

CONTRADICTIONS ARE THEORETICAL, NEITHER MATERIAL NOR PRACTICAL. ON DIALECTICS IN TONG, MAO AND HEGEL

ASGER SØRENSEN

Department of Education, Aarhus University

Abstract

Tong Shijun holds a concept of dialectics which can also be found in Mao's writings and in classical Chinese philosophy. Tong, however, is ambivalent in his attitude to dialectics in this sense, and for this reason he recommends Chinese philosophy to focus more on formal logic. My point will be that with another concept of dialectics Tong can have dialectics without giving up on logic and epistemology. This argument is given substance by an analysis of texts by Mao, Tong and Hegel.

1. Introduction

One of China's finest contemporary philosophers, Tong Shijun, keynote speaker in Seoul at the World Congress of Philosophy in 2008 (Tong 2009), has been so daring as to employ the idea of dialectics in the titles of two of his early books, *Chinese Philosophy: Practical Reason and Dialectical Logic* from 1989 and *The Dialectics of Modernization. Habermas and the Chinese Discourse of Modernization* from 2000; the latter in fact is his PhD thesis from Bergen 1994. Now, this could simply be a result of youthful enthusiasm for catchy book titles, but actually Tong both uses the word dialectics frequently and discusses dialectics at various occasions in these texts. Thus, since dialectics ranks among the most important ideas in philosophy, it seems worth looking a bit more closely into the matter.

Dialectics is very much present when you read Tong, so you cannot help being reminded of it constantly. However, it was precisely because of this that I was puzzled, since in his actual way of thinking and discussing there was not much that called my attention to dialectics. Instead this apparent contradiction caught my attention. In other words, if Tong's way of analysing and discussing

is dialectical, then it is dialectical in another sense than the one I have become accustomed to. And here it must already be made clear where I get my idea of dialectics from, since this, of course, conditions my verdict. Dialectics to me first of all appears in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, in Horkheimer and Adorno's writings, in Marcuse's, in Gadamer's, and in the writings of Kojève and Bataille (Sørensen 2003; 2007; 2010, 138–40, 308–10; 2012a, 261–68; 2012b).

Of course, one's notion of dialectics can be based on many sources, and this is not the first time I encounter conflicting concepts of dialectics.¹ So there might just be two different concepts of dialectics at play, and Tong might simply mean something different by dialectics than I do. Whereas I was formed philosophically by critical theory and analytical philosophy in a Danish philosophy department, Tong was raised intellectually during the Cultural Revolution by the thoughts of Mao Zedong, and the latter based got his concept of dialectics on yet other sources. This has naturally given Tong an idea of dialectics that is quite different from mine.

Furthermore, another and more general thing also struck me as curious. In both of the books mentioned Tong claims that classical Chinese philosophy did not develop logic in the same formal sense as Aristotle and later Greek thinkers. I have been raised to think that the universalist criteria of logic are crucial for Hegel's dialectics, and when Tong mentioned that Chinese dialectical thinking sometimes degenerates into "romantic nonsense" or "sophistry" (Tong 1989, 85–87), I therefore immediately related this to the alleged negligence in Chinese traditional thought concerning the development of formal logic.

This leads to one further point, namely that I suspect that this is the reason why Tong has an ambivalent relationship to dialectics in the sense, which he himself understands it. Even though Tong apparently uses the word dialectics approvingly in his book titles, he is very sceptical about dialectics as the ideal of philosophical thinking. To Tong, some of the so-called dialectical thinkers have simply degenerated into "mysticism or sophism" (Tong 1989, 10). Nevertheless, Tong obviously appreciates dialectics, even in his own understanding. He thus recognises that dialectics plays a huge role in the Chinese tradition of thought, and not just in Mao, but also in Dao. At the very same time, however, he seems to be sceptical towards the philosophical fruitfulness of dialectics as it has developed in Chinese thinking.

I suspect that this ambivalence is precisely the reason why Tong is so preoccupied with analysing dialectics in Chinese thought as well as in Chinese social

reality. I further suspect – and this is my hypothesis – that his ambivalence must be linked to the understanding of dialectics, which he has inherited from his philosophical predecessors.

If this is the case, then it is with good reason that Tong has drifted towards a kind of transcendentalism inspired by neo-Kantians like some of the logical positivists, Popper (Tong 1989, 142), and especially the late Habermas (Tong 2000). Nevertheless, given this reconstruction, a challenge to Tong could be to argue that his concept of dialectics is shaped by Mao, Lenin and classical Chinese thinking, that their concept of dialectics is not the only one available for philosophy, and that Tong therefore does not have to be so sceptical about dialectics as such. My point is thus that I think Tong as a critical theorist would be better off with a philosophical concept of dialectics as the one I was raised with.

This paternalist analysis is offered as a gift to Tong in the most classical sense, namely as a donation of something that the recipient may not know he needs, and therefore it is a gift that he may not actually want, when he discovers what it contains. As such, the donation is thus an expression of both generosity and antagonism.²

In short, I will argue the following:

- (a) Mao's conception of dialectics is mainly practical and therefore susceptible to theoretical critique.
- (b) The Chinese concept of dialectics from Dao to Mao is mainly causal and material, i.e. not logical or epistemological in the sense in which these words are most commonly understood by mainstream academic philosophy.
- (c) Tong accepts such a causal and material conception of dialectics when he criticises dialectics, and he is sceptical about dialectics in this sense as an ideal of philosophical thinking.
- (d) Tong, however, draws the wrong conclusions about dialectics, since we actually in Hegel's *Phenomenology*, classical critical theory and Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics have a much stronger concept of dialectics, which does not succumb as easily to theoretical critique as the practical and materialist concept of dialectics criticised and used by Tong.

