

Krushchev-Era Debates in Soviet Philosophy of Contradiction

These excerpts are taken from the discussion of dialectical contradiction in F. Konstantinov, Filosofskaiia Entsiklopediia, (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo "Sovetskaia Entsiklopediia," 1960-, vol. 4, pp. 403 - 405). Remarkably for an encyclopedia, these two articles present two different conceptions of dialectical contradiction, sometimes called the "polarist" and "antinomist" views, and argue against each other. The first article defends the polarist idea that a claim that some property is present and also simultaneously not present cannot be true, but merely states a problem to be solved. That is, antinomies are rejected. Under the guise of attacking Hegel, this article attacks much of the dialectical viewpoint of Marx and Engels, and argues that the requirements of formal logic must be met. The second article defends the view that there are antinomies in reality, but also suggests that such antinomies cannot be fully expressed in language. All footnotes are inserted by the translator.

Contradiction (Greek *antiphrasis*, Latin contradiction, German *Widerspruch*), dialectical.

In the Soviet philosophical literature there are different points of view on the problem of contradiction. The editors are publishing two essays, reflecting two basic points of view.

1. The general features of a dialectical contradiction must be considered to be unity (mutual conditioning, mutual penetration) and struggle (mutual exclusion, mutually negating interaction) of the sides of the contradic-

tion, and in many cases also the presence of its function as the basic moving force of development and change of the object in which the contradiction inheres. The classification of dialectical contradictions cannot be constructed on any one basis. Apart from the more or less broad division of contradictions into antagonistic and non-antagonistic, it is possible to emphasize specifically contradictions which are the basic source of development of an object (this is contradiction in its essence), contradictions connected with the transition of an object from a given state into its opposite state, and also those where an object exists through its opposite, and "asymptotic" discrepancy contradictions (for example, between an organism and its environment, between relative and absolute truth, between formal and dialectical logic). It is necessary to differentiate strictly between the contradictions of the object itself, along with their reflections contained in consciousness and based on scientific theories, and, on the other side, the dialectical contradiction of different degrees of latitude peculiar to the process of understanding and reflecting its specific character. It is also necessary to emphasize the contradiction between the results of cognition and the developmental tendencies of the objects which are known. The contradiction of these two latter aspects is quite often expressed as a formal logical contradiction, that is, in the simultaneous acceptance of an affirmation (p) and also its negation (Np) in the system of some theoretical language. It is maintained that the reflection in knowledge of an objective contradiction must be free

from formal logical contradiction; also the dialectical contradiction of the process of cognition and the contradiction between the results of cognition and the object cognized, entering in the form of *paradoxes* and antinomies, usually play a heuristic role, assisting the revelation of profound contradictions in the object and overcoming formal contradictions in that way.

Plato recognized the necessary commonality in knowledge of dialectical contradiction with formal laws which exclude contradiction (*Republic* 436, *Sophist* 259c, *Phaedo* 103c¹). This recognition was lost by Hegel but was restored on a qualitatively new basis by Marx, who came out against (1) idealistic reconciliation of contradictions within concepts, (2) the eclectic combination of contradictions under the formula “yes and no in one and the same sense,” which was especially characteristic of the Young Hegelians and Proudhon, and (3) separation of one side of a contradiction as “good,” as against the other side, which is discarded as “bad.” The critique of these positions by Marx is connected with the elaboration of the characteristics of dialectical synthesis and its relation to the thesis and antithesis which form a dialectical contradiction. In a Hegelian triad, because of the idealist principle of the identity of thought and being, structures which are qualitatively different in reality were erroneously united in the structure of a concept: (a) thesis and antithesis are *stages* in the development of the object, going over into an opposite state, but synthesis is the third of these stages; (b) thesis and antithesis are simultaneously existing interacting sides of a contradiction, which is the moving force of the development of a given object, but a

synthesis is a new state in which the given contradiction finds its relative, objective resolution; (c) thesis and antithesis are *judgments*, consisting in their totality in the cognitive task whose resolution is a qualitatively new judgment, which gives a basis for the construction of a theory of the state and the development of the object being investigated. If the differences among these cases are considered, then there exists no general pattern for attaining dialectical synthesis; in all cases this synthesis is neither the thesis nor the antithesis itself, nor their conjunction according to the formula “is and is not in the same sense and the same respect,” an admission which would mean substituting formal relations for dialectical ones in metaphysical applications of the latter. Dialectical synthesis is the result of a transition to a qualitatively new state, negating both sides of the original contradiction, although in different ways. In cases (a) and (b), the problem of whether “is or is not a synthesis of a formal logical conjunction of thesis and antithesis, taken in one and the same sense and respect” becomes nonsense in general, since outside the head of a human being, there are no theories or judgments as such. The specific critique of understanding the dialectical resolution of a contradiction through the conjunction of its sides can be found in *The Poverty of Philosophy* (cf. Karl Marx, in *K. Marx and F. Engels Collected Works*, 2nd ed., vol. 4, p. 132.²)

