

FREEDOM & MORALITY

**The Lindley Lectures
delivered at the University of Kansas by**

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**Edited with an introduction by
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UNIVERSITY OF KANSAS HUMANISTIC STUDIES, 46

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University of Kansas Publications

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Lawrence: University of Kansas, 1976

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What is Dialectical?

Paul Ricoeur

I

To ask: What is the genuine place of dialectic, is, more explicitly, to pose the following question: If dialectic makes sense, what is the central, paradigmatic experience that could support this claim? But it is necessary first to clarify what is meant by the hypothetical clause: if dialectic makes sense. . . . The hypothesis, it seems to me, comprises two intentions: on the one hand, certain things do not exist or are not known unless another, opposite thing exists or is known at the same time. On the other hand, the opposition is such that it does not end in a zero, i.e., neither in the logical zero produced by the contradiction of two propositions, nor in the physical zero resulting from the equilibrium of two opposite forces. The hypothesis of dialectic is therefore put forth outside of the two kinds of opposition described by Kant in his essay: "How to introduce negative terms in philosophy." If dialectic makes sense, a third kind of opposition must be supposed, what could be called a productive opposition, if we understand by that an opposition which, in one way or another, permits, encourages, or generates a new thing, in reality or in experience, qualitatively distinct from the opposing terms. It must be clearly understood that both these characteristics are simply criteria of identification, which should not be transformed into formal traits, under penalty of contradicting the fundamental characteristic of dialectic which will become apparent, namely proceeding by the movement of content alone.

If the notion of productive opposition makes sense, the first question to be asked is where this sort of productive opposition can be observed, identified and recognized as primary in such a way that its first exemplification becomes a paradigm, a model for other similar cases.

Three "places" could compete as candidates for this paradigmatic role: logic, nature, or human reality. These three possibilities are precisely those which were explored by Hegel and which furnish his system with its three main divisions: dialectics "before creation," dialectics in natural things, dialectics in human things. In fact, these are the three sections of the *Encyclopedia of Philosophical Sciences*. But in Hegelian philosophy, commanded by absolute knowledge, the question of the priority among the three candidates cannot be asked.

by Medieval and then by Cartesian philosophers. The former, having only Aristotelian cosmology as a language of reference, strove to keep this dialectic within the bounds of natural causality, conceived as efficient causality. They therefore did not hesitate to speak of the action of the will on the understanding and the action of the understanding on the will. In its most advanced form, this psychology attained the point where it could speak of the will as "moving" the understanding and of the understanding as "moving" the will, but from different perspectives and in different ways—for example, from the perspective of the formal object and from that of the exercise of the will. Reciprocity of actions in these various relations became, then, the equivalent of a mutual action without a vicious circle. It is remarkable that the Cartesians not only preserved but perfected this schema, in spite of the collapse of the Aristotelian and Medieval cosmology which constituted its ultimate foundation. This indicates that the dialectical schema had merely slipped into the only available conceptual apparatus, that of the mutual action of faculties.

What becomes of this schema when its dialectical character is plainly recognized? A very complex situation arises which can be described in the following terms. It is possible, on the one hand, to follow the ascending scale of what one could call the "theoretical representation," from perception to memory and imagination and beyond to conceptual thought. But this ascending scale must at the same time be constructed like a spiral wound within another spiral. If one follows the other ascending scale, that of the "practical representation" which leads from needs to desire, to wish and to demand, and finally to the sphere of properly human feelings and passions, it appears that each stage of one of the spirals is at the same time opposed to—and conditioned by—the corresponding stage of the other spiral. In this way, one could speak of a mutual promotion of the "theoretical" and the "practical" in man. All progress in one order generates a progress in the other. The mutual action of the will and the understanding, according to classical terminology, appears then as a phase in a global process which presents throughout the same dialectical character, i.e., the mutual genesis of the theoretical and the practical. Judgment is only, in the true sense of the word, the "critical" moment of this mutual genesis. Consequently, all this had been more or less understood but had been expressed in inadequate, pre-dialectical language. In Kant, the relation of theoretical reason to practical reason is not easily thought of

as a dialectical relation; this is the case even in the *Critique of Judgment*. It could be said, with Hegel, that the subjective spirit is nothing other than this theoretical and practical sublation through the twofold mediation crossing from one to the other, the sublation of the theoretical mediated by that of the practical and *vice versa*. At the same time, it is confirmed that the spirit must be thought of as a predicate and not as a referential term in order to avoid any possibility of hypostasis and mystification.