My conclusion is that we both can and should maintain dialectics as the ideal of philosophical thinking, and maybe even of scientific thinking, and that Tong as a critical theorist would be wise to accept this. To substantiate these points I

will first focus on one of the primary sources of Tong's philosophy: the dialectical materialism of Mao Zedong (2). Then I will analyse Tong's ontological conception of dialectics, present an epistemological alternative and claim that Tong with his norms for science should take up the latter (3). Finally I will argue that this discussion is not about East versus West, but about politics. The problem is that the dialectical materialism is much more reconcilable with the dynamics of desire and greed than the dialectics of absolute knowledge (4).

2. Mao's idea of dialectical materialism is mainly practical

I must admit that I am by no means a Mao scholar. I may therefore have misunderstood a lot. Nevertheless, let me introduce a concept of dialectics that arises from my reading of some of Mao's key texts. To get easy access to the core of Mao's thinking, I have consulted a Danish friend who was a dedicated Maoist in his youth. According to my friend, in the heyday of European Maoism two texts were considered essential, namely "On practice" and "On contradiction"; hence, I will focus on these texts in the next two subsections (2.1 and 2.2). Both texts date from 1937, just as both are manuscripts for speeches given to students of the Communist party at the military and political college in the city of Yan'an, the capital of Red China, after the long march and until the revolution finally succeeded in 1949.

2.1. The perspective of a military commander must be practical in a pragmatic sense

Mao is thus addressing young party members who are about to go to war, not professional philosophers. Still, the subjects addressed include what they as party members should know about essential philosophical matters such as practice, contradictions and dialectics. Given the context, it is understandable that Mao issues a general warning against developing into classical book worshippers ([1930] 2007, 44–45). Mao recognises that knowledge is important, but he shows no signs of wanting to discuss epistemology proper. According to Tong, this was also the general attitude of traditional Chinese culture (Tong 1989, 165), and, as Tong notes, it is "extremely difficult, even impossible" to abandon one's cultural basis (1989, 77). Tong emphasises that after the death of Mao Deng Xiaoping said that "Practice is the only criterion of testing truth", and in general his idea was to learn "everything useful" "from capitalism" (Tong 1989, 166).

Knowledge in the classical philosophical and scientific sense does not appear to be very important in China, neither for Mao nor for his predecessors or successors. Thus, recognising the importance of knowledge does not lead Mao to claim or search for criteria for the validity of knowledge, as Plato, Hume, Kant or Popper would want them, and there is no mention of principled scepticism either. For Mao, “man’s knowledge is verified only, when he achieves the anticipated results in the process of social practice (material production, class struggle, or scientific experiment)” (Mao [1937a] 2007, 54–55). Expressing himself in this manner, Mao’s concept of knowledge is practical in a pragmatic sense and similar to the one we know from Dewey ([1938] 1970), and according to Tong, Dewey was actually widely read in China in Mao’s formative years (Tong 1989, 117). Tong also emphasises the similarity between pragmatism and the traditional Chinese emphasis on “practical rationality” (1989, 130); hence, the practical bias of Mao’s thinking could be rooted both in his own cultural basis and in Dewey’s pragmatism. Whether this was the case or not, Mao’s perspective appears to be practical in the Deweyan sense, and as Tong rightly mentions, Dewey cannot distinguish between technical and practical problems (Tong 2000, 245).

One could even say that Mao’s concept of knowledge is pre-critical, since he simply talks about things, essence and causal processes of cognition (Mao [1937a] 2007, 55–56). Some of this resembles what Aristotle might say, and apparently Hsun Tzu, who is often called China’s Aristotle, seems to be saying something similar on the subject of things (Tong 1989, 90–91). Mao does not seem to distinguish between the ontological and epistemological aspects of experience and knowledge. He does distinguish between perceptual and rational—i.e. “logical”—knowledge, though not so much in terms of validity, but in terms of scope and as two stages in the “movement of knowledge” (Mao [1937a] 2007, 61). And whereas Aristotle (*Eth.Nic.*, 1139b) opposes the practical and poetic kinds of knowledge with a strong theoretical sense of knowledge, for Mao they are basically all of the same kind. As he expresses it, “Theoretical knowledge is acquired through practice and must then return to practice” (Mao [1937a] 2007, 61).

For Mao what is important is realising goals or objectives, and such a teleological process sometimes requires changing the plan along the way (Mao [1937a] 2007, 63). Mao clearly wants his listeners to become practical in the pragmatic sense and avoid being theoretical in the Aristotelian sense. Where Aristotle considers useless theoretical knowledge the finest (*Met.* 983a), for

Mao the important goal is practical. And “practical” should properly not even be understood in the Aristotelian sense. In these speeches at least it does not seem as if Mao wants the party students to become political or ethical in the Aristotelian sense. An Aristotelian understanding of “practice” would imply recommending a mixed constitution (*Pol.* 1296), which is close to the ideal of modern parliamentary democracy. In contrast to this, Mao, at least in this context, apparently holds a much more instrumental conception of democracy (Mao 1930, 48). Tong mentions that Mao argued for an idea of a “new democracy”, but the overall criterion was that it should be “useful” for “the practice of the Chinese revolution” (Tong 1989, 122–23).³

China scholar J.W. Freiberg notes that in general Mao is more of a military commander than a professional philosopher (Freiberg 1977, 14), and this must hold true especially in the context of the speeches analysed here, since they are precisely directed to an audience which has to participate in both civil war, class struggle and revolution. So from Mao we get a causal account of how to acquire knowledge as impressions and ideas, and how to use knowledge practically in the revolutionary struggle. Apparently he has no wish for an epistemological criterion for truth or falsity by which we can evaluate the knowledge acquired in order to see if this knowledge really is knowledge or only an illusion. The truth is already decided beforehand. As Mao ([1937a] 2007, 62) puts it, “dialectical materialism is universally true, because it is impossible for anyone to escape from its domain in his practice”. In this practical perspective, in terms of metaphysics, Mao is thus clearly a materialist. In terms of epistemology he is just as clearly a naïve realist. And this also seems to be the case when we take a closer look at Mao’s idea of dialectics.