Formal logical conjunction can be used, however, in cases of the interpretation of a scientific problem as the possible resolution of the “conflict” of two direct opposites of one another. In this case the conjunction of the thesis and antithesis enters as a statement of

the problem. Several times in *Capital* Marx had recourse to this recipe, in particular in the problem of extraction of surplus value (capital arising and not arising in the sphere of circulation) (*ibid.*, vol. 23, p. 206³). In the *Mathematical Manuscripts*, Marx came out against interpretations of similar problems as ready solutions (“syntheses”), but in particular against simultaneous interpretations of infinitely small sizes both as usually different from zero size, and as “disappearing” sizes (approaching zero) [404] in comparison with finite or infinitely small sizes of lower order, *i. e.*, speaking loosely, as zero and non-zero at the same time. Lenin indicated that the reading of the *aporia* of the “flying arrow,” by not taking into consideration the difference between “results” (*i. e.*, epistemological fixation) of a movement and the true result of the movement (in particular, this reading leads to the situation “is and is not”), yields a situation where “... (dialectical) contradiction ... is not removed, but only covered, moved aside, curtailed” (Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. 38, p. 255.⁴)

Construing the formula “yes and no in one and the same sense and respect” as an adequate expression of an objective contradiction and as the resolution of a cognitive contradiction leads toward its own type of “paralysis” of the process of cognition. Understanding that formula as the formulation of the problem situation of knowledge permits knowing the objective dialectical contradictions more profoundly. In particular knowledge takes place through opposites: to reveal objective dialectical contradictions it is necessary to overcome contradictions in theoretical investigation, proceeding by way of the reflection of the dialectical process through formal logical “fixation,” by way

of formal logical contradictions. These latter contradictions are resolved in such a way that there arise before the investigator further new problems which are again formulated by means of antinomies of the type “is and is not.” This triple rhythm, which Hegel guessed in his triads but which was falsely construed by him, continues without end, since the process of movement from relative truth to absolute truth through contradiction is infinite.

--I. Narski, Moscow.

2. A dialectical contradiction is that essential relation of opposite moments inside a system, in which the concrete identity of these moments is realized, and which makes the system a self-moving organic whole; it is the mutual definition of these moments through one another and simultaneously their strict mutual negation. To the extent that a contradiction is realized, its content is resolved as well. In particular, the continuous resolution and, simultaneously, the continuous reproduction of a contradiction make movement self-movement. Contradiction is the “source of all dialectic” (cf. K. Marx, *Das Kapital*, vol. 1, Berlin, 1960, p. 626⁵), an important definition of its “kernel,” its “essence.” “Dialectics in the proper sense is the study of contradictions in *the very essence of objects*,” (Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. 38, p. 249; see also pp. 215, 357⁶), *i. e.*, the comprehension of the concrete identity of opposites (cf. *ibid.*, pp. 97 - 98, etc.⁷).

From the vulgar point of view, a contradiction enters as a confusion or deception [izvorotlivost'] of thought, etc. The philosophical category of contradiction is utterly different from such a representation, from that disorder resulting from amorphousness or logical

indistinctness of thought that would justify the view that everything is garbled in reality itself. Conversely, only the creative process of investigation can reveal an objective contradiction and indicate the path to its resolution. As a philosophical category it is impossible to pass off contradiction as a superficial symptom, proper only to historically transitory, reduced forms, although it is precisely these symptoms that “speak for themselves” very forcefully and are noticed above and beyond the scientific investigation of them. This investigation is called on to explain these contradictions, proceeding from a strict understanding of the general nature of contradiction. According to an uncritical view, the transitional form of contradiction is interpreted as a conflict between forces not forming any unified whole, between primordially [iznachal’no] different essences (dualism). In practice all polar opposites, endowed with independence, are in general not primordially external to one another, but are entirely derived from the inner moments of a unified whole, and only from that point of view can they be explained systematically. Dialectical contradiction is above not all contradiction *between* the different essences, but *inside* a single essence and immanent in it. There are no real opposites unless they have inner unity and concrete identity. To break them off from one another and dogmatically oppose them is possible only in a subjective ideological construction, but not in a systematic scientific investigation.

