[Talk delivered at the International Marcuse Society meeting in Toronto, 2017]

Marcuse's Dialectic

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This is how Marcuse began his lecture at the famous "Dialectics of Liberation" conference in London in July, 1967:

> "I believe that all dialectic is liberation…and not only liberation in an intellectual sense, but liberation involving the mind and the body, liberation involving entire human existence.... Now in what sense is all dialectic liberation? It is liberation from the repressive, from a bad, a false system — be it an organic system, be it a social system, be it a mental or intellectual system: liberation by forces developing within such a system. That is a decisive point. And liberation by virtue of the contradiction generated by the system, precisely because it is a bad, a false system. I am intentionally using here moral, philosophical terms, values: 'bad', 'false'. For without an objectively justifiable goal of a better, a free human existence, all liberation must remain meaningless — at best, progress in servitude. I believe that in Marx too socialism *ought* to be. This 'ought' belongs to the very essence of scientific socialism. It *ought* to be; it is, we may almost say, a biological, sociological and political necessity. It is a biological necessity in as much as a socialist society, according to Marx, would conform with the very *logos* of life, with the essential possibilities of a human existence, not only mentally, not only intellectually, but also organically." (Marcuse, 1968: 175-6)

The lectures now published in *Transvaluation of Values and Radical Social Change"* show how Marcuse intended these words to be interpreted both philosophically and politically in the decisive decade of the rise and fall of the New Left.

Like many of Marcuse's lectures in this period, the text must be read at two levels. Superficially, the argument is one that any listener can understand: we live in a bad society that ought to be replaced by a better one. The remainder of the lecture, considered in this light, details some of the problems and proposed solutions. But at a deeper level there is a lot going on that would be difficult for listeners untrained in philosophy to fully appreciate. This mattered to Marcuse and there are lectures such as the one on "The Rationality of Philosophy" that attempt to explain those depths to ordinary listeners.

The passage I have quoted hints at that deeper meaning with the words "false system," "objectively justifiable," "ought, "*logos* of life." In what sense can a "system" be not just bad but "false?" How can values be "objectively" justified? And what sense does it make to associate an "ought" with "scientific socialism" and with a "*logos"*?

Let's begin with the question of objective values. Marcuse supports values which, with one exception, are banal: peace, love, freedom, but also an emancipatory rationality capable of justifying resistance to oppression and building a rich society free from competitive strife. Who can dislike peace, love and freedom? And what has rationality to do with them? The bare statement of these values is insufficient, both practically and philosophically. If we don't know how to realize them nor how to justify them philosophically we are not much advanced. For Habermas and his followers, this unflattering evaluation of Marcuse's program goes without saying.

But is it fair? I don't think so. From very early Marcuse intended an unusual ontological

justification of values. That justification was based at first explicitly on a phenomenological interpretation of the basic thesis of historical materialism, later supplemented by a largely compatible reading of Hegel and Freud. This is what I will try to explain in the remainder of this paper.

Here is a particularly rich statement of Marx's thesis: "The mode of production must not be viewed simply as reproduction of the physical existence of individuals. Rather it is a definite form of their activity, a definite way of expressing their life, a definite *mode of life.* As individuals express their life, so they are" (Marx, 1967: 409). Such ideas are usually interpreted deterministically, as showing the causal dependence of social life on the means of production. But Marcuse sensed that Marx was trying to make a philosophically more interesting argument concerning the nature of human existence.

Human beings belong *essentially* to a world through their interactions with nature in production. This essential belonging is not only causal and material but also involves the meaning of what it is to be human, to participate in a certain way of being.[1] As Marcuse writes in *One-Dimensional Man,* "When technics becomes the universal form of material production, it circumscribes an entire culture; it projects a historical totality–a 'world' (Marcuse, 1964: 154).[2] The inseparable bond between human being and world contradicts the Cartesian assumptions of modern philosophy and opens philosophical reflection to the ontological alternatives proposed by Hegel and Heidegger. In that framework, values appear as dimensions of being rather than as merely subjective opinions.

This interpretation of Marcuse's deeper thought is implicit in his idea of a *logos* of life. In his talk on "The Rationality of Philosophy" Marcuse argues that philosophy arises from the problems and contradictions of the philosopher's *Lebenswelt.* This German word means literally the "world of life." It was introduced into philosophy by one of Marcuse's early teachers, Edmund Husserl, the founder of the phenomenological tradition. The *Lebenswelt* is the world of lived experience, what Marcuse calls "unpurged, unmutilated experience," in contrast with the restricted notion of experience that underlies the natural sciences (13).[3] Experience in Marcuse's sense includes more than the empirical facts. It is fraught with values that are sensed along with the given. The *logos* of life thus pertains to an experienced world which, Marcuse argues, consists not only in facts but also in the valuative potentials that drive its historical development.