2.2. The idea of contradiction is universal, material and causal

Mao is indeed very practical in the speech “On practice”; more interesting from a philosophical perspective is the speech “On contradiction”. The conceptual framework of Mao is dialectical materialism, and it is this perspective that gives contradictions their importance. To be occupied with material dialectics means to Mao that one must study the inner contradictions of things, and this means further that material dialectics is seen as opposed to “metaphysics”, which is concerned with the exterior influence on things and the interaction between things. It is the inner contradictions that set things in motion, just as growth in nature also comes from such contradictions (Mao [1937b] 2007, 69). As an example, Mao states that the history of China is formed by changes

within the Chinese society, not changes in climate or geography (Mao [1937b] 2007, 70).

Mao emphasises the “universality or absoluteness of contradiction”, namely that “contradiction exists in the process of development of all things” (Mao [1937b] 2007, 72). Mao also distinguishes between, on the one side, temporary and historical contradictions and, on the other, stable contradictions such as those between forces of production and relations of production, theory and practice, base and superstructure (Mao [1937b] 2007, 91–92). The main point for Mao, however, still seems to be practical, namely that it is important to study the particularity of every contradiction in order to find the right method to resolve it, whether it is stable or not. Mao is still talking to party members. The goal of the analysis of the “movement of opposites in different things” is to find “methods for resolving contradictions” (Mao [1937b] 2007, 71).

To Mao dialectics is thus characterised by contradictions. According to Mao, in contradictions both aspects are always in unity, just as they are or become identical, and one of the aspects can or will be transformed into the other (Mao [1937b] 2007, 93). Mao refers to Lenin with regard to this conception of dialectics and contradiction; he also quotes Lenin with regard to the absoluteness and universality of motion opposed to the temporality of unity (Mao [1937b] 2007, 97). There “is nothing in the world except matter in motion and this motion must assume certain forms” (Mao [1937b] 2007, 75–76). Mao further approvingly quotes Lenin when it comes to the juxtaposition of various kinds of opposed terms as examples of contradictions: in mathematics between integral and differential summation, in mechanics between action and reaction, in physics between positive and negative electricity, in chemistry association and dissociation of atoms, and finally in the social sciences the class struggle (Mao [1937b] 2007, 73). Mao summarises very well the idea, namely that it is not a matter of whether there is a contradiction, but of what kind it is (Mao [1937b] 2007, 74).

In the practical spirit of resolving contradictions Mao urges his audience to be objective, specific and concrete and not to be one-sided, subjective and superficial. To understand the whole, it is crucial to understand the parts. It is necessary to understand both sides of the contradiction; it is not enough to understand just one (Mao [1937b] 2007, 79). Mao’s point here is that dialectics is clearly about contradictions in or between things already existing in reality. Mao qualifies some of these contradictions as sometimes “temporary” and more or less “intense” (Mao [1937b] 2007, 81), and examples of such contradictions include military conflicts between warlords (Mao [1937b] 2007, 82)

and between the Kunmintang and the people (Mao [1937b] 2007, 84). Mao does focus a lot on war in these speeches (Mao [1937b] 2007, 87, 95), and that is quite understandable given the context of the speeches. Actually it has been argued by Freiberg that the dialectics of Mao is first of all an expression of the dialectics found in the Daoist *Art of war* found in the Sun Zi classic with precisely that title (Freiberg 1977, 12–18), and that seems like a promising strategy of interpretation.

Mao thus thinks of dialectics as anti-metaphysical. According to Mao metaphysical thinking is determined by the idea that the qualitative principles of reality are unchangeable and that only quantitative change is possible. When we have discovered these principles, then we will know what reality is, and also how it will change in the future, since it cannot but change quantitatively (Mao [1937b] 2007, 68–70). This, however, seems like a very narrow concept of metaphysics. In the mainstream philosophical understanding of metaphysics a dialectical materialism such as Mao's would qualify as indeed very metaphysical. Tong mentions that the metaphysics of Leibniz is comparable to some of the classical Chinese philosophers, and I think it is obvious that Mao's idea of dialectical materialism is metaphysical in the same sense.

Mao thus develops speculatively the principles of reality on the basis of pure reflection and only with reference to philosophical and political authorities such as Lenin. These principles are principles of qualitative change, not just quantitative, but they are nevertheless speculative principles. And Mao apparently totalises these principles in the most classical philosophical way, saying for instance that “all processes transform themselves into their opposites”, and that constancy is only relative, whereas “the transformation of one process into the other is absolute” (Mao [1937b] 2007, 98).

In the end Mao, without any hesitation, quotes what I would consider the sophistry of Lenin, stating that “there is an absolute in the relative” (Mao [1937b] 2007, 99). However, sophistry or not, as it will be obvious below, in his understanding of dialectics Mao is actually very well in line with the tradition of dialectical materialism, and therefore so is Tong.

