*naturwüchsig*) he then has the capacity, by means of the development



of an economic system of exchange, for individualization (*vereinzelt sich*). It is for this reason that the freedom of man (via the recovery of his essence) that he speaks of in his manuscripts of 1844 cannot be found in an idyllic past, but may only be possible in an imagined post-capitalist future. Seeking to avoid an obvious utopianism, Marx views his imagined pure communist society as emerging out of and built upon the co-opted capitalistic productive system which has been 'negated' in its original, exploitative, and class-divided form, but preserved as what he considered as the most productive economic system in the history of the world. Marx's conception of the 'becoming' of modern communism is a paradigmatic model of a Hegelian dialectical *aufgehoben*.

Neither Marx nor Kierkegaard worked out a comprehensive unitary theory of dialectics. Marx tended to accumulated selective collections of economics facts and social data and present them as evidence of the prevalence of dialectical processes. Both he and Engels insisted on the scientific nature of their socio-historical theory of development. But it is the case that theory was driving the empirical data that was gathered. Hegelian philosophical principles and moral valuations (as appropriate as they may have been) continuously intrude upon what was supposed to be a scientific theory of development. Both Engels and Marx were furious when the German philosopher and economic theorist Eugen Dühring proclaimed that the famous "dialectic" was actually nothing more than yet another *a priori* conception. Engels (with some anonymous help from Marx) paid Dühring the compliment of seeking to refute him in an interesting and revealing polemic, *Anti-Dühring*.

In the case of Kierkegaard, the empirical source of his "primitive impressions of existence" was a kind of phenomenological psychology of the dynamics of individual existence in which he discerned, among other things, the "existential categories" (which were precursors of Heidegger's *existentialia*) that comprised his philosophical anthropology. Even though he followed Hegel in trying to approximate the dialectical nature of the self and the "dialectic of life," Kierkegaard was self-consciously aware of the impressionistic, psychologistic nature of his project. In *Either/Or* he remarks, in passing, that "a philosophy of the concrete" is not possible and in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* he maintains that an "existential science" is impossible. Language and conceptualization, he held, transform existential actuality into forms of "ideality." Both the endeavor to attain empirical knowledge and to understand "the existential" are, at best, approximation-processes. In his journals he notes

the difference between “conceptual existence” and the lived experience of actual existence. Against the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus*, he would have denied that language pictures the world insofar as language involves “idealization” in the sense of a transformation into an “ideality” or into what has recently been characterized as “the linguistic *a priori*.”

Unlike Hegel, Marx did not develop either a conception of dialectical thinking or of the correspondence between such a mode of thinking and actual dialectical processes. Hegel held that the dialectical method is a “reflection” of objective dialectical phenomena. Dialectical thought-processes (*die Dialektik*) are applicable to actuality because actuality is dialectical in its nature. In this sense, Hegel was the originator of the notion that dialectic pictures the world as it is, a notion adopted by Lenin (with a materialistic twist) and repeated by Soviet epistemologists up to recent times.

Whereas Marx sometimes vacillated between saying that individuals are the creators, to some extent, of dialectical processes by virtue of their energetic, productive activity (which, in turn, conditions their further activities and their lives) and that individuals were fragmentary elements of a powerful socio-historical dialectic over which they, as individuals, had no control, Kierkegaard contended that the most important dialectical process is the dialectic of life manifested in the personal development of subjective individuals and particularly in the existence of those who took up responsibility for their lives and sought to actualize their “potentiality-for” a striving after an “ideal self” by means of a freely chosen “subjective teleology.” Kierkegaard admitted that the concept of necessity may be applicable to the natural world and (global) history, but neglects to point to the dialectical character of this necessity. Dialectic is found in the thinking, the experiences, and the “movements” of the reflective individual. Unlike Hegel, Kierkegaard denied that there is a correspondence relationship between dialectical thinking (which, although negative and polemical, is directed towards relations between concepts and the exposure of paradoxes, but is paradigmatically found in self-reflexive thought) and a supposed dialectical actuality. Reflections on existence itself are dialectical in nature. That is, they are characterized by paradox, opposition, asymptotic approximation, and conflicting notions.

While Kierkegaard was apprised of the reciprocal (hence, dialectical) relations between individuals in which subjective consciousnesses encounter each other without being able to grasp or comprehend their inevitably inaccessible “inwardness,” he tended to slight social existence

