

## FROM DIALOGUE TO DIALECTIC : SOCRATES, KANT, HEGEL AND MARX

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The present paper is an attempt to investigate into the sources of the emergence and development of dialectic as expounded by Kant (1724-1804), Hegel (1770-1831), and Marx (1818-83). The roots of dialectic can be found in the dialogues of Socrates (c. 470-399 BC) which have been compiled in the works of Plato (c. 428-348 BC). I shall expound and examine the nature and status of a dialogue - not in general, but specifically referring to that of Socrates - and bring out its stimulating characteristics that may have helped the emergence and growth of dialectical thinking.

I would like to state at the outset that a dialogue, as expounded by Socrates, was a method, a procedure, in the early stages of the development of philosophy. During modern times, due to complex developments in various fields, multiple disciplines emerged and consequently, various methods are evolved. Dialectic, as developed by Kant, Hegel and Marx, is one of the most significant methods in modern times. I shall explicate those features of Socrates' dialogues which have now become operative terms for dialectic.

A dialogue is a process of conversation, argumentation and mutual supplementation of ideas between two individuals. With dialogue, a method is evolved in which the encounters with other thinkers is essential. It is just opposed to a monologue which can formulate nothing but a dogma. The ideas I formulate to defend my standpoint must confront me with other approaches, must give expression to other thinkers *as others*, and not as possible elements of a system in which I can recognise my own thought.

Other thinkers must be permitted to speak as others on the same subject. I am and remain only a participant.

We come across such instances in the dialogues of Socrates. Here the totality of the moments of participation come to be on a specific subject. Two or more than two thinkers exchange their ideas through argumentation with the aim of the *search for truth*. It is the search for truth that provides food for *thought and thus* thinking is stimulated. In Plato's *Theaetetus*, for instance, in discussing the question of the nature of knowledge, Theaetetus advances an ostensive definition. He says that sciences like Geometry, Astronomy, Harmony and Calculation are knowledge. Socrates examines this definition thus :

**Socrates** : Too much, Theaetetus, too much; the nobility and liberty of your nature make you give many things, when I am asking for one simple thing.

**Theaetetus** : What do you mean, Socrates ?

**Socrates** : Perhaps nothing. I will endeavour, however, to explain what I believe to be my meaning: When you speak of cobbling, you mean the art or science of making shoes?

**Theaetetus** : Just so.

**Socrates** : In both cases you define the subject-matter of each of the two arts?

**Theaetetus** : True.

**Socrates** : But that, Theaetetus, was not the point of my question; we wanted to know not the subjects, not yet the number of arts or sciences, for we were not going to count them, but we wanted to know the nature of knowledge in the abstract. am I not right ?

**Socrates** : Let me offer an illustration; suppose that a person were to ask about some very trivial and obvious thing - for example, what is clay? and we were to reply, that there is a clay of potters, there is a clay of oven-makers, there is a clay of brick-makers; would not the answer be ridiculous?

**Theaetetus** : Truly.

**Socrates** : In the first place, there would be an absurdity in assuming that he who asked the question would understand from our answer the nature of 'clay', merely because we added 'of the image-makers', or of any other workers. How can a man understand the name of anything, when he does not know the nature of it ?

**Theaetetus** : He cannot.

**Socrates** : Then he who does not know what science or knowledge is, has not knowledge of art or science of making shoes?

**Theaetetus** : None.

**Socrates** : Nor of any other science?

**Theaetetus** : No.

**Socrates** : And when a man is asked what science or knowledge is, to give in answer the name of some art or science is ridiculous; for the question is 'what is knowledge?' and the replies, 'A knowledge of this or that?'

**Theaetetus** : True.

**Socrates** : Moreover, he might answer shortly and simply, but he makes an enormous circuit. For example, when asked about the clay, he might have said simply, that clay is moistened earth - what sort of clay is not to the point."

And this way, the dialogue goes on. Socrates is often portrayed as seeking definitions of particular excellences: courage (in the *Laches*), soundness of mind (in the *Charmides*), piety (in the *Euthyphro*), or excellence in general (in the *Meno*). The only method which is followed here is dialogue. Professing perplexity in the process of dialogue, Socrates goads another person into offering an account of an excellence, but refuses to be satisfied with examples, insisting on a general characterization that can be used to tell whether something is, indeed, an example of that excellence.

When an account is offered, Socrates presses the other party with questions requiring a 'yes' or 'no' answer, and by means of inferences drawn from the statements to which the other party is committed, Socrates drives him into contradiction. Another definition may be tried, or occasionally the other party may be given a chance to change his answer to one of Socrates' question. In either case another contradiction results and the dialogue eventually ends with the participants in the same state of perplexity as Socrates.

