

15

Ancient Indian Dialectics and Marx

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Introduction

India is the birthplace of dialectical thinking in our world—or it is the first written record of such a form of philosophical and critical thinking. My research has been concerned with tracing how dialectical thinking developed in the Axial Age, across a range of civilisations, beginning in the Axial Age. In this paper, I highlight some of the key aspects of dialectics in Ancient Indian thought—elements that I believe need to be reclaimed in contemporary critical theory to revitalise dialectical thinking today. There are a number of ontological assumptions that inform my conception of dialectics: (i) that the world, and everything in it, undergoes constant change (the doctrine of flux); (ii) that everything in the cosmos is internally related (however closely or distant that relation may be) (which is the idea of interconnection or interdependency, otherwise known as the philosophy of internal relations), and; (iii) that these processes of the internal relations between all things are the forces for the change that we observe and

experience as humans in the phenomenal world. Humankind has been fascinated with this constancy of flux, desiring to better understand this existential given of our world between interdependency, internal relations, and change. Yet this has also been equally concerned with a knowledge interest: to help direct ourselves, to guide humanity toward a more emancipatory future. And my firm belief is that the best way to understand our world—and perhaps even guide this process of change toward desired ends—is through dialectical analysis. It is not only the best approach for grasping transformation and change, it is the *only* one that takes this ontology as the basis of its method. This is why dialectics was so fundamental to Marx's thought, and why I think it must remain so for any self-professed critical theory of society today.

We can examine dialectics in any number of ways. Firstly, we could focus on the way it has been defined or how it has been conceived by individual thinkers. This this would mean particular forms of dialectics would then stand in for the whole (i.e. the Hegelian system). Whilst there is much to say about how such towering figures advanced dialectical thinking in some of the most important and profound ways, they do not cover all of its aspects nor are they without their significant limitations (Hegelian objective idealism, for example). Secondly, we could look at how a particular school of dialectical thought deploys this form of analysis (i.e. Dialectical Materialism, or Daoist Dialectics, and so on). But this would only broaden the circle by degree—certain forms necessarily excluded. The third option, and what I have undertaken in my research, is to define dialectics by its constitutive elements: its logical components (from non-contradiction to context, from vantage point to syllogism and many others); its methods (such as dialogue, and open-ended, truth seeking inquiry); and its ontology (internal relations and flux). It is from these expansively defined constitutive elements that we can then examine how dialectics has been composed and added to, expanded and contracted, in human thought—whether of individual dialectics or dialectical

schools—over time. Using this constitutive method allows us to do at least four things: to historically trace how dialectics has emerged to what it is today; to compare the various forms of dialectical thinking as against other dialectical forms, schools, and individual thinkers; to evaluate different dialectical forms by what they emphasise and what they leave out in their dialectical analysis; and to a purposive reconstruction—one that is more inclusionary of the many different strands of dialectics and which can retrieve those aspects otherwise lost or down-played. Taken together, this can help lead us toward a more robust method of dialectics for thinking through today's problems.

We can identify dialectical thinking thousands of years before it was understood by Hegel and mastered by Marx, by tracing its origins outside of the Western philosophical canon, and instead locating its emergence from the period that Karl Jaspers named the Axial Age (so from around 800 BCE to around 300 or 200 BCE). This historical narrative identifies a number of civilisations that begin to pivot (hence the name)—as if on an axis—away from long accepted myths and localised knowledge towards thoughts of *transcendence*. Transcendence is not in the Kantian sense but rather a shift toward second-order thinking, largely beginning with movements in thought to speculation about the cosmos and our relation to it, rather than acceptance of myth or deity. It is in this moment of the so-called 'Great Transformation' that dialectical thinking emerges, and in ways that reveal it to be seemingly global (though not universal) in its formation. That is, dialectics emerges across a variety of cultures whose contact was minimal though by no means independent of each other.¹ And from here we can observe the remarkable shared characteristics across the Vedic, Buddhist, Daoist, Greek, Jewish, Persian, and on into Islamic and Scholastic dialectical systems. This begins within the Axial period, as Jaspers wrote:

"What is new about this age...is that man becomes conscious of Being as a whole, of himself and his limitations. He experiences the terror of the world and his own

powerlessness. He asks radical questions. Face to face with the void he strives for liberation and redemption. By consciously recognising his limits he sets himself the highest goals."²

