

DIALECTIC : EAST AND WEST

The word "dialectic" is derived from a Greek prefix *dia*—and the Greek verb *lego*, whose verbal noun is the famous word *logos*. *Dia*—means "across", "apart", or "thoroughly" and is found in such words as "diagnosis," "diagnosis" (*dia-gnosis*), a "thorough" knowledge or a knowledge "through and through." It is also found in diameter (*dia-metron*), a measurement "across" the circle. In Latin *dia*—was translated as *dis*—, which followed the Greek meaning of "apart" as well as "asunder, separation". These meanings will become important in expressing the disjunctive aspects of what I call 'existential' dialectic.

The meaning of *lego*, if we follow the one root $\sqrt{\text{leg}}$, are "to gather", "to collect", "to pick up," "to put together", and later "to speak or say." The other root of *lego*, $\sqrt{\text{tech}}$, means "to lay." It appears, not surprisingly, in the Greek word for marital couch *lechos*. Using both roots here, we have a very graphic "laying down and joining together", the synthetic aspect of what I call "both-and" dialectic.

As I lay out the various types of dialectic, I intend to draw on these etymological sources as a heuristic guide. I realize that some of my derivations will border on the edge of "creative" etymology, but my use of the etymologies is strictly for insight and illumination. I do not offer them as contributions to the science of etymology.

Dialectic As Traditional Logic

In the West dialectic as logic began with Socrates. His formula for true knowledge (*episteme*) was an opinion (*doxa*) backed up by an argument (*Logos*). Socrates' principal aim was to come up with definitions that were not equivocal and arguments which did not violate the law of non-contradiction. Aristotle formalized the rules of logic and criticized the pre-Socratics (especially Anaxagoras and his theory of "seeds") for their flagrant self-contradictions. Only Parmenides among the pre-Socratics had a firm, albeit implicit, grasp of the law of non-contradiction.

In the *Protagoras* (333c), *logos* is the personified logical guide who speaks to her subjects and chides them for not following her rules. In the *Phaedrus*, dialectic is a philosophical method by which thinkers can maneuver *across* the face of the real and speak to each other about true knowledge. The good dialectician would be like the expert butcher : she would be able to find the "joints" of the real and be able to "cut off" one concept cleanly from another. Here the meanings of *dia*—as "apart, asunder" illuminate the analytic character of this type of dialectic.

Medieval philosophers continued this Greek tradition with their dialectical disputations, and this meaning continues with us to the present day. In the East this form of logic developed with just as much vigor and sophistication as in the West. Oriental philosophy, however, chose to emphasize ethical and religious concerns much more heavily than Occidental philosophy. In the East logic is rarely ever just an end in itself.

Negative Dialectic — Existential Dialectic

Both traditional logic and existential dialectic are types of "either/or" dialectic. For example, after one separates all geometrical figures into their proper logical classes, then a figure is *either* a square, *or* a circle, *or* some other figure — a square cannot be *both* a square *and* a circle. Logical arguments against the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation follow the same model : *either* Jesus is God *or* human ; he cannot be *both* at the same time.

Negative dialectic, however, is dramatic and existential, not formal and logical. It is epitomized in the writings of Soren Kierkegaard, who, in his M. A. thesis *The Concept of Irony* claims that Socrates' main aim was not logical clarity but conceptual confusion. According to Kierkegaard, the goal of the early dialogues was to lead the interlocuters into the nothingness of *aporia*. This led Kierkegaard to believe that ethical choices are based on faith not reason.

The irrationalist tenor of much of existentialism comes from Kierkegaard's works and this concept of existential dialectic. Kierkegaard's favourite example was Abraham faced with this choice : *either* to follow God's arbitrary will *or* to follow the moral law and God's previous promises. There was no way in which Abraham

could have made a rational decision. The existentialist thinkers used situations like these to support their belief that logic and ethics are ultimately incompatible. "Dialectic" theology (early Barth, Bultmann, Brunner) also uses Kierkegaard to declare the complete autonomy of faith and eliminate reason and traditional dialectic in so-called "natural" theologies.

Etymologically, one can recognize the meaning "apart" in the *dia*—of negative dialectic. This becomes more clear if we are allowed to include the Latin translation of *dia*—as *dis*—, as in "dysfunction" and "disjunction." The negative dialectic is definitely dysfunctional and disjunctive in this alleged capacity to jolt us out of complacent modes of thought, including the confidence we have in logic as a solution to human problems. Although most Buddhist thought should be placed under the rubric of "neither/nor" dialectic, some Buddhist writers (especially early writings) tend to propound their issues in terms of a dramatic either/or : *viz.*, either the religious life ending in *nirvāṇa* or the life of *samsāra* continuing in eternal rebirth.