In a dialogue, it is the contradiction or the views of the other *as the other* which is the operative term. But a dialogue is possible only when both the speakers maintain a fundamental consensus, i.e. both the speakers "(a) speak and (b) listen, (c) aim at truth (d) understand each other's language; (e) understand each other's way of thinking (f) do not live in two worlds whose contents totally differ."<sup>2</sup> These elements prepare a meeting ground for a dialogue to be possible. "As speaker, I am successful when my words elicit a response. Total silence or applause interrupts or ends my speaking. The listener who assimilates what I have said can produce an answer, which can stimulate me in return. My listener becomes speaker and vice-versa. Master and pupil exchange places."<sup>3</sup>

In Socrates' dialogues, we thus find, two characteristic features; namely, consensus and contradiction. These are the two operative terms for the possibility and development of ideas under the method of dialogue. Absolute consensus is nothing but a dogma. Absolute contradiction leads us nowhere. It is only under certain degree of consensus that certain amount of contradiction is entertained and thinking is stimulated.

In dialogue, there is a sophistical use of logic in pretending to prove false or ungrounded views of the opponents. And this is the meaning which Kant attributes to dialectic. Just as in Socrates' dialogues with Theaetetus, there is a movement of thought through criticism; similarly, dialectic, for Kant, is the critical movement of thought, or the self-criticism of reason itself. In dialogue, both the speakers are related to each other like the subject and the object in proposition; in dialectic, reason is both the subject

and the object of the critique. Dialectic is inherent in the nature of reason itself. In the Preface to the first edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant writes:

"Human reason has this peculiar fate that in one species of its knowledge it is burdened by questions which as prescribed by the very nature of reason itself, it is not able to ignore, but which, as transcending all its powers, it is also not able to answer."<sup>4</sup>

Similar is the situation in the process of dialogue too. Several definitions are offered, but due to one or the other contradiction arising, the dialogue eventually ends with the participants in a state of perplexity. In dialectic, Kant discusses such questions which human reason can neither comprehend nor reject. Reason cannot comprehend those issues because it cannot present them in reality. Reason cannot avoid those issues, because they arise out of the very nature of reason itself. These are called the antinomies of pure reason. Kant, here, presents a critique of reason itself in order to resolve certain contradictions which create a conflict of reason with itself.

It is in the discussion of the antinomies that Kant does justice to his general claim that reason investigates various series of conditions in an attempt to discover the absolutely unconditioned. He expounds four antinomies. In each antinomy, there is a thesis with supporting arguments, and an antithesis with supporting arguments. By conjoining thesis and antithesis, we come across an antinomy, an apparent contradiction.

Although transcendental Dialectic is the third part of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, its main problems are the fundamental pre-occupation of the critical philosophy. The first two parts hinge on his answer to one question: How is scientific knowledge possible and to what extent? The answer, Kant found, lies in his formulation of 'synthetic a priori judgement'. As synthetic, it amplifies the concept of predicate and is thus more than a mere tautology. As a priori, it expresses universality and necessity. What we require in science, according to Kant, is such an ampliative knowledge with the characteristics of universality and necessity. But scientific knowledge, Kant

warns, has a limit; i.e. it can not pretend to apprehend what is beyond experience. This is the point where we come to Kant's exposition of dialectic.

In the context of dialectic, Kant's contributions to German philosophy consist in his attempt to draw a distinction between 'understanding' and 'reason, and, to give an insight into the nature of our attempt to apply our concepts to the absolute unconditioned.

The crux of Kant's dialectic consists in exposing those tendencies which attempt to overstep the experience, and, thus, precipitate into antinomies. Such a tendency, in Kant's terminology, is characteristic of traditional metaphysics. Kant argues that the absurd results of the antinomies can only demonstrate that metaphysicians must give up the attempt to 'know the infinite'. Therefore, metaphysics is not possible, what is possible is science.