3. Tong could make good use of another idea of dialectics

By my philosophical standards Mao in his metaphysics demonstrates an extremely wide conception of contradiction, since he apparently includes all kinds of oppositions. Normally I would take the point of reference for the term

“contradiction” to be the principle of contradiction which, according to a standard textbook like Wilfrid Hodges’s, states that p and non- p cannot both be true, no matter the time and place (Hodges [1977] 1986, 16). The principle of contradiction is a formal principle of normative logic telling us how to think clearly about matters in general, namely that we should avoid contradicting ourselves, at least in scientific discourses. One normally expresses the point by saying that from contradictions literally everything can be deduced logically, and since we cannot distinguish truth from falsity, then we cannot know anything in the strong sense of the word. The idea is thus that stating something contradicting amounts to stating nothing at all, since no truth condition or value is implied by such an utterance.

In the account of dialectics that Mao gives us, there are supposed to be contradictions in and between all kinds of real things that oppose each other. Mao’s dialectics can be said to be both ontological and empirical in a very broad sense as well as normative in a pragmatic sense. He thus gives a general conceptual account of the causality of change and opposition, while also calling for practical solutions to empirical problems caused by the contradictions. What is missing in Mao’s conception of dialectics, however, is precisely the acknowledgment of the importance of validity. There is no recognition of the role played by truth in epistemology or formal logic, and apparently Mao does not distinguish causal or material oppositions from logical contradictions in the sense just mentioned. As mentioned above, according to Tong, the lack of interest in formal logic is characteristic of Chinese thought (Tong 1989, 106, 181), and in this respect Mao thus demonstrates himself to be very loyal to the Chinese tradition.

In view of this I argue first that one can detect an idea of dialectical logic from Dao to Mao, that Tong’s conceptions of dialectics and logic seem to reflect this, and that he therefore has good reasons to be ambivalent about dialectics (3.1). As an alternative I then introduce the dialectics of Hegel’s *Phenomenology*, emphasising the importance for Hegel of epistemology and formal logic, which also implies taking seriously the distinction between contradiction and opposition (3.2). Finally I argue that in dialectics theory must be prior to practice, and to substantiate this I explain what I take to be the core of this conception of dialectics, namely scepticism, determinate negation and the idea of *Aufheben*. Taken together this secures the epistemological basis of Hegel’s dialectics as well as the idea of *Bildung* (3.3).

*3.1. Tong is critical of how the material dialectics of practice
ignores validity and formal logic*

First, Tong underlines the principled distinction between validity and usefulness (Tong 2000, 63–64), and this means that he in contrast to Mao can discuss matters of epistemology beyond those of technology and political strategy. Second, he proposes a strong criterion of knowledge, namely the idea of cognitive rationality and truth found in the traditional understanding of scientific knowledge (Tong 2000, 61–62), like the one we know from Plato and Aristotle. Together this means that Tong does not restrict his philosophical reflections to the pragmatist perspective of, for instance, Dewey or Mao, but can occupy himself with theory of knowledge and science in the tradition after Kant. Finally, he follows Popper in emphasising that philosophy of science must be occupied with “problems in the context of justification” (Tong 1989, 149).

In such an almost classical 20th-century philosophical perspective, dialectics in the sense described above is not the most attractive candidate for philosophical thinking, and this is precisely the point. Even though Tong says that dialectical thinking is the most important contribution made by Chinese philosophy, he immediately afterwards says that dialectical logic cannot replace formal logic and that we—i.e. the Chinese philosophers—should pay more attention to formal logic (Tong 1989, 101). To Tong, the implication is apparently that Chinese philosophy, at least for a while, should leave behind dialectics and focus on formal logic in the Aristotelian or modern western sense. Still, Tong seems to be somehow ambivalent about these matters. According to Mao, one must not be one-sided (Mao [1937b] 2007, 79), and in spite of Tong’s emphasis on the importance of formal logic and epistemology in philosophy, he apparently also wants to give credit to the intellectual achievements of traditional Chinese thinking (Tong 1989, 14).

What is interesting is that the conceptions of dialectics apparently are very similar in the sources that are constitutive for Tong’s philosophical conception of dialectics, namely the Chinese classics, especially the Daoist and the neo-Confucians, and the thinking of Mao. Actually, Freiberg argues that one can detect a rather consistent conception of “dialectical logic” from Dao to Mao (Freiberg 1977, 11). Given the perspective of Tong just mentioned, there are however good reason to be sceptical, or even critical, towards this way of thinking and the conception of logic implied by it. To put it crudely, one can claim that in the classical academic philosophical perspective adopted by Tong

this way of thinking does not appear to be about logic at all, or only in a very limited or general sense.

However, and this is the important point, even though Tong can have good reason to be sceptical or even critical towards dialectics in the sense just mentioned, I will claim that he nevertheless accepts a general understanding of dialectics in precisely this sense. Tong thus credits Liu Yu-hai as the first to have brought the idea of contradiction from two statements contradicting each other to “two real forces, which oppose each other” (Tong 1989, 97), just as he states that *The Book of Changes, I Ching* contains important ideas of “dialectical logic” (1989, 90), and many other references could be mentioned. Tong also has a broad conception of ontology (1989, 147), which supports conceptually his rather causal conception of dialectics. Furthermore, he refers approvingly to his teacher, Feng Qi, who claimed that dialectical logic is distinguished from formal logic by being part of philosophy proper (Tong 1989, 157).

Tong thus seems to be caught up in a classic argumentative trap. As an active part of an intellectual tradition Tong has unwittingly accepted a particular understanding of a concept. Accepting an understanding of a concept, however, does not mean agreeing with the content and the implications of it. Still, the acceptance means that Tong criticises a particular understanding of dialectics, even though there are other and more promising interpretations available.