Both—and Dialectic—Synthetic Dialectic

In the West this type of logic is epitomized in the philosophy of Hegel. But Hegel himself tells us that he is indebted to the pre-Socratic Greeks, especially Heraclitus' idea of *logos* reconciling all opposites into a unitary process. Aristotle's criticisms of the pre-Socratics prevailed, however, and the law of non-contradiction and traditional logic won out in the West. Until Hegel, a both—and dialectic survived in the Western mystical tradition, most notably in Nicholas of Cusa and his doctrine of *coincidentia oppositorum*.

The key to synthetic dialectic is the rejection of the law of non-contradiction, and the belief that opposites coincide or are reconciled (Hegel's *au'gehoben*) in a higher synthesis. Etymologically, we can now see other dimensions of the meaning of *dia*—and *lego* coming to the fore. *Dia* preserves its meanings of "thoroughly" and "through," but the meaning of *lego* as "to put together" is now crucial. Hegel's dialectic is a "through putting together" of all of the conscious elements of Spirit; it is a synthesis "through and through."

In the East we can find many examples of synthetic dialectic—Taoism and Vedanta in particular. (I stress here the original Vedanta of the *Upaniṣhads* and not the philosophy of Śaṅkara which can be seen as a form of neither/nor dialectic.) Brahman can be seen as *both* nirguṇa Brahman (without qualities) and saḡuṇa Brahman (with qualities). Brahman, just like Tao, is *both* being and non-being. The human soul is *both* Brahman and Ātman. The difference between Hegel and Vedanta is that the synthesis of being and non-being leads Hegel to a real progressive movement in history (becoming); whereas for Vedanta becoming is *māyā*, unreal and unprogressive. Taoism does definitely have a feel for real movements and plurality in nature, but lacks the historicism of Hegel.

A synthetic both—and dialectic pervades the entirety of the *Tao Te Ching*. The first stanza of the second chapter expresses this dialectical method well :

When the people of the world all know beauty as beauty,
There arises the recognition of ugliness.

When they all know the good as good,
There arises the recognition of evil.

Therefore :

Being and non-being produce each other;

Difficult and easy complete each other;

Long and short contrast each other;

High and low distinguish each other;

Sound and voice harmonize each other;

Front and behind accompany each other.

(Chan translation)

Dialectical reversal describes the “movement of the Tao” and everything achieves “harmony through the unification of affirmation and negation.”¹ Sung-peng Hsu translates the same line in this way : “10,000 things carry the *yin* and embrace the *yang*.”²

A synthetic dialectic can also be found in Buddhism, one example being Asvaghosa’s commentary on “suchness.” Asvaghosa maintains that the noumenal and the phenomenal soul “constitute all things, and both are so colselly inter-related that

one cannot be separated from the other." In a *coincidentia oppositorum*, both souls "coincide with each other. Though they are not identical, they are not a duality." ³

In the same passage Asvaghosa states that the phenomenal soul "comes forth from the Tathagata's womb". It appears as if we have the Hegelian equivalent of the emanation of nature and history from the first dialectical negation of Spirit-in-itself. This thesis is further supported from a passage in the *Avatamsaka Sūtra* in which the *Dharmakaya* is said "to create all things." ⁴ The historical, progressive nature of Hegel's dialectic is still missing. Granted, there is a gradual, historical overcoming of ignorance in Buddhism, but this development does not change the basic nature of reality as it does in Hegel. There is *real* dialectical development in Hegel. This means that Hegelian dialectic has been fully ontologized. For Plato and the Buddhists, dialectic is a mental process only; for Heraclitus and Hegel, it is a development in reality itself.

Even though an emanation theory is supported by the two passages cited above, it is not a correct interpretation given the context of Asvaghosa's works and Mahayana philosophy in general. A similar confusion appears in the *Upanishads* where Brahman is said to create a phenomenal world by its "uncanny power". For both Vedanta and Asvaghosa, there is no other reality than *Brahman* or the *Dharmakaya*. Plurality, change, distinction are the result of ignorance; and, notwithstanding the passages above, the phenomenal world does not emanate from the ultimate reality. The analogy of passing white light through a prism is helpful. If the white light is noumenal reality and the various colours are phenomenal reality, then the prism represents ignorance. If one removes the prism/ignorance, there is nothing but an undifferentiated reality left. As the *Lankavatara Sutra* puts it : "But, if they only realized it, they are already in the Tathagata's Nirvana for, in Noble Wisdom, all things are in Nirvana from the beginning" ⁵.

