as I have already said, this seems too banal and obvious. Hopefully not that 'everything is always changing', since this is false. There is stability within change. We cannot describe change except by talking about 'things which change', and to say that a thing is changing is to imply that within the process of change there is sufficient permanence and continuity for us to identify the 'thing' which has undergone the change. If for example we speak of a change from feudal to capitalist society, we are saying that a certain identifiable society has changed from being feudal to being capitalist, and in that case there must be sufficient continuity for us to be able to say that it is the same society which has undergone the change. The only way in which we could make plausible the claim that everything is always changing would be in terms of the first of the four examples which I quoted from Engels - the example of theories of modern physics, theories of the ultimate constitution of matter which make use of some basic concept such as 'energy'. But if we accept that 'everything is always changing' in this sense, this would be perfectly compatible with the denial of change at other levels. It would for example be compatible with a completely unhistorical view of human society. This cannot be the kind of thesis we are looking for.

The empirical dialectic, then, is not to be identified with any single general thesis which could be either true or false. Rather, the notion of an empirical dialectic points us to the value of a certain kind of explanation - developmental explanation. 'Dialectic' in this sense is not a super-scientific law about the whole of reality, but a way of looking at particular areas of reality, a way of understanding them. It is an immensely fruitful way of looking at things, but how fruitful it will be in any particular case can be determined only by examining the particular case.

IV

In this paper I have been concerned to distinguish between the 'conceptual' dialectic and the 'temporal' or 'empirical' dialectic; to give an account of each; to show that they do not stand or fall together, but that each is valuable in its own right. The enterprise has itself been a non-dialectical one, an example of what Hegel calls the exercise of 'Understanding', whose function is to analyse and make distinctions, separating one thing from another. That a discussion of dialectic should itself be undialectical is not as inappropriate as it sounds. Hegel himself recognises the need for 'understanding' in this sense, describing it as 'the most marvellous and mighty, or rather the absolute power'. I would myself be content with a more modest description of what I have been doing; but, more seriously, I would also recognise with Hegel that the role of understanding is a preparatory one. Having made the distinctions, we then need to make the connections. I have criticised Hegel's way of connecting the conceptual and the temporal dialectic, which takes the form of identifying them. But if this is unacceptable, we should not be content merely to leave the matter there. We need to work out an alternative account of the connections between the two kinds of dialectic. I shall try to do this in a further paper, and in the process I shall take up some of the points raised in Sean Sayers' paper in this issue and Roy Edgley's paper on dialectic presented to the Radical Philosophy Conference at Oxford.

The Marxist Dialectic

Sean Sayers

"Wherever there is movement, wherever there is life, wherever anything is carried into effect in the actual world, there dialectic is at work. It is also the soul of all knowledge which is truly scientific."

Hegel, Logic, trans. Wallace, p148

The law of contradiction in things is the basic principle of dialectical materialism, the philosophy of Marxism. In Mao's words:

'Marxist philosophy holds that the law of the unity of opposites is the fundamental law of the universe. This law operates universally, whether in the natural world, in human society, or in man's thinking. Between the opposites in a contradiction there is at once unity and struggle, and it is this that impels things to move and change."

(Mao, OCH, p91)
My purpose in this paper is to try to show that the dialectical outlook is not an absurd, irrational and confused extravagance, but rather an attempt to express truths of fundamental philosophical importance; and that it is not vulnerable to the arguments commonly brought against it (which, I shall attempt to show, merely reveal an ignorance and misunderstanding of the meaning of dialectics). I shall rely primarily upon the classic presentation of dialectical materialism as it is implicit in Marx's writings and explicitly formulated by Engels, Lenin and Mao Tsetung. I shall also refer often to Hegel, who is, as Marx and Engels repeatedly acknowledge, the source of their dialectical philosophy. Indeed, it is difficult to understand that philosophy without going back to Hegel; for it is only in Hegel, and particularly in his Logica, that the concept of contradiction is explained and defended in detail against opposing points of view.

What then is dialectic? First of all one must see that it is not a mere absurdity but a philosophy, a logic, a way of seeing the world. And the opposing point of view is not simply commonsense, pure reason or logic just as such, but rather an opposing philosophy, logic and way of seeing things. So what we have is an argument between two different philosophies: on the one hand, dialectics; and on the other hand, what Hegel and what Marxists have called the 'metaphysical' world-view.

The metaphysical outlook is succinctly summarised in Bishop Butler's saying, 'Everything is what it is and not another thing'. A chair is a chair, a circle is a circle, etc. - in general A = A, and A cannot at the same time be not-A. These seem such obvious and evident truths that it would be futile to deny them. And, of course, it is true that A = A, that everything is identical with itself; dialectics does not deny this triviality. Hegel, for example, says:

The subsistence or substance of anything that exists is its self-identity; for its want of identity, or oneness with itself, would be its dissolution. But self-identity is pure abstraction. (Phenomenology p. 113)

Everything has self-identity, being-in-itself, but the matter does not end there; for nothing is merely self-identical and self-contained, except what is abstract, isolated, static and unchanging. All real, concrete things are part of the world of interaction, motion and change; and for them we must recognise that things are not merely self-subsistent, but exist essentially in relation to other things.

