

THE DIALECTIC OF THE ANCIENTS AND ITS RE-EMERGENCE IN HEGEL

PREAMBLE

It can be said that Hegel was in the main, the modern rediscoverer of the extremely dynamic character of Aristotle's metaphysics which treats all being as process and movement—a dynamic that had become entirely lost in the formalistic tradition of Aristotelianism. It can also be said with a little exaggeration that Hegel's philosophy is, in a large sense, a re-interpretation of Aristotle's ontology rescued from the distortion of metaphysical dogma and linked to the pervasive demand of modern rationalism that world be transformed into a medium for freely developing subjects; that the world become, in short, the reality of Reason. But much more acceptable is the view that Hegel's philosophy is Kant seen through an intensive study of the ancient Greeks, and a religious conviction that has rejected orthodoxy.

Our concern here is only with the off-mentional "magic" of Hegel: the dialectical method. Thus this paper elucidates the ancient and contemporary antecedents to Hegel's philosophical orientation.

FROM THE ANCIENTS

The word "dialectic" is derived from the Greek word *dialektos*, which means "debate" or "discourse". Diogenes Laertius ascribes the origin of dialectic to Zeno of Elea who is renowned for his paradoxes. Others ascribe it to Heraclitus while yet others claim that dialectic started with Socrates. According to Engels "Heraclitus was the first to penetrate the hard core of scientific insight.... described the universe as flux".¹

But Aristotle joins Laertius in the view that dialectic originated with Zeno, and says further that dialectic proceeds from the opinions

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of men and, therefore, its reliability cannot be juxtaposed with demonstration which proceeds from first principles. He therefore classified dialectic with sophistry, but admits that it is capable of providing a method of criticism for the unearthing of principles of inquiry. Zeno's paradoxes are therefore good examples of dialectic because they refute the hypotheses of their opponents by drawing unacceptable conclusions or consequences from them.

The attempt to credit Socrates with the origin of dialectic is readily called to question by the fact that in Plato's *Parmenides* Socrates (as a young man) was subjected to the kind of treatment he metes out to others elsewhere. Perhaps the two innovations to the dialectical method that can be legitimately ascribed to Socrates are: (1) epagogic arguments and (2) universal definitions. The former consists in leading an interlocuter in an argument to a generalization by leading him to accept the truth of series of propositions about particular cases. The latter refers to the constant and peculiar characteristic of a genus e.g. "man is a rational animal" attributes rationality to all men.

Plato in his use of dialectic distinguished between "eristic" and "philosophical" dialectic, respectively. Eristic dialectic, which he variously termed the degenerate form of dialectic, shadow of dialectic and "anti-logic", refers to the art of quarrelling employed by the sophists for the sole purpose of winning a dispute. By calling it "anti-logic" or the art of contradiction, Plato indicates that it is a tendency to contradict, to maintain aggressively whatever position is opposite to that of one's interlocutor. In this respect, Protagoras, a leading sophist, claimed that he could "make the worse argument the better" i.e., he could take any side in an argument and win. For the sophists "knowledge in the strict sense was unattainable.... everyone should 'measure' matters according to his nature and needs, since man alone was the measure of all things".²

For Plato, dialectic is applied philosophically when it is employed in seeking the truth. It emphasizes seriousness without conscious trickery and it is from the perspective of philosophical dialectic that Plato recommends the debarment of youths from the practice of dialectic. According to him it can be used wrongly and can make unserious men reject good moral principles in which they have been bred and resort to pleasure-seeking.

Lads, when they first get a taste of disputation, misuse it as a form of sport, always employing it contentiously, and imitating confuters, they themselves confute others. They delight like puppies in pulling about and tearing with words all who approach them.... And when they have been confuted by many, they quickly fall into a violent distrust of all that they formally held true³.

Apart from the desire to win, people may also engage in eristic dialectic for pedagogic or tutorial purposes. Aristotle believes that a pupil's wit is sharpened if he is encouraged to practice argumentation by trying to defend his thesis against criticisms, by trying to think up and organize criticisms of other pupils' theses. Thus a teacher may himself engage his students in eristic bouts, or else pit one student against another, subject to his own tutorial criticism and moderation. Parmenides recommended this type of dialectic for the young Socrates, because of its importance to the young man who desires to study philosophy.

