

Opening text

In this short text, Engels returns to questions raised when he and Karl Marx were first establishing Marxism as its own independent philosophy separate from that of Hegel. The pair were preparing a manuscript on Marxism's opposition to German philosophy of the time, but ultimately this project was abandoned. Marx spent much of his remaining life supporting the workers of Europe in their various struggles as well as writing the volumes of Capital, so was unable to return to this topic and give us a clear explanation of the origins of Marxist philosophy. It is this tragedy which Engels steps forth to rectify in this brilliantly concise and substantive analysis.

Chapter 1

The first chapter of the text explores the truly revolutionary content of Hegel's rediscovery of dialectics, as well as his shortcomings on the question of materialism.

Engels starts from Hegel's famous statement: "All that is real is rational; and all that is rational is real." This does not mean that all things that exist are justifiable, as some have chosen to take it, but that whilst something is necessary, it is justified and can be explained by the conditions that create its necessity. As it exists it acts upon these conditions, developing them further and further, until they can no longer justify the thing, and it is no longer necessary. Thus the necessity of the thing brings about its own demise. Engels brilliantly turns the earlier statement on its head: "All that exists deserves to perish." Unfortunately it was this revolutionary aspect of Hegel's philosophy that the man himself was unable to fully grasp.

This discovery has revolutionary implications for philosophy itself. Philosophy seeks to find the most general truths for all people, and for all of time and space. Hegelian dialectics reveals that all that is 'real', is so only temporarily, making this a fool's errand for any one person. Instead the task of seeking truth can be successfully carried out only by a great many successive thinkers, each building upon the previous, and taking their

knowledge not from abstract reasoning, but from interacting with the real world. Hegel's own philosophical limitations prevented him from seeing this though, he instead believed the Hegelian system to be the ultimate and final form of philosophy.

This understanding also has revolutionary implications for history. The ruling class of any epoch has portrayed all that came before as 'one damned thing after another', a series of needless and horrific events that the new system has finally saved them from, and will keep them safe from forever. This too is revealed to be a sham. Any historical era was in fact necessary and justifiable at the time. But as the conditions developed, their necessity fell away, they became inexcusable and despotic. This applies no less to all present and future states of affairs. Here too Hegel falls short, as he sees his own historical epoch as the last one.

Feuerbach was able to advance beyond Hegel in some ways by returning dialectics to its materialist roots, however in doing so he lost much of the new content gained. It was necessary to bring forwards the great achievements of Hegel, but to surpass his shortcomings by working on a materialist basis. This was the burden that fell squarely on the shoulders of Karl Marx and Freidrich Engels.

- Which aspect of Hegel's philosophy is revolutionary, and which makes room for conservative views?
- "All that is real is rational." "All that exists deserves to perish." What do these statements mean? Do they contradict each other?
- Can we overcome all contradictions in our ideas? Isn't this what we should seek to do?
- If what is 'real' changes as time goes on, does this mean that anything is possible and there is no point in investigating? Is dialectics akin to relativism?
- Consider the current capitalist system. Is it 'rational' and 'real'? Do the massive protests and uprisings of the last few years have any

bearing on your answer? Would your answer be different during a time of great capitalist boom?

Chapter 2

The question of the relation of thinking to being has its origins in the pre-history of humanity, and today separates two definite philosophical camps. Materialists see the material world as primary, and the mind as only a product of it. Idealists see the material world as dependent on consciousness, or as a product of an eternal spirit or idea such as God.

What is the relation of our thoughts about the world to the world itself? Are we able to produce a correct reflection of reality in our minds? For Hegel the answer is yes, as what we cognize in the real world is precisely that which makes it an alienated form of the absolute idea, which is its true nature.

Some other idealists such as Kant say no. For them the outside world is foreign to us and we cannot know of it intimately, unlike knowledge of our own thoughts or of mathematics which we can know 'without observation'. If I see something from my own viewpoint, how can I know that its qualities come from the thing itself and are not features added by my own mind? This view is refuted in practice. When we act upon the world we can bring about by our own labour these same things we previously observed. The thing is no longer alien, the thing-in-itself becomes a thing for us.

As for Feuerbach's view, he evolved his philosophy into that of a materialist from a Hegelian. The absolute idea for him is not something that has existed before the world, but a surviving belief in the existence of a creator, and the world we live in is the only reality. Our consciousness is the product of the bodily organ known as the brain. Mind is the highest product of matter. Feuerbach rejects materialism in name alone. He lumps together materialism as a philosophical view and the crude materialist conceptions of the 18th century. This form of materialism is both mechanistic and metaphysical. It does not embrace change and so falls back into idealism.

Mechanical materialism requires an external impulse to give their system movement, for they assume matter to be inert. What is this external impulse, if not god?