Using some Hegelian terms to be explained below, my point is as follows: Instead of following the neo-Kantians in simply giving up on the ideal of dialectics as a result of abstract sceptical critique and relegating dialectics to the past, the causal and materialist concept of dialectics should be negated in a determinate and very concrete way in order precisely to demonstrate the limitations in the understanding at hand. This is what I intend to do with my critique in this article. Or put differently, instead of ending up praising formal logic or venturing into transcendentalism, Tong could take a look at different ways of conceiving dialectical thinking, which I think are much more promising than the conception of dialectical materialism developed from Dao over Lenin to Mao.

3.2. I emphasise the distinction within dialectical metaphysics between logic and causality

The main point is—as Jørgen Huggler has argued in detail in his *habitulation* on Hegel’s *Phenomenology* (Huggler 1999, 339–49)—that without the universalist criteria of knowledge and logic, i.e. without scepticism, there would be

no determinate negation and thus no dialectics in Hegel's *Phenomenology* at all (Huggler 2009, 21, 34–35).⁴ And this point seems to be overlooked by Lenin if he, as Freiberg claims, thinks that negation is not sceptical (Freiberg 1977, 5). As Carl-Göran Heidegren (1995, 15) has stated in his commentaries on the *Phenomenology*, Hegel does indeed want to unite theory and praxis. Whereas “theory” clearly should be understood in the classical sense of Plato and Aristotle, it is in Hegel we find the roots of the unified concept of “practice” that is used by Dewey and Mao. However, in contrast to their respective ways of thinking, in the dialectics of Hegel it is the strong theoretical criterion of knowledge, and the accompanying scepticism, that is made the criterion of practice, not the other way around. What is often called formal logic is therefore a necessary condition for the dialectics of Hegel.

Without a formal and very strict logic, there is no dialectics in the Hegelian sense. As Huggler (1999, 2009) argues, it is scepticism and thus the above-mentioned logical principle of contradiction as well as the law of the excluded middle that propel Hegelian dialectics. Hegel's dialectics should thus be thought of as an ontology in the most literal sense, that is, a logical conceptual reconstruction of being. Therefore, in the dialectics of Hegel the causality is also by necessity logical in the strong formal sense. As Gadamer ([1961] 1999, 10–11) has aptly put it, dialectics is about grasping change conceptually. Since both “change” and “concept” are to be understood in their most literal senses, most philosophers in this Hegelian tradition have considered dialectics to be a forever unfinished story of the impossibility of synthesis or reconciliation. Dialectics in this sense is thus about the theoretical understanding of the principles of reality, not about resolving contradictions practically for pragmatic purposes.

The important point here, however, is that this does not seem to be the case when I read about dialectics in Mao and Tong. One way to express the nature of their conception of dialectics is precisely to do as Freiberg, namely to make a distinction between formal or positive logic and dialectical logic (Freiberg 1977, 2–4). Where the former is thought of as primarily constituted by the principle of identity, the latter is constituted by the idea of the unity of contradictions and change (Freiberg 1977, 4–7). Such a conception of dialectics can first of all be used to describe classical Chinese philosophy, as it is described by Tong and others. However, by referring to the works of Lenin, Freiberg can also argue that such a conception constitutes the core of dialectical materialism and that it is thus the Marxist conception of dialectics (Freiberg 1977, 4–6).

If this is the case, it is not at all surprising that it is this conception of dialectics that is found in Mao's thinking. What we see, both in the writings of Mao and in the Chinese classics, is precisely the idea of unity in contradictions at all levels of reality. We even get a classification of contradictions distinguishing between universals and particulars, just as we are told that the particular is only a contradiction because universality is "residing" (Mao [1937b] 2007, 85) in particularity. This formulation, it must be noted, does however appear very metaphysical, even in Mao's own rather narrow sense. In a classical philosophical perspective dialectical materialism must thus be considered a kind of metaphysics.

Still, Mao's conception of dialectics is very different from the one inherent in Hegel's dialectical metaphysics. As Wolfgang Röd (1974, 2, 210–11) emphasises, Hegel's ambition was to both distinguish as well as to unite the logical justification and the causal explanation into a strict ontology of change. Such an idea of dialectics would enable us to distinguish real, necessary logical and dialectical contradictions from just apparent, particular and causal oppositions or conflicts. Apparently Mao does not see that it is only a strictly logical reconstruction of the causal dynamics of society and history, such as Hegel and Marx attempted, which can legitimate calling, for instance, class struggle a contradiction. Particular historical military conflicts like the ones mentioned by Mao would thus not qualify as contradictions in this sense. Mao states that the opposites are identical, because they are conditions of each other. However, in the examples mentioned it seems to be a matter of empirical reality and being, rather than of logic, since it is said in the same context that a "thing transforms itself into its opposite" (Mao [1937b] 2007, 94).

To Hegel, dialectics is not primarily causal, organic or material. It is primarily epistemological and thus logical in the formal or positive sense mentioned above. Since reality is changing, dialectics thus becomes onto-logical in the strong sense of both parts of the word. And therefore, dialectics is also metaphysical, but this is actually something we should be happy about. It is only because it is metaphysical that it can give us hope that we can get to know reality and thus change reality. If dialectics was only a causal drive, then we would merely be things that are pushed around at the mercy of a matter beyond our understanding and influence.

So ontologically Hegel's dialectics is realistic, and so it should be. As the young Habermas is believed to have said when criticising positivism, it is only realism that allows us to change anything through conscious action, i.e. *praxis*

in the Aristotelian sense mentioned above. As critical thinkers within the dialectical tradition after Hegel we should be realists, although not naïve. In fact Hegel ([1807] 1999, A 3–58) already discusses the challenges of empiricism and positivism in the introduction and the first few chapters of the *Phenomenology*. So already from Hegel himself we have a reflective basis for a kind of dialectics ontologically constituted by strict logic and thus different from the one employed by Mao and Tong.