The third dialectic is the preeminent dialectic; the other two prepare it in the same way that the dialectic of nature in Hegel prepares that of the spirit. The core of this dialectic is the transition from the subjective will to the objective will. It is this dialectic that phenomenology and analytical philosophy alike are apt to overlook to the extent to which each of them limits its considerations to individual goals and ignores the ethico-political dimensions of the will and human action.

Because this dialectic has been overlooked, the wide perspective exhibited in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* was entirely lost from sight in classical as well as in Cartesian and Medieval philosophy. According to Aristotle, human action was structured by various "excellences" (*arétai*) which covered the private and the public spheres of action. Ethics was subordinated to politics, considered the architectonic science, for the reason that the good of the individual was thought to be less important than the public good. In the course of time, however, the Aristotelian totality fell apart: two continents became separated and drifted away from one another. On the one hand, a psychology of decision and consent was imprisoned in individual psychology and was practically reduced to the theory of judgment evoked above. In this way, personal ethics was severed from political theory. On the other hand, political philosophy moved outside the bounds of philosophy of will in order to constitute a separate entity, in spite of the fact that its principal concepts—power, sovereignty, authority, etc.—continued to draw their meaning from the sphere of human will, which is also power, force, domination.

It was the task of a dialectical philosophy, like that of Hegel in *The Philosophy of Right*, to reconstruct the broken totality in accordance with the concept of the "realization of freedom," and to reunite the scattered elements of a philosophy of will and a political philosophy within the unified framework of the theory of *objective spirit*. Such was the task of Hegel; he conceived it essentially as a

dialectic of arbitrary will and of the institutions—in the largest sense of the word—by which this arbitrary will becomes rational and objective. Everyone knows the way in which Hegel completed his task, in following the progressive order of institutions from the most abstract, like penal law, to the most concrete, like political institutions. Our problem is not to decide whether this order is itself compulsory. It is certainly without any internal necessity. The economic sphere precedes the political neither historically nor conceptually; we find the same thing in the case of the juridical sphere. Therefore, nothing compels us to repeat Hegel. What is, however, exemplary in the work of Hegel is the general project of a dialectic which proceeds from psychology to politics, from a subjective will to an objective will, from an arbitrary form to a rational form of action. Let me mention only one example—perhaps the simplest and yet the most convincing—found at the beginning of *The Philosophy of Right*. This paradigmatic example is that of contracts. The contracting will is at the outset an arbitrary will defined only by its compulsion to possess—*Besitznahme*—to take hold of things. In contractual exchange, two different wills are mediated through the exchanged thing and become juridical wills. The thing itself, however, defined at the start as a subjective utility, is raised to the level of an abstract value, that of the value of exchange. The thing and the will become universal at the same time and in a reciprocal manner. The exchange value mediates two wills, in the same way that each will mediates the other will and the thing.

All the other forms of dialectic involving the relation between wills which occur at the economic, social and political level present the same fundamental structure of an initial opposition surmounted in a more concrete modality which, at the same time, reasserts the opposing poles and surmounts their contradiction.

This sublation of simple opposition in mediated opposition permits us to classify the relations of exchange among men in a certain order, following the degree of internalization of the link which unites them. Thus, in the purely juridical relation of the contract, the two contracting wills live radically estranged from one another and do not in any way form a totality. This is why the juridical relation which binds them is restricted to delimiting the sphere of right belonging to each subject. "Render to each his due," preventing the encroachment of one on the other—this is all the juridical relation can do. In the economic sphere, the tie between the interests of one and the interests of the other is closer; the interests