What is central to Kant's dialectic is one of the fundamental tendencies of Socrates' dialogue; i.e. contradiction. Under the title Antinomies of Pure Reason, Kant formulate four pairs of contradictions, namely, finite and infinite, simple and complex, causality and freedom, and, conditioned and unconditioned. Kant, however, leaves these contradictions unresolved. And by doing so, he draws a limit to the extent of the categories of understanding. Reason is never in immediate relation to objects given in sensibility. It is understanding that holds sway in Kant's epistemology. Reason is required as the indispensable corrective to the deficiencies of understanding. Since there are four main heads in which categories are divided, there will be four kinds of absolute totality and four kinds of search for a complete series of explanatory conditions, right upto the absolute unconditioned. First, there is the search for a complete series of objects in space and a complete series of events in time. Second, there is the search for a complete series of parts of matter. That is, we begin with some material object and attempt to divide and sub-divide it into its constituent parts, so obtaining a series of simpler and simpler parts of matter. The third and the fourth searches are for two kinds of complete causal series, consisting of a given event, the cause of

that event, the cause of that cause, and so on. In every case, reason urges us to pursue the search until the series of conditions is completed, until we reach the absolutely unconditioned that requires no further explanation. But reason, in every case, despite arguing rigorously from apparently true premises, arrives at an antinomy, a contradiction. Reason comes to such an embarrassing situation because it uses the categories of understanding separating them from sensibility, i.e. without corresponding sensible intuitions.

Kant, in his formulation of dialectic, however, fails to incorporate the other characteristic feature of Socrates' dialogue, i.e. the moments of consensus. It's precisely due to this failure that Kant could not resolve the antinomies. He over-emphasized the moments of contradiction, but ignored the significance of a meeting ground between two contradictory concepts. Kant's dialectic is therefore not as dynamic and alive, as Socrates' dialogues are.

It goes to the credit of Hegel to recognize the significance of identity in the every moment of contradiction. The strikingly new interpretation of Hegel's dialectic consists in his attempt to incorporate logic into it. It requires two lines of argument: the first, showing that a given category is indispensable; the second, showing that it leads us to a characterization of reality which is somehow contradictory. Hegel, in fact, fuses these together. This has certain amount of resemblance to the characteristic features of Socrates' dialogue. Just as, for Socrates, it is only consensus and contradiction that keep a dialogue in continuity; similarly, for Hegel, the operative terms for dialectic are sublation and contradiction. Hegel's dialectic is thus in many ways analogous to Socrates' dialogue.

Despite such similarities, there are certain fundamental differences between Socrates' dialogue and Hegel's dialectic. The amount of consensus in Socrates' dialogue is not, and can not be, the same as sublation (*aufheben*) in Hegel's dialectic. Moreover, contradiction in Hegel's dialectic is radically different from the contradiction in Socrates' dialogue.

Sublation, in Hegel's dialectic, means to resolve into a higher unity or to bring into the wholeness that which is fragmentary. The deduction of

categories from one another in the *Science of Logic* shows that all lower categories are sublated into the higher ones and they have a direct reference to the wholeness. To substantiate this point, I would like to take up Hegel's analysis of Kant's position on understanding and reason. Hegel, undoubtedly acknowledges Kant's Transcendental Dialectic as his greatest contribution to philosophy; both for its basic distinction between understanding and reason, and for its insights into the nature of our attempt to apply our concepts to the absolute unconditioned. The Kantian antinomies effected the fall of the previous metaphysics by examining the finitude of the contents of the categories. But for Hegel, the function of understanding – through a process of abstraction – is to present contradiction between individual and universal, identity and difference, and so on. And the realm of reason seeks to unify that which the understanding has divided. Reason shows that the function of understanding - to define things in terms of their isolation - constitutes a process of abstraction. The function of reason is to make manifest the concrete relation in which an idea, concept or reality subsists. Kant argues that the function of reason is to draw a limit to the extent of the categories of understanding. Hegel's criticism of Kant's concept of reason consists in the fact that while recognizing its dialectical characteristics, reason fails to overcome the antinomies between finite and infinite, etc. Hegel, however, regards reason as the indispensable corrective to the deficiencies of understanding. In the process of unifying the opposites, reason sublates the finite and its negation, so that they are revealed as moments of a more inclusive whole. This wholeness in which the contradictions are sublated, Hegel terms as the 'Absolute'. the 'Truth'. Hegel says :

"The true is the whole. But the whole is nothing other than the essence consummating itself through its development. Of the Absolute, it must be said that it is essentially a result, that only in the end, is it what it truly is; and that precisely in this consists its nature."<sup>5</sup>

The *Phenomenology of Spirit*, however, does not adequately furnish the whole dialectical process through which the knowledge of the Absolute, the Truth, is possible. Its foundations are given in the *Science of Logic* with



an exhaustive formulation on the notion of contradiction. Hegel says :

"... everything is inherently contradictory. and in the sense that this law in contrast to others expresses rather the truth and the essential nature of things ... 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."<sup>6</sup>

It may here be recalled that for Socrates, human thought develops by the elimination of contradictions in the process of dialogue; but, for Hegel, contradiction is internal to each term. That is why every term whether a concept or a reality develops. Hegel continues,