3.3. *And I argue for a conception of dialectics with a predominance of theory over practice*

Clearly, as argued above, it is the unified practical and pragmatic perspective that is the key to understanding Mao's position, and apparently it is in the spirit of Hegel, when Mao explicitly aims at uniting theory and practice. I would claim, however, that in Hegel's synthesis theory gets the upper hand, since it is the theoretical criterion of validity that rules, not the practical criterion of success. In the dialectics of Mao and Sun Zi the exact opposite seems to be the case, namely that practice gets the upper hand and, even more so, that "practical" by the two military commanders is understood exclusively in the pragmatic sense, i.e. not in the Aristotelian sense including ethics.

Further, I would claim that the two alternatives are not of equal philosophical importance. Without uncompromised theoretical commitment there is no reason to go deep into conceptual distinctions, no reason to idealise the rational will to precision, no logic and, I would say, no reason to will a professional philosophical development. As it has been argued forcefully, *In Defence of Philosophy* pragmatism can be said to express *The American Evasion of Philosophy* or even an *Eclipse of Reason*.⁵ As a fellow professional philosopher I therefore understand that Tong had a need to discuss the tradition that he grew up with and especially the pragmatic and materialist concept of dialectics that is shared by the classical Chinese tradition and the thinking of Mao.

Add to this a fact that Tong has also called attention to, namely that the very idea of a scholar in China until recently was of somebody who explained the already accepted canon of classical texts (Tong 1989, 165). If you combine this latter fact with the lack of training in formal logic in the Chinese philosophical tradition, then you can understand why there is a risk of superficial and imprecise common sense sophistry, for example about the so-called unity of contradictions, which does not have much to say to philosophical dialectics in the strong sense.

Still, dialectics can be better than this. Even though an appreciative and serious interpreter like Röd gets to the point of accusing Hegel of sophistry (Röd 1974, 1, 198), he also demonstrates that Hegelian dialectics rests on a solid epistemological principle, namely the principle of the determinate negation. Here the basic point is that to deny something implies affirming something else. A negation is thus determinate, since it negates something specific and leaves the rest of the totality as a basis for the negation in question.

Hegel extends this logical argument to scepticism and doubt in general. Scepticism cannot be maintained if it ends in “the abstraction of nothingness or emptiness”. To Hegel, scepticism must therefore also be determinate, namely in being directed to something (Hegel [1807] 1999, A 11–12). When confronting, doubting and negating truth claims scepticism has to be specific in order to be justified. For Hegel being sceptical thus means employing a determinate negation in relation to what is proposed. Such a move constitutes a demand of universal validity, although in the negative form, and it should never be done without a reason. If there is no reason to be sceptical, then it is unreasonable and irrational. Scepticism must always be concrete and specific; if not, it is abstract and thus, according to Hegel, empty. Or, in other words, scepticism must be intentional, if it is to be rational. You can only have doubts about something if you accept other things. Accepting the truth of some propositions gives you a basis for questioning the validity of other propositions. You cannot doubt everything at once, but you must always be ready to doubt something particular. Just as there must be given reasons for thinking positively and making affirmative propositions about real matters, there must also be reasons for being sceptical and doubtful. Both affirmation and negation are truth claims, and to be rational they must be based on reasons given.

The epistemological concept of dialectics developed by Hegel enables us to cope with contradictions, but in another sense than Mao’s. First, the contradiction has to be shown to be a logical contradiction. Then we might be able to circumvent or deconstruct the contradiction by rational reconstructions of the constituting conditions, showing them to be reconcilable, or arguing against assuming the conditions in question. To Hegel, the result is a metaphysical process driven by principled scepticism and the demand for absolute knowledge. The unconditional demand for universal truth means that each particular determination of the truth becomes the object of a dialectical “*Aufheben*” (Hegel [1807] 1999, A 57), where what is negated is sublated into a new form of the same object (Hegel [1807] 1999, A 18). Even though Tong does mention

Aufhebung and is quite aware of the importance of the displacement from logical contradiction to causal opposition, he fails to emphasise that for Hegel dialectics is not about two opposing and real entities. In fact—and this is where our interpretations of Hegel’s dialectics depart—for Tong this displacement is what constitutes the idea of contradiction “in a dialectical sense” (Tong 1989, 97).

In the *Phenomenology* Hegel develops an idea of dialectics that departs from the basic epistemic model of a consciousness confronted with an object. As Röd emphasises, object should be understood in a very broad sense, since the German word “*Gegenstand*” literally means “what is opposite to” (Röd 1974, 1, 167). Hegel’s claim is then that any concept or idea must be realised ontologically in order to be completely true; only by *being* true can a concept be true. The point is thus that in the realisation of the concept, i.e. in the process of becoming real, it becomes manifest—either conceptually or by material resistance—that the concept does have an inherent logical contradiction. As Röd makes clear, even though Hegel uses the word “movement”, it must be understood in a logical sense rather than an ontological (Röd 1974, 1, 158). We are not dealing with an opposition between real beings, but with a logical contradiction, namely the one between the assumed completeness of the concept, theory or idea and the specific limitations that come to the fore when it has to legitimise itself by realisation, either theoretically or practically.

