

We present here a reading guide for Alan Woods' *The History of Philosophy: A Marxist Perspective*, which can help you digest the many key insights from this unique text. The study questions at the end of each chapter can be used to stimulate discussion in reading groups.

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**The question may be raised: why bother studying complicated questions of science and philosophy? For our daily lives there is evidently no need for this and at first sight studying a book on the history of philosophy can appear a bit academic. However, if we wish to gain a rational understanding of the world in which we live, and the fundamental processes at work in it, then we clearly do need to study philosophy – essentially a way of looking at the world.**

People pretending not to have any philosophy will inevitably reflect the ideas and prejudices of the society and the milieu in which they live. Life is not a meaningless series of accidents or an unthinking routine, and it is our duty to occupy ourselves with thought at a higher level than the immediate problems of everyday existence.

In this book, Alan Woods outlines the development of philosophy from the ancient Greeks, all the way through to Marx and Engels. They were the ones who brought together the best of previous thinking to produce the Marxist philosophical outlook, which looks at the real material world, not as a static immovable reality, but one that is constantly changing and moving according to laws that can be discovered.

It is this method which allows Marxists to look at how things were, how they have become and how they are most likely going to be in the future, in a long process which started with the early primitive humans in their struggles for survival, through to the emergence of class societies, all as part of a process towards greater and greater knowledge of the world we live in.

## **1. The Emergence of Philosophy**

The need to understand the world was initially closely linked to the need to survive. With the development of technique came the development of the mind, and the need to explain the phenomena of nature which governed the lives of the early hominids. Over millions of years, through trial and error, our ancestors began to establish certain relations between things. They began to make abstractions, that is, to generalise from experience and practice.

However, the abstractions of early humans did not have a scientific character and were more akin to tentative explorations, “like the impressions of a child, guesses and hypotheses, sometimes incorrect, but always bold and imaginative.” Nevertheless, these were important attempts to find a rational cause for certain natural phenomena. The notion that the soul exists separate and apart from the body comes from this early period, where religion (magic), art and science were not differentiated. Religious explanations filled the gap left by lack of knowledge of the laws of nature.

The dualism separating soul from body, mind from matter, thinking from doing, received a powerful impulse from the development of the division of labour at a given stage of social

evolution. The separation between mental and manual labour is a phenomenon which coincides with the division of society into classes. For the first time, a minority of society was freed from the necessity to work to obtain the essentials of existence.

Man's earliest attempts to explain the world and our place in it were mixed up with mythology, as shown by the various Creation myths. The true history of scientific thought commences when men and women learn to dispense with mythology, and attempt to obtain a rational understanding of nature, without the intervention of the gods.

The earliest Greek philosophy represents the true starting point of philosophy, which initially was thoroughly materialist. Ionian philosophers like Thales, Anaximander and Anaximenes turned their backs on mythology and sought to find a general principle for the workings of nature from an observation of nature itself.

In contrast, the Pythagoreans approached the world from the standpoint of number and quantity relations. Despite a strong mystical element, they made important discoveries which greatly stimulated the development of mathematics. This development of the quantitative side of investigating nature was important and without it, science would have remained on the level of mere generalities. However, this in turn had certain limits as it is impossible to reduce the complex, dynamic and contradictory workings of nature to static, orderly quantitative formulae.

### **Study questions and prompts:**

- Can you think of any present day examples of "neutrality" or "objectivity" that instead reflect the status quo?
- What makes humans qualitatively different from the other animals?
- What do you know about animism and what is the relevance to the history of philosophy?
- What did Feuerbach mean when he said that "if birds had a religion, their God would have wings?"
- In what sense were the ancient Greeks pioneers?
- How was Anaximenes' world view a step forward compared to the other Ionian materialists?
- Is it correct to say that in periods of social decline philosophical idealism tends to dominate? And materialism in periods of social advance?
- Explain how the "numbers approach" of the Pythagorean school was both an important scientific advance and a source of future misconceptions about mathematics.

## **2. The First Dialecticians**

With Heraclitus, the contradictory assertions of the Ionian philosophers for the first time are given a dialectical expression. Indeed, Heraclitus was the first to give a clear exposition of the idea of the unity of opposites. All things contain a contradiction, which impels their development. Without contradiction, there can be no movement and no life. "Everything flows," was the basis of this dialectical philosophy – a dynamic view of the universe, the exact opposite of the static idealist conception of the Pythagoreans.

