

# THE TROUBLE WITH CONTRADICTIONS

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In a critical comment in *Radical Philosophy* 16 Russell Keat has raised some interesting objections to Roy Edgley's account of the significance of the dialectic for social science (1). Prominent among them is the charge that while this account 'succeeds in showing the critical practical function of scientific knowledge' the results have nothing distinctively socialist about them. Thus, 'the realisation of its value of reason, i. e. the elimination of contradictions' would not, Keat suggests, 'be necessarily accompanied by the realisation of specifically socialist values' for 'criticism of contradictions does not exhaust the meaning of socialist criticism' (2). In reply Edgley has argued that although he did not show that a science 'that takes objective social contradictions as its target' can be socialist, nevertheless it's true that it must be, and moreover that such a science exhausts the meaning of socialist criticism 'implicitly' even if it does not do so 'explicitly' (3). This is an effective line of reply within the terms it shares with the objection as originally formulated, and yet that objection retains a certain significance. It draws attention in the clearest manner to the goal of Edgley's programme, the delineation of a socialist social science, and it correctly suggests that he does not achieve it. Where it goes wrong is in conceding too much to his framework of assumptions and so it misconceives the character of this failure. The truth is not that Edgley's critical practical science falls short in some respects of socialist practice and criticism, but that it is so far not critical and practical at all. The point involved here is of the greatest importance for the prospects for dialectical social science.

It may be well to start to explicate it by getting clear as to the nature of Edgley's achievement. This consists primarily in the demonstration that the category of contradiction may, while retaining its logical character, be instantiated in social reality. The argument has the form of a series of steps by means of which the category is extended in the direction required from regions where it is unquestionably at home; that is, from statements and propositions through beliefs to actions, and thence to practices and institutions. Through this process a rational basis is provided for a conclusion that is all too often merely asserted or assumed and one which is, moreover, a necessary precondition for talk of dialectical social science to have any point. Any further inquiry will have to have the dialectical merit of preserving this achievement. It is also important, however, to be clear precisely where it leaves us. For that one has to distinguish the thesis accepted here from another than tends to be run

together with it in the discussion. This is the view that the revealing of social contradictions is in itself necessarily a critical activity. Such a view is largely taken for granted by Edgley, as indeed it is by Keat, and yet it surely stands in need of argument. In so far as there is any attempt at justification it consists in the general claim that 'to characterise something as a contradiction, where that concept is a category of logic, is at least by implication, to criticise it' (4). This claim is crucial to the whole position, and we shall begin the task of assessing it by considering what appear to be awkward cases.

## Are Contradictions Critical?

Suppose that one is interested in the moral character of a person's beliefs and actions. It is surely not the case that contradictions must now appear as defects, and it seems easy to conceive of situations in which they would be taken as signs of merit. Thus they may be seen as reflecting the struggle of some decent impulses against the pressure of a racist upbringing, as in the case of Huck Finn's crisis of conscience over the failure to give Jim up to his pursuers. It is worth noting that for some philosophers such cases present themselves in a large and sympathetic perspective as the natural results of quite fundamental features of the context in which practical reason has to operate. Thus, for instance, David Wiggins insists that it is of the essence of the concerns which an agent brings to any situation 'to make competing and inconsistent claims', and he adds: 'This is a mark not of human irrationality but of human rationality in the face of a plurality of human goods.' (5) Clearly within such a theoretical framework the susceptibility of an agent to inconsistency may be taken to indicate seriousness and sensibility, and complete freedom from it is likely to arouse suspicions of fanaticism, shallowness, narrowness of sympathy or lack of commitment to the institution of practical reasoning. The point at stake here is not the substantive merit of Wiggins's position: one had simply to note that in stating it he commits no paradoxes nor are any concepts subjected to unnatural strain. Moreover, the relationship between the concepts of consistency and rationality which is touched on in the passage just cited is of particular interest for our discussion and will have to be taken up later. What has to be added now is that where the structure of an individual's beliefs is concerned the range of possibilities to be dealt with extends well beyond the moral or practical aspects. Consider Walt Whitman's well-known declaration:

Do I contradict myself?

Very well then I contradict myself

(I am large, I contain multitudes.) (6)

Clearly Whitman is not engaging in self-criticism here. Rather he is laying claim to what he takes to be a merit, even a constituent of greatness, in an artist. It may be felt that it is an excessively roman-

1 R. Keat, 'Comment', RP16, p48. R. Edgley, 'Science Social Science and Socialist Science: Reason as Dialectic', RP15, pp2-7. A version of the present paper was read at Goldsmith's College, University of London, in February 1979, and I am grateful to all who took part in the discussion for their comments. I am grateful most of all to Roy Edgley for his criticisms on that occasion, and on others in conversations and correspondence. These have helped the formulation of my views in numerous ways though they have not, I think, let to any substantial reduction of our differences.