For Hegel, this is the basic contradiction that drives the logical development. It is therefore always the same, and there is no special “dialectical sense”, where contradiction turns into opposition, as assumed by Tong. One might even claim that there is only one contradiction in the dialectics of Hegel, and that it is this one, i.e. the one between the universal validity claimed by a position (concept, idea, proposition, theory) and the particularity of the position as realised (Hegel [1807] 1999, A 14–16). Hegel emphasises that the experience of this contradiction is a negation of the position, and that this experience results in an “*Aufheben*” ([1807] 1999, A 40). An *Aufheben* is thus also something which only happens for good reasons, namely when we have learned something about what we claimed. What we learned was that the claimed position was not after all the whole truth. It might have been true in some sense, but it was not the whole truth.

For Hegel, it is such a successful *Aufheben* that constitutes the dialectical process of experience, maturation, and the determinate negation therefore has a “result” (Hegel [1807] 1999, A 11). For a successfully experiencing con-

sciousness the end will be the kind of intellectual formation that the Germans call “*Bildung*” (Hegel [1807] 1999, A 10), and which eventually to Hegel means the freedom achieved through alienation (Sørensen 2012c, 2013).

Of course, there are all kinds of complexities that need to be dealt with to understand Hegel’s dialectics in depth. Sometimes, for instance, the striving for truth and knowledge is not just a rational scientific enterprise, but also a sign of insecurity; and the link between doubt and despair is acknowledged by Hegel in his dialectical reconstruction of experience (Hegel [1807] 1999, A 9).⁶ The point here is simply that with a conception of dialectics like the one just presented, Tong can maintain a positive concept of dialectics, which can appreciate the importance of validity, formal logic and the strong epistemological concepts of knowledge and truth. In other words, with such an understanding of dialectics there is no contradiction or principled opposition between dialectical logic and logic as such, i.e. no opposition between dialectical thinking and the way of thinking that has appealed to professional philosophers since Plato. Chinese philosophers do not have to renounce dialectics to do logic, quite the contrary. In this sense Tong is already doing dialectics, and if he accepts what I am offering him, he can even take pride in doing it.

4. This discussion about dialectics is not about East vs. West – it is about politics

This concludes my presentation of the conception of dialectics that I would like to offer Tong instead of the one he has inherited from Mao and Dao. To wrap up the story let me just add a few comments to explain the perspective that for me makes such an argument interesting and to avoid possible misunderstandings.

An important point is to avoid the East-West stereotype. The materialist conception of dialectics, which I have attributed to Mao and Dao, can easily be found west of China. Röd has traced the history of dialectics from Kant up to the Frankfurt School and Sartre, and already in the natural philosophy of Hegel we find some of the basic roots of dialectical materialism. Apparently it is here that Hegel most clearly blurs the difference between contradiction and opposition (Röd 1974, 1, 215–16), i.e. between validity and causality. For Röd this is obviously an important point, and the reason is no doubt his epistemological point of departure. Röd thus emphasises that Hegel’s dialectical method has its roots in the “analytical theory of experience”, as it is developed in the *Phenom-*

enology (1974, 1, 152). The fundamental structure of dialectics is found in the “descriptive metaphysics of experience” (1974, 1, 178), and, just to leave out any possibilities of misunderstandings, for Röd, the “dialectics of experience” provides the “model for the relations” that can be within Hegel’s “system”. The “theory of experience” is thus the “key to understanding” “dialectics in its objective figure” (1974, 1, 212).

A clear contrast to this position can be found in the collection of essays on dialectics by Ewald Vassilievich Ilyenkov published in the same epoch. Like Mao, Ilyenkov simply equates contradiction and opposition ([1974] 1977, 194), just as epistemology clearly has given way to ontology. According to Ilyenkov, the dialectics of Hegel is to be found in the *Science of Logic*, whereas the *Phenomenology* is only mentioned in passing ([1974] 1977, 207). Like logic in general, Hegel’s logic is taken to be about thought. For Ilyenkov the important point is how Hegel extends the scope of logic from merely thought to reality itself as well as to practice ([1974] 1977, 210). According to Ilyenkov, Hegel sees quite clearly that logic as the science of thought transcends language. Thinking is part of reality, just as reality is also the result of thought, namely through man’s actions ([1974] 1977, 175). In this practical and materialist perspective, however, scepticism is something that is only mentioned in relation to Kant as his “negative dialectic”. To Ilyenkov, being sceptical means that thought is “feeling bewildered” and “powerless to choose and prefer” (Ilyenkov [1974] 1977, 192).⁷

Now, some might here be reminded of yet another East-West stereotype, namely the Cold War version. In order to avoid any cultural geographical prejudices let me just mention that dialectical materialism is also constitutive in the philosophy of, for instance, Maurice Cornforth, where we find statements that are very similar to Mao’s. Cornforth thus confirms the “necessary truth” of dialectical materialism (Cornforth 1968, 111), just as he equates contradiction and opposition (Cornforth 1968, 109), and in his explanation of the unity of opposites he even mentions the similarity to the thinking of Mao (1968, 101).

The circle thus closed, the dialectical materialism of Mao can be located well within mainstream university philosophy. The discussion of dialectics presented here can be considered part of the ideological struggle among Left Hegelians, namely the discussion between the Leninist bolshevism of various communist parties and what is sometimes considered the less dogmatic strands of left-wing intellectual thinking. Now, this might seem like an old and now obsolete story from the bygones of both politics and philosophy. My problem

is that I do not think that it is the case. First of all, Tong has obviously carried the practical and materialist conception of dialectics with him into contemporary philosophy. Even more important, however, is what I take to be a general tendency in current intellectual debates. My impression is thus that today, though often unconsciously and by proxy, the pragmatic materialist conception of dialectics is much more widely accepted than the conception of dialectics that I have proposed above.

