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What is Dialectic? Some remarks on Popper' s criticism

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Abstract

Karl Popper famously opposed Marxism in general and its philosophical core – the Marxist dialectic – in particular. As a progressive thinker, Popper saw in dialectic a source of dogmatism damaging to philosophy and political theory. Popper had summarized his views on dialectic in an article that was first delivered in 1937 and subsequently republished as a chapter of his book (2002, pp. 419-451), where he accuses Marxist dialecticians of not tolerating criticism. Ironically, Popper' s view that all Marxist dialecticians dogmatically dismiss any criticism of dialectic by claiming that their opponents do not understand dialectic makes his position no less dogmatic. Indeed, any attempt to criticise Popper' s views on dialectics would be seen only as an additional example of responses by “ dogmatic dialecticians” , making his theory essentially immune. This completely prevents dialecticians from being able to criticise Popper' s views. This is exactly the opposite of what the great philosopher wanted. Therefore, for the sake of “ anti-dogmatic science” it is desirable and even necessary to defend dialectic. In this work I address several central points about Popper' s criticism of Marxist (materialist) dialectic. In particular, I (a) analyse Popper' s definition of dialectic as the dialectic triad (thesis, anti-thesis, synthesis) and contrast it with a notion of dialectic as a much more complex concept which occurs in dialectical materialism today, where the triad represents only one of the aspects; (b) compare dialectic with the trial and error method; (c) discuss the place of dialectic amongst valid scientific methods: Does dialectic accept logical contradictions; (e) discuss lessons dialecticians should learn from Popper' s criticism. I will test my arguments as to their constructiveness and will demonstrate explicitly the nature of my disagreement with Popper - thereby trying to avoid the “ dogmatic dialecticians” response as much as possible.

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