2 R. Keat, loc. cit.

3 R. Edgley, 'Dialectic: A Reply to Keat and Dews', RP21, p29.

4 R. Edgley, RP15, p6.

5 D. Wiggins, 'Deliberation and Practical Reason', in J. Raz, ed., *Practical Reasoning*, 1978, p145.

6 *Leaves of Grass*, 'Song of Myself', 51.

tic conception that is involved but the lesson to be extracted from its use fits curiously well with a persistent strain in Marxist aesthetics. This is the tendency to regard the great writers of class society as those who most completely incorporate its contradictions into their work. The classic instances are provided by the judgments of Engels on Balzac, of Lenin on Tolstoy, and of Lukacs on Scott or, as in the following case, on Cooper's Leather-Stocking Saga: 'The tragedy of the pioneers is linked superbly here with the tragic decline of gentile society, and one of the great contradictions of mankind's journey of progress therewith acquires a wonderful and tragic embodiment.' (7) Here is a clear expression of the idea that artistic importance may be directly dependent on the way social contradictions are embodied in a text. But the general conclusion we need may be reached in a variety of ways. The value of contradictions for enhancing the resonance and vitality of a literary work has been exploited by many artists and the results explored by many critics. Thus, William Empson's discussion of the sixth and seventh of the 'types of ambiguity' is an extended commentary on his claim that 'contradiction is a powerful literary weapon' (8). It seems quite safe to conclude that in pointing to a contradiction the literary critic need not be making or implying an adverse judgment. Now we arrive at a familiar way of conceptualising the operations of reason in this area, at the idea of distinct spheres of judgment or modes of appraisal. Using the idiom appropriate to this idea we may say that contradictions do not necessarily constitute defects from the standpoint of moral or aesthetic appraisal. If we wish we may mark the contrast that is needed by agreeing that they must indeed do so within the sphere of logical appraisal; that is, in so far as one is interested in appraising things from a logical point of view. If the general character of this point of view is indicated roughly by saying that it concerns itself with the internal coherence of structures, then it is natural to suppose that from it contradictions must appear as defects. That this is so may well be thought to be constitutive of the possibility of logical criticism.

In the light of these distinctions it should now be easier to deal with the thesis that to characterise something as a contradiction is to make or imply a criticism of it. It seems clear to begin with that in all the awkward cases we have cited the contradictions may properly be said to have a logical character in the sense presupposed by Edgley's argument. For to say this is primarily just to say that they depend on relations of meaning between their terms. It is only in so far as this condition is met that they go beyond mere external opposition and achieve their significance for the discussion. But logical appraisal is not the only kind that may be brought to bear on such cases and within other perspectives their defects of logic may not take on any significance at all. Thus one seems obliged to reject the conclusion that the revealing of contradictions is essentially or in general a critical activity and in so far as Edgley's thesis implies this it is false. However, in so far as it may simply be taken as making the point that such contradictions necessarily are defects from a logical point of view it seems uncontentiously true.

7 For Engels and Lenin see D. Craig, *ec.*, Marxists on Literature, 1975, Sections 13 and 16. For Lukacs see The Historical Novel, translated by H. & S. Mitchell, 1969, Ch.1. For the sentence quoted see p72.

8 W. Empson, Seven Types of Ambiguity, Second Edition, 1961, Chs. 6 and 7 esp. p197.

It may be that it derives some of its initial force from an element of ambiguity here. At any rate the important questions that now arise are ones concerning the availability and status of the mode of logical appraisal where forms of social life are concerned. Answers to them cannot be assumed in advance but will have to be reached by concrete arguments.

