

DISCUSSION :

**SOME PROBLEMS ARISING OUT OF THE CONCEPT OF
CONSCIOUSNESS
AS ENVISAGED IN DIALECTICAL MATERIALISM**

Unlike epiphenomenalism, dialectical materialism conceives of consciousness or mind as *somewhat* independent of but in constant dialectical relationship with matter. For the ultimate reality, dialectical materialism assumes only matter—the well-spring of everything material or spiritual; all coming out of it through the “the movement from lower to the higher, from the simple to the complex, as a revolutionary process advancing by leaps from one stage to another.”¹ But the explanation of the phenomenon of consciousness or mind as envisaged in dialectical materialism entails certain difficulties.

The basic laws of materialist dialectics are the following :

- (i) The law of the unity and struggle of opposites.
- (ii) The law of the passage of quantitative into qualitative changes.
- (iii) The law of negation of negation.

The working of the first and the third laws of the dialectics I may represent thus :

Received : 13-6-87

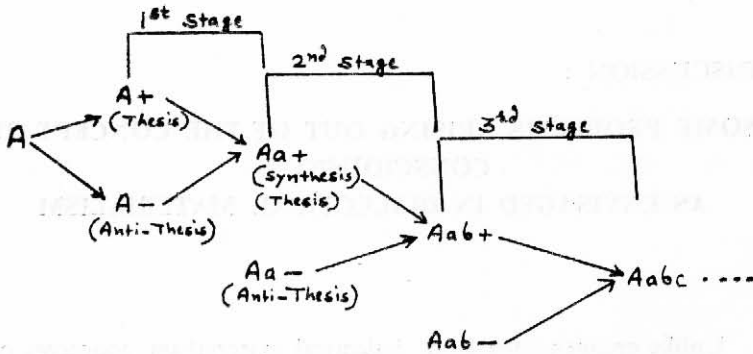


DIAGRAM NO. 1

In the above diagram (no. 1), at the starting point, there is the primordial matter in which motion inheres (A). This (A) is not neutral; it is an unity of opposites (A+ and A-). In course of time this contradiction (dialectical contradiction and not metaphysical contradiction) widens, such that (A) splits, of its own, into a thesis (A+) and an anti-thesis (A-). It must be noted that (A+) and (A-) are certainly opposites, but, however, they are somehow dialectically united according to the first law of Marx's (or Hegel's) dialectic. These two, i.e. (A+) and (A-) are not only united, but they also happen to be in mutual engagements, according to the third law of the dialectics, so that a new phenomenon occurs (Aa) out of that engagement. Here (a) is a new specific which is added to the former (A). (Aa) is called the synthesis. This is the first stage of the dialectical movement or development.

In the second stage of the dialectical development, (Aa) which in its turn also contains contradiction within itself, splits itself, as if, into two opposing camps—(Aa) which now becomes the thesis (Aa+) and creates from within itself its anti-thesis (Aa-),

and following the first and the third laws of the dialectics, creates the synthesis (Aab). And in this way the dialectical movement continues until self-consciousness happens to be. It is very important here to note that for all these stages of dialectical movement no external energy (vector, catalyst or something like that) is necessary. This energy is pre-existent in the primordial matter and is enough for all the multiple stages following it. According to Marxism "from the outset *identity with itself* requires *difference from everything else* as its complement, is evident".² However, F. Engels cites many an example of the dialectical characteristic of nature. "A magnet", he says, "on being cut through, polarises the neutral middle portion, but in such a way that the old poles remain. On the other hand, a worm, on being cut into two, retains the receptive mouth at the positive pole and forms a new negative pole at the other end with excretory anus; but the old negative (the anus) now becomes positive, becoming a mouth, and a new anus or negative pole is formed at the cut end".³ Regarding the third law of the dialectics, Marxism, as Lenin said, holds that negation is not an "empty" or "futile" negation; but a moment of connection or a moment of development. Negation of negation, as Afanesyev said, is the "replacement of the old by the new, of the dying by the emergent that constitutes development, while the overcoming of the old by the new that arises out of the old, is called negation".⁴ Podosetnik and Yakhot gave a concrete example of this phenomenon: "The growing of crop covers a series of successive periods: the sprouting of the seeds, their growth and ripening, the gathering of the crops. In the course of sprouting the seeds lying in the soil cease their existence, cease being seeds. They undergo negation. New plants grow out from them. They bloom, fertilise and, finally, bear fruit, seeds. The whole process of the growing of crops is a negation of the negation"⁵