and class relationships. On the other hand, without developing a theory about it, he called attention in *Either/Or* to our social situation, to the determinations derived from our being born in a certain nation at a particular point in history and our belonging to a particular social class. In general, like Emerson, Nietzsche, and Heidegger, he opposed the genuine, self-reflective individual to the “crowd,” “the mass,” or society per se. Whereas Marx seemed to believe that individuals find their salvation in a just communally-oriented society, Kierkegaard almost invariably sees society as a threat to subjective existence and self-actualization. For the most part, “the crowd” lives in, and thinks in, “untruth.” Even though his general perception of social forces is negative, it is not the case that Kierkegaard has nothing to say about the socio-historical world. For, the centerpiece of Christianity is the paradoxical belief that God became man in time, in *history*. And his entire project of recalling man to the radix of subjectivity is antagonistic towards the megatrends he saw emerging in history: the rise of mass society, the devaluation of the individual, the worship of “world-historical” power, the devaluation of spirituality by virtue of the growth of the natural sciences, the erosion of individuality by virtue of increasing conformity, the desacralization of the world and life, the politicalization of life, etc. Temperamentally and intellectually Kierkegaard was an anti-communistic, anti-socialistic, and (in the sense of Hegel’s emphasis on “objective spirit” and “objective morality”) anti-structuralistic. Between the person who is concerned with “becoming subjective” and the socio-economic system there is only a tense, negative dialectic, a dialectic of repulsion. In the self, for Kierkegaard, there is an opposition between passion and reason, thought (and language) and actuality, an ineluctable “dialectical tension.” Existential thinking seeks, as far as this is possible, to disclose the oppositions, tensions, conflicting tendencies, proclivities, and states of consciousness that comprise the dynamic complexity of the self. Aware of the kaleidoscopic nature of the self and human experience, Kierkegaard remarks that, strictly speaking, an “existential science” is not possible. It is not possible, in part, because of the asymptotic relation between thought and the actuality of the self and the approximate relation between the “dialectic of reflection” and the living dialectic of the self.

Kierkegaard’s conception of the dialectic of life refers to the complex sequences of psychospiritual “movements” of individuals throughout their life-history, their “becoming.” While all dialectical phases or stages

of being are construed as contingent, there is a fundamental, inescapable dialectic at the heart of existence. There are basic oppositions in the self (primarily between passion and reason) that oscillate in terms of dominance throughout a person's life. Kierkegaard does not understand individuals as harmonious unities in which there is a balance of power among the various aspects of the self. Reason, body, spirit, imagination, and will do not coexist peacefully in the self.

Kierkegaard follows Hegel and goes beyond him in depicting the dynamic, relational, interactive nature of the reflective individual. Furthermore, there is an essential opposition or "conflict" (described in *Johannes Climacus*) between ideality (conceptualization and language) and actuality (concrete immediacy) that is a pervasive dialectical feature of Kierkegaard's reflections on existence. A conflict arises out of the attempt to relate what is called the "thought-world" to the concrete, finite, temporal actuality of the individual. The self-consciously reflective individual is characterized as being "in-between" (*inter-esse*) the "ideality" of thought and language and concrete actuality, as, by implication, being at the center of the dialectical oscillation of the two domains. And the existing individual never transcends (except in ethical or religious *pathos*) the dialectical tension of existence as long as he or she is immersed in temporal becoming. Existence does not mean, for Kierkegaard, being as such. Rather, it is "striving" or the intensification of subjective states of being (e.g., anxiety in the face of possibility, resolute choice, reflection on one's death, willed repetition in relation to a *telos* that gives meaning to existence, etc.). The dynamic movement of the self towards a *telos* that can never be realized in temporality is fueled by the dialectical interplay of, and opposition of, the "is" and "ought" in the self. When Kierkegaard describes human existence as contradictory and paradoxical, he could just as well have said it is essentially dialectical. Echoing Heraclitus and, *a fortiori*, Hegel, Kierkegaard avers that psychospiritual movement is not possible without opposition: in effect, it is because man's being is dialectical that he can, in a strict sense, *exist*.

In his dialectic of choice in *Either/Or* Kierkegaard shows the emergence of subjective concern (the choice is significant, not merely a matter of "aesthetic preference"), the tension between the actual self here and now and an ideal possibility, the individual's reflection on his or her past in relation to the future, the positing of the goal of choosing to live within the parameters of the principle of good and evil (i.e., to jettison an aesthetic mode of being and reject a nihilistic indifference), the

relating of *pathos* and reason in resolute choice (a variation on Aristotle's description of choice as a "desiring reason"). The intermixture of these elements in his account of genuine choice in regard to a guiding subjective *telos* displays the dialectical nature of the process of choice. In *The Sickness unto Death* an even more elaborate elucidation of a complex cognitive-emotive process is found: the dialectic of despair.

The dialectic of choice is not only comprised of internal tensions, but it is juxtaposed in opposition to the aesthetic way of life that itself has its own dialectic. An objective dialectic, such as that proposed by Hegel and Marxists is not a conceptual option insofar as what is discerned as dialectical requires a dynamic relation of thought (and language) and actuality, *pathos* and reason, as well as the psychic states that impinge upon an individual at significant moments of life. In our more typical modes of being Kierkegaard suggests, before Heidegger, we tend to drift with the flow of the conventional beliefs, attitudes, and opinions of "the crowd," to fall into the anonymous world of "the they," or we are simply bored or merely confronted with *adiaphoric* or morally neutral 'choices.'