Heraclitus' philosophy was greeted by incredulity and hostility even in his own lifetime. It challenged the assumptions, not only of all religion and tradition, but of the 'common sense' mentality which sees no further than the end of its nose. The Eleatic school represented such a reaction and asserted the direct opposite: that nothing changes, that movement is an illusion, as elaborated by Zeno in his series of paradoxes designed to prove the impossibility of movement.

The first atomists such as Anaxagoras were important in that they, following the best Ionian tradition, believed in experiment and observation. Others like Leucippus and Democritus expounded the idea that matter consists of an infinity of tiny particles, invisible to the senses. This represented a most important generalisation, and a transition to the atomic theory, a remarkable anticipation of modern science. Epicurus further developed and deepened this, but rejected their mechanistic determinism, instead posing the dialectical relation between necessity and chance.

Originally, the term 'dialectics', from the Greek 'dialektike', signified the art of discussion, which may be seen in its highest form in the Socratic dialogues of Plato. This flowed from the very nature of Athenian democracy, which gave rise to a new breed of public figures and professional teachers, from courageous freethinkers and profound philosophers to unscrupulous demagogues. This was indeed how sophism ended up, although originally the sophists were rationalists and freethinkers, who stood opposed to all existing dogmas and orthodoxy. The basic idea which underlies the dialectic of sophism is that truth is many-sided.

Their weakness was that they subordinated the objective world to subjectivity and stripped it of all inherent law and necessity. The sole source of order, rationality and causation was the perceiving subject. Everything was declared to be relative. Nonetheless, what is important is not the subject matter of these dialogues, but the method. This really represents the birth of logic, which was originally the handling of words (Greek 'logoi'). Thus, logic and dialectics were originally the same – a technique for getting at the truth.

As opposed to the earlier Greek philosophers, who were generally materialists and set out from a study of nature, the idealist Plato consciously turned his back on the world of the senses. Not experiment and observation, but only pure deduction and mathematics was the road to truth, and Plato's cosmology represented a retreat from science to Pythagorean mysticism.

### **Study questions and prompts:**

- What did Heraclitus mean when he said that "eyes and ears are bad witnesses to men if they have souls that understand not their language?" How does this relate to Epicurus' theory of knowledge?
- What is the main takeaway of Zeno's paradoxes? What are their limitations and what use do they have?
- To what extent were the fundamental elements of a scientific materialist world outlook present amongst the atomists?
- What does the author mean when he says that modern scientists "in their apparatus are more advanced, but in their mode of thinking, they are worlds behind the early materialists?"
- How is sophism the "true father of modern professional politics, law and diplomacy?"

- In what sense do Marxists employ the Socratic method when intervening in the workers' movement?
- Is it an exaggeration to say that Plato's ideas represented a counter-revolution in philosophy? How so?

### 3. Aristotle and the End of Classical Greek Philosophy

The philosophy of Aristotle marks a sharp break with that of Plato. Instead of the idealist method, which turns its back upon reality in order to take refuge in a world of perfect ideas and forms, Aristotle proceeds from the concrete facts of sense perception, and from these arrives at ultimate grounds and principles.

Aristotle, however, did not merely collect facts. Basing himself on information derived from the objective material world, he proceeded to generalise. He sums up and criticises previous philosophies, and therefore may also be regarded as the first historian of philosophy.

In the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle for the first time provides a systematic account of some of the basic categories of dialectics. This fact is often overlooked, because he also laid down the laws of formal ('Aristotelian') logic, which, at first sight, appear to stand in contradiction to dialectics. In point of fact, for Aristotle, logic and dialectics were both valid ways of thinking. His emphasis on investigation stimulated his pupils to engage in fruitful practical research. The voluminous studies in different fields bequeathed by the Master laid the basis for the development of various sciences.

The flexible, dialectical aspect of Aristotle's method, with its emphasis on observation and experiment, was lost sight of for a long time. The mediaeval Schoolmen, interested only in providing an ideological basis for the doctrines of the Church, concentrated on his logic, interpreted in a lifeless and formalistic way, to the exclusion of practically all else.

Another philosophical school were the cynics. These were followers of Diogenes of Antisthenes, a pupil of Socrates, who professed his open contempt for all existing morals and customs. Others carried this idea to the extreme of wishing to live 'like a dog', hence the word 'cynic', from the Greek word for a dog. The whole idea, in contrast to the modern cynics, was to despise worldly things.

This idea of turning away from the world to seek spiritual salvation in oneself reflected the profound social and cultural crisis caused by the decline of the Greek city-states. It eventually led to a complete renunciation of the world and a total denial of the possibility of knowing anything.