Neither/Nor Dialectic

The Buddhists were much more successful in expressing this preceding notion by use of a "neither/nor" dialectic, which carries dialectical negation to an extreme. While the disjunctive

thoroughness of existential dialectic leads to alienation and despair, neither/nor dialectic leads to the peace of Nirvana. Despite these differences, both existential and neither/nor dialectic have non-philosophical ends.

In contrast to the speculative metaphysics of Hegel and Vedanta and the confident fideism of Kierkegaard, Buddhism combines dialectic with a sophisticated empirical method. The neither/nor dialectic is a means to persuade a thinker to stop reasoning about subjects for which experience could give no answer. More subtle and entrenched than sensual lust is the "craving for views" about origins of the universe, the nature of reality, and the essence of the soul. The proper conclusion about such questions is that the universe *neither* had a beginning *nor* no beginning; that the nature of reality is *neither* a permanent substance *nor* an impermanent flux of *skandhas*.

As we shall see, the presence of neither/nor locution does not necessarily mean that we have a true neither/nor dialectic. An early example of this is Sutta 63 of the *Majjhimanikaya*, usually entitled "Questions which Tend Not To Edification." A certain monk by the name of Malunkyaputta, who has obviously lost sight of the true meaning of basic Buddhist doctrines, craves for more answers about whether the world is eternal or not eternal; whether it is finite or infinite; whether the soul and body are a unity or a duality; and whether the saints exist after death. Although he goes on to phrase the question about the saints in classic neither/nor fashion, it is clear that he still yearns for positive answer to these questions.

The Buddha calls Malunkyaputta a "vain man" and proclaims that religious liberation does not depend on answers to those questions. One is reminded here of Wittgenstein's admonition in the *Tractatus*: "We feel that even when all possible scientific questions have been answered, the problems of life remain completely untouched" (6.52).

The sutra's conclusion, which is probably the view of the historical Gautama, shifts the focus away from the dialectical method, even the neither/nor formula. It is possible that Gautama did not want to address these questions *in any way*. Gautama does not formulate his answer in the neither/nor mode; he simply

maintains that Maṅkyaṣiputta's questions are not relevant for the liberation from suffering. It is important to note that the Buddha, in contrast to Nagarjuna, is not ruling out the possibility of knowledge in these areas. Therefore, the developing neither/nor dialectic in the rest of the *Pitakas* should probably not be identified as Gautama Buddha's method.

Questions of Milinda

The famous "Questions of Milinda" (*Milindapanha*) offers the exciting possibility of a confrontation between the Western either/or and the Eastern neither/nor. But we are disappointed. Either Nagasena rejected the neither/nor approach or he decided to defer its subtleties and conform to Milinda's Socratic approach of straight question and answer. For whatever reason, the Buddhist neither/nor dialectic does not dominate in this debate. In fact, Nagasena is very much the Buddhist Socrates, and Milinda quickly becomes the typical fawning disciple. Much like Simmias and Cebes in the *Phaedo*, who fall over themselves praising Socrates, Milinda calls Nagasena a "clever man," and his answers "marvelous...brilliant beyond measure, highly illuminating."⁶

Even more striking is the Buddhist equivalent of Socratic *aporia*. After struggling to refute Nagasena's contention that there need not be a soul agent behind the mind's various actions, Milinda finally reaches the deadend of *aporia*: "I am no match for you in an argument. Be good enough to explain the matter to me."⁷ With their backs against the wall, Socrates' opponents are not usually this kind.

The first use of neither/nor dialectic comes with the examples of "embryo and child," "lamp and flame", "milk and butter". These are used as analogies to show that the person reborn is neither the same nor different. The effect of the dialectic is to utterly destroy the idea of an enduring object called the soul in which a continuous personal identity resides. Much like Hume in his analysis of personal identity, Nagasena shows that the embryo, child, adult are obviously not the same thing, but at the same time, not different either. There is a basic non-substantial continuity even though all the basic components (*skandhas*) of the mind and body are changing.