Eristic dialectic is also recommended by the ancients because of its "peirastic" or probing purpose. At times people feel self-satisfied and complacent in their views and opinions. In such a state of mind, Aristotle says that they need to be deflated, as it were, for the good of their soul and wits. Hence

When they discover that they can quickly be driven, without trickery, into acknowledging things patently inconsistent with other things which they had felt sure of, they become warier and intellectually humble⁴.

This is explained in Aristotle's *Topics* and in Plato's *Sophist*. In the latter book Plato presents sophists who merit a better name because they help purge complacent people of their conceit of knowledge, through cross-question and examination. This is also what Socrates has in mind when, at the beginning of *Theaetetus*, he explains at length how he, like a midwife, enables people put aside their "sham offspring" (the false conceit of knowledge) in order to give birth to genuine or true knowledge. His usual custom is to start from that which is "familiar" and taken for granted, proceed to point out some of its inherent implications, before moving on to better understanding and clarity.

This idea of orderly progression, or of doing one thing after another, is frequently harped upon in Plato's dialogues. It is present wherever Socrates argues that one question is prior to another and must

first be attended to. He would maintain, for instance, that it would not be proper for us to ask whether "x" is good, bad, etc. until we have disposed of the question "what is 'x'?" Thus for Plato and his master "any discourse ought to be constructed like a living creature with its own body, as it were; it must not lack either head or feet, it must have a middle and extremities so composed as to suit each other and the whole work"⁵. This idea that each item in a composition should follow by some necessity directly from what preceded it, which is also found in Hegel, Plato calls "logographic necessity".

Dialectic was therefore an art as well as a method for Plato, and he hinted variously in his works about its relation to other arts and sciences. In fact he placed dialectic in a sovereign position over and above all other sciences by saying that it is the coping-stone of all other studies, and that no other kind of study can rightly be placed above it. Since for Plato the ultimate science is that which presents truth in its utmost clarity, what he is to be understood to be saying here is that dialectic attains greater truth and precision than any other science. Thus dialectic (the copingstone) should be approached after one has studied the other sciences, because it directs and disposes of all other sciences. The law-giver, or he who makes the words of language must, according to Plato, go to the dialectician to ascertain if he has made them well. Also the mathematician or geometer must hand his discoveries over to the dialectician, just as the fisherman hands over his catch to the cook.

This architectonic character of dialectic is probably a consequence of its synoptic attitude to the other sciences. It seeks an insight into the community and related and the unrelated in all sciences.⁶

In the *Philebus* Plato says that all great sciences require "talk" and the context seems to give this statement the more definite meaning that dialectic is a necessity in every important science or art. It is also in this book that he says conclusively that dialectic is, indeed, the instrument through which every discovery ever made in the spheres of arts and sciences has been brought to light. This may mean that in all fields of endeavour it is possible to achieve something without the science of dialectic, but that one must rely on dialectic to achieve the best. By the best Plato means the highest amount of certainty, clarity

and systematization. This, in part, is what philosophy *per se* aims at in its search for knowledge and truth.

Plato distinguishes between reason and sense and maintains that dialectic uses the faculty of reason to arrive at the truth. Sense can only give us opinion, while reason can be used by itself to achieve by far the best results. This does not mean that the dialectician is not interested in the sensible as such; the point being made here is that the dialectician does not answer a question by resorting to a process of sensible observation. Dialectic uses only words, and no diagrams or experiments, in addition to reason. Looking at the opposition between these two faculties, Socrates says :

I was afraid I might become totally blind in soul through looking at facts with my eyes and trying to grasp them with each of the senses. It seemed to me that I ought to resort to discussions, and study the truth of things in them.⁷

The supreme method for Plato has its being only in conversation and he makes out time in *Phaedrus* and *Letters* VII to deprecate the practice of writing philosophy down in very strong terms. In *Phaedrus* (277D) he asserts that writing is inferior to conversation because words cannot teach, clarify or certify a thing. They make people forgetful, by luring them to trust written words instead of their own memories i.e. we can learn most from a man only by conversing with him and not by reading what he has written down. This argument draws nourishment from Plato's conviction that true knowledge is supposed to be engraved indelibly in the soul. Written words cannot answer questions. They can neither explain anything you do not understand nor remove any objection you may raise.