Dialectical philosophy is the attempt to portray things as concrete, and it opposes the abstract character of metaphysics. Lenin called dialectics 'the concrete analysis of concrete conditions'. But one must be careful to understand the meaning of 'concreteness' in this context. When one hears talk of concrete things one tends to think of chairs, tables and other objects immediately about one. But, according to dialectical philosophy, the objects immediately about me - this table, that chair - considered in themselves are abstractions. An object, regarded on its own, by and in itself, is, according to Hegel, abstract, in the literal and precise sense that it has been taken out of its context and is viewed in isolation. The metaphysical outlook is abstract in that it considers things merely in themselves, merely as what they are, as self-subsistent, as isolated and abstracted from their context. According to dialectical thought, real, concrete things are not abstract in this way, but embedded in the world; essentially related to other objects and in interaction with them. To quote Hegel again:

A determinate, a finite, being is one that is in relation to an other; it is a content standing in a necessary relation to another content, to the whole world. (Sc. Logic p. 86)

Not only does the metaphysical outlook treat things as isolated; it also has the effect of arresting all movement and development in things and considering them as static. The object characterised by mere self-identity is static. It is a mere positive existent thing, a given fact - it just is what it is; and the world, according to this view, is a mere collection or diversity of such things, indifferent and inactive in relation to each other. Again Hegel argues that such a view is abstract. All concrete and determinate things are in a process of movement and becoming, of development and change. This is equally essential to all concrete things.

We are aware that everything finite, instead of being stable and ultimate, is rather changeable and transient. (Enc. Log. Sec. 81)

To say that everything is in a constant process of development and change is not, of course, to deny that things can be relatively unchanging and stationary. It is, however, to say that rest is 'conditional, temporary, transitory (and) relative' whereas 'development and motion are absolute' (Lenin's words, 'On the Question of Dialectics', Collected Works, Vol. 38, p. 360)

According to dialectic, this is a truth of universal application and great philosophical importance. In all spheres we find it to be true and yet denied by influential methods of thought which are based upon the metaphysical outlook. It is evident, for example, that all concrete societies are in a process of development and change; that they are essentially historical in character; that particular forms of society are not eternal but come into being, develop and eventually perish and give way to other forms. And yet, in the non-Marxist social sciences, it is standard to treat societies, or institutions of society, abstractly and unhistorically. It is standard to consider them statically and not dynamically; merely as they are, and not in their necessary process of becoming, development and decay.

A dialectical process of development characterises not only the human world, but also all natural phenomena. This is perhaps not so
evident because the metaphysical approach is very influential in our thinking about natural processes. Thus we often conceive of mechanical processes as an endless repetition of the same basic law-like processes. For example, planetary motion, or the action of a piston or lever. However, to conceive of mechanical processes in this way is to conceive of them abstractly. No real, concrete mechanism is an eternally repeating process. All real machines were created at a certain time and place and, as they operate, gradually wear out, decay and cease to be. Similarly, the real motion of the planets is not eternal. The solar system was formed at a particular stage in the evolution of the universe, has gone through a process of change and development, and is destined eventually to perish.

The metaphysical conception of mechanism sees it as abstract and unchanging. Concrete mechanical things are not like this. Rather, what we are given in the metaphysical picture is an idealisation and an abstraction. Wittgenstein is pointing to this metaphysical character of mechanics when he says:

We have the idea of a super-mechanism when we talk of logical necessity, e.g. physics tried as an ideal to reduce things to mechanisms or something hitting something else. We say that people condemn a man to death and then we say the Law condemns him to death. 'Although the Jury can pardon him the Law can't.' ... The idea of something super-strict, something stricter than any Judge can be, super-rigidity...

Cf. a lever-fulcrum. The idea of super-hardness. 'The geometrical lever is harder than any lever can be. It can't bend.' Here you have a case of logical necessity. 'Logic is a mechanism made of infinitely hard material. Logic cannot bend.' ... This is the way we arrive at a super-something. (Lectures & Conversations p15-16)

There can be no doubt that such idealised and abstract pictures of mechanical processes have been extremely useful and important tools in the advance of science and of human knowledge generally. Such an abstracting approach becomes false, however, when it is elevated into a philosophical system. Reality is then regarded as abstract, unchanging and 'super-rigid' - that is to say, metaphysically and not dialectically. Again we see that dialectics is a method of seeing things as concrete.

It is often claimed that mathematical, logical and conceptual truths are eternal and unchanging. But according to dialectical philosophy even this is not so; ideas have no separate, abstract, ideal and eternal existence. Logic, mathematics, philosophy and so on are not mere abstract ideas, but concrete thoughts developed by real historical men. Such ideas have consequently come into being at a certain time, and they too have undergone development and change.

