Mark Cowling: The Dialectic in Marx and Hegel – an Outline.


Abstract

This paper offers an outline of the relationship between the dialectic in Hegel and Marx. It identifies four major forms of the dialectic in Hegel. These are, most importantly, the dialectic of method, meaning the dialectical development of categories; the dialectic of historical development through human intellectual labour, and the conception of the social totality which results from this; the dialectic of the concrete real, as found particularly in Hegel’s Philosophy of Nature, and finally the dialectic of human physical labour. I then look briefly at the major forms of the dialectic in Marx. In order to do this it is necessary to divide Marx’s work into periods. I discuss the extent to which the dialectic in Marx is derived from that of Hegel. I conclude that the only part of Hegel’s dialectic which is significant in the older Marx is his dialectic of method, which suggested a scientific method to Marx.

Introduction.

Before going on to the main discussion, I shall give a brief account of how not to analyse the relationship between the dialectic in Hegel and that in Marx. The 1960s were characterised by an upsurge in interest in Marx’s writings in the West, notably by an interest in Marx’s Economic and
Philosophical Manuscripts (EPM), which, in turn, was linked to a desire to distance Western Marxism from the legacy of Stalinism. One of the figures who took this approach was the French philosopher Roger Garaudy. In his account of the dialectic, to be found in his book Karl Marx – The Evolution of His Thought (Garaudy, 1964). Garaudy simply assumes that everything that Marx and Engels said at any time is valuable. He has a simplistic approach to Marx’s own statements about the relationship between his dialectic and that of Hegel. All he can come up with by taking this approach is vague generalisations: ‘Dialectics is primarily a logic of relationship. Dialectics is a logic of conflict... Dialectics is a logic of motion... Dialectics is a logic of life.’ (pp. 91-3). He also entangles himself in logical contradictions. He seems to both assert and deny that there can be a dialectics of nature. He says that dialectical thinking could not enable us to ‘understand a being not like it to any degree’ (p. 97), but also that Marxism is a ‘materialist method enabling us to grasp again the meaning of things’ (p. 82, cf. p. 134). Again, he asserts that Marx regarded the idea of the immediate reflection of the real world as the most valuable achievement of Feuerbach’s materialism (p. 85), and also says that in Capital Marx “retained (from Hegel) the movement of thought passing from the abstract to the concrete’ (p. 130). In other words we should and should not begin from the concrete-real. (In what follows I shall use the term concrete-real to refer to the material world, the tangible, the kickable. I recognise, of course, that this formula is simplistic, given that many of the concepts we used to grasp the concrete-real are highly theoretical, such as, for example, the idea of dark matter.)
As a member of the PCF, Garaudy was committed to the idea that Marx’s writings are important and can provide the basis for action. In doing this it seems to me that he was laying himself and the PCF open to ridicule.

I shall now set about trying to give a more precise account of the relationship, focusing particularly but not exclusively on the dialectic in *Capital*.

**The overall intentions of Hegel’s philosophy.**

Most books about Hegel are also, and not surprisingly, books about Hegel’s intentions. Raymond Plant’s approach to this makes a great deal of sense (Plant, 2011). He sees Hegel as attempting a solution to the problem of uniting men in society and the different areas of collective and individual life. The problem of uniting the differing areas of human life was a widespread one amongst the German intellectuals of the early 19th century. The division of labour which accompanied the rise of capitalism was seen as making people less than fully human, and also as isolating individuals from one another, tied only by the depersonalised link of market forces. German thinkers were also troubled by the disunity of Germany itself – a land united in language and culture but divided into many small principalities.

A variety of solutions to this problem were proposed. Herder, Hölderlin, Schiller and Humboldt idealised the integrated life of the ancient Greek city states. Fichte and Kant favoured harmony in nature, whilst Novalis favoured mediaeval Christianity (Lobkowicz, 1967, pp. 164-5). Capitalism was particularly well developed in lowland
Scotland, and the thinkers of the Scottish Enlightenment concerned themselves with the problem of the development of capitalism. German thinkers frequently saw history as comprising three stages: primitive harmony, alienation and division and final reconciliation. The second stage corresponded to the unhappy present. The third stage was at hand. Symptoms were the realisation of the ideals of the Enlightenment in the French revolution and the rise of German philosophy.