## Contradictions in Society

It seems natural at this point to wish to take some account of the work of specialists in the study of such forms of life. Many social scientists have managed to escape the influence of the dogmatic restrictions on the scope of logic which, as Edgley shows, have characterised the analytical tradition in philosophy. Hence they have been quite capable of recognising the reality of contradictions in the sense with which he is concerned, particularly when dealing with societies other than their own. The problems involved in coming to terms with the contradictions of 'primitive' cultures have loomed large in the anthropological literature. E. E. Evans-Pritchard's study of witchcraft among the Azande is an especially rich, and much-discussed, source of material. Thus, for instance, the Azande believe that witchcraft is 'transmitted by unilinear descent from parent to child' so that: 'The sons of a male witch are all witches but his daughters are not, while the daughters of a female witch are all witches but her sons are not.' (9) Yet they also regard witchcraft as a physical substance empirically detectable in the bodies of dead witches, and the result of the autopsy can serve to acquit or convict someone of being a witch regardless of the state of public knowledge about members of their clan. How can Azande believe that witchcraft is inherited in the way they do and also attribute this kind of significance to autopsies? Evans-Pritchard sees plainly that there is a contradiction at this point in their beliefs and practices. Yet his account carries no suggestion that the exposure of it is critical in the sense of implying that things would be better otherwise. Indeed its whole tenor indicates that he would oppose any attempt to purge Zande society of this contradiction. It might be tempting to say that he regards it as 'functional', in that it contributes as a matter of fact to the stability of Zande institutions. The feasibility of such a view has some general significance for a discussion of the practical implications of a science of contradictions. Yet the suggestion may not quite do justice to the particular case. Evans-Pritchard's account is pervaded by the awareness that biological transmission and the efficacy of autopsies are both integral elements of Zande views of witchcraft, that these views are in turn intimately

9 E. E. Evans-Pritchard, Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic Among the Azande, 1937, p28.



bound up with the rest of their belief system and that this system is itself partly constitutive of their social life. The point to be made now is simply that he has no wish to see Zande society destroyed. What this case suggests is that a social scientist may consciously practice a mode of inquiry that involves the exposure of contradictions without thinking of it as being critical in any sense relevant to the present discussion. This result should in itself give us pause in asserting necessary conceptual links here. But it may well be that the issues can only be decisively pursued in relation to problems posed by our own bourgeois society. To begin with we need to expose ourselves to the variety of the ideological possibilities it affords.

The first of them is suggested by what may be regarded as a distinctively 'conservative' position. In the terms of our discussion it is characterised by a blank denial of the claims of logical appraisal where social phenomena are concerned. Such claims are seen as the expression of a doctrinaire rationalism pursuing its abstract calculations beyond their proper sphere. The whole enterprise, it may be suggested, presupposes a conception of society on the model of a scientific theory or mathematical system with the kind of unity that pertains to such intellectual products. Whereas, it may be said, at least by those conservatives who are not simply overwhelmed by the sense of the manifold particularity of the phenomena, such unity as it has is that of an organic entity which we 'murder to dissect'. This line of thought, whatever its ultimate merits, has at least a certain cautionary value. It is a reminder of the need to attend to the specificity of the object of our social science, a theme that will recur in this discussion. It serves more particularly to focus a suspicion that hovers on the fringes of Edgley's argument, that its programme can be carried through only with the help of a partial lapse into idealism. For in one aspect idealism is or involves precisely the view that society is an intellectual product. Within such a perspective it is perhaps intelligible enough that the uncovering of contradictions should be assigned a critical function. But to note this is not to advance the cause of the materialist dialectic a single step. Hence, the warning offered by the conservative position is of the need to guard against 'the idealist temptations involved in the dialectic' (10), and this point will have to be accommodated in any satisfactory treatment of the subject.

A second kind of ideological response may be thought of by contrast as a distinctively 'liberal' one. Its character may be indicated by saying that it seizes on the demonstration of the possibility of social contradictions and tries to turn it to its own purposes. In doing so it relies on the claim that such contradictions may have a positive value. Thus a society rich in them is, it may be said, likely to be one in which there is acceptance of diversity and, hence, in which the virtues of freedom and tolerance can flourish. This in turn guarantees a congenial setting for the exercise of imagination and creativity and the pursuit of truth. The best society will be the one with the most ramified contradictions and this, it may well be, turns out to be bourgeois society. This general line of thought should be familiar enough. It is a restatement, in what may well be a more powerful form, of traditional liberal themes, and