Stated thus, this may appear trite and obvious, but nevertheless it is implicitly denied in one way or another by most contemporary philosophers. For example, it is an almost universal doctrine among contemporary philosophers that philosophy is a conceptual and not an empirical study; and conceptual truths are regarded as having a timeless and eternal validity. It is rare indeed to find philosophy treated as a form of knowledge of concrete reality, produced by concrete individual philosophers living in, and responding to, specific social and historical conditions.

So far, then, I have tried to show how dialectical philosophy seeks to understand things concretely, and how it thus regards things as essentially inter-related and essentially in a process of motion and change. Engels says just this when he writes:

Dialectics ... comprehends things and their representations in their essential connection, concatenation, motion, origin and ending. (Anti-Dühring p36)

This is the purpose of dialectical philosophy and this is what it means when it says that everything is contradictory. For contradiction is at the root of both the identity and relationships of things, and of their development.

All concrete things are contradictory. There are tensions and conflicts within all things and in the relations between things. This is the law of contradiction, which is the most universal expression of the philosophy of dialectics and also the least well understood. It is important therefore to be clear about the meaning of the dialectical concept of contradiction. In particular, it is vital to understand that the dialectical concept of contradiction is not the same as the concept of contradiction in traditional formal logic.

The dialectical contradiction is a concrete contradiction; it is a contradiction which exists not just between ideas or propositions, but in things. When dialectical thinkers talk about contradictions they are referring to conflicts of opposing forces or tendencies in things. This is the most important part of the meaning of 'contradiction' in dialectical thought. We can come to a better understanding of this view by again contrasting it with the metaphysical perspective.

According to the metaphysical outlook, as we have seen, things are regarded as self-contained, positive existents, indifferent to other things. All things, in Hume's words, are 'loose and separate'; or, as Hegel puts it, according to this view,

the different diverse things are each individually what they are, and unaffected by the relation in which they stand to each other. The relation is therefore external to them. (Enc. Log. Sec. 117)
Such a picture of things is abstract and untrue according to dialectics. Concrete reality is not a mere diversity of indifferent and externally related things - it is not a mere 'totality of facts'. For as well as recognizing the positive existence of things, we must also see in things the forces opposing and negating them which lead to development and change. Concrete things are not just related to each other, they are in a constant process of conflict and interaction, which is at the basis of all movement and change. Dialectical reason, says Hegel,

> sharpened, so to say, the blunt difference of diverse terms, the mere manifestations of pictorial (i.e. metaphysical) thinking, into essential difference, into opposition. Only when the manifold terms have been driven to the point of contradiction do they become active and lively towards each other, receiving in contradiction the negativity which is the inherent pulsation of self-movement and vitality.

(Sc. Log. p442)

It is this contradiction and negativity which must be recognized in order to comprehend things in their movement:

> Contradiction is the root of all movement and vitality; it is only in so far as something has a contradiction within it that it moves, has an urge and activity.

(Sc. Log. p439)

The reason for talking of 'contradiction' here is twofold: (1) firstly, to stress that concrete things are not indifferent to one another, but rather in interaction and conflict with each other. This is the very basis of the determinateness of concrete things, as is recognized in Spinoza's saying, 'omnis determinatio est negatio' (all determination is negation). A thing is determinate and has its own identity only by maintaining itself distinct from other things, by opposing other things. All determinate and concrete things are in opposition to other things.

(2) and secondly, the concept of contradiction is required in order to stress that such concrete opposition is not external and accidental to things, but rather essential and necessary; it is internal to things and a part of their nature. Contradiction is not mere accidental conflict, but essential opposition, opposition within a unity. The dialectical concept of contradiction is that of a concrete unity of opposites.

Some illustrations may help to make these ideas clearer. Marx, as is well known, analyses the relations between the classes of capitalist society as a contradictory one. The proletariat and the bourgeoisie are essentially related; both are created by capitalist conditions of production, and neither could have come into existence without the other. Furthermore, they arise together as mutually antagonistic classes. The conflict between them is not external to their natures and accidental. Neither the proletariat nor the bourgeoisie can be properly understood unless they are considered as the contradictory aspects of a single totality. It is not a matter of one self-contained class in external and merely contingent relation to another. Marx's whole understanding of capitalism, and of history generally, is based on the view that class struggle is necessary and essential to society and the motive force of history.

The law of contradiction, however, applies to all things and not just to society. Let us return to the example of mechanical motion. The basic concept of Newtonian mechanics is that of force; and Newton's theory of universal gravitation maintains that all bodies attract all other bodies with a force which varies with the masses of the bodies involved and with their distances apart. That is to say, everything in a mechanical system is in necessary relation and interaction with every other thing. Furthermore, no force can operate in a void; a force must operate on something. And in order to operate on something, it must meet with some resistance, in the form of an opposing force. Action implies reaction.