of one condition those of the other and satisfying the needs of one carries the expectation of some service rendered by the other. Nevertheless, the link remains external, in the sense that the law which rules the reciprocity of needs, works, and services is not itself incorporated into the ego-centered project of each of the members of the system. This law is known only by those who study the system not as members but as disinterested observers. This is why Hegel, anticipating in this way certain Marxist analyses, did not hesitate to describe the "bourgeois" economic system in mechanistic language: the "system of needs," he said, constitutes the "external State." This external character of the system in respect to the ego-centered ends of social agents furnished Hegel with the fundamental contrast between the economic order and the political order. The political order, when it is worthy of the name, realizes an integration of will in the community in such a way that each recognizes the law of the collectivity as the law of his own will. This dialectical reconciliation of man and the City is accomplished by the mediation of the constitution, which is at one and the same time the rule which transcends each of the wills and the condition under which each of these wills recognizes itself. In Hegelian language, self-consciousness finds its completion in the State. I shall not discuss here the question of whether Hegel describes an empirical State, actually existing, or whether he prescribes in a Platonic manner the laws of an ideal State, or again whether, escaping these alternatives, he describes what is present in an inchoate and primitive fashion in every modern State, enabling one to recognize the essence of the State in each empirical State. Nor shall I discuss the question of whether or not Hegel limits himself to projecting into an ideal State, in a thoroughly fictitious and misleading way, the resolution of contradictions and conflicts which he lucidly perceived in the economic sphere, as he was accused by Marx in his virulent "Critique of Hegel's *Principles of the Philosophy of Right*." What interests me here is the type of intelligibility that produces a dialectical approach to human action, when one takes as a guide the idea of the progressive integration of wills and of the gradual internalization of the law which presides over this integration. This dialectical meaning at least saved Hegel from a mere mechanical transposition of a type of relation appropriate to one sphere into another sphere requiring its own distinct characterization. It is this "category mistake" that Hegel reproaches in contractualist theories of the State, which senselessly attempt to extend to the political sphere a relation which holds only for the

exchange of two wills, in the case of appropriating things. In a logic of identity, all new relations must be either the *same* as or *other* than a relation already described. The relation of two wills, mediated by their belonging to the same political community and by their awareness of the common law of the City, is, in regard to the contractual relation, at one and the same time the *same* and *other*. Here again, the metaphor of the spiral imposes itself; the political link, mediated by the constitution, and the juridical link, mediated by the contract, are on the same spiral but at different levels.

The meaningful history of freedom is therefore the history of these three dialectics. The philosophy of praxis, which at once terminates and recapitulates, is essentially the renewal of anterior oppositions in a style that is less abstract and more concrete, less mechanistic and more organic, less external and more internal. The meaningful history of freedom is nothing other than the history of these linked dialectics. It is in this sense that one could say that praxis is the dialectic at work.

This formula is another way of saying that the practical dialectic cannot be isolated from the concrete stages from which it proceeds. Once more, there is nothing like a logical dialectic which could be added to formal logic. The counterpart of this relation between dialectic and its content is that these contents themselves cannot be understood as meaningful without the full recognition of their dialectical character.

Nothing better demonstrates the superiority of a dialectical approach than a comparison between Hegel and Kant. Kant's philosophy remains caught in insoluble dichotomies: between nature and freedom, between theoretical reason and practical reason, between understanding and sensibility, between duty and pleasure. I do not deny that these dichotomies constitute a "necessary crisis" in reason itself. The very fact that they are posed as such shatters the homogeneity of nature and naturalism. Something other than nature emerges; the uni-dimensionality of understanding is split asunder. In this regard, Kant's thought will always represent a necessary way station for all systems, from logical empiricism to the philosophy of ordinary language, which believe us to be able to live within a language without conflicts, without aporias, without contradiction. But, if it is necessary to pass by way of Kant, one cannot stop with him. The following step outside of the dichotomy cannot be taken from within the same philosophical framework. Kant's thought

remains, ultimately, a philosophy which separates and divides. It is not yet the thought of reason, but the thought of understanding, although Kant did perceive the relation of the antinomy to reason in quest of the unconditioned. But to live within this division is to remain at the level of "divided understanding." The Kantian antinomy calls for a mode of thought which does not limit itself to separating free causality from natural causality but which combines them. We need a philosophy which distinguishes and connects, which hierarchizes and totalizes the moments that the antinomy has separated. This philosophy no doubt can no longer be that of the historical Hegel. But it will have to be a philosophy informed by him.