By approaching this era via the historical record provided in philosophical texts, we can begin to move beyond the usual tropes that dismiss these dialectical systems under gross misunderstandings: that Indian dialectics remains magical (or lost to the domination of the Brahmins); that Buddhist dialectics remains mystical (concerned with release of the soul and not release on earth); or that Daoism remains strictly authoritarian (via its veneration of monarchy rather than balance). There is ample evidence of such readings, to be sure. But they do not cover everything, nor does their presence taint everything else so that these systems must be dismissed in their totality. Rather, it is more productive for us to reconstruct these dialectical systems in order to find what we can use of them today: to retrieve from them old or lost ways of thought that can help us to analyse and understand social life today...

So What is Dialectics?

Dialectics means many things, to many different people. But consistent across most of its forms are three elements: an ontology of flux and relations, methods of dialogue and logic, and a purpose (or knowledge-interest) in the possibility of consciously directing change. Dialectics is not a theory and does not do anything: instead, I think it is best conceived as a way of thinking—an 'approach' to thought itself—that helps one to bring into view the relations between things and the possibilities for change within this expansive context of interactions. This is its unique feature and the reasons for its utility for research and critical thought.

The ontology of flux is relatively uncontroversial as nearly everyone would agree that change is constantly taking place in some form—'one can never step into same river twice' as the old saying of Heraclitus reminds us. The unique aspect of dialectics here is that the emphasis on flux forces analysis to include how things happen as part of what a thing or

phenomena is. It is not a simple cause/effect model other surfaced notion of causation but a historical and relational notion of change. It replaces the idea of a thing or phenomena as separate and static, with “process”—process contains the things history and its possible futures as the thing in-itself. Hence Marx saw the historical relation of capitalism as the conditions of emergence for communism. The key aspect of dialectics is that it places reality as flux at the forefront of its analysis.

The methods of dialogue are also relatively straight forward. For example, some of the first forms of dialectical thinking in Ancient India adopted a question/answer method between various ascetics, the so-called *vāda-vitandā* approach. In the Western canon this method is best known through Plato’s dialogues that involve the method of Elenchus (how two or more people engage in a debate over a specific problem until they reach a point of contradiction and attempt to work through it to resolution or exhaustion). Sometimes these dialogical forms become so sophisticated that they develop into fully articulated or formalised systems of logic: and we can observe these in Ancient India through Nyaya logic, and also in the Gelugpa Buddhist tradition (that continues today in Tibet), or even the closed logic of the Christian Scholastics. It was this openness to critique that typified the Axial period in the Upper Ganges where the many different orthodox and heterodox schools competed and integrated many ideas and concepts throughout this formative period.

Yet if there is one key part of dialectics that I would emphasise—and one that has also been consistently affirmed by Professor Bertell Ollman, the leading figure in Marxist-dialectics as well—it is the philosophy of internal relations. This could be otherwise labelled the study of the ‘relations inside the whole’ because ‘internal’ may wrongly imply we are looking at the individual make-up of a particular thing/object, when we are in fact concerned with the whole in which it relates. The philosophy of internal relations treats the relations in which anything stands as essential parts of what

that thing is: the parts of the whole are not separated from each other but are inherently related. Changing one part of one thing, changes all the other individual units and the whole as well. As such, the assumed identity of one thing, abstracted and separated from all others, is not really the thing in-itself but is mere appearance: one-sided, and ultimately false. And this is really the revolutionary aspect of dialectical thinking because it overturns the commonsensical and superficial view that makes things/objects appear static and independent of one another, leading to distorted and incomplete picture because these relations are abstracted away. Instead, dialectics looks at how a certain thing or phenomena has become what it is, and, the broad set of relations (its interactive context) in which it is located. The philosophy of internal relations goes to the history of the thing and its possible futures in relation to all other things. So whereas non-dialectical thinkers look for external causal agents to explain change, dialectical thinkers attribute the main responsibility for all change to the inner contradictions of the system in which it occurs and which form the possible tendencies—the horizon—of future change. But these are tendencies only: dialectics is not a teleology leading to prediction or some determined end.