Each of the spheres of existence has, for Kierkegaard, its own internal mode of dialectic. He was concerned with presenting what could be called an existential phenomenology of the various tensions, paradoxes, and oppositions of the aesthetic, ethical, and religious stages of existence. At times, he suggests the one-sidedness of any single sphere of existence, the possibility of an integration of the aesthetic, ethical, and religious modes of existence. But even then there is no higher synthesis of disparate (and internally dialectical) spheres of life. In the final analysis, the paradoxical nature of existence cannot be entirely transcended in temporality.

Insofar as Kierkegaard declares that in human life "everything is dialectical," he is committed to the view that the struggle or *ἀγών* of human life is pervaded by an interaction of numerous dialectical states of mind, conditions, and phases of development. Neither the accumulation of knowledge nor the longevity of experience can overcome the paradoxes of reflective self-existence. In this sense, it could be said that dialectic is one of the central ontological traits of the self-reflexive existing individual. Given that the dialectical aspects of thought and experience are described by Kierkegaard in language and linguistically expressed concepts, and given his theory of the differentiation of cognitive-linguistic forms and concrete actuality, it would seem that his dialectical interpretation of life and the self (in its "becoming") is itself

dialectical in nature or, differently stated, it is an “approximation-process.”

Where Kierkegaard’s dialectical analysis of existence is relatively weak is in his undeveloped conception of the place of the individual in the social world, of the dependence of each individual upon a complex network of social relations. As we’ve seen, he was not unaware of the “necessity” in the person, the conditioning factors that shape our being and act upon us. However, he thought that a clarified understanding of the causal factors that have acted upon us *a tergo* could be defused by a complete acceptance and appropriation of them. We could become, he thought, freed for possibilities we project even though we never completely negate the necessities in the self. But, once again, there is a dialectical interaction between necessity and possibility in the individual. And, in *The Sickness unto Death*, he calls attention to the danger of seeking to nullify the limits of the self (necessity) and seeking to live in the phantasmagoria of imagined possibility. The reflective dialectical movement from the acknowledged necessity in the self to (in Heidegger’s phrase) “the silent power of the possible” that emerges within protects the individual from becoming lost in the madness of the labyrinth of infinite possibility.

Kierkegaard’s dialectic of existence is not entirely incompatible with the structural aspects of Marx’s concept of dialectic. For, in his tracing of the devolution of romantic aestheticism in *Either/Or* there is a strongly implied critique of aristocratic decadence and a direct ironic exposure of the cynical hedonism of the leisure class. And, in *The Present Age*, we find a cultural and intellectual critique of the ideas and values of his time that anticipates, in a more ironic tone, Nietzsche’s polemic against modern man and modern ideas. Kierkegaard did have a sense of the power of history and culture, of social and political forces. He accurately predicted the revolutionary explosions that would emerge in a mass society in which an unholy mixture of science and politics was crowding out religion, ethical ideals, and the value of individuals. Although he rarely touches upon the economic factors that stimulate a historical or social dialectic, his corrective to the cultural tendencies of his time was reprised by the Marxist revisionist Leszek Kolakowski, who has said that the Marxist conception of historical determinism must be supplemented by an emphasis upon the moral responsibility, the freedom of choice, of each individual. Ironically, with the dissolution of Marxist governments there will not only be the problem of radical economic readjustment, but,

as people are granted more freedom, the difficulty of passing through the dialectical field of a Kierkegaardian existential anthropology may eventually have to be endured.

The addition of Kierkegaard's ideas of the dialectic of life and of the dialect in the self to a Marxian dialectic would deepen the complexity of human existence. It is not only in productive activity or political action that man discovers his being, but in his intensely subjective states as well. One could construe the psychological, conceptual dialectic of subjective consciousness as having a dialectical relationship to the larger socio-historical dialectic. It is simplistic and misleading to insist that the tensions and paradoxes of individuals are "caused" by or are a consequence of contradictions in the social, political, and economic domains of a society at a particular moment in history. To be sure, each individual is affected (sometimes in a significant or dramatic way) by the social and economic environment (as well as the natural environment) in which he or she lives. But individuals encounter dialectical tensions, oppositions, and conflicts in their personal existence that no economic or political system can eliminate. In this regard, Kierkegaard has provided an important emphasis upon the dialectical, unique, and often confusing aspects of reflective existence as it is lived and would be lived in any possible human world.