II

So far we have taken praxis as the pivotal point of our discussion, and we have said that praxis is dialectic at work. Is the converse true? Is it necessary to say that all that is dialectical is praxis? To affirm it would be to fall back on the kind of systematic philosophy that I denounced at the beginning. But to deny it is to engage in a perilous investigation beyond the solid core where we were able to verify the equivalence between praxis and dialectic. A concrete way of proceeding would be to advance step by step, moving progressively away from the nuclear experience which we described earlier. To my mind, that can be accomplished by moving in two different directions. On the one hand, one could enlarge the concept of dialectic beyond that of praxis in the direction of other domains of experience and, ultimately, move toward a philosophy of nature. By this procedure, the dialectic of nature can be restored at least as a horizon for a dialectic of praxis. But we then run the risk of extending the concept at the expense of weakening its criteria. The other way to proceed would be to diminish the breadth of the concept and thereby to reinforce the criteria. This is, in my view, what occurs in Marxism when the dialectic is understood essentially as a social dialectic and when class struggle becomes the paradigmatic example of the dialectic. The risk is then the inverse of the preceding: it is not to weaken the concept of the dialectic but to harden its features to the point of giving them a mechanistic interpretation, and this at the expense of the initial breadth of the problematic. Let us try to follow both directions in turn, with the understanding that in doing so we shall be raising some very con-

troversial questions. This is why I by no means wish to mitigate the polemical character of this "second navigation," as Plato would have called it.

I presented historical materialism above as a way of limiting the scope of dialectical thought. It is true, however, that this narrowing is compensated by an extension in an inverse sense, under the title of dialectical materialism, and that, under the influence of Engels—then of Lenin—what today we call Marxism-Leninism represents at once the reduction of the philosophy of praxis to the class struggle and its extension to the dialectic of nature. But an undue extension does not excuse an undue restriction. It seems to me that something is lost of the breadth of the dialectic of praxis if we focus our attention on just one kind of conflict—the conflict between classes—as important as this concept may be in understanding the structure of capitalism and even that of socialist societies inasmuch as they have not realized the project of integral communism.

The restriction that I reproach here in Marxism comes from its reduction of the concept of praxis to that of production, the reduction of the concept of labor to that of work, as Hannah Arendt has shown in a convincing way, it seems to me, in her book *The Human Condition*. In this regard, there is more in Hegel than in Marx, even as regards work—since the analysis of this concept appears in several different contexts and in several partial dialectical processes in *The Phenomenology of Mind*. It is not a paradox to say that this reduction of praxis to productive work is responsible for the permanent temptation among Marxists to fall back on what they themselves call the "economicist deviation."

That there was indeed more in Hegel than in Marx concerning the dialectic of action and even that of work is hidden behind a prejudice, held by Marxists themselves, which asserts that the difference between Hegel and Marx is that between idealism and materialism. This too facile opposition entirely obscures the debate. Nothing is more paralyzing, erroneous and misleading than this rigid opposition, and this is so for readily apparent reasons.

First, for Hegel himself, the permanent problem is that of reality. One cannot stress too strongly that the central and ultimate category is that of *Wirklichkeit*. The entire philosophy of Hegel is turned against idealizations, hypostases, elevating separate entities to the transcendental. No dialectic can function without a marked progress toward the reconciliation of terms, the internalization of conflicts and, finally, the actualization of meaning. It is for this reason that

we have been able to place the entire development of the philosophy of right under the sign of the concept of the "realization of freedom." It is due to the same principle that the juridical is subordinated to the economic, and the economic to the political. In this light, the horizon of Hegelian philosophy is indeed seen to be the identity of the rational and the real.

In addition, we say there is more in Hegel than in Marx because Hegel is more attentive to the multi-dimensionality of human experience. He takes in hand the immense variety of juridical, ethical, cultural, political, and religious phenomena. In this sense, the multi-dimensionality of the Hegelian dialectic argues against the tendency toward uni-dimensionality that a philosopher like Habermas believes can be exposed in Marx himself, due to the predominant character of the categories of production. This is why even the notion of work receives a more complete interpretation in Hegel than in Marx.