A force in and of itself is an unreal abstraction. Thus any real mechanical system is to be understood as the action and interaction of opposing forces. This is true whether the result of those forces is an equilibrium (as studied in statics) or motion (as studied in dynamics). Thus, for example, planetary motion is the result of the interaction of the opposing forces of, on the one hand, the forces of gravitational attraction between the planet and the sun (the centripetal force), and on the other hand, the inertial force of their motion (the centrifugal force). Such examples could be multiplied indefinitely, for, as Hegel says,

> There is absolutely nothing whatever in which we cannot and must not point to contradictions or opposite attributes; and the abstraction made by understanding therefore means a forcible insistance on a single aspect, and a real effort to obscure and remove all consciousness of the other attribute which is involved.

Enc. Log. sec. 89

**Criticsims**

So far I have tried to explain the philosophy of dialectic and the idea that there are contradictions in things which is basic to it. Now it is time to consider some of the criticisms that are commonly brought against it. These criticisms have been remarkably constant and we find them repeated in essentially the same terms time and again. Indeed, they all reduce in the end to the re-iteration of the formal logical principle of non-contradiction and a dogmatic insistance that formal logic provides the sole valid principles of reasoning. This refusal to recognize any other valid methods of thought than deduction and formal logic is
characteristic of metaphysics. What we find in these critics is the assertion of the metaphysical viewpoint.

Here is Dühring's version, as quoted by Engels:

Contradiction is a category which can only appertain to a combination of thoughts, but not to reality. There are no contradictions in things, or to put it another way, contradiction accepted as reality is itself the apex of absurdity.

(quoted in Engels, A.D. p164)

The dialectical idea of contradiction in reality is thus regarded as absurd and impossible because it violates the 'law of non-contradiction'. According to Popper, another such critic,

This law says that no self-contradictory proposition, or pair of self-contradictory propositions, can be true, that is, can correspond to the facts. In other words, the law implies that a contradiction can never occur within the facts, that facts can never contradict. (Popper, 'What is Dialectic?', Mind 1940 p419)

So when dialectical philosophy maintains that there are contradictions in things it is dismissed as being muddled and confused. Hegel and the Marxists are accused of making the most elementary logical blunders. Dialectic is caricatured as the mere acceptance of formal contradiction and it is rejected as the quintessence of absurdity and irrationality.

Popper, for example, tells us that Hegel 'simply said that contradictions do not matter' (p416). This is a travesty, even if a common one; what Hegel actually says is as follows:

Whatever exists is concrete, with difference and opposition in itself... Contradiction is the very moving principle of the world; and it is ridiculous to say that contradiction is unthinkable. The only thing correct in that statement is that contradiction is not the end of the matter, but cancels itself.

(Enc. Log, Sec. 1198s)

In other words, according to dialectics, contradiction is indeed repugnant to reality, and just because of that the contradictions in things lead to their development and change. But, of course, when it is said by the critics of dialectic that contradictions are unacceptable more than this is meant. The result of attempting to express a contradiction is supposed to be an absolutely self-annuling proposition, which implies anything and everything and thus asserts nothing. To quote Popper again,

From two contradictory premises, we can logically deduce anything and its negation as well. We therefore convey with such a contradictory theory - nothing. A theory which involves a contradiction is entirely useless. Because it does not convey any sort of information. (p410)

Dialectical philosophy is supposed to be just such a theory.

In order to see why it is not, it is vital to understand that there is a distinction between formal contradiction and dialectical contradiction. What critics such as Popper describe is formal contradiction (as defined by the formal logical law of non-contradiction), which is indeed self-annuling. The formal contradiction represents mere formal impossibility. Its result is mere nothingness. In reasoning according to formal principles, to demonstrate that a proposition or theory is self-contradictory is to demonstrate its failure and its nothingness. Or, if you prefer, the result of formal contradiction is mere assertion; the assertion of anything and everything; an absolutely indeterminate assertion. Thus a formal contradiction is an indeterminate assertion. Thus a formal contradiction is an indeterminate and abstract assertion; and, as Hegel shows at the very beginning of his Logic, whatever has only abstract and indeterminate Being is pure Nothingness.

Dialectical contradiction is not of this kind, but it is a contradiction nonetheless. The dialectical contradiction is a concrete contradiction; it is a feature of concrete and determinate things. It takes the form of a concrete unity or conjunction of incompatible events. Real contradictions are repugnant to reality and therefore dissolve themselves. But, unlike with the abstract contradictions of formal logic, the outcome, the resolution of a concrete contradiction is not a mere nothingness, a mere indeterminacy. The outcome of a concrete contradiction, the outcome of a real clashing of opposites, is a result, something determinate, a new thing, which is equally contradictory and hence equally subject to change and eventual dissolution.

The concrete contradictions in things thus lead to their dissolution and negation; but this negation is not the abstract and absolute negation of formal logic, it is rather a dialectical and concrete negation, which Hegel calls 'determinate negation'. The metaphysical approach, he says,

always sees in the result (of contradiction) pure nothingness, and abstracts from the fact that this nothing is determinate, is the nothing of that out of which it comes as a result. Nothing, however, is only, in fact, the true result, when taken as the nothing of what it comes from; it is thus a determinate nothing, and has a content... When once... the result is apprehended, as it truly is, as determinate negation, a new form has thereby immediately arisen; and in the negation the transition is made by which the progress through the complete succession of forms comes about of itself.