It is no less false to construe contradiction as a product of subjective arbitrariness, either of practical will or thoughtful reflection. According to that view of contradiction, “appearance” conceals the bare contradiction of an

essence which is always simpler, and ostensibly revealed only in spite of the contradiction. But in fact there is also no real identity without opposition and contradiction. Identity without contradiction degenerates into something abstract, cerebral, and lacking the concreteness which is obtained in creative movement according to the logic of the object. Truth is always concrete, and concreteness is attained only from the revealed and resolved contradictions of the object.

Dialectical contradiction does not yield direct judgment on the foundations of being, by forming an ontology. It also does not grapple with a speculative description of the empirical. A precondition of the comprehension of dialectical contradiction is the active mastery of nature by social man. Social man makes contradiction his own contradiction, reproducing it ideally, in thought, by his own objective activity. In its purest, most universal form, contradiction appears in rational, scientific-theoretical thought—as a category of that thought, carrying out its methodological function. Through this active function, contradiction is also grasped by philosophical investigation. Therefore, although contradiction certainly exists as immanent in *all* reality, it is nevertheless adequately known only beginning with a definite, extremely high *level* of culture of theoretical thought. Discussion of contradictions in some object outside a theoretical system of knowledge is methodologically unsupportable.

The function of a dialectical contradiction in cognition is to be a nodal point of divided development, of a multi-plane [mnogoplanovoi] system of theoretical knowledge, *i.e.*, the ascent from the abstract to the concrete, from the general to the particular, and what is

more, to be the driving force of such theoretical development, the form of its synthesis in cognition. In particular, thanks to contradiction, each concept within a theory is not simply brought in as a previously prepared result, described in a way indifferent to its mode of origin, but appears as a process. It appears in an account which arises out of the resolution of a contradiction, and thus it plays a role of that kind in the process of the ideal reconstruction of the object itself by the movement of thought. Contradiction is also the immanent “motor” of the process of thought, directing it to that which it by its own movement reconstructed the logic of the object itself, which coincides with the “motor” of self-movement of the object, represented in its standing structure. This is the definition of the object as reproducing its opposite inside itself, an opposite in which are retained both its universal and its particular characteristics. Contradiction is a mode combining within a concrete object immediately incompatible specific characteristics, a mode of synthesis of different aspects in the unity of a complex system.

The origin of a dialectical contradiction is in that *antinomy* of content, which, because of its objectivity, it is impossible to remove by enhancing the correctness of the account within the limits of available knowledge. The object itself is antinomic – it has a “problematic character” hidden in it. In grasping it, an antinomy enters as an adequate form for expressing as yet unsolved problems. An antinomy testifies to the need for a further creative process of penetration into the object. Inside the antinomy itself, thesis and antithesis have equal logical status: mutually negating one another just as much as they mutually presup-

pose one another. But from the point of view of the whole system and its unfolding [405], thesis and antithesis always have unequal status, are anti-symmetric, and only for that reason is the contradiction resolved. Dialectical reason does not stop with the implications of polar moments. By no means does it postulate opposites as frozen, logically symmetrical extremes in order to expose all concreteness as split in two, abstractly divided, on such a dualistic basis. On the contrary, it deduces oppositions, analyzes their genesis and their transformations starting from identity. The antitheses, the inner system of the object immanent to its negation, is understood as derived from an inner moment, but not as something primordially confronting it [iznachal’no emy protivostoiashchee] or introduced arbitrarily. Moreover, for this reason, the only path to synthesis is the resolution of the contradiction.

To conceive a contradiction dialectically means to conceive the real resolution of its content in the self-development of the object as well. To insist on the objectivity of contradiction without regard for the need to discover its resolution is as absurd as, for example, taking a cause without an effect, or a form without its content. The resolution of a contradiction is a transition into a *particular*. In so far as the particular is defined as a universal, *i.e.*, is defined as the inner completeness of a system, to that extent a resolved contradiction is reproduced; but in so far as the particular is not immediately contained in the universal, is not “laid out in advance [predzalozheno]” in it, but negated by it, to that extent the resolution of the contradiction gives rise to its result – a genuine creative syntheses enriching the

universal itself, making it more concrete, more developed. Only by creative movement – through contradictions and their resolution – does scientific-theoretical thought “represent” the object in its truth as a complete system.