Now, in West this philosophical tradition of internal relations stretches from Parmenides, through to Spinoza and Hegel, to Marx and Dietzgen. But it has earlier and non-Western counterparts that formed in ancient India. For example, Buddhism's notion of (Pratīyasamutpāda) 'interdependent origination' that draws attention to the realisation that every *thing* and every *event* is the result of previous *things* and *events*. Here, no *thing* or *event* is born of itself—a thing is both 'that which *is* put together' and 'that which *puts* together'. We can think of later examples, outside of India, such Daoism's Ten Thousand Things (sometimes translated as 'myriad creatures'). This phrase expresses the multiplicity of things in the phenomenal world (all things under 'sky and earth'), not only in their status as objects (with internal yin/yang forces) but in their relations with

one another that produces the cosmic constancy of change. A passage from the *Zhuangzi* states: “So we say: That is derived from This, and This is also dependent upon That.”

It is this relationalism that, in turn, leads to the dialectical notion of change symbolised as a spiral. So perhaps best known is Engels account that, following Marx, says that dialectics reveals that everything is made of the mutual penetration of polar opposites (or contradiction), and the negation of this relation leads to gradual change. He calls this the ‘spiral form of development’—Or what Katie Brown calls the ‘cycles of elevating proportion’. Change progresses in a spiral-movement (i.e. it is not circular or necessarily progressive).³ Nothing is lost in this process; new things arise in their interconnection with others, and preserved in the arms of the spiral. This spiral image does not make an implicit judgement on whether change is progressive or regressive, it is what is possible within given relations themselves.

Dialectical thinking is not particular or unique to any civilisation but emerged across a range of civilisations during the Axial Age, albeit in ways that differ in terms of emphasis according to the social problems that this form of critical thinking was directed (i.e. some who emphasise change/flux, others on dialogue, and logic, others on relations). What appears common to them all is the use of dialectics in terms of exploring metaphysical questions. When myth and accepted custom were questioned, it was dialectics—the method of doubt—that was germane to open discussion on questions that could not be proven or demonstrated.

The shift—the axis—in human consciousness that took place in India, and elsewhere, involved three changes:

- the movement from the mythos/mundane to the transcendental or metaphysical;
- the beginnings of a recognition of historical unity (or what Jaspers calls ‘solidarity’);
- and the realisation of ‘historical self-comprehension’, the idea that humans could direct their own history

In this milieu, thinking was greatly advanced by taking a dialectical approach: thinking became its own object; critical thought was used to attempt to convince or persuade others (and hence the importance of rational argumentation and dialogue); the exploration of contradictions and opposites that remained related to one another rather than considered as binary or exclusive; and perhaps most importantly, the questioning of all previously accepted ideas, customs, and traditions. In this revolutionary period thinkers began to ask “radical questions”:

All this took place in reflection. Consciousness became once more conscious of itself, thinking became its own object. Spiritual conflicts arose, accompanied by attempts to convince others through the communication of thoughts, reasons and experiences. The most contradictory possibilities were essayed... opposites which nonetheless remained related to one another, created unrest and movement to the very brink of spiritual chaos... As a result of this process, hitherto unconsciously accepted ideas, customs and conditions were subjected to examination, questioned and liquidated. Everything was swept into the vortex.⁴

There were sociological and material conditions that provided the context for this shift and which were shared across all of these civilisation regions: the formation of small city-states with independent (or sovereign) existence; reciprocal intercourse of trade; massive improvements in agriculture; and widespread urbanisation. The question of the degree of inter-civilisational cross-fertilisation of ideas between these civilisations, and especially dialectics as a method of thought, can only be speculated on.

Jaspers gives an unfortunate religious and Eurocentric interpretation to this process—how he “orders” history—which we can readily dismiss. Rather, the most important question when ordering this history is looking for the “profound common element” to these Axial Age civilisations which, I argue, lies in how each of these societies began to think dialectically. Regardless of the degree of the interrelation between these civilisational groups (something that only future

historical work will be able to uncover) all of these civilisations developed sophisticated dialectical systems because of an urgent imperative or knowledge interest to: think through oppositions/contradictions as inherently related. Rather than conceptualising beginning/end, dark/light and so on as binary oppositions and separate, thinkers began to see them as correlatives, that is, mutually implicated in the other. This breakthrough allowed these societies to engage with new transcendental and metaphysical questions in an open form, that of rational dialogue between opposed ideas rather than through force or authority—and this was especially true in Ancient India through the orthodox dharsanas, the heterodox schools, and the ascetics and Renouncers...). In the absence of old accepted traditions of authority (like myths or tribal kings), and in societies in which no class or sect dominated, each had to settle their metaphysical conceptions through critical thinking. In these conditions dialectics became a key tool and weapon one wielded by a new intellectual elite: the ascetics in India, wandering thinkers in China, philosophers of Greece, prophets of Israel and so on.