10 L. Aitnasser, *Essays in Self-Criticism*, 1976, p177.

approximates in particular to the position of a thinker like Karl Popper, freed of its arbitrary restrictions on the scope of logic. Indeed by demolishing such prejudices Edgley may now be thought to have done a service to the liberal cause by providing it with a broader theoretical base. The new liberalism may turn out to be a more formidable opponent than its non-dialectical predecessors. For present purposes, however, the important point is that our sketch of it has been able to trade on an authentic element in the dialectic which is constantly emphasised by the classical writers. This is the positive aspect of contradictions, their role as conditions of progress hinted at in the sentence quoted earlier from Lukacs. It is an element to which Edgley's account pays little attention and which is difficult to deal with on his premises. It is natural to suppose, as Keat does, that the realisation of his science would be a society without contradictions. It is far from clear that such a state of affairs could be coherently described in any detail. Moreover, the suggestion of it leaves the way open for a familiar kind of anti-socialist rhetoric. This revolves around a picture of the socialist society as a nightmare world of stasis and mediocrity in which differentiation is reduced to a minimum with the loss of everything that makes human life admirable and interesting. In order not to lend any encouragement to such travesties it may be necessary to say clearly that the goal of socialism is not, even were such a thing conceivable, a society without contradictions. This in turn suggests a need to make discriminations within the varieties of social contradiction so that some escape the critical verdict of socialist science. Such a move is inhibited by the character of Edgley's argument, dependent as that is on tracing conceptual connections at a general level. Yet it represents a kind of flexibility that is essential if justice is to be done to our subject.

It is worth remarking that this requirement holds no difficulties for the classic case of dialectical social science in operation. The work of Marx involves no claims to be a general science of social contradictions. To grasp its relevance here one has first to note a point made by many commentators concerning the specificity of its object. This is not human society as such but rather class society, or more particularly, as exemplified in *Capital*, modern bourgeois society. Moreover, it is clear that criticism of contradictions, important as it is, does not exhaust the variety of the criticisms brought to bear on this object. Marx's freedom from the dogma of the autonomy of values, of the idealist separation of the 'is' and the 'ought' (11), enabled him to deploy a wide range of practical scientific concepts in a way impossible to bring under such a rubric. The use made of 'exploitation' and of 'alienation' provides only the most obvious instances. It should also be said that there is no reason to ascribe to him any generalised hostility to social contradictions, and hence no reason to ascribe the fantastic ideal of a society from which all contradictions have been eliminated. He may, of course, be said to have assumed that a society without classes would escape the pervasive and systematic contradictions whose

11 See the letter of 1837 to his father in which the teenage Marx repudiates his former belief in 'a complete opposition between what is and ought to be' and adds, in connection with his first efforts in law and philosophy: 'Here the same opposition of "is" and "ought" which is the hallmark of idealism was the dominating and very destructive feature...' (D. McLellan, ed., *Early Texts*, 1972, pp2-3). The later Marx never departed from this insight and it makes a significant contribution to the remarkable unity of his intellectual career.

existence depends on class structure. Thus, it is the contradictions specific to class society, those that flow from and give expression to the fundamental fact of the division into classes, that he opposes and seeks to abolish. But this stance does not require, and in truth is incompatible with, the assumption that social contradictions as such must be defects. It leaves all the room one needs to make the discriminations within the varieties of social contradiction that were spoken of earlier. Indeed the main problem that Marx's practice bequeaths to this discussion is that of giving an adequate explanation of the theoretical basis for such discriminations.

## The Epistemological Solution

The tendency of the discussion so far has been to cast doubt on the assumption that the revealing of contradictions is by nature a critical activity. It has tried to loosen its grip through the method of giving counter-examples to indicate the true complexity of the phenomena. This procedure is, however, too negative and piecemeal to lead by itself to full theoretical understanding. For that some fundamental issues have to be tackled directly. A convenient place to start is with the recognition that for some objects of appraisal it can hardly be denied that contradictions do indeed constitute defects. Such a conclusion normally seems to be forced in dealing with items falling within the category identified earlier of 'intellectual products'. The question has to be asked of what after all is wrong with contradictions in such cases: in precisely what way do they constitute defects? It is a question to which a variety of answers may be found in the literature. So far as the study of formal logic itself is concerned a standard response relies on the idea that from a contradiction any conclusion whatever may be derived (12). Hence a logic that admitted contradictions would, as Susan Haack points out, 'be useless for the purpose of discriminating valid from invalid inferences' (13). The weakness of this line of thought, however, is that while it may be decisive on its home ground it seems to offer no purchase at all on the problem of what is wrong with contradictions in social beliefs and practices. The suggestions made by students of 'informal logic' are scarcely more helpful. P. F. Strawson represents a common view when he contends that a man who contradicts himself does not actually succeed in saying anything:

The point is that the standard purpose of speech, the intention to communicate something, is frustrated by self-contradiction. Contradicting oneself is like writing something down and then erasing it, or putting a line through it. A contradiction cancels itself and leaves nothing (14).