(Phen. Mind p137)
The concept of determinate negation is central to dialectics, but apparently unknown to those critics who can conceive of no other sort of contradiction than formal contradiction. The result of contradictions, conflicts in things, is indeed that they are disrupted, negated and reduced to nothingness. But this nothingness is not the abstract and simple nothingness or absurdity which results from formal contradiction. It is a concrete nothingness, the nothingness or negation of something determinate, a concrete result.

The negative which emerges as a result of dialectic, is, because a result, at the same time the positive; it contains what it results from, absorbed into itself, and made part of its own nature.

(Enc. Log. Sec. 81Ss)

This process, by which a concrete contradiction in things results in a determinate negation of them, Hegel calls 'aufheben', which in philosophical contexts is variously translated as 'to sublate', 'to overcome', 'to supercede', 'to transcend' and so on. However, there seems to be no English equivalent which captures the contradictoryness of its meanings in ordinary language, which Hegel explains as follows:

'To sublate' (Aufheben) has a twofold meaning in the language: on the one hand it means to preserve, to maintain, and equally it also means to put an end to... Thus what is sublated is at the same time preserved. (Sc. Log. p107)

For example, to say that capitalism is contradictory does not mean that it is impossible and unreal, but rather that it is an essentially dynamic social form, and that it is ultimately destined to perish and be negated in a new social form, socialism, which will emerge from it as its result. Socialism is, according to Marx, the historical outcome of the contradictions of capitalism and the determinate negation of capitalism. Since socialism develops out of capitalism, it is not a mere abstract negation, but a concrete result which necessarily must base itself upon the positive achievements of capitalism and which preserves also, at least initially, many of the negative ones too. Marx, writing in the Critique of the Gotha Programme of the initial period of socialism, says,

What we have to deal with here is a communist society, not as it has developed on its own foundations, but, on the contrary, just as it emerges from capitalist society; which is thus in every respect, economically, morally and intellectually, still stamped with the birthmarks of the old society from whose womb it emerges.

Marx's account of socialism, as well as capitalism, is thoroughly dialectical, and an excellent example and proof of the power of dialectical thought. His picture of socialism is thoroughly concrete and dialectical: it recognises that socialism will be a contradictory and hence developing stage of history, a transitional stage 'between capitalism and communism'. And this recognition is not the result of a priori or metaphysical speculation, but is based upon the lessons of the fullest possible historical experience and understanding, as Lenin emphasises throughout State and Revolution, and in the following characteristic passage:

The question of the future development of future communism (can) be dealt with on the basis of the fact(s) that it has its origin in capitalism, that it is the result of the action of a social force to which capitalism gave birth. There is no trace of an attempt on Marx's part to make up a utopia, to indulge in idle guess-work about what cannot be known... Marx bases (his) conclusion(s) on an analysis of the role played by the proletariat in modern capitalist society, on the data concerning the development of this society, and on the irreconcilability of the antagonistic interests of the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. (Sel. Works p324-5)

It is vital, then, to distinguish dialectical from formal contradiction; and to see that dialectical contradiction implies a concrete conflict of forces with a determinate outcome, and is not just self-annulment and abstract nothingness. When one understands this one can see clearly that the standard criticisms of the dialectical concept of contradiction misunderstand it and treat it as though it were formal contradiction.

Against Colletti

Such criticisms are based on the dogmatic belief that formal contradiction is the only possible kind of contradiction. We meet with this dogma in various forms in the criticisms of dialectics. On the one hand, as we have seen, we are assured that dialectical philosophy is absurd and irrational. On the other hand, the view that dialectic - the avowed philosophy of such intellectual giants as Hegel, Marx, Engels and Lenin - is just an elementary logical blunder cannot seriously be maintained. This is not to say that it is not tiresomely familiar; but nevertheless all the more important critics have recognised that dialectical materialism has been an extremely fruitful method, at least in Marx's hands. How an 'absurd' and 'irrational' philosophy can at the same time be fruitful is explained by attempting to foist this contradiction onto Marx and dialectical materialism. Marxism is revised. When it talks of 'contradictions' in things, it is said, it does not really mean this. The language of 'contradiction' is a metaphorical and confused Hegelian extravagance; what is meant is simply that things are in a state of conflict and opposi-
tion; and such conflict has nothing to do with contradiction.