Axial Age civilisations began to think dialectically because they were confronted with similar social conditions, such as the massive transformation from agrarian into urban centers, and faced similar metaphysical questions under the loss of old sources of legitimacy or authority or tradition, such as the post-Vedic system in Ancient India. We have vast amounts of evidence in the philosophical texts that have survived to us that reveal how dialectics was a unifying thought process across the Axial Age civilisations. This literature documents exactly how the various movements and schools, or sometimes even individual thinkers, began to think dialectically. And underlying all these intellectual movements was a shared goal of “mutual comprehension.” That is, even though they were each “concerned about the same problems” they were *not* bound by the same truth, which therefore required a methodology to be able to assent to contending “propositions.”

Ancient Indian Dialectics

The first forays into dialectics in India shared a common social problem with other Axial civilisation: extreme social disparities under hierarchical divisions, and, a period of profound technological, productive, and social growth. After the composition of the Vedas (between 1500-800 BCE), India in its so-called Classical or Brahmanic period (between 800-200 BCE)—a timeline that fits within Jasper's Axial Age—was a land of profound change. It was a time when traditional practices, beliefs, and interpretation of the Vedas were reassessed... Out of this milieu would come many schools of thought—Hindu, Buddhist, Jainist and other schools, the heterodox and the orthodox Darśanas, individual mystics and Renouncers—all locked in deep disputes over metaphysics that was of fundamental consequence for religious and social order as a whole. Indeed, these remain at the core of Indian social-life today.

The East Ganges basin, east of modern-day Patna, was the focus of this Axial revolution. The Brahmana of the Hundred Paths (*Śatapatha Brāhmana*) offers a reason for this site: that the Gadank river had never been "burnt over" by Agni (Vaisvanara), the messenger and fire god in Vedic thought. It meant the Orthodox Brahmins of the Western Doab (those from the so-called 'land of the holy stages') had not penetrated beyond this point.⁵ In this place between a western orthodoxy and an emerging heterogeneous, urban society in the east provided the site for intense social and intellectual disputes that would propel Indian's Axial Age. What was unique was not just the overall material development that I have already highlighted (such as urbanisation, improvements in agriculture, and small kingdoms) but the new intellectuals and the awareness of change that led radical innovative thinking. So from the worldview of Vedic ritualism gave way to philosophical speculations on the relation between immanence and transcendence.

The texts to which dialectical thinking would be first

applied in Ancient India are some of the earliest examples of written philosophy: the *Rigveda* and on into the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. The *Rigveda* contains passages that trace cosmogonic speculation, with its hymns on deities (especially in Books 1-10) that examine the origins of the universe and god,⁶ and its later interpretation offer early attempts to think through the contradictions that arise when the mind speculates on the nature of cosmic origins. As is well known, there were numerous cosmogonies and no single or standard cosmogony within Ancient India, or indeed contemporary Indian thought. This hotbed of contested ideas of cosmological origins provided highly fertile soil for the development of dialectical thinking into the nature of the phenomenal and metaphysical. Arguably, it is the *Nāsadīya Sūkta* (0:129-6), one of the cosmogonic hymns, that expresses most clearly the type of speculation that would propel dialectics forward. This hymn it attempts to think through the seeming opposition of being/non-being at the point of creation, that is, to think beyond the impasse between the divine or autogeneration of the cosmic idea. But it breaks off at the point of answering this: positing that this may never be knowable. Even more important that in its open skepticism, is how the text raises ideas of other worlds, dawns, and times—speculations that provided the grounds for thinking through to the transcendent during the Axial Age.