In this view, then aim of higher education is the conversion of the soul from the study of what is empirically given to the senses to the contemplation of real existence. This, he explains, is because most men dwell in the darkness-as in a cave-and all their thoughts, beliefs and ideas are tailored to suit the blurred luminosity of the environment; and the object of education is to lead men from the cave of obscure vision to the clarity and world of reality. Thus education is neither a matter of putting knowledge into the soul of a person who does not possess it, nor of putting sight into blind eyes, but of orientating man to the supremely real.

FROM THE MEDIEVALS AND THE MODERNS

Much later in the history of philosophy some Neo-platonists developed the idea that the course of the world is governed by a process with three stages: unity (*mone*), going out of oneself (*Prohodos*), and return into oneself (*epistrophe*). In the middle ages dialectic was one of the seven liberal arts and it was Abelard, a conceptualist and a student of William of Champeaux and Roscelin, who made it the method of scholasticism. In his book entitled *Sic et Non* (Yes and No) Abelard held the view what dialectic is the sole road to truth apart from scripture. This view had, at the time a valuable effect as a solvent of prejudices and an encouragement to the fearless use of the intellect⁷⁸. Abelard was opposed by Peter Damian for whom dialectic was an exhibition of the sin of pride.

In Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (A61, B86) dialectic becomes *die logic des Scheins*: the logic of mere appearance, of error and illusion. For Kant dialectic among the ancients is a name for the misguided efforts of man to apply the principles governing phenomena to "things-in-themselves"; "...A Sophistical art of giving one's ignorance and even the illusions that one produced deliberately, the whitewash of truth, by imitating the method of thoroughness prescribed by logic...."⁷⁹. Kant therefore set out to expose what he calls the illusions of judgement which claims to go beyond the limits of sense experience (Transcendental Judgement).

Looking through the West European philosophic tradition, Hegel rejects eristic dialectic. He rejects

that dialect which takes an object, proposition and co. given to feeling or in general, to immediate consciousness and explains it away, confuses it, pursues it this way and that, and has as its sole task the deduction of the contrary of the idea with which it starts- a negative form of dialectic commonly appearing even in Plato⁸⁰.

Fichte introduced into German philosophy the three steps of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis, using these three terms. Schelling took up this terminology, but Hegel did not. He never once used these three terms together to designate three stages in an argument or account in his books. And they do not help us to understand his *Phenomenology*,

his *Logic* or his philosophy of history. Insistence on this triad impedes any open-minded comprehension of Hegel's work by forcing it into a scheme which was available to him and which he deliberately spurned. The mechanical formalism, in particular, with which critics since Kierkegaard have charged him he derides expressly and at some length in the Preface to the *Phenomenology*.

This not to say that Hegel is at variance with Plato. Quite the contrary. He joins Plato in rejecting the mischievous form of eristic dialectic and also recognizes the need to "disturb" people with rigid views. This, according to him, is because,

... philosophy finds obstruction too in the unreasoning concept that builds itself on well-established truths, which the possessor considers he has no need to return upon and consider, but rather takes to be fundamental, and thinks he can by means thereof propound as well as decide and pass sentence. In this regard it is necessary once again to make a serious business of philosophy¹¹.

The school of thought which holds dialectic as a method that seeks to build a deductive system as Hegel knew in the various branches of mathematics, and such as we know in our systems of symbolic logic, is rejected by Hegel. Such methods, according to him, though essential and brilliantly successful in their own fields are quite useless for philosophical cognition. They are successful in mathematics because the concepts of mathematics have been artificially arrested and purged of anything half-thought or implied. Thus it achieves hard clarity because it deals with things merely as units, merely as externally ordered and assembled, and not as having any deeper affinities with one another.

Hegel was therefore clear, as Kant was not, that the truth of such propositions as $5 + 7 = 12$ was the tautological consequence of the rules and definitions of the number system. It is only on its fringes that mathematics becomes dialectical; where, passing beyond the situations with which it is adapted to deal, it is forced to frame wholly new concepts of the infinite, the infinitesimal and incommensurable.

The kind of thought we find in a formal deductive system is characterised by great fixity and definiteness of notions, presuppositions and deductive procedures; as well as by an extreme stress on the distinctness and independence of one notion and principle from another.