Whereas Marx's conception of dialectic refers to oppositions of class antagonism and the relationship between the individual and the forces of production (as well as to the social relations that are held to be derived from them), Kierkegaard (and, to some extent, Heidegger) holds that the actual existence of man is dialectical not only within, but in relation to what he called "the medium in which we live": the world. Heidegger, too, places stress on our relationship to the world (which is primarily a 'spiritual' environment rather than an *Umwelt* or surrounding world), to the "inner-worldly beings" within it, to other *Dasein*, in such a way as to disclose a kind of dialectic. In point of fact, the description of our "falling" into the inauthentic world of the "they-self" and our capacity to attain authentic existence (which is not presented as a permanent possession or state of being) is virtually the presentation of a dialectical oscillation between the two modes of being. For Kierkegaard, the highest mode of being requires the intensification of subjectivity in psychic "inwardness" (*Inderlighed*), in religious or ethical "striving." The similarity between Kierkegaard's psychologistic conception of intense subjectivity and Heidegger's ontological depiction of authentic *Dasein* is

made clear in an entry in his *Journals* in which he proclaims that an “authentic existence” is not possible unless one passes through the discipline of the ethical stage of life.

In contrast to Kierkegaard and Heidegger, Marx contended that it is only in the collective transcendence of the dialectical class oppositions that have hitherto generated historical change and in an authentic communal society that individuals can be emancipated, truly free, truly human. The freedom or “all-round development of the individual” will be possible, it is believed, when the socio-material world comes under the control of persons freed from egotism and greed, freed from social injustice and the negativities of a harsh, exploitative economic system. The question, which was raised earlier, is whether there is any reason to assume that the dialectical complexity of individual existence will be transcended even in the most ideal collectivistic society. Both Kierkegaard and Heidegger highlighted fundamental aspects of human existence that no social or economic order can delete. Even if individuals are freed from the bonds of necessity which have blocked their self-realization, they have not thereby negated the internal dynamics and tensions of the self. In fact, they may come to discover them for the first time. In *Johannes Climacus* Kierkegaard refers to the emergence of self-reflective consciousness (hence, possibility, choice, and responsibility) as the beginning of “the pain of becoming.” And would it not be expected that if and when individuals are emancipated from drudgery, slavish labor, exploitative and repressive socio-economic conditions of life that they, too, would sooner or later be faced with this same “pain of becoming”?

It is ironic that, for both Kierkegaard and Marx, there is an “ideal self” that is projected as the goal of a temporal teleology. For Marx this self is the free, creative, liberated social being of individuals who are no longer alienated from their essence by an economic system that converts them into commodities and things, that blocks the full realization of their humanness, their communal nature. As we’ve seen, there is a strong tendency in Marx’s thought to suggest that human beings had, in the past, been free from dialectical oppositions, antagonisms, and contradictions *in illo tempore*, perhaps in a cooperative, humane state of nature such as that depicted by Rousseau. At times, Marx places emphasis upon a return to what man was meant to be. In such instances he implies a kind of historical fall of man into social inauthenticity. But this would have to have been, according to his general theory of development,



something that happened as a result of economic evolution. The capitalistic economic system is the mature outcome of a long evolutionary process that extends from primitive communalism, through a slave economy, through feudalism, and up to itself. Since Marx treats this process of development as progressive and cannot say enough about the power and productive capacity of international market capitalism, the progressive evolution of man's modes of production is, paradoxically, the cause of the fallen, alienated condition of the expanding class of "workers." But, as we've said, the emancipation of the class of workers can only occur *in futuro*. Hence, it would seem, the essence of man, what he was meant to be, cannot consistently be projected back into the remote past. Individuals will attain emancipation when they are freed from the crushing necessity (but not all necessity) of alienated labor under the control, under the social and ideological dominance of a minority. The ideal person would attain emancipation, Marx believes, when he or she integrates his or her real, individual being and political, communal citizenship, and realizes his or her "social powers" in "species-being." This, of course, is only attainable in a classless, propertyless communist society, one built upon the expropriated foundation of capitalism.

For Kierkegaard, we are estranged from our "ideal self" in many ways: because we are immersed in an aesthetic pursuit of repeated enjoyment, are languishing in the revolving door of nihilistic indifference, are hiding in the anonymity of "the crowd," or have no meaningful, constructive, selfbuilding personal *telos*. Social or group participation did not hold much promise for self-realization despite Kierkegaard's defensive (against the perceived threat of socialism, communism, or anarchy) and not enthusiastic support of political conservatism. Each individual must first be morally and spiritually transformed before a good social system is possible. Although Kierkegaard lambasts the "bourgeois" from time to time, he criticizes the values of this class for the sake of moral reform, not revolution. He criticizes communism, as Nietzsche later does, for its leveling tendencies, its apparent devaluation of individuals, and its movement towards what he is already characterizing as a "mass" society. And even though he shares the traditional Christian concern for the poor and the destitute, for a charitable disposition towards the "have nots," he harbors a strong sentiment of spiritual aristocracy, a veneration of excellence. In sum, Kierkegaard is skeptical of two general Marxian beliefs: that man is basically good, but is corrupted by unjust social and

economic systems, and that the elimination of unfair institutions will engender a new man who will be spontaneously cooperative and virtuous. He had a much more jaundiced view of man's "first nature" than Marx did. The ideal self is a subjectively posited goal that must be repetitiously striven for and chosen "each day," a goal that cannot be fully attained in temporal existence. Genuine existence is in the effort to realize the ideal self, in the "striving" itself, because, as Kierkegaard remarks in his *Journals*, the ideal can never, in a strict sense, become actual because then it would no longer be "ideal."