This is not to say that we have nothing to learn from Marx. On the contrary, it is from him that we learned what the dialectic of economy is and its nonresolution in the Hegelian political sphere. Moreover, we have to learn what is meant by the principle of class struggle in the structure of capitalism. But I think that the task of the philosopher is to resituate this dialectic as a partial dialectic within the total dialectic of the objective spirit. We have to recover the breadth of historical experience. It is here that the word "historicity"—the historicity of human experience—appears as the inclusive concept in regard to the social experience of struggle and conflict.

The second direction is that of an expansion, if not of a dissolution of the concept of dialectic. Here dialectic is at once enlarged and weakened.

We took a first step in this direction in identifying as dialectical certain features which belong to experience as such, but in a sense of the word experience which goes beyond its usage in the epistemology of natural science. This epistemology is based precisely on the denigration and exclusion of the dimension of human historicity and, consequently, of the dialectical features of experience. Three features, however, cannot be entirely eliminated from an experience, even when it is taken in hand by a rigorous methodology. Gadamer in *Warheit und Methode* evokes the extraordinary text in Aristotle's *Second Analytic*, where the search for the universal is compared to what happens to an army in full flight: suddenly, one soldier stops

fleeing; then another; finally the whole army stops and *turns around*; then a new order emerges from the chaos. This turn-around is historical and dialectical. Gadamer discerns a dialectical sense in Francis Bacon as well, when Bacon outlines the role of *instantae negativae* in the *interpretatio naturae*. No methodological organization of experience will be able to exhaust the meaning of this dialectic, which reveals its historical character in other spheres less easy to control and to dominate through specific methods. Aeschylus evokes this dramatic dimension of human experience in the famous verse in the chorus of *Agamemnon*: *pathei mathos*—"through suffering, knowledge." It is not by chance that in the French language we still use the same word—*expérience*—both in the laboratory and in life. These two poles of learning have in common the same usage of *instantae negativae*, of which everyday experience itself carries a trace. Do we not in fact speak of a man of experience when we want to say that a man has not only accumulated information, but that he remains open to contradictions as he is acquiring knowledge? Someone who is prepared, in this way, to place his acquired knowledge in a dialectical relation to what is still open and undetermined, that is a man of experience. In this sense, the process of experience is a negative process.

In Hegel's work, we find a concept of *Erfahrung*, which has been discussed by both Heidegger and Gadamer, and which designates the historicity belonging to all knowledge when we pass beyond a simple methodology of the sciences. It is not without interest to note that Hegel himself understood experience as the realization of scepticism. In fact the "turning over" of experience is at the same time a "return" of consciousness to itself. (Hegel makes use of the semantic kinship between *Umkehrung*, turning over, and *Zukehrung*, return.) To quote Hegel: "The dialectical movement which consciousness exercises on itself, as much on its knowledge as on its object, to the extent to which a new and real object emerges—that is basically what we call experience" (*Phenomenology of Mind*, ed. Hoffmeister, p. 73). Here the "turning over" of knowledge "on" the object and the return of consciousness "to" itself go together. What is foreign becomes ours at the same time that we become another in the other object. Our knowledge and its object are involved together in the dialectical process.

But if this direction of inquiry is sound, we must, nevertheless, admit that the concept of dialectic begins to be weakened and diluted. Experience is indeed no longer a particular experience but

experience as a whole; ultimately, it merges with the historical essence of man, considered as the limit set for the pretensions of organizing reason. What still remains clear and precise in the word "dialectic" is perhaps finally the notion of dialogue, which is after all one of the historical as well as semantic roots of the word. We cannot forget that the dialectic comes from the Socratic dialogue. The weak sense can easily be related to the dialectical features of experience itself. To be open to negative instances is to submit experience to the jurisdiction of the play of question and answer, which is the ultimate basis of all dialogue. The chain of meanings is then closely linked between: "to learn by suffering," to welcome the negative instances in empirical experience, to become a man of experience, and to submit discourse to the play of question and answer.

It is by a new extension of meaning, much more controversial than the first, that the concept of dialectic can be applied to nature itself and that one can speak of a dialectic of nature, in the sense of Engels and orthodox Marxism-Leninism.

