

Lenin: On the Question of Dialectics

Proletarians of all countries, unite!

Vladimir Ilyich Lenin

On the Question of Dialectics

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The splitting of a single whole and the cognition of its contradictory parts (see the quotation from Philo on Heraclitus at the beginning of Section III, "On Cognition," in Lasalle's book on Heraclitus^[1]) is the *essence* (one of the "essentials," one of the principal, if not the principal, characteristics or features) of dialectics. That is precisely how Hegel, too, puts the matter (Aristotle in his *Metaphysics* continually *grapples* with it and *combats* Heraclitus and Heraclitean ideas).

The correctness of this aspect of the content of dialectics must be tested by the history of science. This aspect of dialectics (e.g. in Plekhanov) usually receives inadequate attention: the identity of opposites is taken as the sum-total of *examples* ["for example, a seed," "for example, primitive communism." The same is true of Engels. But it is "in the interests of popularisation..."] and not as a *law of cognition* (and as a law of the objective world).

In mathematics: + and -. Differential and integral.

In mechanics: action and reaction.

In physics: positive and negative electricity.

In chemistry: the combination and dissociation of atoms.

In social science: the class struggle.

The identity of opposites (it would be more correct, perhaps,

to say their "unity,"—although the difference between the terms identity and unity is not particularly important here. In a certain sense both are correct) is the recognition (discovery) of the contradictory, *mutually exclusive*, opposite tendencies in *all* phenomena and processes of nature (*including* mind and society). The condition for the knowledge of all processes of the world in their "*self-movement*," in their spontaneous development, in their real life, is the knowledge of them as a unity of opposites. Development is the "struggle" of opposites. The two basic (or two possible? Or two historically observable?) conceptions of development (evolution) are: development as decrease and increase, as repetition, *and* development as a unity of opposites (the division of a unity into mutually exclusive opposites and their reciprocal relation).

In the first conception of motion, *self* – movement, its *driving* force, its source, its motive, remains in the shade (or this source is made *external*—God, subject, etc.). In the second conception the chief attention is directed precisely to knowledge of the source of "*self*" – movement.

The first conception is lifeless, pale and dry. The second is living. The second *alone* furnishes the key to the "self-movement" of everything existing; it alone furnishes the key to "leaps," to the "break in continuity," to the "transformation into the opposite," to the destruction of the old and the emergence of the new.

The unity (coincidence, identity, equal action) of opposites is conditional, temporary, transitory, relative. The struggle of mutually exclusive opposites is absolute, just as development and motion are absolute.

NB: The distinction between subjectivism (scepticism, sophistry, etc.) and dialectics, incidentally, is that in (objective) dialectics the difference between the relative and the absolute is itself relative. For objective dialectics there *is* an absolute *within* the relative. For subjectivism and sophistry the relative is only relative and excludes the absolute.

In his *Capital*, Marx first analyses the simplest, most ordinary and fundamental, most common and everyday *relation* of bourgeois (commodity) society, a relation encountered billions of times, viz., the exchange of commodities. In this very simple phenomenon (in this “cell” of bourgeois society) analysis reveals *all* the contradictions (or the germs of *all* contradictions) of modern society. The subsequent exposition shows us the development (*both growth and movement*) of these contradictions and of this society in the $\Sigma^{[2]}$ of its individual parts. From its beginning to its end.

Such must also be the method of exposition (i.e., study) of dialectics in general (for with Marx the dialectics of bourgeois society is only a particular case of dialectics). To begin with what is the simplest, most ordinary, common, etc., with **any proposition**: the leaves of a tree are green; John is a man; Fido is a dog, etc. Here already we have *dialectics* (as Hegel’s genius recognised): the **individual** is the *universal*. (cf. Aristoteles, *Metaphisik*, translation by Schegler, Bd. II, S. 40, 3. Buch, 4. Kapitel, 8-9: “denn natürlich kann man nicht der Meinung sein, daß es ein Haus (a house in general) gebe außer den sichtbaren Häusern,” “ού γρ άν ύείημεν είναι τινα οίχίαν παρα τχς τινάς οίχίας”).^[3] Consequently, the opposites (the individual is opposed to the universal) are identical: the individual exists only in the connection that leads to the universal. The universal exists only in the individual and through the individual. Every individual is (in one way or another) a universal. Every universal is (a fragment, or an aspect, or the essence of) an individual. Every universal only approximately embraces all the individual objects. Every individual enters incompletely into the universal, etc., etc. Every individual is connected by thousands of transitions with other **kinds** of individuals (things, phenomena, processes) etc. *Here already* we have the elements, the germs, the concepts of *necessity*, of objective connection in nature, etc. Here already we have the contingent

and the necessary, the phenomenon and the essence; for when we say: John is a man, Fido is a dog, *this* is a leaf of a tree, etc., we *disregard* a number of attributes as *contingent*; we separate the essence from the appearance, and counterpose the one to the other.