The dialectic of the self and within the self, for Kierkegaard, cannot be overcome in the dynamics of becoming. Man is perpetually tempted to revert to a natural aesthetic mode of life, to immerse himself in the bosom of the crowd, to drift into the indifference and greyness of passive nihilism. And, most of all, we tend to be inauthentic because we've obscured or denied our primal "oughtness-capability," our *kunnen* or "potentiality-for." What we have a "potentiality-for," as Heidegger later correctly transcribed Kierkegaard's thought, is "being-a-self" or, more accurately, striving to become a self.

Insofar as Marx's dialectical laws in a development that continues the historical existence of human beings are construed as "necessary," then man has previously been subject to overpowering structural forces that impinge upon his individual life. Even though he grants that "men make their own history," he quickly adds that they do so under circumstances or "conditions that they have not made." This paradoxical notion is one that is foreshadowed in his doctoral dissertation, *The Difference between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature in General* (1841). There Marx seeks to mediate between Democritus' understanding of nature as subject to necessity (ἀνάγκη) and Epicurus' theory concerning "swerving atoms" that manifest chance (τύχη) in the natural world. Aside from praising Prometheus as an "eminent saint and martyr" in philosophy, Marx hails Epicurus' rejection (*via* Lucretius) of the superstitions of Greco-Roman religion.

Using the analogy of the limited 'freedom' of swerving atoms in Epicurus' philosophy, Marx found the means of preserving man's (finite) freedom within a deterministic and materialistic system. In fact, in what he conceived of as his complete "naturalism or humanism" he synthesized the truths of idealism and materialism. However, as Marx sought to create a scientific socialism and began to emphasize dialectical laws of development, a deterministic structuralism came in conflict with

his earlier defense of man's relative freedom for intentional *praxis*. Having argued for the necessary nature of historical materialist laws, an objective dialectic of economic forces seemed to minimize individual power. Aside from this paradoxical tension between relatively free *praxis* and powerful, systemic social structures, Marx's suggestion that the laws of development in history and society will terminate with the emergence of a communist social order is not merely paradoxical, but seems to violate his dynamic theory of social and historical change. There is no reason to believe that a communist society would not engender its own unique dialectic of social relations. Even if man were able to retrieve his "species-being," a dialectic of individual existence would be inescapable. The envisioned communist man who is the idealized "socialized being" is an abstract entity. If the historical band of necessity is broken in what Marx calls "actual history," then individuals would have transcended alienation and the forces of class-driven dialectical antagonism. But then the individual would be faced with open possibilities and the contingencies of life. In effect, emancipated individuals would find themselves in the self-reflective world of Kierkegaardian subjectivity.

### ***The Uses of Dialectic***

Having examined some representative conceptions of the meaning of dialectic, we may now ask, what is the legitimate use of the concept of dialectic? While most Anglo-American philosophers who made the linguistic turn have long since ignored the idea of dialectic or relegated it prematurely to the graveyard of "old fashioned" notions, it still flourishes in Marxian thought and has been incorporated into many forms of existential phenomenology. Thus, Merleau-Ponty referred to the dialectical relationship between the I-body and its surrounding world and described the embodied subject as the center of meaningful dialectical relations. And, in his *Critique de la raison dialectique*, Sartre sought to revitalize the conception of a complex social dialectic that is primarily initiated and sustained by individual *praxis*. He has, in addition, attempted to revive his own variation on dialectical thinking as a special mode of cognition. In the *Critique*, Sartre sought to attack dogmatic Marxism and create his own brand of existential, critical Marxism. And even though Heidegger scrupulously avoids the term 'dialectic,' his description of the dynamic modes of being of *Dasein* often takes on a dialectical coloration. As previously mentioned, there seems to be a

(possible) dialectical alteration between a typical inauthentic social existence and an atypical state of authentic existence. Moreover, the endeavor of *Dasein* to realize his or her projects entails an interaction with inner-worldly entities and other *Dasein*. Heidegger's conception of the self as projective, dynamic, capable of transcendence towards the world and the uncertainty of the future, as well as being oriented variously to the three modi of temporality, is compatible with a general dialectical interpretation of human existence.