While Aristotle's Lyceum produced important scientific results, Plato's Academy fell increasingly under the influence of scepticism, which questioned the possibility of the objective knowledge of reality. This marks a degeneration from objective idealism to subjective idealism. Just as with the later decline of the Roman Empire, here we have arrived at a society which has exhausted itself economically, morally and intellectually, which is expressed in a general mood of pessimism and despair.

**Study questions and prompts:**

- What is problematic about the law of identity?
- The author uses a long quote from Engels' *Anti-Dühring* to point out the limitations of the laws of formal logic when faced with the contradictory reality of nature. Can you paraphrase this and come up with some other examples from modern science?
- In what way did the sophists make a caricature of dialectics? How is this relevant to today?
- What's the main point of difference between the philosophy of Aristotle and that of Plato?
- Hero of Alexandria famously invented a steam engine, although it was never put to use. Why not?
- In what way was the sceptic philosophy the logical outcome of the method of deduction?
- Describe the process that led to "decadent" Greek idealism.

## 4. The Rise of Christianity

The rise of Christianity occurred at a time of upheaval and change associated with the dissolution of slave society, which found its reflection in a crisis of the old morality, philosophy and religion. The Roman Empire in the phase of its decline was a fertile ground for the spread of mystical ideas, which partly explains the rapid spread of new religions from the East.

The temples stood empty and people sought a religion that would offer them some consolation for their endless suffering, and some prospect of salvation. In this context, the idea of a Saviour, a Redeemer, had an obvious attraction, and the Church offered every individual the hope of salvation and the promise of life after death.

The early Christians were a revolutionary movement based on the poor and oppressed layers of society. The communion of believers was expressed in the form of primitive communism. This soon led to attempts to crush the Christian movement by state repression, but this failed and instead they won mass support. The unprincipled cynic (not in the philosophical sense) Constantine decided that the best tactic was to neuter the Christians by bribing their leaders, the bishops, and co-opting them.

There was a gradual consolidation of the power of the bishops and the crystallisation of a privileged bureaucratic stratum, which eventually fused with the Roman state. When the new religion became recognised by the Emperor Constantine, it changed into its opposite. From being a revolutionary movement of the poor and oppressed, the Church was absorbed into the state to become a formidable weapon in the hands of the rich and powerful. In place of reason, the Church Fathers preached blind faith, with science looked on as suspicious and a heritage of paganism.

### Study questions and prompts:

- How did the early Christian movement turn into its opposite and what was the material basis for it?
- What do you know about the gospels and why some did and others did not end up in the Bible? What does this say about the Bible as we know it today?

- What is the philosophical meaning of Tertullian's notorious phrase "*Credo, quia absurdum est*" – "I believe because it is absurd"?
- What does the belief in miracles signify?
- Explain how Hypatia's death marked the end of paganism and the triumph of Christianity. What were the implications for science?

## 5. Islamic Philosophy

In the absence of a revolutionary alternative, the breakdown of slave society produced a frightful collapse of culture in Europe, the effects of which lasted for centuries. In the period known as the Dark Ages, the scientific and artistic achievements of Antiquity were largely lost. The flame of learning was kept alight in Byzantium, Ireland and, above all, in the Islamic world.

The advent of Islam radically transformed the lives of millions of people. With its simple, levelling message, it struck a responsive note especially among the poorest and most downtrodden layers of the population, who greeted the Arab invaders more as liberators than oppressors. In its origins, Islam represented a revolutionary movement and the awakening of the Arab nation.

Not unlike the Gothic invasions of the fourth and fifth centuries, the early Arab conquests swept away the rotten edifice of the imperial state. This produced a profound spiritual and intellectual awakening across this newly-formed empire, not least among the Muslim conquerors themselves. Despite frequent attempts by later so-called fundamentalists to interpret Islam in a narrow and fanatical spirit that denies independent thought and cultural inquiry, in its early period, the Islamic revolution gave a powerful impulse to culture, art and philosophy.

Later on as well, throughout the Middle Ages, the only real advances in mathematics were made by the Indians (trigonometry) and Arabs (algebra).

### Study questions and prompts:

- How was it possible to achieve the Islamic conquest of Spain so quickly?
- What was the impact of Ibn Rushd Muhammed (Averroes) on the Western world?
- What do Marxists have to say about the Crusades when looked at through a historical materialist lens?
- What parallels are there when comparing Islam with early Christianity?