In turn the *Bhagavad Gita*, juxtaposed the polarities of good and evil, creation and destruction, in both a metaphysical and spiritual sense and for their profundity in thinking through relations of opposites.⁷ More specifically, it is the delusion of the binary opposition between good/bad that is said to be one of the principle sources of error.⁸ One of the first to instances of 'both-and' thinking operative in the *Bhagavad Gita* in the dialogue between Arjuna and Krishna. Arjuna is stuck within thinking in 'either/or' categories not yet realizing that Krishna's categories are not 'either/or' but 'both-and'. The latter is a dialectical way of thinking in which "opposites do not exclude each other but complement each other."⁹ This 'both/'

and' thinking was taken up in the Axial Age, exemplified in the *Isha Upanishad's* account of Brahma as *both* nirguna Brahman (without qualities) *and* saguna Brahma (with qualities). Yet, even today, many remain stuck in their interpretation of the *Bhagavad Gita* at the point of formal contradiction. As shown by Dorter, these apparent contradictions disappear when they are seen as arguments that are related dialectically rather than analytically. That is, rather than to be solved by conceptual distinction or terminological clarification, it requires a change of perspective or context. For example, Krishna's statement that Brahman [as the ultimate metaphysical reality] is 'neither existent [sat] nor non-existent [asat]' (13.12) is meaningful only at the point where thought pushes through the paradox of thinking existence/being within a sensory or phenomenal frame: "If we understand existence in terms of presence in space and time, and non-existence as absence from space and time, the source of space and time itself can neither be said to exist or not exist."¹⁰ The text compels thought to move dialectically, to push through to a mutual understanding of contradiction rather than opposition.

So how was dialectics first defined in these debates from Ancient India, and, how does this term translate across time to us today? Matilal provides a range of answers to this question. For him, the most relevant Sanskrit term seems to be *vāda* (or *vāda-vivāda*), defined as a bifurcating or divisive debate,¹¹ and for this reason Matilal refers to dialectic as the Ancient Indian 'art of philosophical disputation'.¹² He sets the scene in post-Upanishad India (we can assume the period between 800-300 BCE) in which philosophy was, as he describes it, "brisk, critical and controversial." As he writes: "No subject was considered too sacred for criticism and refutation." Here the Vedic cosmogony—the theory of the universe, both the mundane and the transcendent, were radically disputed amongst a plethora of schools and individuals. As such, one of the unique features of Ancient Indian dialectics was its spirit of knowledge-seeking. A passage from the Questions of Milinda (*Milinda-pañho*) captures this cooperative intention behind

dialectics eloquently: “When the scholars debate with one another” [it says] “... there is summing up and unravelling, there is also defeat, and yet the scholars do not get angry at it.”¹³ Consequently, *vāda* and *vāda-vitandā* were upheld as most productive because each involved “honest seekers after truth” within a formal context of “honest and fair debate aimed at the refutation only of the opponent’s thesis.”¹⁴

Dialectical thinking also held great practical utility. An exemplar is how dialectics was used at the law courts in Indian society at the time. Solomon shows how legal disputes involved dialectics both in the procedures of intellectual debates, and, syllogistic statements of arguments.¹⁵ The *Manusmṛiti*, a legal text on dharma that engages questions of law, rights, and conduct, provides that in cases where “doubts arises” regarding the interpretations of the dharmas, an assembly of ten persons was required to deliberate the matter. This assembly expressly includes a dialectician (alongside Vedic scholars, a logician, and laypeople from different groups i.e. a student, household member, and retiree).¹⁶ Such a rigorous process, and the specific inclusion of a dialectician, demonstrates the level of respect for dialectical thinkers during the Axial period.

The other key aspect of dialectics was that it provided a means for critical, dissenting positions to be expressed in a medium accessible to others, whether orthodox or heterodox. For example, one of the most significant challenges to orthodoxy during this time emanated from the Lokāyata or later Cārvāka school found in the fragments of the *Bārhaspatya Sūtras*. This school insisted on perception, inferential doubt, and empiricism within a materialistic conception of the cosmos. This school rejected the Vedas, doctrines of Karma/Samsara, and the notion of the afterlife. They were persecuted by Brahmin and sadly we have lost much of their knowledge. For them, insisting on sense-perception was a defence against the deception and exploitation that could come about through adherence to the Vedas. Importantly, their adherents were usually labelled negativists (*nastikah*)¹⁷ because through

logical argumentation they would negate Brahma, the practice of sacrifice, and the authority of the Vedas. As a famous story goes, when the Brahmins defended animal sacrifices by claiming the sacrificed go to heaven, Cārvāka members asked why the Brahmins did not then kill their aged parents to speed them on their way to heaven also? The element of doubt or scepticism deployed with dialectical thought remained a key defence against the imposition or over-reach of metaphysical dogma.