Sartre has argued for the value of a dialectical understanding of social phenomena, individual action, the internal and external dynamics of groups, and the evolution of social organizations. He opposes this mode of interpretation to analytical, structural, and quantitative methods of social analysis. In volume one of his *Critique de la raison dialectique*, Sartre has plausibly shown that social phenomena and social relations, insofar as they are characterized by paradigmatic relationships of reciprocal interaction, lend themselves to dialectical explication. Even though Sartre's social phenomenology builds upon an already developed "dialectical sociology" (such as that of Georges Gurvitch), it seeks to flesh out such a sociology with concrete illustrations and focuses upon inertial social forces (the practico-inert) that stultify constructive social change and block the attainment of individual and collective goals. Curiously enough, in his existential-dialectical account of the dynamics of social existence Sartre replicates the earlier paradoxes of general dialectical theory. For, on the one hand, he suggests that detailed empirical studies of social processes and events reveal a pattern of complex dialectical interactions. With reference to Gurvitch's work in sociology, Sartre describes this as the uncovering of a "hyperempirical dialectic." But, on the other hand, he assumes a correspondence between dialectical reason (*raison dialectique*) and objective dialectical processes. By doing so, and by insisting upon the unique nature of dialectical thinking, Sartre backs into the murky theoretical domain of Hegelian and Marxian reflections upon this issue.

Sartre, like Hegel and the Marxists, offers a number of illustrations of dialectical processes at work in actuality that are plausible. However, his general answer to the question concerning how man can comprehend dialectical phenomena or processes is not too reassuring. He maintains that man understands dialectical processes in the social world because his own existence is itself dialectical. That is, individual existence is characterized by a movement from stage to stage in terms of encounters

with oppositions, antagonisms, and antitheses. The overcoming of obstacles, limitations, and negations involves the constant interaction of various aspects of a self-in-process, the tension between feeling and thought, knowledge and action, subjective/individual and exterior social existence. Insofar as Sartre remains within the framework of phenomenological description (which retains the same psychologistic elements found in Hegel and Kierkegaard), he is convincing, persuasive, and effective. This is nowhere more evident than in his formulation of the social milieu: it is field in which there is a complex series of interactions brought about by an "exteriorization of the interior" (an external social expression of individual *praxis*) and an "interiorization of the exterior" (the appropriation in consciousness of the external social actions and processes one encounters). Since this oscillating dialectic of interiority and exteriority fuels the dynamics of social existence, it is an indefinite dialectical process which, as long as man exists, will never come to a halt, despite the inertia of emergent practico-inert socio-material entities. Sartre deviates from the culminating views of Marx in this sense in that he foresees no future transcendence of dialectical forces in the socio-historical realm even though he cautiously points to the *possibility* of the negation of the negation of the anti-human in man, the possibility of overcoming conflict between man and man when and if what he calls the "Manichean" aspect in mankind is extinguished.

The problematic aspect of Sartre's concept of dialectic pertains to his claim that there is a distinctive and identifiable form of dialectical reasoning. As long as he sticks to descriptions of the dialectic of the self, the dialectic of experience, and of phenomenal dialectical processes as they appear to consciousness, Sartre is on reasonably secure ground and is convincing. However, he does not clarify the precise nature of dialectical reasoning nor does he show how it differs from any other rational, descriptive analysis of (hypothetical) sociological phenomena. Thus, in his *Critique*, his reasoning about individual *praxis* in a social field, about the evolution of groups out of loosely structured contingent "serialities," about virtually all of the social processes he deals with, is not unlike traditional forms of sociological reasoning. Indeed, his actual use of what he calls dialectical reason does not extend to a Hegelian "logic of contradiction" even though he seeks to accommodate a general Marxian notion of actual contradictions in the social world. Although Sartre endeavors to remain faithful to the concrete reciprocal relations between individuals, individuals and groups, and groups and

countergroups, his explicit reasoning is not at all paradoxical and certainly not “contradictory,” even when what he is discussing or describing is itself paradoxical. In fact, Sartre is as adept as Kierkegaard was in lucidly expressing what is construed as paradoxical.

In order to illustrate my point, let me borrow a particular example from the *Critique*. In regard to the passive, inert, diffuse social structure called a “seriality,” Sartre remarks that “a seriality is...a premier structure of alterity, founded on the reciprocity of antagonism.” While one may admit that a seriality, a loosely structured assemblage of individuals, as an actual concrete social structure, is dialectical in form, the statement which describes this form is neither dialectically nor paradoxically expressed. In fact, it is indistinguishable from any other form of sociological description. When Sartre does employ paradoxical expressions (e.g., when he says that a singular life and human history are fundamentally *identical*) he is either expressing something logically absurd or is exaggerating what could be expressed in other terms. If a singular life and history were truly identical, then history could only be an account of one person’s life! History, especially as Sartre later refers to it, is certainly not the singular adventure of a single life even though, as Heidegger once held and as Rorty now maintains, individual life is profoundly affected by historicity (*Geschichtlichkeit*).