## 6. Philosophy in the Middle Ages

Following the collapse of the Western Roman Empire in the fifth century, most of Europe entered a stage of barbarism known as the Dark Ages, characterised by a tragic decline of culture. All the enormous advances made by the Greeks and the Romans in the spheres of art, science and philosophy were lost for hundreds of years. Humanity would have to go through a painful path lasting almost 1,000 years to recover them again.

Gradually, a new form of society emerged from the wreckage of the old system, based on the exploitation of a peasantry who were no longer slaves, but were tied to the land under the

domination of temporal and spiritual lords. The rigid social hierarchy that characterised this feudal system found an ideological expression in the fixed dogmas of the Church, which demanded unquestioning obedience based on the official interpretation of the sacred texts. The heritage of classical Greek philosophy was lost, and only partially revived in Western Europe in the twelfth century.

Because of the Church's monopoly on culture, all intellectual life had to be channelled through it. For centuries, education was confined to the monasteries under the strict control of the Church officialdom. For the medieval Schoolmen (Scholastics) philosophy was the "handmaiden of theology." Science was reduced to a bare minimum.

The ideological pillar of mediaeval theocracy was the ideas of Augustine, the most influential philosopher of the Dark Ages, who based himself on the most reactionary elements of neoplatonist thought. His philosophy was a mix of Christian mysticism and a crude and impoverished form of Platonic idealism. Augustine's theory of universals lay at the base of the trend in mediaeval philosophy confusingly called Realism.

In the monastic educational tradition, students were not allowed to speak, not even to ask questions. But in the universities matters were quite different, where open public debates about theological topics ('disputations') were common. This partial liberation of ideas gave philosophy a new lease on life, as did the translation of scientific and philosophical texts from Arabic into Latin.

This was the early beginning of the process of separation of philosophy and science from religion. For the first time in hundreds of years, a glimmer of light could be seen in the darkness that had covered Europe. In philosophy, contradictions began to pile up that the old Augustinian paradigm could not account for.

Figures like Abelard, the father of Nominalism, broke with the old way and rejected Augustinian Realism. These ideas were a radical departure from conventional Church beliefs and left little room for the supernatural. They were an existential threat to the ideological stranglehold of the Catholic Church on medieval society, but the Church could not stop the march of history.

Abelard's theory of knowledge became universally accepted and was backed up by the rediscovery of Aristotle. Along with the slow advance of science, bigger and bigger gaps were beginning to appear in the Augustinian approach. In this context, Averroism was rapidly gaining ground. A trend emerged trying to merge the Platonic and Aristotelian world views, in order to combat the radical Averroist interpretation of Aristotle. The most prominent representative of this trend was Thomas Aquinas, the most famous mediaeval scholastic, with other scholastics like John Duns Scotus and William of Ockham developing a one-sided and superficial materialism.

In the main, scholastic philosophy did not go beyond the achievements of classical Greek philosophy. Nevertheless, it played an important role in recovering the advances of the past, setting the stage for the advances made during the Renaissance.

**Study questions and prompts:**

- What is the theory of Divine Illumination and how, along with Augustinian Realism, did it lay the philosophical foundation of mediaeval reaction?
- In what way did Abelard provide a radical departure from conventional Church belief?
- How was Nominalism, as a reaction against the sterile idealist doctrines of the medieval Church, an important advance, yet also fundamentally flawed?
- Explain what the author means when he writes that “neo-Thomism remains a basic position of the Roman Catholic Church.”
- Why was the conflict around Ockham’s ideas and the ideas of Copernicus and Galileo not merely an abstract intellectual debate? What did it really signify?

## 7. The Renaissance

Modern science takes its starting point from the Renaissance, a period of spiritual and intellectual rebirth. Humanity once again looked to nature with eyes unblinkered by dogma. They rediscovered the wonders of classical Greek philosophy, and the materialist world outlook of the old Ionians and the atomists pointed science onto the right path. This was a revolutionary period in every sense of the word.

The Ptolemaic system of the cosmos, placing the Earth at the centre, was no longer sustainable after the heliocentric theories put forward by Copernicus and Kepler. Soon after, Galileo’s observations left not a single stone standing of the old view of the universe. However, it was Newton’s theory of universal gravitation that marked the definitive break with the old Aristotelian-Ptolemaic world-picture.

The discovery of the circulation of the blood by William Harvey revolutionised the study of the human body, destroying the old myths. The discoveries of science, more than the logical disputation of the philosophers, made the old views untenable. Observation and experiment were becoming the norm, with England in the vanguard in advocating the empirical method. The most prominent proponent of this was Francis Bacon.