On the questions of time and creation, Nagasena appears to give straight either/or answers; i.e., time has no beginning and therefore it is eternal; and the world is eternal, because there can be no creation out of nothing. Similarly, Nagasena concludes quite confidently that Nirvana is unalloyed bliss, instead of a neither/nor conclusion that it is beyond "perception and non-perception." (This language is found in the Pali accounts of the Buddha's death). Nagasena continues within the either/or mode: "Pain is one thing; Nirvana is quite another."⁸ Nagasena then proceeds to name the qualities of Nirvana, which, though figurative in character, are nonetheless far from true neither/nor dialectic.

In the final discussion about Nirvana, Milinda offers a Buddhist explanation of Nirvana in the neither/nor mode: "You Buddhists say (that) Nirvana is neither past nor future nor present; it is neither produced nor not produced nor to be produced." Nagasena responds in the like manner, but Milinda protests: "Do not, Reverend Nagasena, throw light on this question by covering it up." Milinda obviously wants a straight answer in the Greek dialectical mode and Nagasena is forced to oblige. He answers that Nirvana is characterized "by its freedom from trouble, by its freedom from adversity, by its freedom from peril, by its security, by its peace, etc."⁹

Later Developments : Mahayana and Śāṅkara

Although I have pointed out some both-and dialectic in Asva-ghosa, the neither/nor dialectic is central to his thinking. When describing the *Baddhadharmas* as "neither identical nor non-identical with the essence of the mind," his intent is to show that speculation about this relationship is "utterly out of the range of our comprehension."¹⁰ For the same reason, dialectical negation is intensified in the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra*. Here the Buddhist "Void" (*sunyatā*) is described as "not existing and yet not not existing, not coming into being and yet not going out of being, not acting and yet not not acting."¹¹

There is neither/nor language in at least two philosophers of the Yogācāra school, but closer scrutiny reveals a methodology wedded to the use of speculative reason. In his famous criticism of the theory of atoms, Vasubandhu declares that the external

world is "neither one thing, nor is it many atoms."¹² But Vasubandhu's final conclusion is an affirmative one: the external world does not exist in any independent form. Asanga's teacher Maitreya states that "on the pure stage there is neither oneness nor plurality of Buddhas"; but, as D. J. Kalupahana points out, this language is designed to give a basis for the speculative idea of the Buddha's three bodies (*trikaya*).¹³ Furthermore, Asanga is serenely confident when he lists the positive characteristics of the *Buddhadharmas* and the *Dharmakaya*.¹⁴ In the Yogācāra literature I have read there is rarely a hint of the neither/nor dialectic of other Buddhist schools.

Moving away from Buddhism momentarily, it is significant to note that Śāṅkara develops a sophisticated neither/nor mode which goes beyond the initial both-and dialectic of the *Upanishads*. (Only the famous "*neti, neti*" ["not this, not that"] of the *Bṛhadaraṇyaka Upanishad*[4:5:15] approaches neither/nor dialectic.) P. T. Raju has shown that Śāṅkara, just like Vasubandhu, uses dialectical negation in order to ultimately affirm a doctrine of absolute monism.¹⁵ This again is contrary to the mature dialectic of the Buddhist Madhyamika school. It is significant that in his famous nation-wide debates with the Buddhists Śāṅkara revealed the positive goal of his dialectic by labelling his opponents "voidists" and "nihilists".

It is also significant to note that Śāṅkara rejects the *coincidentia oppositorum* implicit in the *Upanishads*. Śāṅkara concludes that Brahman cannot be both being and non-being, because they are opposites. In other words, the neither/nor dialectic in all its Indian forms preserves the law of non-contradiction. This constitutes yet another crucial difference between both-and and neither/nor dialectic. With its acute analysis and commitment to non-contradiction, neither/nor dialectic actually has more in common with either/or logic.

In the Buddhist tradition, it is Nagarjuna who becomes the master of dialectical negation. His famous "four-cornered negation" can be found in the earliest Pali sutras. (Raju has shown that it actually has its origin in the pre-Buddhist skeptic Sanjaya.) Even the unenlightened Malunkyaputta can give us the four logical possibilities concerning the continued life of the saint: "That the

saint exists after death, that the saint does not exist after death, that the saint both exists and does not exist after death, that the saint neither exists nor does not exist after death.”¹⁶ Therefore, the logical form of the four-cornered negation is “S is neither P, nor not-P, nor both P and not-P, nor neither P nor not-P.”

Western logicians may shake their heads at the apparent redundancy of this dialectical thoroughness (one meaning of *dia*-again), but they miss the Nagarjuna's ultimate motive : to completely eliminate the possibility of logical affirmation. Affirmation will lead to attachment and attachment will intensify the craving for views, and philosophers will remain in the wheel of Samsāra just as surely as murders, rapists, thieves, and gamblers.