Seen in this way, the central themes of the work of both Hegel and Marx can be seen as part of the German ideology of the late 18th and early 19th centuries. This search for a solution to disintegration and alienation makes sense of Hegel’s *Early Theological Writings* (Hegel, 1948). In these he goes through a startling series of religious changes, but these changes have in common a search for a practical solution to the bifurcations and discord of contemporary German life. Around 1800 Hegel started to see philosophy as the solution to bifurcation and discord, and started to lay the foundations of his mature philosophy.

Hegel’s mature philosophical system is first seen in his *Phenomenology (Phänomenologie des Geistes)* of 1807 (Hegel 1931). He sees the process of world history as the gradual reconciliation of opposites, and the unification of Spirit (Geist) with itself in a mediated fashion, and its return from self-alienation. Along with this development goes that of self-consciousness. Spirit is at first a very simple form of consciousness, but becomes increasingly elaborate and all-embracing. The Cunning of Reason enters in that, in pursuing their goals, the individuals and traces of history also play their part – without particularly meaning to – in the
development of unified, self-conscious Spirit. Individuals who have a particularly clear sense of a ‘her universal’, though not of the goal of World History itself (which is the Idea), and make it their own purpose, are called World Historical Individuals – examples would be Julius Caesar and Napoleon.

At all stages of history and philosophy provides reconciliation through understanding (in the everyday sense rather than the Hegelian one), and religion, art and the state also do so, although each less explicitly than the one before. As Hegel’s philosophy comes at the end of world history up to the present it is actually the culmination of world history.

**Hegel as a philosophical encyclopaedist.**
There is a good case to be made for considering Hegel as a philosophical encyclopaedist. He called the version of his system that he used for teaching the *Encyclopaedia* (see Hegel, 1892, 1970, 1971) and there is much about it that parallels other writers of encyclopaedias in his day. There was a very wide desire for structured knowledge. The scientific books of his day were frequently structured as a progression from simple to complex. The levels which Hegel used in his *Philosophy of Nature* reflected those of the science of his day. The account here follows that of Petry in his introduction to his translation of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Nature* (Hegel 1970). Hegel aimed to divide knowledge into levels, hierarchies spheres. Within a sphere there are levels and hierarchies, and spheres of parts of more comprehensive spheres, where they are levels arranged in hierarchies. The biggest sphere is Encyclopaedia itself, which has as levels Logic, Nature and Spirit (Petry/Hegel, 1970, p. 31).
According to Petry, the Logic concludes with the Idea, which is the most complex category that Hegel could formulate in this sphere. Hegel then moves on to the next sphere, which is Nature, and starts with its least complex level, space (Petry/Hegel, 1970, p. 45).

To some extent, Petry’s version of Hegel regards the relationship between philosophy and the world as a heuristic one. Knowledge would be seen as independent of the world, which the Encyclopaedia helps us to understand. Although I shall be arguing subsequently that the relationship between theory and the real world in Marx’s Capital is of this nature, this is not a plausible account of Hegel’s philosophy. The more plausible view is parallelism – the idea that both Logic and Nature are internally consistent and are part of a united system – they are both fully realised in the Idea. Several commentators take an approach of this sort (see, for example, Mure, 1940, chapter 8; Hyppolite, 1953, pp. 74, 91-2, 129-31, 1969, p. 169; Stirling, 1865, Vol.1, pp. 26-7). In support of this approach, Hegel sees nature as fossilised intelligence, which was a relatively respectable scientific view in the early 19th century. He is clear that his categories are universally present – an example might be Being and Nothing at the beginning of his Logic, but even at the highest stages of the Logic Hegel includes what seems like empirical material (Hegel, 1969, pp. 68, 84-5, 727, Wallace, 1894, p. 112).

understanding of Hegel is that the description of him as an objective idealist, meaning that he sees the world was existing independent of our thoughts, but thinks that these become merged and reconciled in the Idea, is accurate. The panlogistic interpretation takes Hegel too close to subjective idealism, the notion that the world is my idea. It makes no distinction in fundamental approach between Hegel and Fichte. It must be admitted, however, that there are passages in Hegel which lend support to such an approach, for example:

This realm (of pure reason without external matter) is truth as it is without veil and in its own absolute nature. It can, therefore, be said that this content is the exposition of God as he is in his eternal essence before the creation of nature and a finite mind (Hegel, 1969, p. 50).