‘English’ materialism was a healthy reaction against the sterile method of idealism. In turning its back upon the real world, idealism spins fancies out of its own head and takes them for the truth just because they correspond to a set of preconceived prejudices which are taken as axioms. Instead of this, Bacon urges us to “imitate nature, which doth nothing in vain.” Significantly, he prefers Democritus the atomist to Plato and Aristotle. But the real significance of Bacon’s philosophy was that it pointed the way forward.

Bacon’s theory of knowledge was strictly empirical. Like Duns Scotus, he emphatically denied the existence of ‘universals’. He developed the method of reasoning known as induction which is already present in the works of Aristotle. This is a way of studying things experimentally, in which we proceed from a series of single facts to general propositions. As an antidote to the arid idealism of the Schoolmen, this was an important advance, but it had serious limitations, which later became an obstacle to the development of thought.

In the writings of Thomas Hobbes the materialism of Bacon is developed in a more systematic way. In comparison to Bacon, the method of Hobbes is much more worked-out, but at the same time becomes increasingly more one-sided, rigid, soulless, in a word, mechanistic. This



was not accidental, since the science which was advancing most rapidly at the time was mechanics.

John Locke continued in the same direction as Hobbes, declaring that experience is the sole source of ideas. He supplied the proof for Bacon's fundamental principle, that the origin of all human knowledge and ideas was the material world given to us in sense-perception. Locke is the philosopher of "sound common sense."

With David Hume, empirical philosophy comes full circle. For Hume, reality was only a string of impressions, the causes of which are unknown and unknowable. He merely developed an idea already present in the idealist bishop Berkeley, namely the non-existence of causation. From this point on the road the further development of philosophy in Britain was blocked, but not before it had given a powerful impulse to the movement which became known as the Enlightenment in France, where the materialist school acquired a revolutionary content. In the hands of Diderot, Rousseau, Holbach and Helvetius, philosophy became an instrument for criticising all existing society. These great thinkers prepared the way for the revolutionary overthrow of the feudal monarchy in 1789-93.

### **Study questions and prompts:**

- Explain how the development of science is closely linked to the growth of technology and the development of the productive forces.
- Explain how "the propensity for mystical thinking does not disappear, but rather appears to grow in geometrical proportion to the advance of science."
- What was the significance of the discovery of the infinitesimal calculus?
- In what sense are Newton's undoubted revolutionary contributions to science not an unmixed blessing?
- What is problematic about "common sense"? What are the limitations of empiricism?
- "I interpret the world through my senses." How does inconsistent materialism lead to idealist conclusions and how did Berkeley exploit this weakness?
- How is David Hume a throwback to the ideas of the Greek sceptics? Why is it a metaphysical dead end?

## **8. Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz**

Until the revolution effected by Marx and Engels, with their theory of materialist dialectics, no further development of materialism took place. Even Feuerbach really went no further than the French materialists of the eighteenth century. We therefore come face to face with one of the greatest paradoxes in the history of philosophy – that the really significant advances in thought in the period after Locke were made, not by the materialists, but by the idealists. Unrestricted by the self-imposed limits of empiricism, they arrived at a whole series of brilliant theoretical generalisations, although, setting out from false hypotheses, they invariably had a fantastical character to them.

The question of the relation of thought to being was posed by the French philosopher Descartes in a different way to the English empiricists. His scepticism, in contrast with the jaundiced pessimism of Hume, had a lively and positive character. Descartes is one of the main protagonists in the struggle between rationalism and empiricism, between the method of

deduction as opposed to that of induction. The rationalists approached science from a diametrically opposite standpoint to the empiricists. Descartes was more concerned with general principles than the detailed work of observation.

Thought, from a consistent materialist position, is matter that thinks. It does not and cannot exist by itself, separate from matter. On this decisive question, Descartes adopted an unsatisfactory and inconsistent position, which ended up in all kinds of contradictions. The fundamental difference between thought and matter, he said, was that matter had extension in space, whereas thought, spirit and soul had none. This leads us straight to a dualist position, where thought and matter are diametrically opposed.

Despite its weaknesses, Descartes' philosophy had a notably progressive side. Its advances in science stimulated the growth of natural science in France. Philosophically, Descartes' idealism was overthrown by the prevailing materialist trend of the Enlightenment, though he influenced people like La Mettrie. But outside France his ideas were the starting point for two of the greatest philosophers of all, Spinoza and Leibniz.

