

# Dialectic

## INTRODUCTION

THE words "dialectical" and "dialectician" are currently used more often in a derogatory than in a descriptive sense. The person who criticizes an argument by saying, "It's just a matter of definition" is also apt to say, "That may be true dialectically, but . . ." or "You're just being dialectical." Implied in such remarks is dispraise of reasoning which, however excellent or skillful it may be as reasoning, stands condemned for being out of touch with fact or experience.

Still other complaints against dialectic are that it plays with words, begs the question, makes sport of contradictions. When the theologian Hippothadeus almost convinces Panurge that he "should rather choose to marry once, than to burn still in fires of concupiscence," Rabelais has Panurge raise one last doubt against the proposal. "Shall I be a cuckold, father," he asks, "yea or no?" Hippothadeus answers: "By no means . . . will you be a cuckold, if it please God." On receiving this reply Panurge cries out, "O the Lord help us now; whither are we driven to, good folks? To the conditionals, which, according to the rules and precepts of the dialectic faculty, admit of all contradictions and impossibilities. If my Transalpine mule had wings, my Transalpine mule would fly. If it please God, I shall not be a cuckold, but I shall be a cuckold if it please him."

As a term of disapproval, "dialectical" has been used by scientists against philosophers, by philosophers against theologians, and, with equal invective, by religious men against those who resort to argument concerning matters of faith.

The early Middle Ages witnessed a conflict between the mystical and the rational ap-

proaches to the truths of religion. Those for whom religious experience and revelation were the only avenue to God condemned the dialecticians—the philosophers or theologians who tried to use reason discursively rather than proceed by intuition and vision. With the Reformation and with the Renaissance, men like Martin Luther and Francis Bacon regarded dialectic as the bane of medieval learning. Because of its dialectical character, Luther dismissed all theological speculation as sophistry. Bacon, for the same reason, stigmatized scholastic philosophy as consisting in "no great quantity of matter and infinite agitation of wit."

On grounds which were common as well as opposite, both mystics and experimentalists attacked dialectic as a futile, if not vicious, use of the mind—as "hair-splitting" and "logic-chopping." Even when they admitted that it might have some virtue, they approved of it as a method of argument or proof, proper enough perhaps in forensic oratory or political debate, but entirely out of place in the pursuit of truth or in approaching reality.

A CERTAIN CONCEPTION of dialectic is implicit in all such criticisms. The dialectician is a man who argues rather than observes, who appeals to reason rather than experience, who draws implications from whatever is said or can be said, pushing a premise to its logical conclusion or reducing it to absurdity. This aspect of dialectic appears to be the object of Rabelais's satire in the famous dispute between Panurge and Thaumast, which is carried on "by signs only, without speaking, for the matters are so abstruse, hard, and arduous, that words proceeding from the mouth of man will never be sufficient for the unfolding of them."

In view of those who think that truth can be learned only by observation, by induction from particulars, or generalization from experience, the technique of dialectic, far from being a method of inquiry, seems to have virtue only for the purpose of disputation or criticism. "The human faculties," writes Gibbon, "are fortified by the art and practice of dialectics." It is "the keenest weapon of dispute," he adds, but "more effectual for the detection of error than for the investigation of truth."

J. S. Mill describes "the Socratic dialectics, so magnificently exemplified in the dialogues of Plato," as a "contrivance for making the difficulties of the question . . . present to the learner's consciousness . . . They were essentially a negative discussion of the great questions of philosophy and life," he continues, "directed with consummate skill to the purpose of convincing anyone who has merely adopted the commonplaces of received opinion that he did not understand the subject . . . The school disputations of the Middle Ages had a somewhat similar object." In Mill's opinion, "as a discipline to the mind, they were in every respect inferior to the powerful dialectics which formed the intellects of the 'Socratic viri'; but the modern mind," he says, "owes far more to both than it is generally willing to admit, and the present modes of education contain nothing which in the smallest degree supplies the place either of the one or of the other."