Although dialectical reason, as construed by Sartre, does tend to focus on paradoxes, it cannot, in any strict sense, be meaningfully expressed in logically contradictory assertions. If, as I believe, Sartre tries to retrieve a Hegelian notion of a unique mode of thinking in his concept of *raison dialectique*, he will not find Hegel expressing overt contradictions. For even though Hegel maintained that “contradiction is at the root of all movement and life,” he did not make assertions that were themselves literally contradictory. Thus, for example, to say, as he did, that in their self-identity things are self-different is not to say something that is unintelligible or absurd. It could be explicated in the same way in which one could explain that the statements “man is a unity” and “man is a multiplicity” are not incompatible. Since, for Hegel, existence is conceived of as comprised of conflicting tendencies, whatever we say about a dynamic, living process (or a dialectic generated by it) may be said to approximate this paradoxical actuality without being nonsensical. Thus, for example, we may speak about and think about an automobile as self-identical (as enduring as a totality in time) and as “self-different” insofar as it is constantly undergoing gradual alteration. At best,

dialectical thinking seeks, in a psychologistic and impressionistic way, to approximate an ontological order of change.

As Popper and others have pointed out, Hegel adopts a questionable and extreme position in his assumption that a comprehension of complex, dynamic, dialectical processes requires a logic of contradiction. Although Hegel's attempt to create such a logic was daring, it was also doomed to self-negation. As Kierkegaard said in *The Concept of Anxiety*, the inferential transitions in logic are entirely unlike the transitions in "becoming," in the domain of concrete actuality. "Transition," he tells us, "belongs in the sphere of historical freedom, for transition is a *state* and it is actual." Elsewhere, he points out that the 'dialectic' of logic is a quantitative dialectic that is quite unlike the "qualitative dialectic" of existence.

The movement of dialectical thinking (which Sartre inherits from Hegel), insofar as it can truly be distinguished from inductive and deductive inference, is primarily guided by a suggested, psychological inference. In this mode of inference an attempt is made to follow through relationships among concepts to the point at which there is an emergence of opposing or paradoxical notions that expose the one-sidedness of determinate notions or, in some instances, determinate propositions. The ostensible "necessity" of dialectical thinking is by no means similar to a purely logical necessity. However, it may be said that certain premises, theses, and propositions do tend to suggest—in a conceptual-imaginative way—a psychological inference that may not be appropriate in a purely deductive argument. There are numerous notions (particularly in the social sciences and psychology) that have a high degree of heuristic value, but are decidedly paradoxical in their propositional expression. There are many useful notions that we use that cannot be reduced to strictly logical terms or relations, even though they have a discernible meaning. Thus, we may speak of an ambivalent feeling we have for someone. Or we may consider the extraordinary complexity of, and paradoxical nature of, certain psychological conditions (as described by psychoanalysts or psychiatrists) such as a borderline personality disorder. It would be unfair and misguided for a logician to criticize the intricacies of the theoretical accounts of the psychodynamics of this disorder without having encountered directly the empirical and often astonishingly paradoxical phenomena associated with this condition in the feelings, beliefs, thoughts, memories, attitudes, and behaviors of an individual who presents symptoms of such a

disorder. In many current psychodynamic theories of the self we find confirmation of Kierkegaard's conception of the dialectical nature of the self and, if anything, a deepening of, and extension of, its application.

Again, we get some sense of the nature of dialectical thinking by showing how certain reductive assertions (e.g., a sociological generalization such as, "The individual is a product of society.") lead us to think of a polar notion (e.g., that "Society is a product of the individual."). We may say that a member of society is a social agent and then reflect that, from another equally justified point of view, such an individual is also a social patient. These are not unambiguous instances of inductive or deductive inferences and yet they are common features of thought, dialogue, and discourse. Curiously enough, dialectical thinking is a central feature of a technique frequently found in linguistic analytic discourse: the counterexample.

Dialectic is the language of paradox as well as a mode of thinking that attempts to deal with reciprocal relations or interactions (for example, the reciprocal influences that take place in authentic dialogue), mutual determinations, and asymmetrical exchanges. Sartre's *Critique* is a heroic attempt to uncover the large-scale (as well as the microsocial) dialectical vectors that intersect in the social world. On the one hand, he emphasizes the creation of and continuation of society by virtue of millions of individual praxis. And, on the other hand, under the influence of Marx, he calls attention to the effects these social actions produce, the objective institutions, the practices, the "worked-upon matter," the counterdialectical forces which rebound back upon individuals. The one dialectical notion that Sartre explicates that seems most appropriate to the increasing global interactions and interdependencies of the present is the concept of counterfinalities; the unexpected outcomes or negative effects that result from individual, group, or national projects that were originally construed as constructive, positive, and beneficial.