Problem I. The dialectics contradicts the logical dictum : *ex nihilo nihil fit*. In diagram no. 1 (above), the new quality or specific of (A), i.e. (a) is generated out of (A), (a) being previously absent in (A). How is this possible, logically? If (a) is not previously present in (A), at least potentially, it cannot come out of (A). The quality of water of being hard at the freezing point is certainly present beforehand, and when the appropriate conditions are fulfilled, the potential qualities become actualised. This phenomenon cannot be explained otherwise.

We may profitably refer to the *anekāntavāda* of Jainism : "Every object possesses innumerable positive and negative characters. It is not possible for us, ordinary people, to know all the qualities of a thing. ... Human knowledge is necessarily relative and limited and so are all our judgments."⁶ The wrangle of contemporary physicists over the nature of matter is a pointer here. Lenin, too, was aware of this fact and so he rightly wrote : "All-sided, universal flexibility of concepts. a flexibility reaching to the identity of opposites — that is the essence of the matter."⁷ But, before knowing all the aspects, qualities, attributes or characteristics of matter, how can we be sure about the essence of it? How can we say that the identity harbours within itself (a) was not present in (A) beforehand, at least potentially? And is our knowledge of matter complete even to-day?

Problem no. II. Dialectical materialism assumes only two dimensions—affirmation and negation, which are in constant opposition. Why can we not assume, in addition, a *neutrality*? Sir Eddington was aware of this defect of the scene of affirmation and negation. In his *The Nature of the Physical World*, he wrote "I think that that is an example of the limitation of physical schemes that has troubled us before—namely, that in all such schemes opposites are represented by + and -, Past and future,

cause and effect, are represented in this inadequate way. One of the greatest puzzles of science is to discover why protons and electrons are not simply the opposites of one another, although our whole conception of electric charge requires that positive and negative electricity should be related like + and -.⁸

Problem no. III. If we can assume that from the interaction of material objects, previously non-existent qualities may come out, we do not find any reason why this process of generation of ever newer and newer qualities should stop at a certain stage, say of self-consciousness. Why can it not go even further to a stage which we do not know or cannot conceive of, as yet?

However, the Marxian dialectic does not stop here, it goes on. According to it, in course of the accruing of newer qualities to matter, what has now become organism, through evolution, a very peculiar quality—consciousness—is added to matter". In the course of further evolution, as the organisms themselves and the environment became more complex, an even higher form of reflection sensation, arose on the basis of response to stimuli. Lenin wrote that sensation transforms the energy of external stimuli into consciousness".⁹ And, yet, the evolution did not stop here; it went on ahead until "In the process of labour man acquired not only consciousness, that is the ability to reflect the world around him, but also self-consciousness, that is, the ability to understand and assess his thought and emotions, interests, motives and actions, his place and role in social life".¹⁰ Therefore, "As a product of matter and as its reflection, consciousness does not remain passive, but *actively influences* the world. It is in this sense that Lenin wrote that "man's consciousness not only reflects the objective world, but creates it".¹¹ We may conveniently represent what has been told above with the help of a diagram as follows :

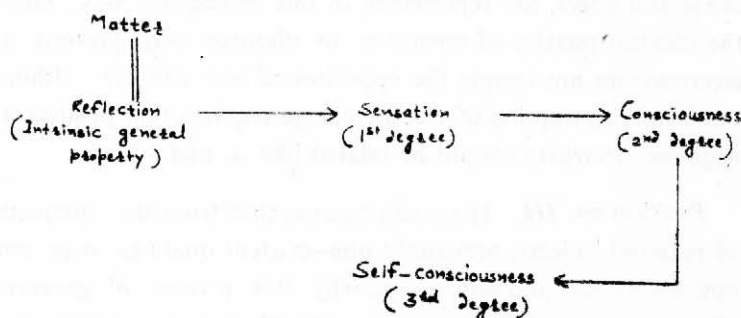


DIAGRAM No. 2

Not only this that consciousness has now arisen out of matter, it has assumed a degree of independence. Because :