But what has the *logos* to do with life? The Greek concept of the *logos* signifies discourse, reason, but also the rationale of human activity, especially technical activity. In Plato's *Gorgias,* for example, the authentic craftsman is said to be guided by a *logos,* a meaning or purpose. The doctor is guided by the *logos* in the form of health, and so on. The *logos* is not simply an extrinsic end of a neutral means but shapes the means internally. Every tool and gesture of the craftsman is inhabited by a purpose that belongs to the nature of the craft. Neutral means indifferent to any proper end are employed by fakers, such as orators and make-up artists, who profit from simulacra of the achievements of moral legislation and healthy exercise (Plato, 1952).

On this understanding of the *logos*, it is a normative principle, an "ought," that transcends the given facts. Marcuse describes this relation between "is" and "ought" with his concept of a

[1] This unusual interpretation of historical materialism is explicitly developed in Marcuse's early essay on Dilthey (Marcuse, 1978: 480 n7, 483-485).
[2] This comment appears in a discussion provoked by Heidegger's philosophy of technology. The importance of this connection will become clear in the course of this paper.
[3] References to texts included in this volume are to page numbers only.

two dimensional ontology, a first dimension of empirical facts and a second valuative dimension. The transcendence of the second dimension is not absolute; rather, the "ought" is to be understood as a potential of the given facts achievable through appropriate means. Perhaps the original model of such a potential is organic growth. Living things realize a potential contained within themselves as they develop. That potential is real even before it is realized. In this sense potential can be said to be objective. In a traditional culture craft is regulated by culturally secured models, taken to be objective. There the realization of a design resembles growth aided by human intervention. In a modern society, potential is neither natural nor traditional but must be projected by the collective imagination.

Human beings are the one living thing the development of which is contingent to some extent on their own efforts. The realization of human potential is not simply spontaneous but implies a practice of some sort that can be exercised more or less skillfully. The human being must realize its own essence through its practice. Practice is inherently social and as such connected to the wider world and to nature. Its consequences are called "history."

But historical practice is not a craft. What sense does it make to think of human life as moving toward an objective end of some sort? What distinguishes "potential" from any old change, including changes everyone would condemn? These are the truly difficult questions that arise from Marcuse's ontological approach. To answer them, we need a better idea of what he means by dialectics.

Marcuse appears to subscribe to the simple Marxist schema–thesis, antithesis, synthesis: capitalism gives rise to internal contradictions and is transcended in socialism. But underlying this schema something much more complicated and interesting is going on. The fundamental problem has to do with essence. What is it and how is it implicated in truth and falsity? Marcuse treats this problem in his various discussions of Hegel.

Marcuse sees Hegel as having revolutionized the inherited Aristotelian conception of essence. In Aristotle the essence inhabits the thing in some unexplained way as its *telos*. Each substance has an essence through which it preserves itself in contact with an environment to which it relates only externally, accidentally. Hegel rejects Aristotle's metaphysical postulate of an internal *telos* behind appearances. Instead, he seeks an explanation in the relations between the parts of the thing–its "appearances"–and its relation to its milieu, its world, which it must assimilate to itself to persist in being. The structure of appearances must yield the concept of essence through tensions and gaps that both enable the thing to reproduce itself through accidental changes, and also give rise to internal sources of essential development.[4]

Hegel thus saves Aristotle's central idea: with his concept of "essence" potential is definitely bound to the nature of things rather than appearing as an extrinsic goal imposed by a subject. But in doing so Hegel binds the thing to its appearances and its environment: the Aristotelian concept of substance as independent entity only accidentally related to its appearances and other substances is overthrown (Marcuse, 1987: 98-99).