Again Dühring puts it well:

The antagonism of forces measured against each other and moving in opposite directions is in fact the basic form of all actions in the life of the world and its creatures. But this opposition of the directions taken by the forces of elements and individuals does not in the least degree coincide with the idea of absurd contradiction. (quoted in Engels, AD p164)

And Dühring (who himself did not invent the idea) has been followed by a whole line of philosophers who seek to deny the dialectical concept of contradictions in things and replace it by the idea of non-contradictory 'conflict', 'antagonism' or 'opposition'. Colletti is the latest to do so. In an article in a recent edition of New Left Review (No93), he seeks to distinguish two types of opposition:

'Real opposition' (or 'contrariety' of incompatible opposites) is an opposition 'without contradiction'. It does not violate the principles of identity and (non-)contradiction, and hence is compatible with formal logic. The second form of opposition, on the contrary, is 'contradiction' and gives rise to a dialectical opposition. (NLR 93 p3)

He then goes on to deny that dialectical philosophy can be either materialistic or scientific, on the basis of the following, by now familiar, assertion:

The fundamental principle of materialism and of science ... is the principle of non-contradiction. Reality cannot contain dialectical contradictions but only real oppositions, conflicts between forces, relations of contrariety. The latter are ... non-contradictory oppositions, and not dialectical contradictions. (NLR 93 p29)

This raises the question: why do dialectical philosophers insist on speaking of 'contradictions'? - why don't they, instead, talk of 'conflicts' and 'oppositions'? After all, even as they themselves explain it, dialectical contradiction is a matter of the conflict between the opposed aspects of things? In order to understand why they nevertheless insist on the language of 'contradiction', it is crucial to see that dialectical contradiction is more than mere conflict and opposition; it is essential opposition; conflict within a unity; internal conflicts - not mere external and accidental conflict. The dialectical law of contradiction asserts that conflict and opposition are necessary, essential and internal to things; whereas the point of arguing that only conflicts exist in nature is precisely to deny the necessity of these conflicts.

Thus, for example, Colletti characterises 'non-contradictory opposition' in the following terms:

The formula that expresses it is 'A and not-A'. Each of the opposites is real and positive. Each subsists for itself... To be itself, each has no need to be referred to the other. (NLR 93 p6)

In this formula A is merely different from B. We are back to Bishop Butler; everything is what it is... A is A and B is B. They may be opposed, but not necessarily. Thus the world is portrayed by Colletti, in metaphysical fashion, as an indifferent diversity of merely positive things: A, B etc. As we have seen, however, things which are merely positive, which merely are what they are, are abstract and dead. Nothing concrete and real is merely positive. Everything is contradictory and contains negative as well as positive aspects within it. The dialectical notion of contradiction is that such conflicts between opposed aspects are necessary and essential.

The only correct formula to express this is 'A and not-A', because only in this way can it be made clear that the conflicts to which dialectical philosophy refers are inherent and within a unity. The formula 'A and not-A' is the formula of contradiction: that is to say, here we really are talking about contradictions. Although again, of course, we must be careful to distinguish dialectical from formal contradiction; and we must be aware that when a proposition of the form 'A and not-A' is asserted in a dialectical context it is concrete and dialectical, and not merely formal and abstract, negation and contradiction that are meant. Not all statements in the form of a contradiction ('A and not-A') state merely formal contradictions; and because of this it is possible to express meaningful ideas in the

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form of a contradiction (as the histories of science, mathematics, philosophy, etc, clearly show).

The argument that things are in conflict and not contradiction also appears in other forms. For example, it is said that dialectic has nothing to do with logic, and that dialectical philosophy is confused in ascribing logical properties - such as contradictions, negations and necessities - to nature. These can exist only among thoughts. Then follows the attempt to rewrite the philosophy of dialectics, ridding it of the notions of contradiction, necessity and so on. Here is Popper's version:

What dialectic is - dialectic in the sense in which we can attach a clear meaning to (it) - can be described in the following manner. Dialectic ... maintains that certain developments, or certain historical processes, occur in a certain typical way. It is, therefore, an empirical descriptive theory, comparable, for instance, with a theory which maintains that most living organisms increase their size during some stage of their development, then remain constant, and lastly decrease until they die... Like such theories, dialectic is not applicable without exceptions - as long as we are careful not to force the dialectical interpretation. Like those theories, dialectic is rather vague. And like those theories, dialectic has nothing particular to do with logic. (p411-2)

The effect of such revisions of the philosophy of dialectic is strikingly illustrated here. A clear and strong philosophical doctrine is rendered into a banal and ludicrous generalisation.

The philosophy of dialectic does claim to provide a logic. It says not just that things generally and for the most part are related to and in conflict with other things, but that this is the essential and necessary charac­ter of concrete things. Dialectical philosophy is a logic in the sense that it describes the necessary laws of things at the most general level, and thus gives a method of thinking about the world which is of universal application. It is a logic in the sense that it specifies the laws of thought which must be adhered to if reality is to be grasped concretely.

Dialectical logic is not, however, a merely formal logic. It is a logic of the concrete - a logic of content. It is an attempt to specify the logic of reality. Mao writes,

The law of contradiction in things, that is, the law of the unity of opposites, is the fundamental law of nature and of society and therefore also the fundamental law of thought.
(On Contradiction p71)

Dialectic has, therefore, an empirical and descriptive content; for it attempts to describe the behaviour of things in their most universal and general aspects.

However, dialectical philosophy is not a mere empirical generalisation in Popper's sense; it is not an empirical as opposed to a logical theory. It is a logical theory in the sense that it puts forward the law of contradiction as a logical law; as a universally valid principle which describes the necessary and essential character of concrete reality.