The difficulties of revealing dialectical contradictions within rational thought are connected with this. *Reason* gives a mode of organization to knowledge which not only does not embody in its account a creative movement in accord with the logic of the object, but, on the contrary, does not make any reference to that movement. Knowledge does not enter as a process, but as reified [oveshestvlennoe], as a “linguistic entity,” as a “ready made” result. Thus there is no place in such an account for the clear expression of a dialectical contradiction. Concreteness is split into an abstract universal and a specific characterization external to it. Systematic completeness disintegrates into fragments, into “individual” theories lacking the means to be rationally synthesized into a total picture of the object. This fragmentation is not dictated by the particular characteristics of objects, but by fission and *alienation* [otchyzhdeniem] within objective reality itself. In alienated knowledge contradiction seems to disappear and even to be impossible as an objective category, since it is also divided and represented only an antinomy, which is fixed in an irreconcilable form and enters as a past defect, knowledge which was been surpassed plus a resolution of that antinomy which is isolated from its result. But since an accumulation of antinomies is unfruitful, they are only evaluated negatively, as a border of the rational with “irrationalism.” As long as the critical analysis of the social nature of cognition does not overcome such

transmuted forms, grounds remain for substituting some surrogate for contradiction.

There are in the literature many ways of classifying contradictions. The basic subdivisions, however, are not of a categorical sort. The main accepted gradations are the following:

Contradiction in nature. In so far as natural science goes beyond the limits of “partial” theory and goes over to a totally systematic cognition of the object, it collides with the need to reproduce objective contradictions in nature and for the resolution of the content of those contradictions inside theoretical knowledge. This is especially true in cases where there must be a synthesis of knowledge of the objects, prior to their being studied in isolation.

The statement of a complete theory is represented as a system of systems, in each of which there is room also for formal apparatus, subordinate development of concepts, as well as in focal points, in creative transitions – the dissolution and resolution of contradictions, which also synthesizes them into a whole. The negation of contradiction in nature for the sake of dualistically counterposing nature to society leads to irrationalism.

In society, in class-antagonistic formations, contradiction takes on the historically transitory, altered [prevrashchennuiu] form of *antagonistic contradiction*, in which the reproduction of contradiction is given the form of class forces resisting one another. The alteration of this form consists in this, that the relation of these forces enters as the conflict of primordial opposites, or forces lacking a common source [genezisa] and not requiring unity within that relation, but each of them, becoming independent, enters inside itself as

an ostensible unity without opposites, as a “metaphysical” whole. The particular features of the resolution of antagonistic contradiction are studied in the theory of social *revolution*. Starting from the altered forms of the manifestation of antagonism, it is impossible to conceive either antagonism nor contradiction in general. Antagonism must be conceived by proceeding from the logic of contradiction.

In pre-class societies, and also in socialist and communist societies, contradiction does not appear in the form of antagonism. The struggle for communism is directed at overcoming antagonisms. Socialism will provide the resolution of contradictions in the form of conscious social action for the first time. Antagonism is never immanent in creative culture’s own logic of development. To give that culture complete scope is also the mission of communism. Under socialism the importance of serious study of concrete contradictions in the special sciences is dictated by the necessity of struggle with the survivals of bourgeois society, bureaucracy,

matters contradicting socialist democracy, etc.

In the history of cognition, contradiction appears partly in the form of antinomies, which are attributed to past knowledge. In rational thought, there is no criterion for differentiating between contradictions which arise because of incorrect reasoning, and those “... great paradoxes, which provide food for logical thought for decades, and sometimes also for centuries” (N. Bourbaki, “Foundations of mathematics for the working mathematician,” *Journal of Symbolic Logic*, 1949, vol. 14, no. 1, p. 3). Dialectics indicates such a criterion of content, explaining the historical form of the manifestation of contradictions from the contradictions of comprehending the subject matter, and perceiving in the logic of contradiction and its resolution the immanent logic of the development of knowledge.

[Historical summary omitted]

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[1.](#) The Russian text has *Phaedo* 130c, which does not exist.

[2.](#) Russian edition. The German edition is *Das Elend der Philosophie*, in *Marx Engels Werke* (MEW), Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1956 -, vol. 4, p. 136. The English edition is *The Poverty of Philosophy*, in *Marx Engels Collected Works* (MECW), New York: International Publishers, vol. 6, p. 171.

[3.](#) “This whole course, the changing of his [the capitalist’s] money into capital, goes forward in the sphere of circulation and does not go forward there: through the mediation of circulation, since it is conditioned by the purchase of labor power on the commodity market, and not within circulation, since it only begins the process of valuation, which takes place in the sphere of production.” *Das Kapital*, MEW, vol. 23, p. 209. Cf. *Capital*, MECW, vol. 35, p. 205.

[4.](#) Russian edition. Cf. *Conspectus of Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, in *V. I.*

Lenin Collected Works (LCW), Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1961, vol. 38, p. 259.

[5.](#) MECW, vol. 35, p. 592n.

[6.](#) LCW, vol. 38, pp. 253-4; cf. pp. 219, 362.

[7.](#) LCW, vol. 38, pp. 97-8.