A similar conception is to be found in the *Encyclopaedia Logic*, where Hegel says that the ‘Divine Idea lets Nature forth’ (Hegel, 1892, Paragraph 244; cf. Hegel, 1969, p. 843).

**Hegel dialectic of method.**

The above should give some context to the discussion which follows of Hegel’s dialectic, of which by far the most important aspect is his dialectic of method. There will, however, be some discussion of other aspects, notably the dialectic of historical development through human intellectual labour, the dialectic of the concrete real, together with Hegel’s conception of contradiction, and the dialectic of human physical labour. For Hegel these are all part of one grand dialectic, but it is worth separating them if the aim is to find aspects of the dialectic which can be made use of within the general perspective of historical materialism.
The best way in which to make sense of Hegel’s dialectic of method is to see how it develops from Kant’s conception of categories in his *Critique of Pure Reason* (Kant, 1964). The idea of a philosophical category, meaning a basic aspect of the way in which we comprehend the world, goes back to Aristotle and before, but the obvious starting point for a discussion of Hegel is a comparison with Kant. Kant’s discussion of categories is part of his answer to Hume’s scepticism. Hume laid down a fundamental challenge, arguing that we have no particular reason to believe that the sun will rise tomorrow, because all that unites cause and effect is constant conjunction, contiguity, and our psychological disposition to move from one to the other. He also said that when he engaged in introspection he came across various sensations and impressions, but no such thing as a self.

Kant divided his *Critique of Pure Reason* into three parts. In his Transcendental Aesthetic he showed the necessary application of time to all our intuitions, and of space to our outer intuitions. In his Transcendental Analytic he dealt with the central questions raised by Hume, and in his Transcendental Dialectic he dealt with subreption, the use of reason beyond the boundaries of our understanding. It is the self which holds together our past and present intuitions. More important from our point of view is the synthesis of recognition in the concept. Kant held that the 12 categories which he identified, and which were adopted from traditional logic, were all necessary for understanding, and were part of an absolute unity (Kant, 1964 p. 104). The categories are judgements which must relate to intuitions if we are to have knowledge (Kant, 1964, p. 160). He thought that his categories apply a priori to intuitions, and that this is established by transcendental logic (Kant, 1964, p. 113). Kant
notoriously thought that behind the unity established by transcendental logic lay the ‘thing in itself’, which means nothing to us as such (Kant, 1964, p. 137).

In order to get to grips with the relationship between Hegel and Kant it is useful to consider briefly the philosophy of Fichte. In his *Science of Knowledge* (Fichte, 1868) he attempted to derive all the categories from a single fundamental principle, the deed-act of positing the ego, of deriving everything from ‘A is A’ or ‘I is I’. The opposite of the ego is the non-ego, which in turn gives us the category of negation. We then have the possible of how we can think A and not-A, being and not being, reality and negation together without their cancelling each other out. The answer is that these opposites limit each other and thus the concept of divisibility or quantifiability is introduced. Using this sort of approach Fichte manages rapidly to deduce the central categories and concepts of Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* from a single principle. He goes on to conclude that the ego is the cause of the represented non-ego and of the thing in itself – in other words, he manages to derive everything from his own mind. Although this all sounds rather fun, it is highly implausible, and its exposition is actually extremely tedious. The *Science of Knowledge* is to be recommended for insomniacs.

Hegel frequently compares his position on categories with those of Kant. He first assesses Kant’s conception of categories in a set of notes written as early as 1796. The initial discussion of categories in Hegel’s mature system is to be found, of course, in his *Phenomenology*. In the *Phenomenology* categories are found to develop both in the Spirit (*Geist*) and in historical individuals. Because the categories develop in history, they could not, asserts Hegel,
be derived from ordinary logic in the manner of Kant (Hegel, 1971, paragraph 388 et seq., Hegel, 1955, Vol. 1). The starting point for a genetic history is the simplest categories known to both logic and history. Even the simplest experiences of a ‘this’ by an ‘I’ are permeated by mediation and universality, because a ‘this’ such as ‘it is night’ is only true through the mediation of the fact that it is dark outside. Hegelian categories are to be understood as grasping, meaning that they are not simply features of the mind, they are also realised in Nature – Nature and Spirit are ultimately identified.