- (i) " *Thought and matter are not the same* " ¹²
- (ii) " *Conceiving, thinking and mental intercourse are the 'efflux' or separate, nonmaterial outflow which originates from material behaviour* ". ¹³ " Notice that Marx is not saying men's conceiving, thinking, and mental intercourse *are nothing but* their material behaviour. He is saying that they are the 'efflux' i.e., a *separate nonmaterial* outflow which originates and derives from material behaviour ". ¹⁴
- (iii) " *Consciousness can create something of its own* ". ¹⁵
- (iv) " *Consciousness can reflect upon itself (self-consciousness)* ". ¹⁶

And this independence has conferred upon consciousness a special status among all other attributes of matter coming out of it in course of dialectical progression. We may represent the idea of the origination of consciousness and self-consciousness in the following diagram :

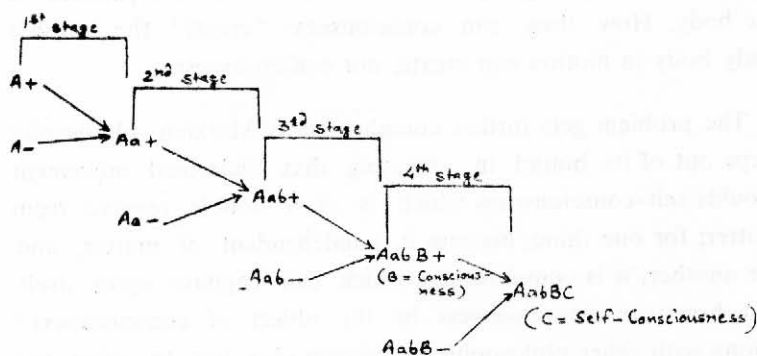


DIAGRAM NO. 3

Problem no. IV. When an independent status is secured for consciousness, Jerome A. Shaffer is right in saying that Marxian philosophy is "not materialistic in our sense".¹⁷ The materialistic basis of Marxist philosophy then falls apart.

Problem no. V. Why, for example in diagram no. 3, at the third stage AabB comes out (B=consciousness) instead of Aabc (a, b, c being ordinary specifics or attributes)? Is B (or consciousness) matter or simply a quality? According to Marxism, the answer is, Neither. If none of these two, what, then, is it? Marxism has left consciousness to be something mysterious.

Problem no. VI. Consider the two statements of Marxism :

- (i) "Thought is a property, a mode of existence, of the body, the same as its extension, i.e., as its special configuration and position among other bodies".¹⁸
- (ii) "Thinking is not the *product* of an action but the *action itself*, considered as the moment of its performance. just as walking, for example, is the mode of action of the legs, the 'product' of which, it transpires, is the space walked".¹⁹

In either case, thinking or consciousness is quite dependent on the body. How then, can consciousness 'create' the world? Only body in motion can create, not consciousness.

The problem gets further complicated as Marxian philosophy steps out of its bound in assuming that dialectical movement moulds self-consciousness which is at a double remove from matter; for one thing, because it is independent of matter, and for another, it is consciousness which can cogitate upon itself. But, how can consciousness be the object of consciousness? Along with other philosophies, Marxism also has to solve this problem.

Problem no. VII. Marxism stops at the stage of self-consciousness and claims that consciousness (as well as self-consciousness) come out of matter in dialectical progression. But can this not be reversed? Can we not say that matter itself is coming out of consciousness? Can the chronological order be changed? Why is matter prior to consciousness? What is the logic behind such an assumption?

Marxism has yet to solve all these problems.

Philosophy Department
Raiganj College,
RAIGANJ-733 134
West Dinajpur (W. B.)