My point is that the predominance of causal relations in dialectical materialism to me makes it a kind of vitalist metaphysics, that is, a general way of thinking about reality inspired by living reality, organic matter and biology. Such a metaphysical vitalism can be attributed to various influential philosophers in the 19th century. One prominent example in this context is Dewey. Another is Henri Bergson, and, according to Tong, besides Dewey, Bergson was one of the western philosophers most extensively translated into Chinese in the first decades of the 20th century (Tong 1989, 130).

I will assume that a vitalist way of thinking is somehow congruent with a lot of Chinese thinking in the Daoist tradition. What is interesting in this context, however, is that this way of thinking in China has been believed to contribute to dialectical thinking, whereas in, for instance, France it has been thought to contribute to a way of thinking that, according to Alain Badiou, must be considered “essentially anti-dialectical” (Badiou 1997, 51), namely the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze in which Bergson plays an crucial role (1997, 62–63, 79). And what is even more interesting is that if one takes a closer look at the vitalist metaphysics of Deleuze in *Difference et Repetition* ([1968] 2008), a lot of it looks very similar to the dialectical materialism we have discussed in relation to Mao, Lenin and Chinese philosophy.

To stretch the associationist logic a bit further, what could be considered alarming in a political perspective is something that Slavoj Žižek calls attention to in his recent introduction to the texts of Mao referred to above. Many postmodern thinkers argue that the thinking of Deleuze represents something subversive to capitalism, but Žižek as a declared Leninist would argue that quite the contrary is the case. Deleuze’s thinking has thus been used by the Israeli defence to conceptualise military tactics and operations in counter-insurgency against the Palestinians (Žižek 2007, 26). What is more, the ideal of fluidity is also an ideologically flexible structure in relation to the automatics of market dynamics, namely the general economic equilibrium that is assumed to be the result if we do not interfere politically, but only mind our own particu-

lar interests. A vitalist metaphysic does not call for political or ethical interference, because due to the basic fluidity of living reality we have no primary conceptual ideal to refer to.

This is what we find in Deleuze; being is one (Deleuze 1968, 52–53), “everything is the same” (Deleuze 1968, 388), and it is all about chance. For Deleuze ontology “is a throw of dice” (Deleuze 1968, 257), but still the “necessary liberation” (Deleuze 1968, 385) will occur. As Badiou (1997, 67) emphasises, for Deleuze there is no primary and secondary, no original and copy. In short, for Deleuze there is no ideal beyond anything else (Deleuze 1968, 385). In his ontology of multiple fluent singulars interferences are functional operations at equal footing. Interventions can only be valued pragmatically and instrumentally, i.e. only in relation to their intended consequences. Construed in this, admittedly hasty and sketchy, manner I think it is obvious that Deleuze’s vitalist pragmatism is too well suited as an ideological backup for the neoliberal conception of a global stateless free market capitalism.

Just like dialectical materialism, Deleuze’s vitalism is all about the movement and unity of opposites, and that is the reason why I think of it as a proxy to dialectical materialism. It is thus a matter of filling out the same functional and ideological role. However, in contrast to dialectics the basic principles of vitalism are not logic, laws and necessity, but primarily incidents, play and chance. According to Deleuze et al., living matter thus moves like in dialectics, but in a less predictable manner. The postmodern version of vitalism is even more radical in its fluidity than both dialectical materialism and the interpretation of dialectics that I have argued for. My point is that it is only in the latter case that dialectics can be made to accept the logic of universal validity and reasonable scepticism, and therefore it is only in the latter case that dialectics can function as the ontological counterweight to the dynamics of desire, greed and the free market. In contrast to a Leninist like Žižek I find the pragmatics of dialectical materialism all too lenient in relation to a form of capitalism backed up by a vitalist ontology of chance.⁸

My argument thus employs guilt by association as well as the slippery slope and probably also a few other questionable moves. Let me therefore end the argument by suggesting an even more radical claim, which is a version of the famous Hegelian idea of reason unfolding history behind our backs. The irony of history could thus be that the vitalist and pragmatic implications of Mao’s dialectical materialism prepared the ground ideologically for the “necessary liberation” of exploitative capitalist playfulness in China. From a traditional

left-wing perspective it might therefore be with good reason that Tong is sceptical about dialectics in the materialist and vitalist sense he knows so well. Still, and this is the main content of my remarks to Tong, there is a sense in which dialectical thinking is constitutive of critical theory from Horkheimer to Habermas, and as such it is worth maintaining dialectics as the ideal of philosophy. I therefore sincerely hope that Tong will accept my gift and use it well continuing the development of undogmatic left-wing thinking.

Notes

- 1 I have discussed the conflict between a French and a German understanding of dialectics in Sørensen (2007).
- 2 For a presentation of the classical concept of the gift offered by Marcel Mauss, see for instance my analysis in Sørensen (2001).
- 3 For a more extended discussion of Mao's relation to democracy, see for instance the work by Zhang (2009).
- 4 For an informative discussion of scepticism and dialectics in relation to Hegel's earlier Jena writings, see Hartmut Buchner (1990).
- 5 Cf. the titles of, respectively, Maurice Cornforth (1950), Cornell West (1989) and Horkheimer (1947).
- 6 It is Nietzsche, however, who deconstructs science as simply an expression of existential longing for security and safety (Nietzsche [1886] 1997, 222), and taking up this lead Heidegger can take Descartes as the prime example of this pathology (Heidegger [1961] 1989, II, 190).
- 7 Just like Nietzsche and Heidegger, Ilyenkov thus interprets scepticism rather as a psychological pathology than as the principled starting point of epistemology.
- 8 For further reflections on the ideological implications of dialectical metaphysics, see my analysis of Bataille's dialectics (Sørensen 2007) and of his general economy (Sørensen 2012d).

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