We now need to move on to Hegel’s conception of science, as best understood through his Logic. This is also the obvious starting point for an understanding of the relationship between the older Marx and Hegel. Whilst working on the Grundrisse (Marx, 1973) the first draft of Capital, Marx wrote to Engels: ‘in the method of treatment the fact that by mere accident I again glanced through Hegel’s Logic has been of great service to me...’ (Marx to Engels, January 14, 1858, in Marx and Engels, n. d., p. 121). In his notes to the Grundrisse, its translator into English, Ben Fowkes, finds it necessary to refer to the Logic 13 times in his explanatory notes, and in Capital Marx refers to the Logic a further three times. There are no references in Capital, the Grundrisse, or the economic manuscripts of 1861-3, to the Phenomenology.

Kant Hegel and Fichte all agree on a conception of science in which it sets out from, as Kant puts it ‘fundamental and elementary propositions’ (Kant, 1819, p. 210). Fichte says that science ‘has a systematic form. All propositions in it are connected in one single proposition or principle, and unite
with it to form a whole.’ (Fichte, 1868, part one, paragraph 1). For Hegel, philosophical science involves the immanent development of the material - the reader must read the book to test its claim that it is scientific (This point is made ad nauseam by Wallace, 2015). Thinking about a starting point, Hegel rejects starting with the ego in the manner of Fichte, on the grounds that the ego is not immediately present to consciousness; we should begin with content Hegel, 1969, pp. 43, 76). Science moves in a circle: it is the circularity of science which proves the validity of the whole (see Hyppolite, 1953, p. 84). Science is driven onwards by its goal of total knowledge, in which the knowing, the method, and the known (knowledge) are act one; pure knowledge is ‘at one with its self-alienation’ (Hegel, 1969, p. 69). Thus the onward movement of science comes above all from where it ends; it is first and foremost a conceptual dialectic. It is driven forward by its goal, which is structured knowledge.

What is being asserted here is that there is a method which can be abstracted from Hegel’s philosophy, but without necessarily bringing with it Hegel’s idealism. I am therefore disagreeing with Walter Kaufmann, who asserts that there is no one method that can be abstracted from Hegel:

And I am not so much rejecting the dialectic as I say; there is none. Look for it by all means; see what Hegel says about it and observe what he in fact does. You will find some suggestive remarks, not all of them in the same vein, as well as all kinds of affectations; but you will not find any plane method you can adopt even if you wanted to.

He says that interpreting Hegel as a dialectical philosopher imposes an alien pattern on him. The dialectic was certainly not a method of science, discovery or prediction (Kaufmann, 1966, pp. 75 et seq.). Findlay has a similar view (Findlay,
1959, pp. 75 et seq.). What seems to be going on with Kaufmann and Findlay is that they identify scientific method with the method of the natural sciences, whereas what is being described above is something different – it might not ultimately be valuable or useful, but it is a method which can be abstracted from Hegel.

One immediate point on which I would agree with Kaufmann and Findlay is that the famous triadic structure of thesis antithesis and synthesis is not particularly important. In the table of contents of every work by Hegel some sections are not triadic, and although he does sometimes emphasise the importance of the triadic form, in other places he points out that, by taking appropriate parts of the onward development of the dialectic one can produce a pattern with two terms or four (Hegel, 1931, pp. 109-112, 1969, pp. 538, 836, cf. pp. 612-3, 1955, Vol. 1, pp. 134-5, Vol. 3, p. 439).

Something which is definitely part of the onward movement of the dialectic is the role of the negative (101). Hegel counts a variety of different things as the negative. Perhaps it is best to try to make sense of this by looking at some examples. What is certainly not involved, generally at any rate, is logical contradictions. Thinking about history, an example of the inclusion of the negative might be the breaking down of an older system of democracy such as Athenian democracy, and its replacement by an absolute monarchy at some stage of history, which in turn breaks down in order to produce modern democracy. In this context the idea of absolute monarchy as a necessary prerequisite of progress to the present makes reasonable sense. Thus the opposite of the present form of government is a prerequisite of it. It would also be possible to make
sense of the idea of the inclusion of the negative in the natural sciences by saying that auxiliary hypotheses are the negative. Thus in order to believe that the Earth rotates around the sun one needs the auxiliary hypotheses that on a rotating Earth the sun will appear to rise and set, whereas what we are actually dealing with is the rotation of the Earth.