Turning to the importance of relationism within Ancient Indian thought, the *Vaiśenika Sutra* held that both the phenomenal and the 'supra-sensual' worlds exist objectively but that the latter could only be considered from a dualist position, the former from a materialist one. This cosmology contributed to a profound shift in thinking. The Vaiśenika theory of matter rendered the phenomenal world as consisting of countless, eternal atoms (*paramanu*)—when these atoms interacted generated the cause of all dynamism and movement in the world. This inherence is the source of motion, cause, and change in the phenomenal world—giving Vaiśenika a much wider, relational account of *prakṛiti* and the patterns of change they could observe in the natural world. Knowledge could obtain a complete understanding of the world of experience, thereby rendering liberation (or Moksha) in material rather than only spiritual terms.¹⁷ In many respects, Nyāya develops this atomistic ontology of Vaiśenika but also made important contributions to epistemology and logic using dialectics. Nyāya recognised illusion and other forms of error in thought were not absolute barriers to liberation but were either flawed, incomplete, or absent cognition—they could be overcome by 'right reasoning' that followed an appropriate *Pramanas* (epistemology). Soul could be liberated or released (*moksha* or *samsara*) through such correct knowledge. In order to ensure accurate knowledge, Nyāya systematised thought to include no less than sixteen principles—though I will focus only on its unique syllogism of five parts, for which Nyāya is most commonly associated with dialectical logic.

This syllogistic method was not deployed for exploring things either known (that could be demonstrated) or unknown (that would require demonstration) but for those in dispute or doubt. This is crucial because it was intended as the “science of inference for the sake of others,” that is, areas of doubt or where thought was in contestation and it focused on the intersubjective nature of persuasion and the possible inferences that interlocutor and audience may make. Two components warrant special attention. The first was the denial of any affirmative-negative dichotomy. Regarding dichotomies, the Naiyayikas argued that the absence of something should be regarded as another type of an (irreducible) attribute or quality (akhandā) rather than a form of non-identity. For example, ‘this pot is blue’ can be known by perception, whereas to know a negation, i.e. ‘this pot is not blue’ requires inference. Nyāya logic implies that our perceptual apparatus—and I would add memory of comparisons and forms of authority to establish and confirm such knowledge—are sufficient to give both affirmation and denial as assertions, especially in obvious cases. So, for example, regarding the contradictory statement ‘It is a blue pot’ and ‘The pot is not blue’ would seem logically inconsistent—they cannot be both true at the same time (‘A’ and ‘not A’). It may be inferred that ‘The pot is not blue’ because of the positive fact that it is some colour other than blue. However, for Nyāya logicians, in such a move the negative has not been eliminated from the facts but merely “smuggled back into them in the (dis)guise of otherness or difference.” That is, they do not readily infer that the non-blue pot must be a colour other than blue, not because this is not a valid inference but because it is not concerned with this level of either/or negation. The fundamental importance of this position is that it pushes thought to oppositional correlatives rather than either/or determinations. For example, when we refer to light/dark, it is their relation that is necessarily implied as conjunction and opposition: without the other, neither would have quality. This would then hold true for all oppositions in which their qualitative dimension

is a gradation to be measured by 'more' or 'less' that exhausts itself in the nuances of their detailed qualitative difference. Nuance is a relational quality, *not* a separation of either/or. Arguably, much of the limitations of the contemporary 'politics of identity' could be overcome by engaging with this type of dialectical thinking. The second component relates to the four kinds of dialectical relations that Nyāya identifies, especially its most unique one, the *svarupa* relation, *viśesanatā* (the relation between object and sense-organ, but also ontologically over and above the object of awareness). The relation of *svarupa/viśesanatā* refers to something related to something by a relation to something else, a process of relation that could seemingly be endless.¹⁸ This is best seen as a clear articulation of the philosophy of internal relations—things are not merely tied by secondary relations, these relations must be seen as part of the things in themselves. Nyāya thus postulated a "peculiar" kind of relation, a *svarupa* relation, which is not to be taken as different from its *relata* but somehow intrinsic to the thing *it-self*. For Nyāya, there is no *a priori* necessity for the relation to be taken as different in all cases from its *relata*. What this thinking pushes toward is an account of a peculiar relation of a thing related to an other that must be seen as *part* of the thing *in-itself*—a key theme later echoed and modified by Hegel, Marx and Dietzgen. That is, whereas some would separate these aspects as endless forms of relations, each separate in their identity, and separate in the causal function, *svarupa* refers to an existential quality 'of/between' that is a constitutive attribute of its being.