SUNIL KUMAR SARKAR

NOTES

1. Afanasyev, V., *Marxist Philosophy*, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1968, p. 85.
2. Engels, F., *Dialectics of Nature*, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1976, p. 215.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 217.
4. Afanasyev, V., *op. cit.*, p. 119.
5. Podosetnik, V. and Yakhot, D., *A Brief Course of Dialectical Materialism*, Progress Publishers, Moscow, no date, p. 84.
6. Sharma, Chandradhar, *A Critical Survey of Indian Philosophy*, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, etc., 1964, pp. 50-51.
7. Omelyanovsky, M. E. (ed), *Lenin and Modern Natural Science*, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1978, p. 64.
8. Eddington, Sir A. S., *The Nature of the Physical World*, Cambridge University Press, 1953, p. 64.
9. Afanasyev, V., *Marxist Philosophy*, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1968, p. 78.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 81.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 83.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 73.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 73.
14. Shaffer, Jerome A., *Philosophy of Mind*, Prentice-Hall, 1968, pp. 39-40.
15. Afanasyev, V., *op. cit.*, p. 83.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 81.
17. Shaffer, Jerome A., *op. cit.*, p. 40.
18. Ilyenkov, E. V., *Dialectical Logic*, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1977, p. 32.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 35.

BOOKS RECEIVED

- Nandy Ashis (ed); *Science, Hegemony and Violence : A Requiem for Modernity*: 1988, Oxford, Delhi; pp. 301;
Rs. 200/- (HC).
- Sharma, Shubhra; *Life in the Upanishads*, 1985, Abhinav Publications, Delhi; pp xiii + 242; Rs. 80/- (HC).
- Singh, L. P. and Sirisena, B. M.; *Zen Buddhism*, 1988, Sterling Publishers Private Limited, Delhi; pp. xiv + 155;
Rs. 150/- (HC).
- Sondhi, Madhuri and Walker, Mary M.; *Ecology, Culture and Philosophy*, 1988, Abhinav Publications, Delhi;
pp. xviii + 188, Rs. 130/- (HC).
- Tahtinen Unto; *Indian Traditional Values*, 1983; Abhinav Publications; Delhi; pp. vii + 103, Rs. 50/- (HC).

Statement about Ownership and Other Particulars about
Newspaper INDIAN PHILOSOPHICAL QUARTERLY

FORM IV (RULE 8)

1. Place of Publication ... Philosophy Department,
 University of Poona,
 Pune-411 007.
2. Periodicity of its
 Publication. ... Quarterly.
3. Printer's Name and
 Address ... Dr. Surendra Sheodas Barlingay,
 Philosophy Department,
 University of Poona,
 Pune-411 007.

Whether Citizen of India ... Yes.

4. Publisher's Name and
 Address ... Dr. Surendra Sheodas Barlingay,
 Philosophy Department,
 University of Poona,
 Pune-411 007.

Whether Citizen of India ... Yes.

5. Editor' Names and
 Address ... (i) Dr. Surendra Sheodas
 Barlingay,
 Philosophy Department,
 Poona University,
 Pune-411 007.
- (ii) Dr. Rajendra Prasad,
 Opposite Stadium main gate
 Premchand path
 Rajendra Nagar
 Patna-800 016.

- (iii) Dr. M. P. Marathe,
Philosophy Department,
Poona University,
Pune-411 007.
- (iv) Dr. Mrinal Miri,
Philosophy Department,
N. E. H. U.,
Shilong-793 003.
- (v) Dr. R. Sundara Rajan,
Philosophy Department,
Poona University,
Pune-411 007.
- (vi) Dr. S. S. Deshpande,
Philosophy Department,
Poona University,
Pune-411 007.

Whether Citizens of India... Yes.

6. Names and Addresses of ... Department of Philosophy,
Individuals/Institutions ... Poona University,
which own the newspaper ... Pune-411 007.
And its ...
Pratap Centre of Philosophy,
Amalner-425 401.

I, Surendra Sheodas Barlingay, hereby declare that the particulars given above are true to the best of my knowledge and belief.

Sd/- Surendra Sheodas Barlingay.