This inclusion of the negative is encapsulated in the use of `the term ‘aufheben’. In everyday German usage this simply means to lift out – an example would be lifting asparagus out of the water in which it has been boiled. However, in Hegel it acquires a specific philosophical meaning. There are a variety of English translations, for example ‘to overcome’, ‘to surpass’ or ‘to suspend’. However, I prefer the term ‘to sublate’, on the grounds that it is a weird word which is not readily recognised, and thus serves as a reminder that we are really dealing with a newly coined word. Hegel defines it thus:

The Expression “to Sublate”. What is sublated is not thereby reduced to nothing. Nothing is immediate: what is sublated, on the other hand, is the result of mediation, it is a non-being but as a result which had its origin in being. It still has therefore, in itself, the determinateness from which it originates.

“To sublate” has a twofold meaning in the language: on the one hand it means to preserve, to maintain and equally it also means to cease, to put an end to’ (Hegel, 1969, p. 393, 1892, paragraph 112).

The use of sublation tends to produce a triadic pattern in which the first level is a positive concept, or thesis, the second level is the partial negation of the first level, or antithesis, and the third level is a sublation of the second level, and is likely to be a partial return to the first level. The third level can
also be called the Negation of the Negation, and is held to grasp opposites in their unity (e.g. Hegel, 1969, pp. 56, 424, 1892, paragraph 82.3).

The dialectic moves from the abstract to the concrete. Something which is abstract in this context focuses on one feature of a concept, whereas in something concrete there has been a development through numerous abstractions, so that the final concepts encapsulate the whole. Because the purpose of Hegel’s philosophy is to reconcile thought with the world, the sort of distinction that might be made between an abstract concept and something that you can kick is rather beside the point.

We have here an abstractable method. However, as will be seen below, the relationship between this and Marx’s method in *Capital* is quite superficial.

Before moving on to look at Hegel’s other dialectics and their relation to Marx, it should be helpful to look at the very first transition into the Logic. Particularly in the Larger Logic, this transition is discussed in much more detail than the other transitions. The transition is that between Being, Nothing and Becoming. To get this transition going, consider an object, perhaps a table (it could be a person or the Milky Way, but I am trying to keep things simple). The table has a variety of qualities: it is brown, harder than toffee but softer than diamonds, made of wood and plastic, of a certain height, width and depth, of a certain weight and so forth. Think of all the qualities you can of a table and now abstract from them, and what you will have, according to Hegel, is Being. However, this will bear a considerable resemblance to Nothing. Hegel proceeds thus:
It is equally true... that they are absolutely distinct, and yet that they are inseparable and that each immediately vanishes in its opposite. Their truth is, therefore, this movement of the immediate vanishing of one in the other: becoming, a movement which both are distinguished, but by a difference which has equally immediately resolved itself (Hegel, 1969, p. 83).

This looks on the face of it a rather dubious argument. Isn’t the being of the table identical to the range of qualities that it has? So a table has being because it is there in front of us, as distinct from nothing, which isn’t there. Feuerbach conducted an argument on these lines. Hegel comes up with two ways in which Being and Nothing are the same as each other apart from the argument found above. One is mysticism, but founding a whole philosophy on mysticism seems dubious. The other is that in Hegel’s day (in which we can include Marx and Engels) calculus in mathematics was held to be based upon infinitely small quantities, both equal to and different from zero. Both Newton and Leibniz accepted this. It would thus provide quite a respectable basis for Hegel’s argument. However, calculus is now considered to be based upon a series or function approaching zero (Schaff, 1960).

The dialectic of historical change through human intellectual labour (dialectic of history).

Althusser says that Hegel’s theory of history involves a spiritual totality which revolves around one central contradiction (Althusser, 1969 101-4). He contrasts this with Marx’s theory of history, which, because it involves the relative autonomy of different aspects of the social totality, is
a de-centred totality. Hegel, of course, sees the way that he manages to explain the major aspects of each stage of world history using a single central contradiction which then, through a process of sublation, leads on to the next stage, as a great merit of his work. The internal contradiction of an epoch is fundamentally a spiritual contradiction, and his achievement is to show how the current level of Spirit is the result of human intellectual labour over thousands of years (see Kaufmann, 1966, pp. 380, 402-3, 440, Hegel, 1955, Vol. 1, p. 2). This is one of the central themes of the *Phenomenology*; and, of course, of his *Philosophy of History*. This idea is very clearly conveyed when Hegel talks of ‘Philosophy as the thought of its time’. He says that there is no cause and effect relationship between political history, forms of government, art or religion on the one hand and philosophy on the other: ‘one and all have the same common root, the spirit of the time’ (Hegel, 1955, Vol. 1).