A final example comes from the concept of *Anekāntavāda*—the many sidedness of reality—a concept unique to the Jainist School. In this line of thinking, substances undergo endless change but what we humans perceive are merely single facets of this process. Judgment is therefore conditional: it is true only in the context where the object it refers to remains the same. What is of importance is that Jainist thought detected a powerful limitation to identitarian logic (well before Adorno or other negative dialecticians) in that judgement

must remain humble, even sceptical, of its ability to know the object. The complexity of reality cannot be expressed in a single way because it has a multiplicity of aspects—and hence Jainism erected a way of analysis to understand these various dimensions of truth. To gain knowledge/experience from only one *naya* (individual character) is, for a Jainist, to become like one of the seven blind men who, each feeling separate parts of an elephant, conclude the single part they hold represents the elephant's true form. To ensure we account for all these many sides, the method of the seven-fold predications, *Syādvāda*,¹⁹ was deployed that when taken together form a system of logic necessary and sufficient to exhaust the possibilities of *all* knowledge claims. So *Syād'*—loosely translated as 'from some viewpoint' or 'may be'—is affixed to every statement to demonstrate its conditional or partial aspect and the logician must go through all of them to show that they have taken in all perspectives.

Conclusion

Having outlined just a few of the many ways that dialectics was developed and used in Ancient India, it is important to reflect on the knowledge interest that gave such an impetus to dialectics. Dialectics was the tool and weapon used to bolster any side of the disputed metaphysical claims regarding the cosmogony of the post-Vedic world within Axial Age India. Consequently, in many ways the dialectical forms of thought that emerged in Ancient India were essentially parasitic on the Vedic cosmology of which it was made to interrogate. Orthodox ascetics and *darśanas* rarely ventured outside of this transcendent realm or even asked questions of the mundane. Aside from the *Cārvāka*, many of its proponents were relatively concerned with using dialectics to explore the material world. In many ways, this led to an ambiguous and paradoxical outcome: dialectics was bound to a set of metaphysical concerns that gave both its motivation to strive into unknowns and yet stunted its wider development and application. Dialectics performed an invaluable service for

metaphysical debates but the manner in which it was pressed into service solely for these needs that meant the subordination of its wider critical functions and potential.

Ancient India dialectics was thus caught in contradiction. On the one hand, the shared basis of the Vedic cosmogonic speculation meant that all sects, ascetics, and philosophers—whether orthodox or heterodox—shared the view of flux: that “The only permanence is the permanent transience.”²⁰ On the other hand, there was the forced separation of all things in the dharmic role, later formalised in varna, and social hierarchy. The Brahmin could officiate liturgy and ritual, and the lower castes could hope but it has some cosmic effect, but that was the extent of the practical relation between the mundane and the transcendent. Nondualism retained two worlds in everyday lived experience. Moreover, the Brahmin no longer needed the gods for they had made them compliant to their will through knowledge of ritual in the mundane. They were *the* gods in practice now. In its place, evidence adduced from intuition (*jnana*) or revelatory experience of the Brahmins, denigrated the experience/knowledge of the human condition in *prakti*. As Ancient Indian thought became bound in on itself, there would be no more Axial breakthroughs.

The limited application of dialectics in Ancient India leads to a fundamental external critique: its failure to grasp fully internal relations. Premised on the Vedic notion of inherence that was caught between nondualism *and* the practical separation of the mundane from the transcendent (and domination of the former by the latter), meant a full articulation of relations was not made, at least within the orthodoxy. In this cosmology, we were all Ātman-Brahma and yet separate from it. Here, it tended to forget that the construction of the worlds, its multiplicity and transience from Vedic cosmology, was ordered by human mind. The whole was revealed only in certain parts, and most of which the Brahmin had re-established the understanding of the two worlds and varna in ways that actually fragmented the whole. So, whereas the philosophy of internal relations admits a

practice of abstraction that allows for an even greater variety of second-order relations,²² it was precisely this aspect that was shut down at the close of India's Axial Age. To riff on Marx and Engels' famous opening of the *Manifesto*, we could say:

Between the Brahmin and Cārvāka; philosopher and sophist; Mutakallim and Falasifa; in a word, dialectician and non-dialectical thinker, have stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary reconstitution of thinking or in the relative closing of thought...