Here again the suggestion, whatever its merits in its original context, fails to address our concerns. A society is not an individual subject of discourse, a would-be communicator, in the sense required, and hence the fact that it speaks with many voices cannot be held against it in the same way. Much more promising is an idea put forward by Roy Edgley himself in his book *Reason in Theory and Practice* which draws on the link between contradiction and falsity or incorrectness. In virtue of this link it follows that 'if the proposition that *p* is inconsistent with the proposition that *q*, one of these

propositions must be false, so that anyone who believes both must be believing something that is false.' (15). This point is presumably what Edgley has in mind in remarking in his paper that he has argued elsewhere for the critical significance of identifying contradictions, and indeed it seems easy enough to take it over for our purposes. For it is also the case that in a social situation in which some peoples' beliefs contradict those of others one side at least must be believing what is false. To point this out is, it may be said, to offer a criticism if anything is, for being false is the primary way in which beliefs can go wrong and be liable to censure. The suggestion is that the revealing of social contradictions is a critical activity in so far as it signals the presence of falsity or incorrectness in its object.

On this view it is with cognitive defects that critical social science is ultimately concerned: its cutting-edge is of a specifically epistemological kind. In order to try its keenness it may be well to make explicit a point that has hitherto been tacitly assumed in the discussion. It is that objective social contradictions cannot be exclusively associated with, or regarded as precise analogues of, the 'contradictions' of traditional logic. For those are distinguished by the fact that their elements exhaust the range of possibilities and necessarily have opposite truth-values. The social contradictions, on the other hand, must include, and perhaps will typically consist of, cases that correspond rather to the traditional category of 'contraries', where truth on one side rules out the possibility of truth on the other but its existence on either is not guaranteed. Thus critical social science will often have to deal with mere inconsistencies or incompatibilities and in such cases its operation is sensitive only to a presence of falsity, not of truth. At this point doubts about the significance of its achievements come into sharper focus. For surely it will normally be only the most ingenuous observer who will find it informative to be told that at least some of the beliefs involved in a social situation are false. The real task of criticism will still remain to be done, and it must presumably take the form of a process of validation applied to individual cases. Moreover, it is hard not to feel that once this is carried out the critical weight will be borne by the notion of falsity rather than that of contradiction. The latter now begins to look suspiciously like an idle cog in the epistemological mechanism.

Even where the issue of falsity itself is concerned the critical edge is not so keen as one could wish.

15 R. Edgley, *Reason in Theory and Practice*, 1969, p84.



12 See, for instance, the discussion in K. Popper 'What is Dialectic?' Section 1. *Conjectures and Refutations*, 1963.

13 S. Haack, *Deviant Logic*, 1974, p36.

14 P. F. Strawson, *Introduction to Logical Theory*, 1952, p3.

The case for it was introduced by Edgley in terms of the situation of someone who believes inconsistent things. The risk in extrapolating from such examples to the social level is one of succumbing to a kind of 'methodological individualism'. The assumption that in characterising a particular belief as false one is criticising it does indeed have an air of rock-bottom certainty. An almost equal assurance attaches to the idea that it must constitute a criticism of the state of an individual's beliefs to say that some are false: such a remark would normally be thought to be practical in the straightforward sense of offering the individual a reason for doing something to alter the situation. It does not follow from this, and does not seem independently obvious either, that it is necessarily a criticism of a social situation that it contains or involves false beliefs. It is as easy to imagine a 'liberal' treatment of the suggestion in this form as it is when presented directly in terms of contradictions: the freedom to make mistakes and tolerance of at least some forms of error may be said to be socially desirable just as is diversity of opinion. Moreover the postulate of a society free of incorrect beliefs is even more obviously a fantasy than that of one free of contradictions. Matters are not improved if one supposes that our science is critical only of those false beliefs that form elements of contradictions in being opposed by other beliefs, while leaving unscathed ones that are universally accepted. If the epistemological turn is taken seriously it becomes hard to see why science should not take the entire realm of error as its target. Once again we seem to be pointed towards the conclusion that the result of such a turn must be to deprive a discourse based on contradictions of any independent significance.