Hegel calls this the thought of the Understanding (*Verstand*). Having cut off ideas by presenting them as independent and fixed, this kind of thought proceeds to play various "neat" games with them. These games are entirely successful because their counters are of standard shapes and fit perfectly with and into each other.

This use of "Understanding", with its faint flavour of deprecation, to stand for a somewhat hide-bound, philosophically inadequate form of thinking is common to the German idealists, and goes back to Kant. Kant opposed Understanding to Reason (*Vernunft*). The former is, for him, a faculty content to apply categories and principles to the wanted material of finite experience, while the latter attempts an "unconditional synthesis" and tries to apply the same categories and principles on and beyond the very horizon of experience. Kant prefers the pedestrian ways of the Understanding to the soaring dangerous ways of Reason, while Hegel reverses the preference. For the latter Reason is a higher mode of cognition and emerges out of Understanding through dialectic.

According to Hegel, Understanding is at work not only in mathematics, but wherever ideas or procedures are given a quasi-mathematical definiteness, and are kept apart by other ideas and procedures into which, however, they naturally shade, and without which they can have no significant application. The sciences and practical arts all involve Understanding in their initial abstractions, and would be impossible without it. They must deal with their subject matter from a peculiar, single standpoint and must dismiss all other standpoints and considerations as irrelevant. "A table of contents is all that understanding gives, the content itself it does not furnish at all"¹².

Understanding, like "sense" in Plato, is for Hegel, the beginning of philosophy: for it is only when mutually complementary, often antithetical abstractions have been clearly developed (perhaps by the sciences) will it be possible to integrate them into a richly analysed living view. Just as Plato would have us believe that the separate sciences need philosophy and the philosopher, Hegel says "Let the other sciences try as much as they like by ratiocination or *raisonnement* without philosophy, they are unable to keep alive without it, or to have any spiritual significance and truth in them"¹³.

Philosophy must therefore be able to use the work of the Understanding because Understanding will lead to thwarted and arrested development if it is allowed to dominate philosophical thinking. Philosophy must allow things to "pass over into one another" if it is to reinstate and understand the continuum of experience and save it from being reduced to senselessness by Understanding.

It is to the hard and fast, isolated notions, axioms or rules of the Understanding that dialectic (a "moment" in philosophical thinking) stands opposed. In dialectic one-sided abstractions demand to be complemented. This demand may express itself by a sheer breakdown into senselessness, or by the passage to the demanded complement or antithesis, which may be just as one-sided as the original notion, and may merely supercede it. At higher stages, however, dialectic becomes a reflective shuttling to and fro between notions known to be interdependent and correlative, and at a yet higher level it becomes a simple development of our notions, the more narrowly abstract growing into the more "concrete" and rich in "sides". In all these processes contradiction is most evident: it is implicitly present in the original products of Understanding, and becomes explicit when these products break down and start passing into their complements. It is also "preserved" in the result of all such processes.

Hegel emphasizes that the corrosive philosophical doubts, which are characteristic alike of the destructive modern and "noble" ancient skepticism, are deep forms of cognitive despair, which are not to be appeased by an ordinary proffer of information. Nor is dialectic to be identified with sophistry, the arbitrary and tendentious seeing of facts from points of view which lead to distorted conclusions. Hegel is therefore opposed to any view of dialectic which makes the contradictions of dialectic *merely apparent*, something that will vanish once systematic science has been achieved. To think of them in this manner is in fact to make of them a restored discipline of the Understanding, from which contradiction and movement have been eliminated. Like the Neo-platonists Hegel sees the levelling of all pretended universal definitions (Socratic "irony") and the development of ideas in the Platonic dialogues, like the *Parmenides* as "the true uncovering positive expression of the Divine Life". For him, therefore, the "...*Parmenides* of Plato- is perhaps the greatest literary work in ancient dialectic"¹⁴.

But it is in the Kantian antinomies that Hegel sees the most positive expression of dialectic. He praises Kant for noting not only that our notions of time, space, and causal dependence can be developed in contradictory ways, but also for showing further that such contradictions are "essential and necessary": that they do not spring from a causal error or a conceptual mistake as previous philosophers had supposed. He, however, criticises Kant for asserting that the antinomies are afflictions of our understanding and that they have no application to things-in-themselves. Hegel points out that, in holding this view, Kant shows a misplaced tenderness for "things-in-the-world": an unwillingness to see contradictions in them and a greater willingness to see them in thought, reason or spirit. Kant is further criticised for confining his antinomies to a limited set of cosmological ideas instead of recognizing their presence in objects of all types and in all notions and ideas.

