

For argument's sake

THE poet Novalis wrote: "To the French, God has given the land, to the English the sea, to the Germans only the air." The lofty realms of metaphysics have long been a German province. And no term has given rise to denser Teutonic clouds than dialectic.

For the Greeks, dialectic was simply the art of reaching the truth by debate. But what if it seems that both sides can be proved? It is an elementary principle of logic that a proposition and its negation cannot both be true. Something has to give, but what? It is here that the German philosophers get to work.

There is, said the great Immanuel Kant, a "natural dialectic" in the mind. Left to ourselves, we tend to apply concepts beyond the limits of our experience, so we get propositions that can apparently be both proved and disproved. This is what gets philosophy a bad name. Keep within the limits of language and paradoxes won't arise.

Kant's successor, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, had other ideas. It isn't just when we go beyond experience that we find contradictions, he thought. When we consider the nature of experience itself we find paradoxes, too. What is consciousness? When we look inside ourselves we cannot find anything except what we are conscious of. But it is not nothing either.

MEANINGS DIALECTIC

Michael Rosen explains why history has not reached its final conclusion

Dialectic in philosophy is a good thing, not a bad one for Hegel. True dialectic does not retreat from contradictions. It rethinks the concepts which lead to them, to get to a new, positive way of thinking.

Common sense is the enemy. If only philosophers could rise above it, the paradoxes would drop away. Common sense takes the world to be made up of lots of independent things related only by external forces, which is fine (up to a point) for physics but hopeless for understanding consciousness, culture and history. So long as we go on trying to model our understanding of society on the idea of atoms then we will end up with something worse than just a wrong idea of the way society works. We will have a society that embodies that misconception and turns individuals into isolated particles.

But help was on its way, or so Hegel thought. History itself has its dialectic. Each form of culture

represents a single assertion in a vast dialectical argument whose conclusion will take us beyond the bad old ways of division and conflict to a new, integrated form of life and thought, the end of history. In fact, history must already have ended – the sign being that he, Hegel, was able to survey it from this higher perspective.

Saying that history has ended is a bit like prophesying the end of the world. What do you do for an encore? Hegel's only important successor had no doubts. Karl Marx thought that Hegel had made just one crucial mistake – he was an *idealist* and ultimately thought reality was nothing but a single all-embracing *idea*. For Marx, he couldn't have been more wrong.

And this explained why history hadn't ended. Hegel believed that society would automatically correspond to his own thought. Marx knew better. Philosophy can do no more than anticipate what has to be put into practice by force. Ideas do not govern history – dialectical struggle between competing classes does. "You may not be interested in the dialectic", said Leon Trotsky, "but the dialectic is interested in you."

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