It may also be doubted whether the turn can meet the needs of that vital part of Edgley's argument accepted at the start of this paper. For the recourse to the notion of cognitive defect does not seem to be equally available at all stages of it. The argument depended, as we saw, on a piecemeal extension of the category of contradiction so as to apply to social phenomena. The preliminary to it was a rejection of some views of logic that are deeply rooted in the analytical tradition, among them the view that 'logical relations are truth-value relations between propositions' (16). This preliminary is needed partly at least because of doubts as to whether the notion of truth-values can take us as far as we need to go. It applies readily enough to beliefs but less happily to other elements of social reality. Moreover, one might wish to leave open the possibility that contradictions between, say, social practices should be thought of on the model of a logic of imperatives rather than of propositions. For that one needs the ability mentioned earlier to speak of relations that hold in virtue of meanings rather than truth-values. Indeed the original enterprise is most readily intelligible if it is seen as an attempt to show how the concept of meaning can embrace and unite the whole field of phenomena. The weakness of purely epistemic concepts here may be brought out in other ways. The social scientist who relies on the interpretation they suggest may be found to be committed to some odd claims. Thus, for instance, it may have to be concluded that: 'Either it is false that witchcraft is biologically transmitted or it is false that autopsies are decisive tests of its presence or both of

16 RP15, p4.

these beliefs are false.' The sense of strangeness is connected with the fact that judgements of the truth or falsity of the beliefs presuppose a grasp of their sense and this depends on, and is intelligible only within, a conceptual framework that is not, and could not be, that of the social scientist. The possibility of scientific criticism arises within a perspective that is not available to the Azande. As Evans-Pritchard remarks, 'they have no theoretical interest in the subject' (17), and to raise such problems about it is already to have left their view of things behind. The corollary is that the question of the truth or falsity of the beliefs cannot arise in any significant or vivid way for the investigator. To insist that the discussion of it may be critical in its implications is to pay lip-service to an ideal of criticism. Without succumbing to the temptations of relativism it may be suggested that those features of the concept of truth that give rise to them are also a source of embarrassment here. That concept has an element of contextual specificity, of culture-boundedness, about it that makes it unsuited to the role of an all-purpose weapon of critical social science. At this point the general moral of the discussion should begin to be clear. It is that the suggestion being considered errs in representing logical defects as though they were epistemological ones and, hence, in seeking to explain phenomena at one categorial level by invoking another that is in relevant respects less fundamental. It is at the level of logic and meaning that the inquiry into what is wrong with contradictions must be pursued. It should be possible to hold on to this idea while taking a hint from the title of Edgley's paper and book and from the general character of much of their argument. To do so is to postulate a vital, mediating role for the concept of rationality. The trouble with contradictions, it may be suggested, is that they are 'irrationalities': they run contrary to reason. The suggestion needs careful explication, but a preliminary check on its feasibility is provided by referring to our working model of dialectical social science. It is true that Marx's explanatory critique is rich in resources for the scientific criticism of the contradictions of class society. But something important about his practice is captured in the suggestion that it attaches a special significance to the possibility of seeing them specifically as offences against the light of reason, as, in Edgley's telling phrase, 'structural irrationalities' (18). It is the conditions for the possibility of such a view that now need to be explained.

## The Importance of Rationality

To explore them adequately one seems obliged to attempt an account of the concept of rationality itself. The prospect is a daunting one for its complexity is a fair reflection of its unique status. It should perhaps be recognised that one is confronted with a collection of concepts loosely gathered under a single heading, or with what is in itself an entire conceptual field. There can be no question of doing justice to the situation here. But it may be possible to pick out a theme that is of particular interest for the discussion and that is central and substantial enough to suggest the outlines of a view of the whole. The discussion has warned already of the need to attend to the specificity of the object of discourse. For a dialectical social science the object consists

17 op.cit.

18 RP15, p7.

of such items as human actions, activities, policies, enterprises and practices. In such cases the most obvious way in which the concept of rationality can be applied is in connection with the intelligent shaping of means to ends. A paradigm is, one might say, provided by the notion of 'instrumental rationality'. It is true, and indeed a common source of complaint, that this model is often abused by being given too much to do. It has to be borne in mind that it cannot be straightforwardly applied to many quite ordinary activities from having a conversation to improvising at the piano or going for a walk. For these activities are not usually structured in terms of a goal that may be identified independently of them. A familiar way of making the point is to say that they are not means to anything external but are pursued just for their own sakes. This way of talking need not, however, introduce any significant difference so far as our present interests are concerned. From this standpoint it may not matter greatly that some activities have to be regarded as ends in themselves rather than as instrumental means. For, as this formulation suggests, they can still be appraised in terms of criteria that have to do with notions of intentionality and purpose, and that may be all we need. These notions are, it may be supposed, the key ones here and it is through the connection with them that one may seek to grasp the category of rationality. Over a wide range of applications that category has something inescapably teleological about it.