I do not wish to say that this concept is entirely fallacious and meaningless, as most of the advocates of logical positivism, analytical philosophy or the philosophy of ordinary language have declared. But neither would I say that this concept is a primitive concept. To speak, for example, of a *dynamic totality* is to implicitly admit an absolute knowledge in which nature *plus* history could be thought together. If one has ceased to believe in absolute knowledge, then it can only be on the basis of the dialectical features of our praxis, extended to all of our experience and protected against all sophistry by the use of dialogue, that we can again speak of a dialectic of nature in a derivative sense.

This cautious extension can be attempted in line with three arguments which not only are not mutually exclusive, but are actually built upon one another. We may proceed in a *genetic* mode and show that a given stage of biological development—for example, a certain stage of infantile sexuality—anticipates the structure of adult sexuality. But it is because we know the final stage that we can apply to the initial stage the vocabulary borrowed from the final stage, for example the perverse or neurotic structure. But then if one claims to derive the final stage from the initial stage, one is simply forgetting that it is thanks to a sort of retrospection that it has been possible to identify in the primitive stage the structures likely to be considered as anticipations or preparations of the final stages. This circular movement in fact characterizes all teleological

arguments in which the *form* of the law—which could be described as a terminal phenomenon—appears to the mind as the reason for the selection of the earlier causes which allowed one to arrive at this terminal state. From outside the sphere of action, where the teleological structure of the argument accurately describes the processes of motivation, extrapolation is valid only within what Kant called *reflective judgment* in the *Critique of Judgment*. Teleological judgment cannot say how things are, but only under what rules it is necessary to place the phenomenon—already constituted in accordance with the rule of causality—in order to think of it as an organism. Sophism begins when we take reflective judgment to be constituting judgment. It is this sophism that Plato called “bastard reasoning”; what is “bastard” is the illegitimate offspring of constituting judgment and reflective judgment. The dialectic of nature is this sort of offspring.

A second argument will reinforce the preceding one. Retrospective projection of the historical dialectic onto a dialectic of nature may seem strengthened by the discovery of significant *isomorphism* between historical and natural processes. Experience abounds in structural analogies of this sort, which seem to give to each term of the comparison a real autonomy, a sort of self-consistency. The dialectic of nature seems then to begin by itself, in the most realistic way. Unhappily, the argument drawn from isomorphism cannot function alone; structural analogies exist because the similarities themselves were occasioned by reflective judgment in the sense we have just described. In other words, isomorphism does not constitute a separate argument; it presupposes the constitution of nature as an “analogy” of history by means of reflective judgment. It is only within the framework of reflective judgment that we can transfer to nature concepts belonging to history.

The same thing can be said with even more force when we move from isomorphism to “formal” laws, such as those proposed by Engels at the beginning of *The Dialectic of Nature*: no reality is given without an opposite reality, all quantitative growth results in qualitative change, and so on. Far from being primitive, these alleged laws—and all similar laws ruling dynamic totalities in general—are only pale abstractions, derived from the operation of authentic isomorphisms between two spheres of nature which, in turn, rely on the “turning over” of teleological explanation in genetic causal explanation. In other words, there is no law of material dialectic without isomorphism; no isomorphism without the

constitution of nature as a field of "reflective" judgment, that is, as "analogous to history."

This polemic brings me back to the principal experience of dialectical thought: to the coupling praxis-dialectic. My thesis is that the only region where dialectic can be identified with some degree of certainty as productive opposition is that region of philosophy of action where dialectic and praxis coincide. But it is the task of dialectic to be able to abstract from its original core in order to constitute a semi-formal mode which justifies to a certain extent the extrapolations we have made. It is in this way that we can speak, but not without impunity, of a "dialectical method." Its scope can be narrowed or widened. In narrowing the scope we may reduce dialectic to historical materialism and make class struggle the core of all modern history, if not ancient history as well. But this reduction tends to obscure the dialectical features of human experience. By extension, however, the dialectic of praxis becomes a dialectic of experience as a whole, in its less methodologically identifiable features; and by further extension, it is possible to speak by analogy of a dialectic of nature.

At equal distance from an undue restriction and a questionable extension, the philosophy of action appears as the birthplace of the dialectic, that is as the place from which the reduction and expansion of meaning proceed and from which they receive their justification. The paradigmatic concept, to my mind, remains that of practical dialectic, or better, of "dialectical praxis."