Marcuse interprets Hegel's concept of essence initially in terms of Heidegger's concept of "being-in-the-world." Heidegger operated with a clear distinction between meaning and causality, made possible by the development of German philosophy in the late 19th century. Dilthey and the neo-Kantians contrasted scientific models of explanation with various forms of hermeneutic interpretation. Heidegger's concept of "world" was a hermeneutic construction, not a collection of facts, but a structure of meaning. The subject, Heidegger argued, could not be conceived along Cartesian lines as a pure consciousness, ontologically independent of material

[4] These ideas are presented in both Marcuse's books on Hegel (1987; 1963).

reality. It was essentially engaged with the objects in its world which Heidegger described as a system of references–meanings–among tools instrumentalized by the subject as it realized its existence in action. In contrast with the neo-Kantians, Heidegger interpreted these meanings as lived, enacted in practice, rather than as purely cognitive contents. In this way he transformed the distinction between subjective meaning and objective reality by introducing a third "existential" term: the acting subject-object of lived experience (Heidegger, 1982: 175) .

The unity implied in "being-in-the-world" includes the human subject and object in a larger whole. That whole is not merely conceptual, but rather its subjective and objective phases belong together in the essential relation of enacted meaning and understanding. That correlation is what makes the unity of subject and object in being-in-the-world intelligible. Where causally related things stand in accidental relations, understanding and meaning require each other to make sense. True, some philosophers would argue that meaning is simply a subjective posit of a subject, but Heidegger rejects that notion. In his phenomenological language, human existence "discloses" a world of meanings to which it essentially belongs.

Marcuse interprets Hegel's concept of essence in these phenomenological terms. I will follow him by using the concept of "world" he derived from Heidegger in his own Hegelian declension.[5] According to Marcuse, Hegel considers life as a general ontological model. The living thing cannot be adequately understood without reference to its world. The subject is not wholly separate from its environment, but consists in a certain organization that crosses the division between it and its objects. The subject, for example, the human being, and the object, its milieu, are essentially joined together by labor in a complex that is necessary to both. The relation is not accidental, as we usually conceive the relation between physical objects, but internal, implicating the existence of the related terms in each other.

Life thus has a structure similar to one essential aspect of world: it exists as a unity of subject and object, organism and environment, constructed around the subject. Marcuse introduces the example of a tree: "It is the tree *itself* (what we want to designate as its substantiality) which moves itself across the range of its conditions and not the conditions which move themselves *around* the tree" (Marcuse, 1987: 99). This description conforms with Heidegger's notion of life, based on his ontological revision of Jacob von Uexküll's famous distinction between "*Umwelt*" and "*Innenwelt*." "The organism is not something independent in its own right which then adapts itself. On the contrary, the organism adapts a particular environment *into* it in each case, so to speak. The organism can adapt a particular environment into itself only insofar as openness for…belongs to its essence…" (Heidegger, 1995: 264).[6]

In Hegel, Marcuse argues, the subject and its objects are not things in the usual sense but are "bifurcations" in a unifying activity that encompasses them both. Marcuse concludes that this "original unity…first makes this world into the world, and…allows it to happen as the world" (Marcuse, 1987: 13). Essence describes this self-reproducing unity which preserves itself through change by realizing its potentials and in so doing "appears," that is constitutes itself as objective, meaningful.

All this is quite abstract, but it becomes concrete when Marcuse has the opportunity to read and reflect on Marx's *Manuscripts* of 1844. Already Hegel's theory of labor suggests a more concrete version of being-in-the-world than Heidegger's phenomenological description. With

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[5] For my interpretation of the relation between Marcuse and Heidegger, see (Feenberg, 2005) and (Feenberg, 2013).
[6] Von Uexküll's innovation was to consider the organism and its niche as essentially related. The organism does not adapt in Darwinian fashion to the natural environment in general but rather selects its environment, its world, from the infinite stuff of nature.

Marx a new element is added: need. The subject and object stand in a relation of need to its satisfactions. This relation, Marx says, is "ontological," "essential." "Man's feelings, passions, etc., are not merely anthropological characteristics in the narrower sense, but are true *ontological* affirmations of being (nature)" (Marx 1963, 189). The unity of subject and object is now mediated by the concrete motive force of the production and reproduction of the "mode of life."

Marx's introduction of necessary mutual dependency into the relation of human beings to their world implies a norm that encompasses both. The necessary relation between subject and object can be more or less realized. Where the relation is fully realized, the human being will be able to express its potential, its essence. Alienation blocks that realization by distorting the relation of human beings to nature and to their own nature. In an alienated society the human being is mutilated as are those dimensions of its milieu that depend on it.

But how does Marx hold together the two phases unified in his version of "world?" Don't human beings and their needs stand in a purely accidental relation to the means of satisfaction? What is the *essential* connection between labor and raw materials?