Disparaging comment on dialectic comes not only from those who contrast it unfavorably with the methods of experiment or empirical research. It is made also by writers who trust reason's power to grasp truths intuitively and to develop their consequences deductively. Sensitive to what may seem to be a paradox here, Descartes writes in his *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*: "It may perhaps strike some with surprise that here, where we are discussing how to improve our power of deducing one truth from another, we have omitted all the precepts of the dialecticians." The dialectician can proceed only after he has been given premises to work from. Since, in Descartes's view, dialectic provides no method for establishing premises or for discovering

first principles, it can "contribute nothing at all to the discovery of the truth . . . Its only possible use is to serve to explain at times more easily to others the truths we have already ascertained; hence it should be transferred from Philosophy to Rhetoric."

THE CONNECTION of dialectic with disputation and rhetoric has some foundation in the historical fact that many of the techniques of dialectic originated with the Greek Sophists who had primarily a rhetorical or forensic aim. Comparable to the Roman rhetoricians and to the law teachers of a later age, the Sophists taught young men how to plead a case, how to defend themselves against attack, how to persuade an audience. Skill in argument had for them a practical, not a theoretical, purpose; not truth or knowledge, but success in litigation or in political controversy. The familiar charge that the method they taught enabled men "to make the worse appear the better reason," probably exaggerates, but nonetheless reflects, the difference between the standards of probability in disputation and the standards of truth in scientific inquiry. This has some bearing on the disrepute of sophistry and the derogatory light cast on the *dialectical* when it is identified with the *sophistical*.

But there is another historical fact which places dialectic in a different light. In the tradition of the liberal arts, especially in their Roman and medieval development, "dialectic" and "logic" are interchangeable names for the discipline which, together with grammar and rhetoric, comprises the three liberal arts known as the "trivium." In his treatise *On Christian Doctrine* Augustine uses the word "dialectic" in this way. Whatever else it means, the identification of dialectic with logic implies its distinction from rhetoric and certainly from sophistry.

Yet Augustine does not fail to observe the misuse of dialectic which debases it to the level of sophistry. "In the use of it," he declares, "we must guard against the love of wrangling, and the childish vanity of entrapping an adversary. For there are many of what are called *sophisms*," he continues, "inferences in reasoning that are false, and yet so close an

imitation of the true, as to deceive not only dull people, but clever men too, when they are not on their guard." He gives as an example the case of one man saying to another, "What I am, you are not." The other man may assent to this, thinking, as Augustine points out, that "the proposition is in part true, the one man being cunning, the other simple." But when "the first speaker adds: 'I am a man' " and "the other has given his assent to this also, the first draws his conclusion: 'Then you are not a man.' "

According to Augustine, "this sort of ensnaring argument" should not be called dialectical, but sophistical. He makes the same sort of observation about the abuse of rhetoric in speech which "only aims at verbal ornamentation more than is consistent with seriousness of purpose." That, too, he thinks, should be "called sophistical" in order to avoid attaching the name of rhetoric to misapplications of the art.

Dialectic for Augustine is the art which "deals with inferences, and definitions, and divisions" and "is of the greatest assistance in the discovery of meaning." Rhetoric, on the other hand, "is not to be used so much for ascertaining the meaning as for setting forth the meaning when it is ascertained." Dialectic, in other words, is divorced from the practical purpose of stating and winning an argument, and given theoretical status as a method of inquiry.

THIS CONCEPTION of dialectic originates in the dialogues of Plato. Not himself a Sophist, either by profession or in aim, Socrates found other uses for the analytical and argumentative devices invented by the Sophists. The same skills of mind which were practically useful in the public assembly and in the law courts could be used or adapted for clarification and precision in speculative discussions. They could also be used to find the truth implicitly in the commonly expressed convictions of men and to lay bare errors caused by lack of definition in discourse or lack of rigor in reasoning.

In the *Sophist* Plato separates the philosopher from the sophist, not by any distinction

in method, but by the difference in the use each makes of the same technique. And in *The Republic*, one of the reasons Socrates gives for postponing the study of dialectic until the age of thirty is that youngsters, "when they first get the taste in their mouths, argue for amusement" and "like puppy-dogs, they rejoice in pulling and tearing at all who come near them." As a result of being vainly disputatious, they "get into the way of not believing anything which they believed before, and hence, not only they, but philosophy and all that relates to it is apt to have a bad name with the rest of the world . . . But when a man begins to get older, he will no longer be guilty of such insanity; he will imitate the dialectician who is seeking for truth, and not the sophist, who is contradicting for the sake of amusement."