It should be fairly clear that Marx did not take over Hegel’s account of history, other than that both thinkers, like many others, make use of the idea of epochs. For Hegel, the relationship between the dialectic of method and the dialectic of history can be seen by considering the relationship between the *Phenomenology* and the rest of Hegel’s system. The *Phenomenology* can be seen as a prologomenon to the rest of the system: the *Phenomenology* forms the basis for attaining the position from which the dialectic of method can be formulated and applied. Because he has perfected a method of structuring knowledge, Hegel can claim to be associated with the advance of the World Spirit.
The dialectic of the concrete real.

If this dialectic in Hegel has a relationship to Marx and Engels, it is to Engels’ Dialectics of Nature. For reasons of brevity, it is not my intention to discuss this fully here. Engels believed that there were contradictions in nature, which, in some sense of ‘reflection’, are reflected in theory. This has parallels in Hegel (Hegel, 1969, pp. 423-4, cf. pp. 237-8). However, the extent to which Hegel is committed to the existence of contradictions in nature is open to debate. Given more time I would also want to argue that Engels’ Dialectics of Nature can be applied to anything, but is basically vacuous. I also find it surprising that Soviet scientists got into trouble for failing to agree with the Dialectics of Nature. Any scientific paper is bound to exhibit one or more of the laws of the dialectics of nature, and the scientist would simply have to indicate that his or her work was a glorious vindication of Engels. I am inclined to believe that Engels was honest when he claimed that he had read his work on the Dialectics of Nature to Marx, and that Marx was basically happy with it. However, this agreement does not mean that Marx made any significant use of the Dialectics of Nature – perhaps he saw it as a way of unsettling the bourgeoisie.

The dialectic of human physical labour.

Hegel has some reflections on the economic problems of capitalist society based on direct or indirect reading of the political economists. These can be found in the Philosophy of Right (cf. Hyppolite, 1969, pp. 35-40, Kojève, 1969, p. 237). Economic affairs are a central area for the operation of
the Cunning of Reason. However, this is very far from saying that there is an economic basis to Hegel’s thought in general, except for the scene-setting background of disunity mentioned at the beginning of this paper. It is possible to make a link between the Master-Slave dialectic, an overall interpretation of Hegel’s work, and Marx, on the lines of that book forward by Kojève, but this involves an idiosyncratic interpretation of Hegel.

Some interpreters of Hegel have felt that the Master-Slave dialectic underlies the Marxian dialectic in some way (136). However, as McLellan out, Marx does not discuss the Master-Slave dialectic much. The struggle between the Master and the Slave in Hegel is a struggle for recognition. Marx came to an understanding of class struggle by reading of French historians, notably historians of the French Revolution of 1789, not by reading Hegel.

**Continuity in Marx.**

It would not be appropriate here to re-hash arguments that I have presented elsewhere to the effect that there is a break in Marx’s work around 1845, and that the idea of alienation, which is a central concept in Marx’s work from 1843-5, is replaced by the concepts of historical materialism. I am therefore going to briefly assert some points which require much longer discussion and justification (see Cowling, 1979, Cowling, 2006).

From about 1841 to his encounter with the theories of Feuerbach in 1843 Marx was a left Hegelian with an interest in economic issues. From 1843 to 1845 Marx adopted a
Feuerbachian perspective. Where the dialectic is concerned this has considerable ambiguities. Feuerbach asserts that he is a materialist, but does not at this stage seem to have a very clear idea of what this actually means. He talks in terms of true philosophy directly reflecting nature, rather than involving a dialectic of concepts in the manner of Hegel, and Marx makes a statement on these lines at the beginning of the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* (MECW, Vol. 3). However, Feuerbach also talks about inverting subject and predicate. Once this operation is carried out, Hegelian philosophy can be brought back to earth. Marx goes along with this in the extended fruit example in *The Holy Family* (MECW, Vol. 4). But, of course, it is possible that inverting Hegel does not actually provide a good guide to real life in the way that direct reflection would. It is notable, in any case, that Marx’s praise and criticism of Hegel in the EPM is very much praise and criticism that Feuerbach would have agreed with.