Whereas one might accept the view that the self, human experience, organic and inorganic systems, local and global societies, dialogue, and perhaps, as Hegel said, anything that is characterized by movement can be understood as dialectical, it is far more difficult, despite what has been said about it, to identify precisely what dialectical *reasoning* is. In *Soviet Theory of Knowledge* Blakely has shown that twentieth century Soviet epistemologists, in spite of repeated efforts, have failed to provide an adequate definition of dialectical reasoning (*dialektika umoza-kljuenie*) or to produce a single "dialectical syllogism." In all likelihood,



there simply is no such unique, distinguishable mode of *reasoning* entirely distinguishable from inductive or deductive reasoning. There is at least a defensible form of dialectical thinking that has been discussed here: a psychologistic, conceptual, imaginative, impressionistic mode of thinking that attempts to approximate the apparent dialectical complexity of a variety of concrete processes. We cannot claim for such a form of thinking apodictic conclusions that necessarily follow from given premises. In this sense, there is in dialectical thinking something that resembles what Aristotle described as probabilistic reasoning insofar as it cannot provide demonstrative certainty. The relations between or among concepts and/or propositions in this form of thinking seems to be guided more by intuition than by purely logical inference.

Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, if we bracket the ostensible necessity of its transitions, is an exemplification of dialectical thinking as it has been described. This is especially so in regard to the disclosure of the evolution of the forms of consciousness. But it is not a practice of a logic of contradiction. It is, rather, an impressionistic symbolization of selective stages in the development of Western thought that is punctuated by startling, subjectively colored reflections. Although Hegel's descriptive analyses are remarkable, they are neither reductive nor concerned with dissolving a philosophical question. Their movement is like a series of interlinked, horizontal conceptual spirals. Such a metaphorical description of his dialectical thinking, as inadequate as it may be, seeks to capture the strong imaginative element in the *Phenomenology*. Hegel seems to be trying to picture in concepts transitions of consciousness. But logic, not even a putative "logic of contradiction," cannot picture the world since it deals with conceptual, abstract class relations and statement relations, not actual, dynamic, existential relationships and interactions.

It is not necessary to preclude the projection of a logical structure on the world of phenomena for heuristic purposes. Carnap's ambitious attempt to elucidate the logical structure of the world is, by his own admission, a construction of the world in terms of a conceptual representation of its "form" and not its "content." Hence, "the world" that Carnap tried to construct is neither Hegel's dynamic, living and moving actuality nor the world Heidegger characterizes as our own "immediate domestic environment." Unlike Carnap, Hegel seemed concerned with endeavoring to express in language not merely the form of the world (for consciousness), but its actual mobile content as well. It was not only

a philosophy in which there would be a supposed identity of thought and being that he wanted create, but something even more paradoxical: an identity of dialectical thinking and becoming. At best, we might grant an asymptotic relation between such a form of thinking and actuality. This is *a fortiori* the case in regard to its expression in language since language universalizes whatever it is used to describe.

Whenever we are confronted with processes in which there is action and reaction (counteraction and counter-reaction), interpenetration, interaction, reciprocal transaction, an otherwise pragmatically useful one-directional causal analysis is inadequate. A dialectical method of interpretation which would stress the multiple lines of interacting factors and avoid reductionist or one-sided accounts of event-processes has, in such instances, a high degree of heuristic value. It is not necessary to adopt a universal metaphysics of an objective dialectic (hypostasized as "the dialectic") operative in the world in order to appreciate the value and use of a dialectical *interpretation* of a limited class of phenomena. The hypothetical, provisional nature of dialectical analyses should not be lost sight of, ought not to become hardened into an *a priori* method of comprehending aspects of reality that blinds one to contrary evidence or incontrovertible empirical knowledge.

Perhaps dialectical thinking cannot do all that Hegel thought it could do; but it seems appropriate for reflection on various dimensions of self-reflective existence, social relations, group dynamics, and the reciprocal interactions that characterize genuine dialogue and one's being in the network of a public world. Sartre's claim that the concrete world of human experience is characterized by an "indefinite multiplicity of reciprocities" is a reasonably accurate depiction of the actual social world.

Too often the term 'dialectic' has been used by Marxists as a synonym for change, movement, or dynamic processes. This tended to lead to references to a 'dialectic' that is immanent in the world as fate or *Μοῖρα* was thought to be an immanent cosmic force acting in and through the world. We may hold that certain kinds of occurrences or event-processes are peculiarly suited to dialectical interpretation without reifying "the dialectic." And one should not continually refer to a unique form of dialectical "reason" unless one can show clearly and specifically how this ostensible mode of reason is differentiated from extant and frequently analyzed types of reasoning. This does not preclude the possibility of

finding a viable place for the kind of dialectical thinking that I have sought, in a provisional way, to identify.

The conception of dialectic should not be abandoned or merely considered as a relic of nineteenth-century metaphysics. Nor should Marxist thinkers feel that they have cornered the market on its proper use and application. Philosophy can use as many interpretative guides as are available in order to try to understand the complexity of the self, the socio-historical world, and the total actuality in which we exist.

*State University of New York at Brockport*