Thus in any proposition we can (and must) disclose as in a “nucleus” (“cell”) the germs of *all* the elements of dialectics, and thereby show that dialectics is a property of all human knowledge in general. And natural science shows us (and here again it must be demonstrated in *any* simple instance) objective nature with the same qualities, the transformation of the individual into the universal, of the contingent into the necessary, transitions, modulations, and the reciprocal connection of opposites. Dialectics *is* the theory of knowledge of (Hegel and) Marxism. This is the “aspect” of the matter (it is not “an aspect” but the *essence* of the matter) to which Plekhanov, not to speak of other Marxists, paid no attention.

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Knowledge is represented in the form of a series of circles both by Hegel (see *Logic*) and by the modern “epistemologist” of natural science, the eclectic and foe of Hegelianism (which he did not understand!), Paul Volkmann (see his *Erkenntnistheoretische Grundzüge*,^[4] S.)

“Circles” in philosophy: [is a chronology of *persons* essential? No!]

Ancient: from Democritus to Plato and the dialectics of Heraclitus.

Renaissance: Descartes versus Gassendi (Spinoza?)

Modern: Holbach–Hegel (via Berkeley, Hume, Kant). Hegel–Feuerbach–Marx

Dialectics as *living*, many-sided knowledge (with the number of sides eternally increasing), with an infinite number of shades

of every approach and approximation to reality (with a philosophical system growing into a whole out of each shade)—here we have an immeasurably rich content as compared with “metaphysical” materialism, the fundamental *misfortune* of which is its inability to apply dialectics to the Bildertheorie,^[5] to the process and development of knowledge.

<p>Philosophical idealism is <i>only</i> nonsense from the stand-point of crude, simple, metaphysical materialism. From the standpoint of <i>dialectical</i> materialism, on the other hand, philosophical idealism is a <i>one-sided</i>, exaggerated, überschwengliches (Dietzgen)^[6] development (inflation, distension) of one of the features, aspects, facets of knowledge, into an absolute, <i>divorced</i> from matter, from nature,</p>	
<p>apotheosised. Idealism is clerical obscurantism. True. But philosophical idealism is (“<i>more correctly</i>” and “<i>in addition</i>”) a <i>road</i> to clerical obscurantism <i>through one of the shades</i> of the infinitely complex <i>knowledge</i> (dialectical) of man.</p>	<p>NB this aphor- ism</p>

Human knowledge is not (or does not follow) a straight line, but a curve, which endlessly approximates a series of circles, a spiral. Any fragment, segment, section of this curve can be transformed (transformed one-sidedly) into an independent, complete, straight line, which then (if one does not see the wood for the trees) leads into the quagmire, into clerical obscurantism (where it is *anchored* by the class interests of the ruling classes). Rectilinearity and one-sidedness, woodenness and petrification, subjectivism and subjective blindness—voilà the epistemological roots of idealism. And

clerical obscurantism (= philosophical idealism), of course, has *epistemological* roots, it is not groundless; it is a *sterile flower* undoubtedly, but a sterile flower that grows on the living tree of living, fertile, genuine, powerful, omnipotent, objective, absolute human knowledge.

Notes

[1] See [p. 348](#) of this volume—*Ed.*

[2] *resumen*—*Ed.*

[3] “for, of course, one cannot hold the opinion that there can be a house (in general) apart from visible houses.”—*Ed.*

[4] P. Volkmann, *Erkenntnistheoretische Grundzüge der Naturwissenschaften*, Leipzig-Berlin, 1910, p. 35.—*Ed.*

[5] *theory of reflection*—*Ed.*

[6] The reference to the use by Josef Dietzgen of the term “*überschwenglich*,” which means: exaggerated, excessive, infinite; for example, in the book *Kleinere philosophische Schriften (Minor Philosophical Writings)*, Stuttgart, 1903, p. 204, Dietzgen uses this term as follows: “absolute and relative are not infinitely separated.”