It is only by interpreting need on the model of existential understanding that this unity can be maintained. Marx needs a phenomenological distinction between existential meaning and objective existence that cannot be clearly formulated in the philosophy of his time. He comes close, however, with a wholly original concept of sensation. The human being is a sensuous being for Marx. Sensation is the means through which the laboring human being encounters things as objects of labor. The senses are thus "theoreticians in practice," by which Marx seems to mean that they are able to extract meaning from their objects (Marx, 1963: 160). Indeed, meaning is implied in the fact of labor, which encounters the world not immediately but through its potential to satisfy needs. Marx argues further that the world revealed to the senses of liberated human beings will be a richer and more beautiful world than the one available to the alienated participants in the capitalist system. In other words, the senses disclose meaning in an anticipation of phenomenology.

In his 1932 review of Marx's *Manuscripts* Marcuse offers an interpretation of Marx's concept of "species being" that further develops the distinction of meaning and existence implied but not explicitly formulated by Marx in 1844. Marcuse writes that human beings are species beings insofar as they can recognize the "species" of beings, that is, insofar as they are capable of formulating universal concepts. "*Labor*, as the specifically human 'life activity,' has its roots in this 'species being' of man; it presupposes man's ability to relate to the "general" aspects of objects and to the possibilities contained therein" (Marcuse 2005, 96). This is the meaning of Marx's notion that the senses are practical theoreticians: the universal as well as the particular, the given as well as the possible, is first revealed to sensation.

In the lecture on "The Rationality of Philosophy," Marcuse formulates these ideas through the exoteric concept of man as a rational animal. He writes that philosophy pursues a "*truth* [that] is the right theory of man and nature as the *theory of the human universe*…[T]he philosophical quest is for the conditions under which man can *best fulfill his specifically human faculties* and aspirations. These conditions are *objective* ones because there is such a thing as 'man' being a (potentially) rational animal finding himself under circumstances…which allow the development of general concepts with *general validity*" (3). In sum, man and world form a unified whole which in its optimal configuration would permit the realization of man's rational essence, his (and her!) capacity to formulate universals and thereby to relate to "possibilities," potentialities, both human and material.

Here we have the ultimate ontological basis of Marcuse's rejection of a "false system" in the

interests of an “objectively justifiable” “ought.” It is reason itself which is at issue and this is why truth enters into the evaluation of societies. The configuration of the unified whole, the “system” in which human beings encounter nature either favors or obstructs the spread of rationality as the highest potential of human beings.

Why is rationality so important? Not because Marcuse entertains an intellectual’s love of pure thought, but because rationality is the name given by the philosophical tradition to the free encounter with the essence of things, with that which in the subject and object transcends their given form as instinct and fact. Thus “Reason and Freedom are identical” (7).

Marcuse argues that the defense of reason belongs to “the existential meaning of truth” (Marcuse, 2005: 51). Truth is not simply a cognitive fact but engages the subject of knowledge morally, existentially. To the extent that the system blocks potentialities for progress in rationality which could be realized on the basis of its own achievements, it can be judged bad, “false” at this existential level. This is the case with advanced capitalism. It arbitrarily restricts human development long after the elimination of the scarcities that at one time made the full development of rationality the exclusive property of a small elite. A radical change in the configuration of the whole is imperatively required to realize its potentialities.

To complete the story we would have to consider the Freudian reinterpretation of Marx’s concept of need in the later Marcuse. The turn toward Freud introduces a historicized notion of biological drives into Marcuse’s version of something like a “being-in-the-world” (Marcuse, 1969: 10 n.1). Indeed, Marcuse explicitly enlists Freud in his ontological approach, arguing that "it seems permissible to give [Freud's] conception a general ontological meaning" (Marcuse 1966, 125). Marcuse now considers the erotic relation to reality as a primordial disclosure. It privileges the imagination over the merely given facts. Nature now appears as a realm of possibilities corresponding essentially to the human need for beauty, peace and love. And, following Marx’s example in his discussion of need, Marcuse grants these values the form and meaning of an enlarged concept of rationality.

All these various versions of a unified “being-in-the-world” contain an implicit normative aspect. To the extent that the configuration of the subject-object relation supports the fulfillment of human needs, it is valid, “true.” Toward the end of his life, Marcuse discovered in environmentalism a scientific analogue to this proposition. The unity of human being and nature is not only philosophical validated in experience, but scientifically validated by ecology. The aggressive struggle to dominate nature destroys “forces in nature which have been distorted and suppressed — forces which could support and enhance the liberation of man” (Marcuse 1972, 66). Theoretical and practical reason are truly united in the struggle to save the environment as a human *Lebenswelt.*

> Violation and suppression [of nature] then means that human action against nature, man’s interrelation with nature, offends against certain objective *qualities* of nature– qualities which are essential to the enhancement and fulfillment of life. And is is on such objective grounds that the liberation for man to his own humane faculties is linked to the liberation of nature–that “truth” is attributable to nature not only in a mathematical but also in an existential sense. The emancipation of man involves the recognition of such truth in things, in nature (Marcuse, 1972: 69).