In the hands of the philosopher, dialectic is an instrument of science. "There is," according to Socrates, "no other method of comprehending by any regular process all true existence or of ascertaining what each thing is in its own nature." It passes beyond the arts at the lowest level, "which are concerned with the desires or opinions of men, or are cultivated with a view to production and constructions." It likewise transcends the mathematical sciences, which, while they "have some apprehension of true being . . . leave the hypotheses which they use unexamined, and are unable to give an account of them." Using these as "handmaids and helpers," dialectic "goes directly to the first principle and is the only science which does away with hypotheses in order to make her ground more secure."

The dialectic of Plato has an upward and a downward path which somewhat resemble the inductive process of the mind from facts to principles, and the deductive process from principles to the conclusions they validate. Dialectic, says Socrates, ascends by using hypotheses "as steps and points of departure into a world which is above hypotheses, in order that she may soar beyond them to the first principle of the whole . . . By successive steps she descends again without the aid of any sensible object, from ideas, through ideas, and in ideas she ends."

As the disciplined search for truth, dialectic

includes all of logic. It is concerned with every phase of thought: with the establishment of definitions; the examination of hypotheses in the light of their presuppositions or consequences; the formulation of inferences and proofs; the resolution of dilemmas arising from opposition in thought.

WHEREAS FOR PLATO dialectic is more than the whole of logic, for Aristotle it is less. Dialectic is more than the process by which the mind goes from myth and fantasy, perception and opinion, to the highest truth. For Plato it is the ultimate fruit of intellectual labor—knowledge itself, and in its supreme form as a vision of being and unity. That is why Socrates makes it the ultimate study in the curriculum proposed for training the guardians to become philosopher kings. "Dialectic," he says, "is the coping-stone of the sciences, and is set over them; no other science can be placed higher—the nature of knowledge can go no further."

For Aristotle, dialectic, far from being at the summit of science and philosophy, lies at their base, and must be carefully distinguished from sophistry, which it resembles in method. "Dialecticians and sophists assume the same guise as the philosopher," Aristotle writes, "for sophistic is wisdom which exists only in semblance, and dialecticians embrace all things in their dialectic, and being is common to all things; but evidently their dialectic embraces these subjects because these are proper to philosophy. Sophistic and dialectic," he continues, "turn on the same class of things as philosophy, but philosophy differs from dialectic in the nature of the faculty required and from sophistic in respect of the purpose of the philosophic life. Dialectic is merely critical where philosophy claims to know, and sophistic is what appears to be philosophy but is not."

ACCORDING TO ARISTOTLE, dialectic is neither itself a science nor the method of science. It is that part of logic or method which he treats in the *Topics*, and it differs from the scientific method expounded in the *Posterior Analytics* as argument in the sphere of opinion and probabilities differs from scientific demonstration.

Unlike the conclusions of science, the conclusions of dialectical reasoning are only probable, because they are based on assumptions rather than self-evident truths. Since other and opposite assumptions cannot be excluded, one dialectical conclusion is usually opposed by another in an issue of competing probabilities.

Intermediate between science and rhetoric, dialectic can serve both. In addition to its practical employment in forensics, it is useful in the philosophical sciences because it develops skill in making and criticizing definitions, and in asking or answering questions. "The ability to raise searching difficulties on both sides of a subject," Aristotle says, "will make us detect more easily the truth and error about the several points that arise."

Though it is primarily a method of arguing from assumptions and of dealing with disputes arising from contrary assumptions, dialectic is also concerned with the starting points of argument. The *Topics* considers how assumptions are chosen, what makes them acceptable, what determines their probability. Here again Aristotle shows how the philosopher can make use of dialectic—as that "process of criticism wherein lies the path to the principles of all inquiries."

THERE ARE FOUR major expositions of dialectic in the tradition of the great books. It is as pivotal a conception in the thought of Kant and Hegel as it is in the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle. With differences which may be more important than the similarities, the Kantian treatment resembles the Aristotelian, the Hegelian the Platonic.