To talk of necessity in nature and of logical relations between things at first seems outrageous to anyone brought up in the atmosphere of contemporary British thought. For at present there is no philosophical theory more widely accepted or more celebrated than Hume's view that there are no necessary connections between things. He writes,

All events seem entirely loose and separate. One event follows another, but we never can observe any tie between them. They seem conjoined, but never connected. (Enquiry Ch.7)

This doctrine is not the bland common­sense it is portrayed to be by many contemporary philosophers. On the contrary, as Hume himself was well aware, it is a radical scepticism that contradicts the fundamental aim of science, which is: to discover the causes of things; to find out why things must happen as they do; in other words, to know the necessity in things. It is vital to see that causality is the notion of necessary
connection in things. If A causes B, then B must happen given A. For example, the law of gravity states that an unsupported object must fall to the ground. It cannot do otherwise. And furthermore, this law specifies how its rate of fall is necessarily dependent on the masses of the bodies involved and the distance between them. To say that there is necessity in nature is to say that things develop and change according to laws, and this is a fundamental presupposition of all science. Including, of course, social science. When Marx says that the interests of the proletariat and the bourgeoisie are in contradiction in capitalist society he means that this class struggle is necessary to capitalism; that is, that it is a law of capitalism. So far from being an abomination to science, as the critics state, it is the concept of contradiction, and the attempt to determine the necessary and essential features and forces of bourgeois society, which gives Marxism its scientific character.

To say that there is necessity in nature is not necessarily to say that this necessity can be known a priori. The particular sciences seek to discover the necessities in things - the laws of nature and of society - on the basis of experience and experiment, and not a priori. Dialectic, however, just because it claims to be a logical doctrine, is frequently accused of ascribing necessity to things in an a priori fashion. That this is true of Hegel cannot be doubted; indeed, he proclaims it as his aim:

> The whole progress of philosophising in every case, if it be methodical, that is to say a necessary progress, merely renders explicit what is implicit in a notion. (Enc. Log. Sec. 88)

And in his system he attempts to deduce all the essential categories of reality, starting from the concept of mere abstract Being. Dialectical materialism diverges from Hegelian dialectic at this point. Marx's dialectic is not an a priori deduction, but a summary of human knowledge. 'Nature is the proof of dialectics' (AD p36) according to Engels. Colletti, Popper and company do not understand this. Their constant refrain is that dialectics is an a priori dogma. Colletti, for example, writes:

> For dialectical materialism, contradiction is a precondition of any possible reality. Its cardinal principle is the series of propositions enunciated by Hegel... 'All things are contradictory in themselves' (etc)... From these premises, dialectical materialism deduces... that 'reality' and 'dialectical contradiction' are the same thing... In a word: from the perspective of dialectical materialism, one can maintain with

axiomatic certainty and prior to any analysis of one's own, that within every object in the universe there must be inner contradictions. (NLR 93 p26)

No doubt dialectical materialism can be used as a set of dogmatic principles from which to deduce things. But Marxists have been at pains to stress that dialectical materialism is not a universal formula which may be applied to generate significant conclusions a priori. Marx, for instance, contrasting his own use of the dialectical method with that of Proudhon, says of the latter,

> As a philosopher who has a magic formula at his elbows, he thought he could dispense with going into purely economic details. (Pov. Phil. p110)

And Mao makes this point in the following words:

> We study Marxism-Leninism not for display, nor because there is any mystery about it, but solely because it is the science which leads the revolutionary cause of the proletariat to victory. Even now there are not a few people who still regard the odd quotation from Marxist-Leninist works as a ready-made panacea which, once acquired, can easily cure all maladies... It is precisely such ignorant people who take
Marxism-Leninism as a religious
dogma. To them we should say bluntly,
'Your dogma is worthless'. (Rectify
the Party's Style of Work', Sel.R p219)

And, even more bluntly, he has said,
dogma is less useful than cowdung'.

Not a Dogma

Correctly understood, dialectical materialism is not a dogma. Indeed, it is rather
Popper, Colletti and other such critics of
dialectics who show themselves to be dogmatic by the terms of their criticism. For
they merely assert their philosophy, embodied in the principles of formal logic,
and when confronted with the dialectical concept of contradiction, reject it as
'absurd' and 'irrational' for failing to conform to formal logic.

Philosophy and logic can never replace the need for a detailed investigation of the
concrete and particular conditions under study. They can never replace the need for
the fullest possible practical experience; and no philosophy makes this point more
forcibly than dialectical materialism. According to it, philosophy is not a body
of merely conceptual, logical or a priori truths. Philosophy has a twofold character: it summarises, at the most general
level, the results of human knowledge and experience; and it functions as a guide to
further thought and action.