It seems easy enough to develop this suggestion in the way we need. Social practices and institutions may be seen as permeated with intentionality by virtue of embodying various modes of human will and consciousness. An understanding of the mode involved in each case should enable one to see the point, the *telos*, of the institution and in terms of that one can assess the rationality of details. If one wishes one could speak of 'rational appraisal' here, using the label to enforce the distinction with the logical concern with questions of internal coherence that was discussed earlier. To illustrate its potential we may return to reconsider some of our previous examples. Thus, formal logic is itself, though the point is often lost sight of, a social practice, something that human beings engage in and that is created and sustained by their efforts. Hence it is interesting that Susan Haack in asking what is wrong with contradictions from the standpoint of this practice should have explicitly referred to its purpose of discriminating valid from invalid inferences. It is equally interesting that P. F. Strawson in saying what is wrong with inconsistent utterances should have explicitly referred to the standard purpose of speech, a communication of meanings that is frustrated if people give things and take them back in the same breath. All of this fits readily with the suggestion that to speak of irrationalities in connection with forms of social life is to speak of obstacles to the achievement of the purposes that are implicit in the forms and provide their human significance.

It seems obvious that contradictions are likely to have a large role in human affairs as obstacles of this sort. Nevertheless, it remains the case that whether or not they count as defects of rationality depends on the constitution of the form of life in which they occur. It is a contingent question to which the answer will vary with circumstances: there can be no guarantee of congruence between the critical

verdicts of rational and of logical appraisal. This conclusion is easy to support from familiar ways of thinking and speaking. Thus it is not usually supposed that it must be a defect in a joke that it contains a contradiction. Indeed if theories that connect humour with incongruity have any substance one might rather expect a kind of affinity here (19). Contradictions do not constitute breaches of the kind of rationality that belongs to the institution of joke-telling, and on occasions the insistence on applying the logical point of view may simply reveal that one stands outside that institution. It is easy to find more weighty illustrations. There is, for instance, Paul Feyerabend's account of science as an activity whose aim is 'objective knowledge', an aim that is not advanced by treating contradictions as defects. A large part of his concern is to warn the practising scientist against following 'the barren and illiterate logician' who preaches about the virtues of clarity, consistency, tightness of argument and so on. Feyerabend's 'anthropological study' of episodes in the history of science has convinced him that these virtues, if 'practised with determination', would bring the whole enterprise to a standstill for 'there is not a single science, or other form of life, that is useful, progressive as well as being in agreement with logical demands.' (20). The point that concerns us is not whether the anthropology is correct but simply the fact that the conclusions Feyerabend draws from it are conceptually in perfect order. In this case, too, where one is dealing with an activity often regarded as the paradigm of human rationality, what is rational depends on what purposes are being served.

The conclusion to be drawn is that if the contradictions of class society are to count as irrationalities they will have to be seen as obstacles to the achievement of some human purposes. How is one to say what these purposes are? At this point the largest issues begin to open up and new realms of theory exert their claims. It also becomes clear that misgivings about Edgley's work have their deepest source in the fear that, for all its positive achievement, it may encourage misunderstanding of the nature and complexity of the tasks that remain. Its apparent success in establishing dialectical social science just on the basis of a large-scale map of the conceptual relations between a limited number of general categories may obscure the need to engage in concrete ways with these substantive theoretical questions. The questions arise most urgently for the project of a materialist 'philosophical anthropology'; the attempt to give an account in materialist terms of how we are to conceive of ourselves as human beings, of what is distinctive about our existence, of what its well-being consists in and of what purposes are compatible with, or elements of, such a condition. The project can, of course, draw help and encouragement from the work of Marx. Thus, he has much to say on the question of what differentiates human beings from other animals. A particularly graphic statement of his views is given in the section on the labour process in the first volume of *Capital*:  
We presuppose labour in a form in which it is an

19 See the discussion in S. Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, 1960, esp. Section A II. Typical of Freud's illustrations is the following: 'Is this the place where the Duke of Wellington spoke those words? Yes, it is the place; but he never spoke the words.' (p60, n). A bad-taste example of the category, that is much better as a joke and hard to omit in the present context in view of the connection with a great master of dialectic, is provided by the dying words attributed to Hegel: 'Only one man ever understood me. And he didn't understand me.'