Like the division between the *Posterior Analytics* and the *Topics* in Aristotle's *Organon*, the transcendental logic of Kant's *The Critique of Pure Reason* falls into two parts—the analytic and the dialectic. The distinction between his transcendental logic and what Kant calls "general logic" is discussed in the chapter on LOGIC, but here it must be observed that for Kant "general logic, considered as an organon, must always be a logic of illusion, that is, be dialectical." He thinks that the ancients used the word "dialectic" in this sense, to signify "a sophistical art for giving ignorance, nay,

even intentional sophistries, the coloring of truth, in which the thoroughness of procedure which logic requires was imitated." For his own purposes, however, he wishes "dialectic" to be understood "in the sense of a critique of dialectical illusion."

When he comes to his own transcendental logic, therefore, he divides it into two parts. The first part deals with "the elements of pure cognition of the understanding, and the principles without which no object at all can be thought." This is the "Transcendental Analytic, and at the same time a logic of truth"—a logic of science. Since in his view "it ought properly to be only a canon for judging of the empirical use of the understanding, this kind of logic is misused when we seek to employ it as an organon of the universal and unlimited exercise of the understanding."

When it is thus misused, "the exercise of the pure understanding becomes dialectical. The second part of our transcendental logic," Kant writes, "must therefore be a critique of dialectical illusion, and this critique we shall term Transcendental Dialectic—not meaning it as an art of producing dogmatically such illusion (an art which is unfortunately too current among the practitioners of metaphysical juggling), but as a critique of understanding and reason in regard to their hyperphysical use."

Kant goes further than Aristotle in separating dialectic from science. With regard to the sensible or phenomenal world of experience, science is possible; with regard to the mind's own structure, the supreme sort of science is possible. But when reason tries to use its ideas for other objects, and then regards them "as conceptions of actual things, their mode of application is *transcendent* and delusive." Kant explains that "an idea is employed transcendently, when it is applied to an object falsely believed . . . to correspond to it; immanently, when it is applied solely to the employment of the *understanding* in the sphere of experience"; and he maintains that when ideas are used transcendently, they do not give rise to science, but "assume a fallacious and dialectical character."

A conclusion of dialectical reasoning, according to Kant, is either opposed by a con-

clusion equally acceptable to reason—"a perfectly natural antithetic"—as in the antinomies of pure reason; or, as in the paralogisms, the reasoning has specious cogency which can be shown to "conclude falsely, while the form is correct and unexceptionable." In this balance of reason against itself lies the illusory character of the transcendental dialectic.

Where Aristotle recognizes that reason can be employed on both sides of a question because it involves competing probabilities, Kant in calling dialectic "a logic of appearance" explicitly remarks that "this does not signify a doctrine of probability." He further distinguishes what he calls "transcendental illusory appearance" from "empirical illusory appearance" and ordinary "logical illusion." The latter two can be corrected and totally removed. But "transcendental illusion, on the contrary," he writes, "does not cease to exist even after it has been exposed and its nothingness has been clearly perceived by means of transcendental criticism."

The reason for this, Kant explains, is that "here we have to do with a *natural* and unavoidable illusion, which rests upon subjective principles, and imposes these upon us as objective . . . There is, therefore," he continues, "a natural and unavoidable dialectic of pure reason" which arises because the mind seeks to answer questions "well nigh impossible to answer," such as "how objects exist as things in themselves" or "how the nature of things is to be subordinated to principles." In its effort to transcend experience—"in disregard of all the warnings of criticism"—the mind cannot escape the frustration, the dialectical illusion, "which is an inseparable adjunct of human reason." It is not, Kant repeatedly insists, that "the ideas of pure reason" are "in their own nature dialectical; it is from their misemployment alone that fallacies and illusions arise."

FOR HEGEL AS FOR Plato dialectic moves in the realm of truth and ideas, not probabilities and illusions. But for Hegel dialectic is always the process of mind, or of the Idea, in interminable motion toward absolute truth—never resting in the intuition of that truth. The Idea, he writes, "is self-determined, it assumes suc-

cessive forms which it successively transcends; and by this very process of transcending its earlier stages, gains an affirmative, and, in fact, a richer and more concrete shape."