Throughout Marx’s work some sort of a dialectic of the real operates in a general way. He is always interested in contradictions in society, by which he means systematic conflicts of interest, or systematic dysfunctions in an economic system, notably the capitalist system. David Harvey in his *Seventeen Contradictions* (Harvey, 2014) makes good use of this notion of contradiction. Harvey distinguishes between the earlier contradictions which he discusses, which have some potential to cause difficulties for capitalism, and dangerous contradictions, which he discusses the end, and which he considers might be fatal to it. But preferring to look at conflict rather than stability is a prejudice, and the merits of the analysis of any particular contradiction lies in the detail. Just to take one example, the
contradiction between use value and exchange value which appears early in *Capital* may cause problems for capitalism, but is normally resolved. Also, if you choose to accept marginalist rather than labour theory of value economics, this contradiction does not exist – the merits of the analysis of the contradiction are as good or bad as the theory which tells us that it is a problem. In the EPM Marx does not operate with a labour theory of value, so that although he sees a conflict between rich and poor, it is not based on exploitation. So if there is a contradiction in this area in the EPM, it is not the same contradiction as that between capital and labour which is to be found from *The German Ideology* (MECW, Vol. 5) onwards. The idea of this sort of contradiction may possibly come from Hegel, but it does not seem to be particularly close to the Hegelian pattern of world history.

In spite of the break in 1845, Marx does not operate with a dialectic of concepts until 1857 in writing the *Grundrisse*. His materialism seems to be a matter of seeking a direct reflection of reality, and in that sense retains one aspect of Feuerbach’s approach. He seems to have bracketed this together with a general sympathy with other thinkers in the philosophical materialist tradition.

Marx’s dialectic of method is thus to be sought in the *Grundrisse* and *Capital*.

**The dialectic of method in Marx from 1857.**

It would be legitimate to describe Marx’s dialectic as dialectical materialism not in the Soviet sense in which dialectical materialism is basically derived from Engels’ three laws of dialectics. There is a very occasional mention of
these laws in *Capital*, but they are not Marx’s method as I am about to describe it. Rather, from time to time, Marx mentions the transformation of quantity into quality or the Negation of the Negation, but, as Engels himself says, Marx proves the transition in question by empirical means, and then says that it is an instance of a dialectical transition. However, as Gareth Stedman Jones points out in an excellent article, by proving that Marx is not using the dialectic as a method of scientific proof, and is therefore not leaning on a “dialectical crutch”, he is also proving that Marx could perfectly well do without the dialectic in this sense (Stedman Jones,).

On the other hand, Marx is definitely a materialist in the broad sense that, if you ask which is primary, spirit or nature, or whether God created the world, or whether the universe would exist if there were no people, he would come down the broadly materialist side of each of these questions, and in this sense he shares a general perspective with Engels and Lenin, but also with thinkers who would not remotely have agreed with the rest of Marx’s theories, such as Hobbes, Bentham, John Stuart Mill or Richard Dworkin. Beyond this general agreement, he does not seem to have been particularly interested in issues raised by materialist philosophy, for example, the exact way in which sense perception relates to external objects, or the relationship between mind and brain.

The following three quotations demonstrate the point being made in the above paragraph, and also provide an introduction to the discussion below of Marx’s dialectic of method.
Hegel accordingly conceived the illusory idea that the real world is the result of thinking which causes its own synthesis, its own deepening and its own movement; whereas the method of advancing from the abstract to the concrete is simply the way in which thinking assimilates the concrete and reproduces it as a concrete mental category (Marx, 1971, p. 206).

What we find in the *Grundrisse* and in *Capital* is a dialectic of method broadly suggested by Hegel in his *Logic* as described above, but not, so far as I can see, corresponding in any detail to Hegel’s *Logic*. The two well-worn quotations below indicate the parallel:

> It would seem to be the proper thing to start with the real and concrete elements, with the actual preconditions, e.g. to start in the sphere of economy with population, which forms the basis and the subjects of the whole social process of production (Marx, 1971, p. 205).

