

Are we necessarily contradictory?

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What philosophy has denominated dialectics - from Heraclitus and Plato to Hegel and Marx—seems to align, throughout the history of all societies, with human thought and action. I refer to the fact that we coexist with the love and compassion of Francis just as we do with the hatred and cruelty of Phalaris, and with both moderation and temperance (*sophrosyne*) and excess and insolence (*hybris*).

Heraclitus (6th and 5th centuries BC) had already become convinced that nothing is entirely rigid, that everything is interconnected and nothing remains (πάντα χωρεῖ καὶ οὐδέν μὲνει, as cited by Plato in the *Cratylus*), or that the phenomena of both the human and natural worlds occur through fluxes and refluxes rather than through an unalterable identity. And this continuous transition from one thing to another was nothing other than a transformation into its opposite. The visible would become invisible, order would turn to disorder, and vice versa. Shadow and light, good and evil, action and reaction, beginning and end would constitute an eternal alternation. Thus, "conflict is the father of all things and the king of all; and everything happens according to strife and necessity; for the change of one leads to the other, and vice versa" (fragments 53, 80, and 88). Ultimately, the whole would reveal itself precisely through the unity of opposites. Thus, the principles of dialectics, at their very inception, were grounded in the ideas of opposition and transformation; through them, we are led to view natural and human phenomena as realities that are simultaneously ephemeral and contradictory.

As for Plato's dialectic, unlike Heraclitus's, it constitutes merely a method of inquiry that would allow us to penetrate the essence of things - that is, to recollect the Ideas (those essential, unconditioned, and immutable realities the soul had already glimpsed) through an interplay of questions and answers, of arguments

for and against (influenced by the Sophists, his contemporaries and experts in debate). It may also be understood as an internal spiritual dialogue in which affirmations and negations are set against one another, with the Good standing as the highest of the Ideas - the foundation of all knowledge and of all other Ideas related to it.

The statement by Socrates - Plato's teacher - that "one thing I know is that I know nothing" (ἐν οἷδ' ὅτι οὐδὲν οἷδ' – Meno, 80d, 3-1) is indeed dialectical; for to distinguish what is known from what is not known, one must, above all, be aware of the nature of knowledge - whether in its grounded and pertinent form (*episteme*) or merely as something subjective, uncertain, and even capricious (*doxa*).

The most characteristic understanding of dialectics, as action intrinsic to material or spiritual phenomena, returned with force in the ideas of the Lutheran theologian Jacob Böhme. According to him, God contains within himself a polarity of opposing forces: on the one hand, he is the Nothingness, an unfathomable and indeterminate abyss, from which, however, an irrepressible desire for life arises, through which the various realities in which creation unfolds take shape. In his words: "What is the abyss of all things, where there is no creature, that is, the Abyssal Nothingness? It is the dwelling place of divine unity, for the opening [das Auf-thun], that is, the unity or I-being of Nothingness [das Ichts des Nichts], is God himself. The unfolding is unity, an eternal to live and flow [Wellen]: pure will [Wille] that has nothing to desire but itself" (Questioni Theosofiche, ovvero esame della divina rivelazione in 177 domande, II, 1, Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, 1996). God embraces in Himself the good and evil, spirit and matter, light and darkness, recognizing the positivity of what is negative. The cobbler theologian says: "Know that all things consist in the Yes (Jah) and the No (Nein), whether they are divine or diabolical, earthly or otherwise. The One, that is, the Yes, is pure force (Kraft) and life and the truth of God, or God Himself. God, however, would be unknowable in Himself, and in Him there would be no joy or exaltation or feeling without the No. It is not its opposite, a resistance force (Gegen-wurf) of the Yes and truth. For the truth to manifest and be something, there must be an opposite in which eternal living is active, sensitive, and disposed" (ibid., III, 2). It follows that action and reaction, or attraction and repulsion, allow the movement of the

universe, as well as, in human relations, good and evil, strength and weakness, command and subordination coexist embedded - jointly and oppositionally - in socio-spiritual life.

This theme reappears critically in two Renaissance works of fiction: the poem *Ship of Fools* (Das Narrenschiff) by Sebastian Brant, and the ironic masterpiece by Erasmus of Rotterdam, *In Praise of Folly* (Moriae encomium). In 114 chapters, Brant exposes all human vices and behaviors that run counter to virtue: "Do not think that we, the fools, stand alone: / We have brothers, great and small; / In every land and place, / Our fellowship is infinite" (XXV);¹ he also asserts, among other things, that "wealth is a splendid thing, yet it depends on the whims of fortune, which dances like a spinning wheel. Worldly glory is beautiful but fickle, swaying now this way, now that. A beautiful body is highly prized, yet it may last no longer than a single night; health is dear to us, yet it can slip away stealthily like a thief. Vigor and strength are admirable, but in the end, they succumb to sickness and old age. Thus, nothing is as enduring as sound instruction" (Octavo Editora, 2010, São Paulo, p. 39).