NOTES

1. The extent to which these civilisation interacted and shared knowledge-systems is a matter of speculation. Yet given what we know of trade and travel routes of this period, it is highly likely there was both cross-pollination of dialectical thought and also auto-generation of dialectical systems particular to each locale.
2. Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History*.
3. See F. Engels, "The Dialectic of Nature," in *Karl Marx, Frederick Engels: Collected Works : Frederick Engels: Vol 25*, Intl Publishers, 1987.
4. K. Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History*, 2.
5. See H. Kulke, "The historical background of India's axial age," in *The Origins and Diversity of Axial Age Civilisations*, (Ed. S.N. Eisenstadt), NY: SUNY, 1986: Chapter 16.
6. L. Renou (ed.), *Hinduism*, NY: Washington Square Press, 1963: 7.
7. S.S. Joarder, "Pondering Dialectical Nature in Indian Thoughts," *Philosophy and Progress: Vols. LI-LII*, January-June, July-December, 2012.
8. Note: Krishna embraces dualism when he praises nonviolence but not its complement, violence. This appears as one of the very few times duality is retained but it is only retained because both are characterised by attachment and difference, whereas in the latter pair only violence is attached and nonviolence unattached. As explained by Dorter, precisely because Arjuna does not want to fight, his fighting would not be an act of violence, i.e. attached. To act from dharma rather than desire exempts the action from being violent. See K. Dorter, "A Dialectical Reading

- of the Bhagavadgita," *Asian Philosophy*, 2012, 22(4): 320.
9. R. C. Zaehner, *The Bhagavad-gita with a Commentary on the Original Sources*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1973: 200.
 10. Dorter, "A Dialectical Reading of the Bhagavadgita," 308.
 11. I thank Jonardon Ganeri for a discussion on this point.
 12. All quotes taken from Bimal Krishna Matilal, *Logic, language and Reality*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1985: 1-22.
 13. Milinda-pañho, 2.6. For details account of these various forms of Indian logic, see Jonardon Ganeri, "Indian Logic," 1-94, available at: <https://philpapers.org/archive/GANIL.pdf>
 14. Matilal, *Logic, Language and Reality*, 16-17, 19.
 15. E.E. Solomon, *Indian Dialectics, 1976-1978*, 93 cited in J. Bronkhorst, *Buddhism in the Shadow of Brahmanism*, London: Brill, 2011.
 16. See Matilal in Biderman, Shlomo and Scharfstein, Ben-Ami (eds.), *Rationality in Question*, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1989: 203.
 17. E. Frauwallner, *History of Indian Philosophy, Vol. II*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1997: 215.
 18. On this see O. Leaman, *Key Concepts in Eastern Philosophy*, London: Routledge, 1999: 269.
 19. "When we talk of x as being related to y by the relation r, we have first to relate x to y by r, and then relate r (which is also a property) to x by, say, r', and r to y by, say, r'', another relation. This again may require that x should be related to r' by a further relation r'." See Bimal Krishna Matilal and Daniel H. H. Ingalls, *The Navya-Nyāya Doctrine of Negation: The Semantics and Ontology of Negative Statements in Navya-Nyāya Philosophy*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968: 40.
 20. The Syādvāda are: (1) May be, it is; (2) may be, it is not; (3) may be, it is and it is not; (4) may be, it is indescribable; (5) may be, it is and yet is indescribable; (6) may be, it is not and it is also indescribable; (7) may be, it is and it is not and it is also indescribable. See Sancheti Asoo Lal, *First Steps to Jainism (Part Two)*, Jodhpur: Sumcheti Trust, 2001: 91.
 21. See E. Shils, "Some Observations on the Place of Intellectuals in Max Weber's Sociology, with Special Reference to Hinduism," in *The Origins and Diversity of Axial Age Civilizations* (S.N. Eisenstadt ed.), NY: SUNY, 1986: 433.
 22. Bertell Ollman, *Dance of the Dialectic*, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003: 73.