The dialectical process is a motion in which contrary and defective truths are harmonized. The synthesis of *thesis and antithesis* results in a more complete truth. To illustrate his meaning, Hegel uses the example of building a house. For such a purpose, we must have "in the first instance, a subjective aim and design" and as means, "the several substances required for the work—iron, wood, stones." In rendering these materials suitable for our purpose, we make use of the elements: "fire to melt the iron, wind to blow the fire, water to set the wheels in motion, in order to cut the wood, etc."

Yet the house that we build is, according to Hegel, an opposite or antithesis of these elements. "The wind, which has helped to build the house, is shut out by the house; so also are the violence of rains and floods, and the destructive powers of fire, so far as the house is made fire-proof. The stones and beams obey the law of gravity—press downward—and so high walls are carried up." The result is that "the elements are made use of in accordance with their nature, and yet to cooperate for a product, by which their operation is limited." The initial opposition between the idea of a house and the elements is reconciled in the higher synthesis, which is the house itself.

While it shows the opposing theses and the resulting synthesis, this example does not fully exhibit the dynamic character of the Hegelian dialectic. If the resulting synthesis is not the whole truth, it too must be defective and require supplementation by a contrary which is defective in an opposite way. These two together then become the material for a higher synthesis, another step in that continuing dialectical process which is the life of mind—both the subjective dialectic of the human mind and the objective dialectic of the Absolute Mind or the Idea.

THE THREAD OF COMMON meaning which runs through these four conceptions of dialectic is to be found in the principle of opposition. In

each of them dialectic either begins or ends with some sort of intellectual conflict, or develops and then resolves such oppositions.

For Kant dialectical opposition takes the extreme form of irreducible contradictions from which the mind cannot escape. "It is a melancholy reflection," he declares, "that reason in its highest exercise, falls into an antithetic." This comes about because "all statements enunciated by pure reason transcend the conditions of possible experience, beyond the sphere of which we can discover no criterion of truth, while they are at the same time framed in accordance with the laws of the understanding, which are applicable only to experience; and thus it is the fact of all such speculative discussions, that while the one party attacks the weaker side of his opponent, he infallibly lays open his own weaknesses."

For Hegel the opposition takes the milder form of contrary theses and antitheses. They can be dialectically overcome by a synthesis which remedies the incompleteness of each half truth. "It is one of the most important discoveries of logic," Hegel says, "that a specific moment which, by standing in an opposition, has the position of an extreme, ceases to be such and is a moment in an organic whole by being at the same time a mean." The Hegelian opposition is thus also "mediation."

Dialectical opposition for Aristotle originates in the disagreements which occur in ordinary human discourse. But just as disagreement is reasonable only if there are two sides to the question in dispute, so reason can operate dialectically only with regard to genuinely arguable matters. The familiar topics concerning which men disagree represent the commonplace issues of dialectic, since for the most part they are formed from debatable propositions or questions. "Nobody in his senses," Aristotle believes, "would make a proposition of what no one holds; nor would he make a problem of what is obvious to everybody or to most people." Each of the conflicting opinions will therefore have some claim to probability. Here the dialectical process ends neither in a synthesis of incomplete opposites nor in a rejection of both as illusory; but, having "an eye to general opinion," it seeks to ascertain

the more reasonable view—the more tenable or probable of the two.

In the Platonic theory of dialectic, the element of opposition appears in the tension between being and becoming, the one and many, or the intelligible and the sensible, which is found present in every stage of the mind's dialectical ascent to the contemplation of ideas. So fundamental is this tension that Socrates uses it to define the dialectician as one who is "able to see 'a One and Many' in Nature"—by comprehending "scattered particulars in one idea" and dividing it "into species according to their natural formation." Here as in the Hegelian theory the oppositions—*apparent* contradictions in discourse—can be resolved by dialectic, and through their resolution the mind then rises to a higher level.