As for Erasmus, it is as if the author wished to personify the ambiguity of man, portraying him - simultaneously or alternately - as a being who is both intelligent and ignorant, *sapiens* and *stultus*. It is worth clarifying that, for both authors, madness or folly signifies a surrender to the passions:² Folly herself states as much: "Wise is he who lives according to the rules of reason, whereas the fool is he who allows himself to be enthralled by his passions. That is why Jupiter, fearing that human life might become sad and miserable, deemed it fitting to increase the measure of the passions far more than that of reason" (Os Pensadores, collection, Abril Cultural, 1972, p. 31). Tell me if there is, by chance, a single day in life that is not sad, unpleasant, tedious, boring... when it is not animated by the voluptuousness, by the flavor of madness... How good it is to live, but without

¹ Glaub nicht, wir seien Narrn allein;/ Wir haben Brüder groß und klein;/ In allen Landen, überall;/ Ist endlos unsre Narrenzahl.

² Passion can be defined as follows: "A tendency that an emo+on or affec+on has not only to guide, but also to dominate the personality of the individual, making him act in an intense and irrisis+ble way, and thus subjec+ng reason to its strength. Generally understood, emo+on is a psychic state that, accompanied by pain or pleasure, a0rac+on or repulsion, leads the human being to assign a value or importance to a certain object or lived situa+on" (Dicionário Sesc, A Linguagem da Cultura - Sesc Dic+onary, the Language of Culture -, Ed. Perspec+ve, 2001).

wisdom, for this is the poison of life"... (idem, p. 23). "Not satisfied with this, he united Jupiter to reason, which was alone, two very strong passions,

which are like two tyrants: cholera, which dominates the heart... center of life; the other is concupiscence, which extends its empire from the youngest youth to the most mature age" (idem, pgs. 31 and 32). Nature, perhaps wiser than its creatures, would have sought thereby to prevent the "plague of wisdom" from spreading too far and ruling alone, autocratically.

At the same time - still according to Erasmus - all human affairs possess a dual nature, much like the Sileni: figures whose outward appearance was crude, yet whose inner spirit proved noble. Consequently, what seems contemptible may ultimately reveal itself to be worthy; conversely, what appears valuable might prove frivolous, and what yields pleasure may end up being harmful.

Thus, in Erasmus's view, no society could endure if governed solely by the dictates of reason. Emotions or appetites - which constitute the sensitive soul (in Cartesian terms) - must play a part in social life, tempering its severity or cold rational order, even though that order remains essential for the best possible coexistence within society.

And why? For the simple reason that feelings and passions are born of the body or spirit, they are natural things, and trying to reject them in a complete way is a futile task.³ Says Descartes (The Passions of the Soul, Chosen Works, Ed. Perspective, 2010): "It should be noted that, according to what nature has instituted, they [the passions] are all related to the body and are given to the soul only in so far as it is united with it; so that its natural use is to induce the soul to consent and contribute to actions which may serve to preserve the body or to make it in some way more perfect (Article 137). Thus, there is indeed a connection between the soul and the body, "which shows that all five [passions] are very useful with respect to the body - even though sadness, in a way, comes first and is more necessary than joy, and hatred more so than love, because it is more important to repel things that harm and can destroy than to acquire those that add some perfection without which one can still subsist (Article 137)... Furthermore,

³ A well-known French proverb expresses this uselessness: *Chassez le naturel, il revient au galop* (Remove the natural, it returns at full gallop).

the soul can have its own separate pleasures; but as for those it shares with the body, they depend entirely on the passions: so that the men whom the passions can most deeply stir are capable of experiencing the greatest sweetness in this life. It is true that they may also encounter greater bitterness

when they do not know how to employ them well and when fortune turns against them; yet wisdom is especially useful in this regard, for it teaches one to become their master and to handle them with such skill that the ills they cause become quite bearable, and one can even derive a certain joy from them all" (Article 212). It is seen, therefore, that the stimulus provided by passions is necessary and beneficial, so long as reason, or at least common sense, contains it in a certain dose or quantity.⁴ Virtue, therefore, would be in the middle (*virtus in medio est*), or, as Pierre Le Moyne puts it, "It is up to [moderation] to reduce the Passions to mediocrity, because every Virtue, of whatever order, has two opposite extremes, one by excess and the other by lack; and perfection consists in finding the right middle ground between one and another" (*Les peintures morales*, I. VII, c. I, Ed. Pierre Mauger, 1659, p. 596).