Spinoza carried out a real revolution in philosophy by taking as his starting point the philosophy of Descartes, completely transforming it, and laying the basis for a genuinely scientific approach to nature. By not restricting himself to the narrow confines of empirical philosophy, he was able to transcend the limits of the mechanistic science of the day with great hypotheses.

Breaking with Descartes and his notion of a body without a soul and a soul without a body, Spinoza advanced the idea that body and mind are two attributes of one and the same thing. The universe is not composed of mind and matter, as alleged by Descartes' dualism. There is only a single Substance, which contains within itself all the attributes of thought and being. It is infinite and eternal, and possesses all the potential to give rise to the abundance of phenomena we see in the universe.

Spinoza gives this Substance the name of "God". But in reality, to make God equal to nature is to abolish God. In Spinoza's universe, infinite and eternal, and therefore uncreated and unbounded by heaven or hell, there is no room for a separate deity. Indeed, there is no room for anything whatsoever except Substance, which is just another way of saying nature.

Thus, in a strange way, the philosophy of Spinoza, despite its idealist appearance, is the real point of departure for materialism in the dialectical, that is, non-mechanical sense of the word. All that is necessary is to substitute the word 'matter' for 'God' and we get a perfectly consistent materialist position.

The monist views of Spinoza were challenged by his great contemporary, Gottfried Leibniz. An objective idealist, Leibniz nevertheless developed dialectics. The basis of Spinoza's philosophy was the single universal substance. Leibniz also starts from the notion of substance but defines it differently – as living activity, internal motion, and energy. Leibniz lays all the emphasis on the multiplicity of the universe, which for him is composed of an infinite number of substances which he calls 'monads'.

Despite its idealistic form, in Leibniz' philosophy there is the germ of a profound idea and a dialectical concept of nature, based on movement, infinite connections, change and evolution from a lower to a higher stage.

In summary, in the works of Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz, we see brilliant conclusions reached on the basis of the developments in science. These achievements, however, were held back by the fact that science at this stage remained subordinate to traditional philosophy.

### Study questions and prompts:

- What were the weaknesses in Descartes' philosophy?
- What was so revolutionary about Spinoza claiming that thought and matter are "one and the same thing, but expressed in two ways?"
- What is monism? Was Spinoza a monist? What about Marx and Engels?
- Explain how Spinoza was formally an idealist, yet came very close to a materialist position.
- Why did Feuerbach consider Leibniz "only half a Christian, atheist, or a cross between a Christian and a naturalist"?

## 9. The Dead End of Kantianism

Immanuel Kant marks the beginning of a turning point in philosophy. When Kant began his intellectual activity, German philosophy had reached a dead end. The brilliant flashes of inspiration that characterised the thought of Leibniz did not really add up to a coherent school of philosophy. Kant was repelled by metaphysical speculation, which attempted to solve the mysteries of the universe, not by looking at nature, but by endless abstract reasoning.

In his most important work, the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant attempts to resolve the problem of knowledge, which had caused a crisis in philosophy, the clearest expression of which was the subjective idealism of Berkeley and the scepticism of Hume. Kant asks what we can know, and how we can know it. This is one of the central questions of philosophy – the theory of knowledge or cognition ('epistemology').

Kant was the first one to distinguish between Understanding (*Verstand*) and Reason (*Vernunft*). Although it plays an important role, for Kant, Understanding is the lowest form of rational thinking. It takes things as they are, and bases itself on the registration and a superficial classification of the bare fact of existence. This is the basis of formal logic, and also 'common sense', which takes things to be just as they seem.

But the process of thinking does not stop at the level of understanding and immediate sense experience. In order to proceed towards a dialectical understanding we need the intervention of Reason, which goes beyond what is immediately given, breaks it down into its constituent parts, and puts it together again. This is the role of the Dialectic. Up until Kant, the art of dialectics had been virtually forgotten. It was regarded as mere trickery and sophism, the 'logic of illusion'. It was Kant's great achievement to restore dialectics to its rightful place in philosophy, as a higher form of logic.

In his 'antinomies', Kant shows the contradictions that exist in thought. Thus, starting with the laws of formal logic, and applying them to the world of experience, Kant precedes to show the contradictions which arise. Kant takes this as proof of the unknowability of the Thing-in-Itself, instead of seeing that the contradictions are objective, and present in the phenomena themselves.