Population is an abstraction if, for instance, one disregards the classes of which it is composed. These classes in turn remain empty if one does not know the factors on which they depend, e.g. wage labour, capital and so on. These presuppose exchange, division of labour, prices, et cetera. For example, capital is nothing without wage labour, without value, money, price, et cetera. If one were to take population as the point of departure it would be a very vague notion of a complex whole and through a looser definition one would arrive analytically at increasingly simple concepts; from imaginary concrete terms one would move to more and more tenuous abstractions until one reached the most simple definitions (Marx, 1971, p. 205).

So, we are beginning with not concrete-real people who can be touched and conversed with, but with their reflection in everyday thought and the work of previous political economists. One important point of the passage is that the process of thought in political economy starts with the
concrete in thought. The sense of “abstract” and “abstraction” which is involved in the quotations is the Hegelian one, where the point is not to contrast thought with the concrete-real, but to contrast simple abstract categories with complex developed ones:

From there (the most simple definitions) it would be necessary to make the journey again in the opposite direction until one arrived once more at the concept of population, which this time is not a vague notion of a whole, but a totality comprising many determinations and relations (Marx, 1971, p. 206).

Thus, the correct point of departure is categories which do not need other categories to explain them and which also have explanatory power – for example, according to Marx abstract labour has an explanatory power because it determines exchange value. Marx points out that the 17th century economists took the population or the nation or the state as the starting point and eventually reached a few decisive abstract general relations such as division of labour. Marx continues:

When these separate factors were more or less clearly deduced and established, economic systems were involved which from simple concepts, such as labour, division of labour, demand, exchange value, advanced to categories like states, international exchange and world market. The latter is obviously the correct scientific method (Marx, 1971, p. 206).

The above paragraph makes it clear why Marx found leafing through Hegel’s Logic was helpful. He realised that the development from abstract to concrete found in the Logic had parallels with the method being used by Smith and Ricardo. The economic theory of Capital generally takes its
departure from Ricardo’s theories. However, apart from specific economic points of difference, such as the identification of surplus value as the immediate value extracted from the exploitation of labour, from which profit wages and rent derive, or the less important distinction between absolute and relative ground rent, Marx was also critical of Ricardo on the grounds that his method of proceeding from topic to topic was chaotic – the economic logic might be scientific, but the whole was messy.

It would require a very lengthy argument to sustain what I am about to say properly, but my argument would continue from here by asserting that there are some fatal problems in Marx’s political economy, notably the transition from value to price, and the law of falling rate of profit. The first problem is complex and much debated, but it may well be that solving it is fatal to some other features of Capital. The second problem involves a fairly simple point. Marx argues that as capitalism develops each worker is matched by an increasing mass of machinery. This means that the value of the machinery outstrips that of the workers’ wages, but according to the labour theory of value the sole source of value is labour. The rate of profit therefore tends to decline over time. Although this looks plausible when one thinks about each worker typically being linked to an increasing quantity of machinery, the relevant issue is the relative value of the machinery. The role of computers over the last 50 years or so illustrates this point dramatically. Back in the 1960s computers were so expensive that it was felt necessary to operate them 24 hours a day. This is now less necessary. The most commonly quoted way of expressing this advance is Moore’s Law, which states that the number of transistors on an integrated circuit will double every 18 months, and
which also translates into a rapid advance in computing power per unit cost. The cost of hard drive space per megabyte fell from $10,000 US in 1956 to about one cent by the year 2000, and has continued to fall rapidly since that time (see Wikipedia). This rapid fall in the cost of computing power has also reduced the cost and enhanced the efficiency of a wide variety of machinery used in production. Thus the common sense idea of the increased role of machinery leading to a falling rate of profit has not merely a logical flaw, but has also dramatically failed to work in the real world for the last 50 years or so.

For reasons of this sort I am inclined to see Marx’s work in capital as scientific, and would be happy to describe his dialectic of method as a scientific method, but would also say that his theories in the state in which he left them were actually refuted science, and unable to properly and accurately predict developments in the real world without considerable modification.

**Conclusion.**
The above offers a brief summary of four forms of the dialectic in Hegel, and concludes that the only one of these which links in any significant way to the older Marx is the dialectic of method. A great deal of the paper involves summarising or asserting matters which actually require a great deal of discussion. However, I stand by my conclusion that Hegel’s dialectic of method suggested part of a scientific method which Marx uses in Capital, and which passes muster as science, albeit refuted science.
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\footnote{This abbreviation will be used for: Marx, K. and Engels, F. E. Collected Works (London: Lawrence and Wishart) 1975 onwards.}