While on one hand there are individuals who dedicate themselves to acquiring factual and substantiated knowledge, drawing upon past experiences, both personal and historical; valuing virtues, ethical principles, and moral conduct; and viewing themselves as part of a natural and social whole that demands serious and respectful consideration - there are many others who prefer, or allow themselves to be swayed by, an imagination that is crude rather than brilliant; by superstitions and delusions; by hopes known to be baseless; by empty verbiage; by impostures, vices, or offenses of the most varied origins and intentions; or even by a blind individualism that fits perfectly into what is known as idiocy. Drawing once again on Erasmus, we see that in such cases "every folly, however crude, always finds followers... and ignorance possesses two great privileges: one consisting of being in perfect accord with self-love, and the other of carrying with it the greater part of the human race" (*ibid.*, p. 79).

⁴ The classifications given to passions are diverse. Thomas Aquinas distinguishes them in eight main, namely, by their opposites: joy, sorrow, love, hatred, desire, flight, fear, audacity, hope, despair (nothing to expect), anger. As for Descartes, the list is much more extensive, including, in addition to those "primitive", other "private" ones, such as: contempt and esteem, generosity and avarice, pride and humility, cowardice and audacity, glory and shame, grief, regret.

Hegel's arrival on the historical scene of philosophy brought with it the idea that human consciousness would evolve precisely through its conflicts and errors, its crises and contradictions, and thus progressively become aware of itself. We can read, for example, the following passage that seems enlightening to us about it: "Any crime, any mistake and, more generally, any finite being or any finite

thought are contradictions. To the point that it is even necessary to say that there is nothing in which there is not a contradiction, which, of course, can also be suppressed and overcome again"...". From the fact that one perceives contradictions not with the eyes of the body, but with the eyes of the mind [means]... that the mind in general has such contradictions in its consciousness that it even thinks them. This property must also be the cause of seeking to resolve them: but if they did not exist anywhere, neither in the outer experience nor in the inner experience of thought, one could not feel the temptation to resolve them" - Review of the book *Idealrealismus* by L. J. Ohlert, in *Berliner Schriften*, at the care of Johannes Hoffmeister, Felix Meiner Verlag, vol. 11, Hamburg, 1956, pg. 408.

Or again: "Everyday experience itself shows that there is an infinity of contradictory things, contradictory institutions, and so on. And their contradictions are not present in an external reflection, but rather within themselves... We must acknowledge the contradictions that the ancient dialecticians detected in movement; yet it does not follow from this that movement does not exist. On the contrary, it follows rather that movement is contradiction in existence" (*Wissenschaft der Logik*, II, Felix Meiner Verlag, Hamburg, 1963, p. 58). It follows from this understanding that every determination of the intellect presupposes a contrary. For example, the idea of the one leads to the idea of the many; that of the false or the lie to the true; that of luxury to simplicity or scarcity; that of the similar to the different; that of the particular to the universal; that of the individual to the collective. And we inevitably contrast supply with demand, production with consumption, the just with the unjust, the good with the bad, the inexpensive with the costly, war with peace, and so on.

Moreover, through consciousness there would be a living and natural movement from one state to another, more perfected, either in the individual sphere or in the world of society, corresponding to the progress of the spirit. The

concept of spirit is understood as everything that is involved and dependent on language, social rules, economic life, arts, science, technology and religion. This self-development of the spirit is also a self-reflection and therefore not only the spirit is one and the same (*unum atque idem*), but it is configured by its diversity, and as every real can be apprehended by reason, every real is rational, that is, it stems from a cause, not from chance, and vice versa). Consciousness initially manifests itself in an immediate manner, until it realizes that this immediacy is precarious and insufficient. Upon encountering that which negates or contradicts it, this perception allows consciousness to transition to another state—one that can be termed a stage of development or a moment of progress for the spirit. In this transition, however, consciousness preserves the element of truth from the previous state, thereby performing an action that transforms the past rather than eliminating it. This act of supersession - which simultaneously entails a partial preservation of the prior state - is articulated by Hegel in the *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences* (among other works) in the following passage: “Here, it is necessary to recall the double meaning of our German expression *aufheben*. By *aufheben*, we understand removing or negating - referring, for instance, to a law or an institution that has been abolished. On the other hand, *aufheben* also signifies preserving; in this sense, we say that something is well preserved - *wohl aufgehoben*” (*Erster Theil, Wissenschaft der Logik* - Part One, *Science of Logic* -, edited by Leopold von Henning, Berlin, p. 191).

These brief considerations lead us to think that, in the end, the realities of the world, of life and of societies do not follow a straight line and unchanged, nor are they placed on flat, fixed, orderly and peaceful ground, but on a field of forces that advance and retreat, that arise and disappear, that transform everything, permanently. Thus, however much we may desire the continued stability or growth of things, the intrinsic and counterposed movement that presides over them makes them definitely transient.