Kant's merit was to submit the traditional forms of logic to a thoroughgoing criticism. His defect lay in his subjectivist position on the theory of knowledge. This was the source of his main weaknesses – ambiguity, inconsistency and agnosticism. In failing to make a clean break with the traditional logic, while exposing its limitations, Kant landed himself in all kinds of insoluble contradictions, which he left unresolved. The problem of the relation between subject and object (thought and being) was only finally resolved by Marx and Engels, who pointed out that, ultimately, all the problems of philosophy are resolved in practice.

### Study questions and prompts:

- What is the task of science? What did Kant have to say about this?
- The relation of subject-object was a central question in philosophy for centuries. How did Kant deal with this question?
- What is problematic about the whole concept of a priori knowledge? What did Engels write about this in *Anti-Dühring*?
- Why is objective idealism superior to subjective idealism?
- What is valuable about Kant's 'antinomies'?

## 10. Hegel's Revolution in Philosophy

For the modern reader, the writings of Hegel present considerable difficulties, largely stemming from the fact that Hegel was an idealist and that, therefore, the dialectic appears here in a mystified form. Here, historical development appears in an idealistic fashion, as the development of self-conscious mind (or spirit).

Nevertheless, it is possible to read Hegel, as Marx did, from a materialist point of view, bringing out the rational kernel of his thought. In *The Phenomenology*, 'self-consciousness' reveals its activity in many ways, through sensation and perception, as well as through ideas. In all this, it is possible to perceive the dim outline of real processes that take place in nature, society, and the human mind. In contrast with previous idealist philosophies, Hegel displayed a lively interest in the facts of nature, human nature, and human history. Behind his abstract presentation, there lies a wealth of knowledge of all aspects of history, philosophy and contemporary science.

What was valuable in Hegel's philosophy was not his system, but the dialectical method. Part of the reason why Hegel's writings are obscure is precisely that he tried to force the dialectic – which he developed brilliantly – into the straitjacket of an arbitrary idealist philosophical system. When it did not fit, he resorted to all manner of subterfuges and peculiar modes of reasoning which make the whole thing extremely convoluted and obscure.

Nevertheless, Hegel's great merit was to show the dialectical character of the development of human thought, from its embryonic phase, passing through a whole series of stages, and finally arriving at the highest stage of reason: the Notion. In Hegelian language, it is the process from being 'in itself' to being 'in and for itself', that is to say, from undeveloped, implicit being to developed and explicit being.

At the heart of this philosophy is a dynamic view of the universe; a view which deals with things as living processes, not dead objects; in their essential interrelations, not separate bits and

pieces, or arbitrary lists; as a whole, which is greater than the sum of the parts. Everything in reality consists of the unity of quantity and quality, which Hegel called Measure. Furthermore, there are not only changes of quantity to quality, but also the opposite process, where a change in quality causes a change in quantity. The critical points of transition from one state to another are expressed as nodal points in Hegel's nodal line of measurement.

The Doctrine of Essence is the most important part of Hegel's philosophy, because it is here that he explains the dialectic in detail. Human thought does not stop at what is immediately given in sense perception, but seeks to go beyond it and grasp the thing-in-itself. The contradiction which lies at the heart of all things is expressed as the idea of the unity of opposites. Dialectically, what seem to be mutually exclusive phenomena are actually inseparable.

Hegel did not set out to deny or demolish previous philosophy, but to summarise all previous schools of thought, and arrive at a dialectical synthesis. But in so doing, he pushed philosophy to its limits. Beyond this point, it was impossible to develop philosophy without transforming it into something different.

The epoch-making quality of Hegel's philosophy consisted in the fact that, by summing up the whole history of philosophy in such a comprehensive way, he made it impossible to proceed any further along the traditional philosophical lines. Secondly, the dialectical method, which he perfected, provided the basis for a whole new world outlook, one that did not confine itself to the analysis and criticism of ideas, but involved an analysis of the history of society and a revolutionary criticism of the existing social order.

Hegel's dialectic was brilliantly conceived, but ultimately deficient, because it was limited to the domain of thought. Nevertheless, it contained the potential for a major departure in thought, one that was to radically alter not just the history of philosophy, but that of the world.

### **Study questions and prompts:**

- Can you think of some examples of a process going from being 'in itself' to being 'in and for itself'?
- What does Hegel mean when he says that there is no such thing as true causality?
- Why is the first principle of dialectical thought absolute objectivity?
- How does Hegel overcome the contradiction between thought and being, between 'subject' and 'object'?
- What did the Russian radical democrat Herzen mean when he referred to the Hegelian dialectic as "the algebra of revolution"?
- Why did Engels describe Hegel's philosophy as the most "colossal miscarriage" in history?