IT IS ONLY IN the writings of Hegel or his followers that the meaning of dialectic is not limited to the activity of human thought. Hegel expressly warns that "the loftier dialectic . . . is not an activity of subjective thinking applied to some matter externally, but is rather the matter's very soul putting forth its branches and fruit organically." It is the "development of the Idea," which is "the proper activity of its rationality." If the whole world in its existence and development is the thought and thinking of an Absolute Mind, or the Idea, then the events of nature and of history are moments in a dialectical process of cosmic proportions. The principles of dialectic become the principles of change, and change itself is conceived as a progress or evolution from lower to higher, from part to whole, from the indeterminate to the determinate.

The dialectical pattern of history, conceived by Hegel as the progressive objectification of spirit, is reconstructed by Marx in terms of the conflict of material forces. Marx himself explicitly contrasts his dialectic with that of Hegel. "My dialectic method," he writes, "is not only different from the Hegelian, but is its direct opposite." Hegel, he claims, thinks that "the real world is only the external, phenomenal form of 'the Idea,'" whereas his own view is that "the ideal is nothing else than the

material world reflected by the human mind, and translated into forms of thought."

Nevertheless, with respect to dialectic, Marx praises Hegel for being "the first to present its general form of working in a comprehensive and conscious manner." The only trouble is that with Hegel, dialectic "is standing on its head." It must therefore "be turned right side up again," a revolution which Marx thinks he accomplishes in his dialectical materialism.

Having put dialectic on its proper basis, Marx constructs the whole of history in terms of a conflict of material forces, or of social classes in economic strife, according to a dialectical pattern which provides "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." History is thus viewed dialectically "as in fluid movement," yet it is also conceived as working toward a definite end—the revolution which has as its result the peace of the classless society. Bourgeois industry, by bringing about the concentration and association of the proletariat, produces "its own grave diggers; its fall and the victory of the proletariat" are "equally inevitable."

In Marx's vocabulary the phrases "historical materialism" and "dialectical materialism" are strictly synonymous. But Marx's protest to the contrary notwithstanding, a comparison of Marx and Hegel seems to show that a dialectic of history is equally capable of being conceived in terms of spirit or of matter.

The question whether there is a dialectic of nature as well as a dialectic of history remains a point of controversy in Marxist thought, despite the bearing which Hegel's *Science of Logic* and *The Phenomenology of Mind* might have upon the question. Engels tries in his *Dialectics of Nature* to give a fuller rendering of the Hegelian dialectic in strictly materialistic terms. Its universal scope, including all of nature as well as all of history, is also reflected in certain post-Darwinian doctrines of cosmic evolution.

CONSIDERATIONS RELEVANT to the Hegelian or Marxist dialectic will be found in the chapters

on HISTORY and PROGRESS. Without judging the issues which Hegel and Marx have raised in the thought of the last century, it may be permissible to report the almost violent intellectual aversion they have produced in certain quarters. Nietzsche is contemptuous of all dialecticians: "They pose as having discovered and attained their real opinions through the self-evolution of a cold, pure, divinely unperturbed dialectic . . . while what happens at bottom is that a prejudice, a notion, an 'inspiration,' generally a desire of the heart sifted and made abstract, is defended by them with reasons sought after the event—they are one and all advocates who do not want to be regarded as such." Freud is as unsympathetic in his criticism of Marx and as uncompromising in his rejection of dialectical materialism, as William James before him is extreme in the expression of his distaste for Hegel. Mocking "the Hegelizers" who think that "the glory and beauty of the psychic life is that in it

all contradictions find their reconciliation," James declares: "With this intellectual temper I confess I cannot contend."

The Hegelian dialectic and what James calls "the pantomime-state of mind" are, in his opinion, "emotionally considered, one and the same thing. In the pantomime all common things are represented to happen in impossible ways, people jump down each other's throats, houses turn inside out, old women become young men, everything 'passes into its opposite' with inconceivable celerity and skill . . . And so in the Hegelian logic," James continues, "relations elsewhere recognized under the insipid name of distinctions (such as that between knower and object, many and one) must first be translated into impossibilities and contradictions, then 'transcended' and identified by miracle, ere the proper temper is induced for thoroughly enjoying the spectacle they show."