Feuerbach unfortunately could not see the great scientific discoveries being tied together in a way that could give light to a dialectical materialist view of history and nature. This was due to his conditions, isolated in rural Germany. This is why he denounced all materialism. He could not see a path past the crude, mechanical, metaphysical form of materialism.

In addition, Feuerbach was unable to bring the social sciences into harmony with materialist philosophy, and so instead, like an idealist, he saw society as governed by ideas.

- What fundamental question do materialists and idealists disagree on?
- Can you be a materialist and religious? How about idealist and atheist?
- Can we form a correct understanding of the world around us? What happens to the Kantian thing-in-itself?
- Was Feuerbach a materialist?
- What problems plagued the materialism of the 18th century?

Chapter 3

In the third chapter Engels finally tells us about Feuerbach's own philosophy, which concerns religion and the affectionate relations between people. For him history can be progressed by a movement "only when it is rooted in the hearts of men". Historically, he says, it has been religion which has been rooted in men's hearts, but the truest inclinations of the heart are for authentic relations with other people, which Feuerbach considers the highest form of religion. In reality Feuerbach's materialist conception of nature is a leap beyond backwards religious ideas, Engels compares this to calling chemistry the highest form of alchemy. And whilst he does see

history as a process of material development, he sees it as the development of religion, which implies an idealist philosophy.

Feuerbach is interested in the moral component of human relations, and nothing more. His moral views start from a concrete position, from man. Unfortunately he takes man in the abstract, the distilled essence of many men rather than any particular man. In doing this he separates man from his conditions, he takes the essential qualities of man to be internal ones, not ones that are determined by the material environment he must survive in. In this there is no room for historical development of mankind's nature. He makes out relations between man and man to be 'pure', as we supposedly find in 'sex love'. As a result the moral relations between man and man are ahistorical and fixed, they are relations between abstract, empty individuals. He cannot account for the myriad and changing material conditions which in reality determine the various social relations that develop in history. This is a huge step back from Hegel who identified the different social spheres as having different moral character due to the relations therein.

His actual moral views are relatively simple. Man has an innate urge towards happiness. In order to satisfy this urge successfully he will do well to be restrained, to not overdo it and eat into his future happiness, and also to be kind, to not infringe on others' happiness lest they infringe on his. This is rather banal and exposes very little.

Feuerbach's morality imagines that the things we want are already at our fingertips, and we must only be careful in how we enjoy them. This is wrong, to achieve happiness we must venture into the world. We must socially labour for food and everything else we need, we must have others to converse and make love with.

And regarding infringing on the happiness of others, this is very much dependent on the social context. Is the master careful not to infringe on the potential happiness of his slave, for fear of his own happiness being snatched away? Not at all, the master relies on his domination of the slave

to gain access to his material wants. By dealing with man in the abstract, Feuerbach's materialism finds no moral end other than the traditional ideals of kindness and moderation.

- What did Feuerbach see as the driving force of history? Why?
- What is the materialist component of Feuerbach's morality? With what error does he betray this materialism?
- What is good and bad for Feuerbach?
- Consider what Engels tells us about the Feuerbachian morality of the stock market. How do you think this same morality would see wage labour, or bourgeois democracy?

Chapter 4

The final chapter deals with the philosophy of Marx and Engels, with the previously discussed philosophers as a backdrop. With Marxism, materialism is for the first time carried out consistently across all domains. Rather than simply reject Hegel as Feuerbach did, Marx brings forwards the revolutionary philosophy of dialectics and sets it upon a material base, turning Hegel's philosophy from its head and onto its feet. As all development can now be explained by the dialectical relations between material phenomena, there is no longer a need for an impulse from outside to set the material world up, be that God, logic, justice, or indeed affection.

Unlike the old materialism of the 18th century, Marxism sees not only objects but processes. Everything is always coming into being and passing away, it is at once itself and not itself. Through this process all things develop, often in one direction for a while followed by periods of retrogression, but nonetheless development does take place. This ends the need for philosophers to dictate eternal truths, as there are no such truths to grasp for, instead the understanding of the world's development can be advanced only through positive science combined with a dialectical understanding.

A similar advance is made in understanding historical science. Society differs from the rest of the natural phenomena only in that it involves conscious actors. The wills of the actors all play a role in the development of society, though not generally in the way they imagine. Though they may be conscious of themselves they are not necessarily conscious of the laws that govern them, and so the effect of consciously chasing certain goals is often not what they had imagined. If we are conscious of the laws that govern society, we can act within them in a way that truly brings about the goals we aim for, making Marxism the first conscious philosophy. The philosophy of Marxism is conscious of its origins in the material struggle of the working class, and conscious of its purpose of achieving the proletarian revolution.

- Has science eliminated the need for philosophy? If not what remains?
- Did Marx turn Hegelian philosophy on its head? Or right way up?
- Why was the German working class the inheritor of classical German philosophy?