"... internal self-movement proper, instinctive urge in general ... is nothing else but the fact that something is, in one and the same respect, self-contained and deficient, the negative or itself. Abstract self-identity is not as yet a negativity, goes outside itself and undergoes alteration. Something is therefore alive only in so far as it contains contradiction within it and moreover is this power to hold and endure the contradiction within it."<sup>7</sup>

Hegel concludes near the end of the Logic that there is nothing, whether in actuality or in thought, that is as simple and abstract as is commonly imagined. "Nothing exists as just brutally given and simply possessing one or two fully positive characteristics. Nothing exists that is just first and primary and on which other things depend without mutual relation... what appears at first simple and immediate is actually complex and mediated."<sup>8</sup>

Hegel, thus, rules out the possibility of the elimination of contradiction once and for all. And with it, Hegel's dialectic deviates from Socrates' dialogue. And this is how Hegel incorporates Logic into dialectic. The traditional belief, that human thought develop gradually with the elimination of contradictions, is central to Kantian philosophy. This is the reason why Kant separates logic from dialectic. Hegel is fundamentally opposed to this view. He applies his dialectic in the *Science of Logic* to the gradual

explication and development of not only of the 'separation' but also of the 'connectedness' between one category and another.

In the process of the deduction of categories from one another, Hegel arrives at the "System of Subjective Logic" which is the third division of the *Science of Logic*. Hegel, here, develops the concept of subject which is the same thing as the doctrine of Notion in which the categories of Being and Essence are merged into a unity. With Notion, we come to the point where subjectivity is the true form of objectivity. Hegel's analysis of it goes in the following scheme :

"The true form of reality requires freedom. Freedom requires self-consciousness and knowledge of the truth. Self-consciousness and knowledge of the truth are the essentials of the subject. The true form of reality must be conceived as subject."<sup>9</sup>

The Notion presents an objective totality in which every particular moment appears as the 'self-differentiation' of the universal that governs the totality. That is to say, every particular moment contains, as its very content, the whole, and must be interpreted as the whole. For explanation, let us refer again to the *Phenomenology of Spirit* where 'the true is the whole. But the whole is nothing other than the essence consummating itself through its development'. The Notion designates the general form of being in which being, through development by means of contradiction and sublation, realizes its essence. At the same time, Notion expresses the free subject which adequately represents the true being. The free-subject exists in a movement from lower to higher modes of self-realization. Hegel calls the highest form of this self-realization - the Geist.

The *Geist* in its final form is the 'free-subject', the Notion. Its otherness and negation is the object, being. And both the Notion and its otherness are constantly overwhelmed by the ontological conceptions of Hegel's absolute idealism. Hegel's *Science of Logic* thus ends where it began, with the category of being. This, however, is a different being that can no longer be explained through the concepts applied in the analysis that opened the Logic. For, being now is understood in its Notion, that is, as a concrete

totality wherein all particular forms subsist as the essential distinctions and relations of one comprehensive principle - the Absolute Truth.

It may here be recalled that just as Socrates' dialogue, due to contradictions, eventually ends with the participants in the same state of perplexity; similarly Hegel's logic and with it his dialectic ends where it began. This similarity is, evidently, because of the similar driving force operating behind the possibility and progress of both the dialogue and the dialectic.

One of the most significant development in this field - from dialogue to dialectic - takes place with the emergence of the dialectical materialism. Marx and Engels entered the philosophical arena when materialism, in its various forms - those of Descartes, Locke, Kant and Feuerbach - had developed to the extent that there was no need to reformulate philosophical materialism. What was lacking in all kinds of materialism including that of Feuerbach was dialectic. At this point, Marx and Engels recognized the significance of Hegel's dialectic.

It is true, as Marx and Engels repeatedly said, that they were not the inventors of dialectic. In modern European philosophy, its fundamentals were first exhaustively formulated by Hegel. However, as formulated by Hegel, the dialectical principles were mysterious in character. Engels explains Hegel's dialectic thus :

"The mistake lies in the fact that these laws are foisted on nature and history as laws of thought, and not deduced from them. This is the source of the whole forced and often outrageous treatment; the universe, willy-nilly, has to conform to a system of thought which itself is only the product of a definite stage of evolution of human thought. If we turn the thing round, then everything becomes simple, and the dialectical laws that look so extremely mysterious in idealist philosophy at once become simple and clear as noonday."<sup>10</sup>

As expounded by Hegel, however, the laws of dialectic were of the nature of a mystery, as Engels explains it, in as much as Hegel was an

idealist and his formulation of dialectic was confined within the general framework of idealism. Marx and Engels extracted the rational core of Hegel's dialectic - or as Lenin figuratively said, picked out the pearl of dialectic from the dunghheap of absolute idealism - and established it on the foundation of philosophical materialism. In the *Capital*, Marx declares enigmatically :