In Western logic the negation of one proposition has always been balanced with some form of commitment to the truth of a related proposition. For example, to say that “the queen's dress is not red” is to imply that it is therefore some other colour. In Indian logic, however, there are two types of negation, one in which the commitment aspect dominates and one in which it does not. B. K. Matilal suggests that in Madhyamika dialectic “the ‘denial’ aspect may be so pronounced as to reduce the ‘commitment’ aspect practically to nullity.”¹⁷

There are some who think that Nagarjuna's dialectic goes too far and subverts the original position of the Buddha himself. Both Nagarjuna and the Buddha wanted to stop all metaphysical speculation about questions which could not be answered, but Nagarjuna's skepticism encompassed knowledge from experience as well as speculative reason. For Kalupahana, this leads to a significant contrast between Nagarjuna's transcendental mysticism and the Buddha's empirical phenomenalism.

Kalupahana lists at least two important differences between Nagarjuna and the Buddha. The former thought that concepts always distorted our view of reality, but the latter maintained that concepts, backed up by experience and the right attitude, could actually liberate. Kalupahana also shows that Nagarjuna transforms the central discovery of the Buddha—the causality of dependent origination—into something which the Buddha would not have recognized. Indeed, the “knowable” causality of early Buddhism seems to be destroyed in the pinchers of Nagarjuna's

"eight-fold negation" causality "neither disappears nor appears, neither has an end nor is eternal, neither undifferentiated nor differentiated, moves neither hither nor thither."¹⁸

Nagarjuna is without a doubt the most influential thinker in Mahayana Buddhism. He is called the "founder of the eight schools" (of later Buddhism) and is sometimes called the "second Buddha." But if the Buddha said "he who perceives causality perceives the Dharma,"¹⁹ does Nagarjuna deserve these titles? Indeed, if Nagarjuna destroys the central concept of Buddhism, can he be called a Buddhist at all?

One must answer "No" for several reasons. It is always easy, even among the sympathetic, to interpret the Madhyamika dialectic in nihilistic and destructive terms. As Nagarjuna so adeptly argues in the *Madhyamika castra*, it is the doctrine of *sunyata*, the discovery of the thorough relativity of all existents, which saves the Four Noble Truths from logical absurdity. The doctrine of dependent origination is not "destroyed" by Nagarjuna's dialectic; rather, it is simply placed in its proper logical perspective. Indeed, Nagarjuna continually equates dependent origination with *sunyata*.

Yet there is some truth in Kalupahana's criticism. Although it is certainly not fair to excommunicate Nagarjuna (this would be a most un-Buddhist thing to do), it is nonetheless correct to suggest, as A. J. Bahm has done, that Gautama Buddha would not have indulged in endless negation and that Nagarjuna's dialectical extremism could possibly be seen as just another form of craving and attachment.²⁰

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NOTES

1. Chapters 40 and 42 from Chang Chung-yuan, trans., *Tao : A New Way of Thinking* (Harper & Row, 1975).
2. Sung-peng Hsu, "Lao Tzu's Conception of Ultimate Reality : A Comparative Study," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 16 (1976), p. 206.

3. *Mahayānā-sraddha-utpada* (The Awakening of Faith in the Mahayānā), excerpted in Lucien Stryk, ed., *The world of the Buddha* (Doubleday Anchor, 1969), p. 248.
4. Stryk, p. 271.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 282.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 93.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 106.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 111.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 118.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 250-1.
11. Quoted in D. Ikeda, *Buddhism: The First Millenium* (Kodansha International, 1977), p. 105.
12. Excerpted in E. A. Burt, ed., *The Teachings of the Compassionate Buddha* (Mentor, 1955), p. 175.
13. *Buddhist Philosophy : A Historical Analysis* (University of Hawaii, 1976), p. 149.
14. *Mahāyāna-Sangraha-cāstra*, excerpted in Stryk, p. 292.
15. " The Principle of Four-Cornered Negation in Indian Philosophy, " *The Review of Metaphysics*, June, 1954.
16. Stryk, p. 144.
17. " Negation and the Madhyamika Dialectic " in B. K. Matilal's *Epistemology, Logic and Grammar* (Mouton, 1971), p. 163.
18. Quoted in Kalupahana, *op. cit.*, p. 139.
19. Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 30.
20. *Philosophy of the Buddha* (Capricorn Books, 1969), pp. 101-102.

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