## **11. From Hegel to Marx**

After the death of Hegel in 1831, his School inevitably disintegrated and fell to pieces, a victim of its own internal contradictions. The Hegelian School split into two wings – the right and left. One expression of this was Marxism, which led away from philosophy altogether (at least, philosophy as hitherto understood).

The early writings of the founders of scientific socialism clearly display their Hegelian origins. The real settling of accounts with Hegel can be traced to *The Holy Family*, *The German Ideology* and, particularly, the famous 'Theses on Feuerbach'. But Marxism did not spring, ready formed and armed, like Athena from the head of Zeus. Marx and Engels first had to pass through the preparatory school of the Hegelian Left.

The revolutionary implications of Hegel's philosophy were already implicit in the writings of the Left Hegelians, although in a confused and still idealist manner. In order to carry it any further, a complete overturn was required: the total abandonment of idealism and the transition to materialism. But the Left Hegelians were incapable of making that transition, and it was up to Marx and Engels to subject their philosophical ideas to a withering criticism. They demolished the subjective idealist conception of self-consciousness, explaining that sensuously perceived reality exists irrespective of the consciousness of the observer. They pointed out that the world continues to exist even when the subject is not present to perceive it.

This criticism of 'Critical Criticism' is systematically developed in *The Holy Family*, where Marx and Engels prove that Bauer's subjectivist philosophy merely carries to a logical end the basic idea of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*: the substance must rise to self-consciousness. Instead of these lifeless abstractions, the founders of scientific socialism proceeded from real, material men and women in society, real history, not the spirit world of idealist 'Self-Consciousness'.

However, it was the tragic figure of Ludwig Feuerbach who was the first one to challenge Hegel from a materialist standpoint. He decided to take an axe to the very roots of idealism by attacking religion itself. This he did in his book, *The Essence of Christianity*. The appearance of this epoch-making work in 1841 had revolutionary consequences. Feuerbach's materialist reading of religion was an important step forward, pointing the way towards a final break with idealism.

Feuerbach's ideas represented a great philosophical revolution and had a great impact on the young Marx and Engels. But ultimately, it failed. Feuerbach regarded human consciousness mainly as a reflection of nature, while also stressing that man came to comprehend his own nature and his relations with other men. However, his conclusions are extremely weak. His only alternative to the domination of religion is education, morality, love, and even a new religion. For Feuerbach, the central problem of alienation is religious, but this left completely out of account the real mainspring and origin of all alienation – the alienation of labour from itself in the form of surplus value in the process of capitalist production.

The problem with Feuerbach is that he merely said no to Hegel, negating his philosophy by simply denying it. His main mistake was to throw the baby out with the bath water. In rejecting Hegel's philosophy, he also rejected its rational core – dialectics. This explains the one-sided character of Feuerbach's materialism, which caused its downfall.

It required the genius of a Marx to discover the rational kernel that lay hidden in the pages of Hegel's *Logic* and apply it to the real, material world. He also explained that the deficiency of Feuerbach's "anthropological materialism" is that here the individual is conceived of as an abstract entity. But real human activity (labour) is not the activity of isolated individuals. It is necessarily collective in its very essence.

Precisely at this point we have arrived at an entirely new point of departure, a fundamental parting of the ways with all previous philosophy. It finds its expression in what is perhaps the greatest and most important of Marx's 'Theses on Feuerbach': the celebrated eleventh thesis – "The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point is to *change* it." Here philosophical thought – the highest, most sublime achievement of the human spirit – for the first time ceases to be merely a contemplative activity and becomes a formidable weapon in the struggle to change society.

As we reach the end of this work on the history of philosophy, it is worth highlighting that many people do not realise that the scope of Marxism extends far beyond politics and economics. At the heart of Marxism lies the philosophy of dialectical materialism. Unfortunately, the immense labour of writing *Capital* prevented Marx from writing a comprehensive work on the subject, as he had intended.

### **Study questions and prompts:**

- Why had Hegelianism reached a dead end?
- How do we as Marxists look at human thought? How does this compare with Hegel's Absolute Idea?
- Can Feuerbach be seen as a catalyst for the workers' movement? What is our appraisal of him?
- What trap did the Left Hegelians fall into when they tried to erect an alternative to Hegel? What false view of history did Marx and Engels explain that this trap ended up in?
- Why is the evolution of thought and science not an endless circle, but rather a spiral? Where does that leave Marxism and the "end of philosophy"?