Dialectic is not, however, for Hegel the end of philosophizing but only a "moment" or an aspect in philosophical thinking. If it overcomes the hard and fast notions and presuppositions of the Understanding, it must itself be overcome in the higher thought of Reason, or, as Hegel calls it, Speculative Thought. The peculiar characteristic of Reason or Speculative Thought is that it succeeds in *uniting* or *reconciling* opposed characteristics, so that the unalloyed contradiction marking the dialectical stage, which is responsible for its unease, passes over into a stage which is also one of harmony and peace.

This speculative or reasonable attitude in philosophy marks, according to Hegel, a thinking return to the unthinking reasonableness of ordinary thought and speech, as this had been before it was disrupted by the action of the Understanding. One may in fact say with some exaggeration that for Hegel, the overcoming of contradictions and irrationality consists really in their permanent acceptance, since they are seen to be essential to, and, therefore part of the final rational outcome.

But from the point of view of the Understanding, the results of Reason cannot be anything but contradictory, since they contain contradictory elements. The stability of the reasonable result (which is alien to Understanding) as opposed to the dialectical phase, lies in the fact that one of its aspects overreaches (*ubergreift*) the other, and demotes it to a mere condition of itself. The stages in such a movement

are: (1) a movement from an initial stage of positiveness (characteristic of Understanding); (2) a stage of contradictory sceptical malaise (characteristic of dialectic proper); and (3) a stage of accommodation which will re-instate the stability of the reasonable result and positiveness at a higher level (and will therefore be typical of Reason) until it culminates in Freedom. Thus "The truth is the whole. The whole, however, is merely the essential nature reaching its completeness through the process of its own development"¹⁵.

Rejecting Schelling's use of dialectic in a wholly external and formal manner, Hegel holds the (platonic) view that the various stages of development should arise from each other in a *necessary* manner in a genuine dialectic. We are not to determine its course: it must determine this itself by its inner necessity. Each stage is to be precisely the "nullity" of the immediately previous stages, the full "experience" of just that which these previous stages were attempting and failing to do. It has no further content than this, and therefore could not be different in any way whatever.

For Hegel, therefore, the dialectical system is in a sense more rigorous than the mathematical. This is because while the latter may have many starting points and many alternative directions that proof may take, there is but one unique starting point and a single line of proof in the former.

The negation which dialectic applies is not only a critique of conformistic logic, which denies the reality of contradictions, but also a critique of the given state of affairs on its own grounds- a repudiation of the established system of life which denies its own promises and potentialities. Nothing which does not sustain itself in a life and death struggle with the situations and conditions of its own existence can be. The struggle may be blind or unconscious, as in inorganic nature; it may be conscious and concerted as in the struggle of mankind with its own conditions and with those of nature.

The different modes of being represent different modes of unifying antagonistic relations; and refer to different modes of persisting through change, of originating and perishing, of having properties and limitations, and so on. And Hegel incorporates this basic (Aristotelian) conception into his philosophy by saying "The different modes of being

are more or less complete unifications". Being thus means unifying and unifying means movement. This is dialectic proper.

Reality thus becomes the constantly renewed result of the process of existence and *identity*- the continuous negation of inadequate existence. Because the subject maintains itself in being other than itself, each reality is a *realization*: a development of subjectivity which comes to itself in history where the development has a rational content. Thus "True reality is merely the process of reinstating self-identity... it becomes actual only by being carried out, and by the end it involves"¹⁶.

It can therefore be said by way of conclusion that for the ancients as for Hegel, the sciences are unable to tell us their essential meaning without philosophical comprehension. Their existence is due to motives whose truth and cogency are themselves beyond scientific demonstration. Science is in need of philosophical direction, but not in the sense that philosophy is to overrule the method of science. Indeed this is precisely the way in which science and philosophy are not to be related. The whole point of dialectic is that the will and striving for systematic knowledge (science) should be pervaded by the desire for comprehensive grasp of reality (philosophy), and that the philosopher need not quarrel with the scientist (The Unity of Knowledge).

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