There is no question here of using the principles of dialectics as 'axioms' from
which to 'deduce' any concrete results. If anything, the process works the other way
around, and philosophies are based upon results in the particular sciences. Such is
the dialectical materialist account of the nature and history of philosophy. In his Ludwig Feuerbach..., Engels brilliantly
shows how the development of philosophy is closely linked to the development of
science. In describing the history of materialism, for example, he writes,

The materialism of the last century
was predominantly mechanical, because
at that time, of all natural sciences, only
mechanics... had come to a definite
close. Chemistry at that time existed
only in its infantile, phlogistic form.
Biology still lay in swaddling clothes;
vegetable and animal organisms had
been only roughly examined and were
explained as the result of purely mech-
anical causes... This exclusive applica-
tion of the standards of mechanics to
processes of a chemical and organic
nature - in which processes the laws
of mechanics are, indeed, also valid,
but are pushed into the background by
other higher laws - constitutes the first
specific but at that time inevitable limita-
tion of classical French materialism.
The second specific limitation of this
materialism lay in its inability to com-
prehend the universe as a process, as
matter undergoing uninterrupted histor-
ical development. This was in accordance
with the level of the natural science of
that time, and with the metaphysical,
that is anti-dialectical, manner of
philosophising associated with it.
(LF p37-8)

These same limitations persisted into the
19th century and, argues Engels, typify
Feuerbach's materialism; and, indeed, they
are familiar still today. Dialectical material-
ism, by contrast, bases itself upon, and
summarises, the results not only of the
natural sciences but also of the social
sciences, and in particular, of course, of
Marxism. For this reason it is a higher
and more developed form of materialism
than that based purely on the natural sci-
ences and the metaphysical outlook.

Dialectical materialism, then, is no set
of axioms, but as Engels says 'the science
of the general laws of motion and develop-
ment of nature, human society, and thought.'
(AD p194). It is not a dogma, but a vital and
useful theory. It cannot be known a priori -
rather it is a summary of human practical
knowledge. Nor is it a collection of prin-
ciples from which results can be deduced -
it is a guide to thought and action. It is an
essential part of Marxism. 'This material-
ist dialectic,' writes Engels (referring to
both Marx and himself), 'has been our best
working tool and our sharpest weapon' (LF
p64). Lenin called it one of the 'three com-
ponent parts of Marxism'; and he recognised
classical German philosophy - and particu-
larly Hegel - as one of the three basic
sources of Marx's ideas. Indeed, Marx and
Engels themselves repeatedly acknowledge
their debt to Hegel.

Attempts to revise Marxism by rejecting
the philosophy of dialectics, and the corre-
ponding wish to write Hegel out of the history
of Marxism, reject a central and vital aspect
of Marxism. The philosophy of dialectical
materialism is dismissed as 'absurd' and
'irrational'. But in the end it is not dialect-
ics which is 'absurd' and 'irrational' but its
critics. For all the metaphysical objections
in the end amount only to a horror of contra-
dictions and to a desire to keep the world
free of contradiction at all costs. Thus,
when such critics are at last forced to admit
that there is opposition in things, they still
refuse to recognise it as essential, necessary
and therefore inevitable opposition - that is,
they refuse to recognise it as contradiction -
but hold to the view that such conflict, in
Hegel's words, 'ranks in general as a con-
tingency, a kind of abnormality and a passing
paroxysm of sickness' (Sc. Log. p440).

Dialectical materialism, by contrast, is a
philosophy of struggle and of conflict.
Nothing comes into being except through struggle; struggle is involved in the development of all things; and it is through struggle that things are negated and pass away. Conflict and contradiction are inevitable. Dialectical materialism does not regard struggle and contradiction with horror. Conflict for it is not merely nullifying. Struggle, and the negativity involved in it, are not merely destructive, but also productive. Struggle is a good thing not a bad thing. Mao expresses this idea in the following passage:

Marxists should not be afraid of criticism from any quarter. Quite the contrary, they need to temper and develop themselves and win new positions in the teeth of criticism and in the storm and stress of struggle. Fighting against wrong ideas is like being vaccinated - a man develops greater immunity from disease as a result of vaccination. Plants raised in hot-houses are unlikely to be healthy.

(OCH p117)

He has also said that Marxism can be summed up as the view that 'rebellion is justified'.

To regard contradictions with horror and to refuse to recognise them is to condemn oneself to being, in Mao's words, 'handicapped and passive' (OCH 4 E p92) in the face of them. Indeed, the denial of contradiction is ultimately a philosophy of reconciliation and of acquiescence to things as they are. The denial of contradiction is the philosophical basis of revisionism; for to abandon Marx's dialectic is to abandon the critical and revolutionary foundation of his thought, as Marx himself states in a famous passage from Capital, with which I shall end:

In its rational form (dialectic) is a scandal and abomination to bourgeoisie and its doctrinaire professors because it includes in its comprehension and affirmative recognition of the existing state of things, at the same time also, the recognition of the negation of that state, of its inevitable breaking up; because it regards every historically developed social form as in fluid movement, and therefore takes into account its transient nature not less than its momentary existence; because it lets nothing impose upon it, and is in its essence critical and revolutionary.

(Capital Vol I; Afterword to 2nd German ed. p20)

Here is a list of works that are relevant to the discussion of dialectics.

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