Marcuse’s politics follows directly from his normative conception of essence. The normativity appears in the very structure of experience. Potential is not just a theoretical construct but appears negatively in revulsion at violence and destruction and positively in utopian hopes. Experience is thus more than apprehension of the given facts, the so-called

"primary qualities." Marcuse rejects the distinction of primary and secondary qualities. The "unpurged" everyday experience of the *Lebenswelt* makes no such distinction. Value and fact are merged in everyday perception, not sharply separated as in the scientific reconstruction of experience for the purpose of research. Accordingly, the philosophical *logos* "is *theoretical and practical Reason* in one" (10).

But this conclusion reveals the fragility of Marcuse's argument. It is not ungrounded as some of his critics have argued, but its ground is ambiguous, appealing on the one hand to experience while on the other hand positing normative perceptions not necessarily available in a "false" society. This ambiguity is developed in its concrete political implications throughout the other lectures collected in *Transvaluation of Values and Radical Social Change.* The lectures reflect the particular situation of the New Left at the time. I want to comment briefly in conclusion on the last of these lectures, delivered in 1977.

I said at the outset that Marcuse's critics complained, among other things, that he failed to trace a path to the realization of his utopian goals. Indeed, this is true, and the lecture of 1977 is quite tentative in its practical suggestions. Although the New Left had faded as a mobilizing force, Marcuse still insists that the qualitative change it sought remains a valid goal. In fact by 1977 critical consciousness is much more widespread than before the rise of the New Left so in that sense the struggles of the 1960s can be considered partially successful. Furthermore, increasing numbers of individuals are disillusioned with the standard consumer satisfactions. New needs have begun to emerge in a broadening mass base for change, no longer confined to the industrial working class, but still far too small to overthrow the system.

The reaction of the ruling class to the challenge represented by the New Left has taken the form of what Marcuse calls the "preventive counter-revolution" (Marcuse, 1972). This involves intensified economic oppression, surveillance and control. It continues to this day. For Marcuse, it testifies to the fact that the ruling class feels itself to be more vulnerable than in the past. In this context the Left can have an impact through struggles for reform the system must tolerate and try to absorb to preserve itself. The question, then, is whether at some point the accumulation of radical struggles and reforms can provoke a general crisis leading to qualitative change. Marcuse argues that "Today reforms have a radical potential in the face of the narrowing limits of concessions" (55). He then goes on to list a number of reform movements such as the feminist and environmental movements, which might destabilize the system.

At this point I must register my own doubts about Marcuse's strategy. In fact the limits of concessions have not narrowed since the 1960s as he claimed, but despite various economic problems and crises, they seem to have enlarged. This wholly unexpected sequel to the decline of the New Left has given it a remarkable afterlife. Major changes in the social world continue to be motivated by the sense of vulnerability in the ruling elites Marcuse noticed early.

The emerging constellation is one in which public pressure has consequences, not always of course, but often enough that the trajectory of the system has been significantly altered from below. Consider, for example, the evolving changes in the roles of women, the broad acceptance of homosexuality, the success of environmentalism in modifying corporate strategies in many domains. Together various social movements have transformed our social life, but always within the framework of the capitalist system. The point of breakdown is never reached. At the same time, the ambiguity of social institutions is constantly increased as they are layered with public demands for new values while continuing to serve the requirements of profit making enterprise. We live within the resulting paradox: growing economic inequality goes along with progress in the recognition of human beings and nature.

Marcuse believed the real struggle was extra-parliamentary. At best he thought a liberal or Eurocommunist government might yield to social struggle for goals surpassing the narrow pragmatic ambitions of conventional politicians. Today we can verify this basic claim even though the system has not come under serious threat. Protest movements and struggles change the political agenda and motivate significant social change that otherwise would never have happened. But these movements and struggles are increasingly disorganized and without revolutionary ambitions. This suggests the need for a very different kind of strategic thinking, not based on the model of revolution derived from the French and Russian examples. Marcuse seems to have been moving in that direction toward the end of his life without fully realizing where that would lead. We still do not know.

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