"The mystification which dialectic suffers in Hegel's hands, by no means, prevents him from being the first to present its general form of working ... with him it is standing on its head. It must be turned right side up again, if you would discover the rational kernel within the mystical shell."<sup>11</sup>

Marx further explains :

"My dialectic method is not only different from the Hegelian, but its direct opposite. To Hegel ... the process of thinking which, under the name of 'the Idea' he even transforms into an independent subject is the demiurgos (creator) of the world, and the real world is only the external, phenomenal form of 'the Idea'. With me, on the contrary, the 'ideal' is nothing else than the material world reflected by the human mind, and translated into forms of thought."<sup>12</sup>

Thus, for Marx and Engels, the ultimate source and sustenance of the laws of dialectic lies in the philosophical materialism.

Marx's dialectic, as for Hegel, is motivated by the contradictory character of reality. But different from Hegel, the ultimate basis of the contradiction, for Marx, is philosophical materialism, and, on this foundation, the achievement of dialectic is imposed. This is where even Feuerbach failed. Feuerbach failed to interpret matter dialectically. Consequently, as Lenin points out, Feuerbach's materialism goes 'below' and idealism comes 'above'. Lenin calls the materialism of Feuerbach, including those of Descartes and Locke, as 'stupid materialism'. He says, "Intelligent idealism is closer to intelligent materialism than stupid materialism."<sup>13</sup> What Lenin wants to demonstrate here is that Feuerbach's materialism could recognise the world

only in terms of its corporeality, and not from the point of view of dialectic operating in nature and society. Marx attempts to correct the materialism of Feuerbach with the help of the dialectic of Hegel which, as we have seen, is itself an outcome of Kant's dialectic. It is the idealism of Kant and Hegel that Lenin calls as 'intelligent idealism'. Both 'stupid materialism' and 'intelligent idealism', according to Marx and Lenin, are abstract or one-sided. Nevertheless, what is so 'intelligent' with the idealism of Kant and Hegel is the formulation of dialectic. And dialectic, with its operative terms of contradiction and sublation, has its historical reference to Socrates' dialogue.

What is central to Socrates' dialogue and the dialectic of Kant and Hegel is their idealism. In his dialogues, the kind of questions Socrates is occupied with are generally the questions of ethics - justice, truth, courage, etc. He is known to be the first philosopher who shifted from the questions of physics to the questions of ethics. And the kind of interpretation and definition, if at all, we come across in Socrates is confined within the general frame of idealism as such. And the stimulating characteristics of Socrates' dialogue - consensus and contradiction - represent the key terms of the dialectic of Kant and Hegel. This again is the development within the general frame of idealism.

Marx and Engels did not re-open the question of idealism and materialism as two contrary trends in philosophy. This question was resolved by their predecessor - contemporaries like Feuerbach. What Marx and Engels did engage in was to formulate their position on Hegel's dialectic with the aim to interpret it materialistically. Hence the dialectic of Kant and Hegel - derived from Socrates' dialogue and developed within idealism - is incorporated and interpreted materialistically by Marx, Engels and Lenin.

Marx considered Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* and its final outcome - the dialectic of negativity - as one - sided and limited in many ways. Marx strongly criticised the final chapter of the *Phenomenology* entitled as "Absolute Knowledge" in which we come across Hegel's speculative dialectic. What is central to Marx's criticism of Hegel's speculative theology is Marx's own conception of man as a social and historical being, whereas, for Hegel,

"The self-abstracted entity, fixed for itself, is man as abstract egoist-egoism raised in its pure abstraction to the level of thought."<sup>14</sup> Just as 'man' is conceived and interpreted by Hegel in terms of 'consciousness' of 'self-consciousness', similarly, all the laws of dialectic are formulated by Hegel abstractly. Marx's answer to the question of the nature of man represents his doctrine of dialectical and historical materialism. This is what was lacking in all earlier philosophies in general and Hegel's philosophy in particular. In his attempt to transform Hegel's dialectic, Marx reached the first full formulation of dialectical and historical materialism during 1844-45.

To bring my paper to a close, I would like to point out that dialogue as a philosophical method developed by Socrates is still alive. The basic features of Socrates' dialogue still stimulate thinkers to incorporate them into their own methods. Kant and Hegel attempted to substitute dialogue with dialectic within the general frame of idealism. Marx tried to develop the same features within materialism. This, in no way, undermines the changes and developments introduced by Kant, Hegel and Marx with reference to their specific philosophical systems.

#### NOTES

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