20 P. Feyerabend, *Against Method*, 1975. For references see pp257-60.

exclusively human characteristic. A spider conducts operations which resemble those of the weaver, and a bee would put many a human architect to shame by the construction of its honeycomb cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is that the architect builds the cell in his mind before he constructs it in wax. At the end of every labour process, a result emerges which had already been conceived by the worker at the beginning, hence already existed ideally. Man not only effects a change of form in the materials of nature; he also realizes (*virwirklicht*) his own purpose in those materials. And this is a purpose he is conscious of, it determines the mode of his activity with the rigidity of a law, and he must subordinate his will to it. (21)

The exclusively human characteristic, it appears, is labour animated by conscious purpose. In the light of the preceding discussion Marx may now be classified as one of the philosophers who conceive of human beings as rational animals. But for him it is a rationality that exhibits itself characteristically not in theory or contemplation but in activity in the world: what is quintessentially human is the faculty of practical reason. The explication of his dialectical social science has to be grounded in a theory of the conditions for the proper exercise of this faculty; that is to say, in a materialist theory of society. In the end such a theory must prove to be the only effective armour against the idealist temptations of the dialectic.

21 K. Marx, *Capital*, Vol. I, trans. B. Fowkes, 1976, pp283-84. Cf. Engels: 'In short, the animal merely uses its environment, and brings about changes in it simply by its presence; man by his changes makes it serve

his ends, masters it. This is the final, essential distinction between man and other animals, and once again it is labour that brings about this distinction.' *Dialectics of Nature*, 1954, pp179-80.

# REVIEWS

## THE HISTORIAN'S COACH

Jonathan Rée, Michael Ayers and Adam Westoby, *Philosophy and its Past*, Harvester, 1978, £8.50 hardback, £3.50 paperback

It is really rather surprising that this book, or something like it, has not appeared before. For as well as being straightforwardly interesting, and readable, it could be important. The History of Philosophy, which figures in almost all undergraduate Philosophy programmes, is arguably the seat of Philosophy's own self-consciousness. Only Logic rivals it as a preparatory study for Philosophy proper. Like a nation's history to the people, it presents to the disciples of Philosophy images of the fatal mistakes and the heroism of the founding fathers, who fought (mostly amongst themselves) to hand on the clear lines of philosophical practice that we now enjoy. But this short book undermines those images. Look again into your collective memory, it suggests, think back over your past. And the truth may be traumatic for the self-assured practitioner of academic Philosophy, if it can get beneath his skin.

The book's three articles cover not only different sides of the subject of the History of Philosophy, but different approaches to arguing for a change in method. Jonathan Rée's is an historical article. It describes the genesis of Philosophy's own view of its distinct history in the Renaissance and Enlightenment views of the history of culture itself. Both periods had a vested interest in rejecting some part of their history. Thus, the Philosophes could make good use of the systematisation of the history of Philosophy into conflicting schools developed by Jacob Brucker to train students in the new German protestant universities. It made a good case for rejecting out of hand all theorising, be it religious or metaphysical, in favour of plain, reasonable man's understanding. But a tactically expedient position has hardened into the orthodoxy of academic institutions for the following two centuries. And today the History of Philosophy shows us no progress, only toing and froing over a given range of possible philosophical positions. Kant, Hegel and

Marx offer ways out of this collective ideology, each of which shows how past philosophies are valid preliminaries for future progress. But these have not been taken up. Again, Rée claims the same lineage for the central position attributed to epistemology, and in particular to the opposition between Rationalism and Empiricism.

I found this a fascinating piece of historical research, but am unhappy about what seems a major lacuna. Although somewhat unevenly, continental Philosophy has advanced, via Kant, Hegel, Marx etc, from the Enlightenment view of the History of Philosophy. It is the country whose only original contribution to Philosophy is Empiricism, namely Britain, where that historical view which counterposes futile theories, making them easy targets for empiricist reductionism, is still followed, and where Empiricism, by being counterposed to all other philosophies, still appears to be God's gift to philosophical thought. I think there must be some historical reason why British Philosophy (and to some extent American) pulled up while European Philosophy moved on. But this historical account of the growth of a range of philosophical positions is chastening for the professional, who takes them for granted. For to raise the question of their historical origin immediately shows how non-necessary they may be.

Though Rée's essay contains certain philosophical arguments (about, for example, whether it is possible to identify a system of beliefs outside a context), it is Ayers' article that attacks the History of Philosophy with more conventionally pure philosophical argument. Ayers shows up mistaken philosophical presuppositions which underlie various examples of misinterpretation of historical philosophers. Russell on Leibnitz, for example, takes his own philosophical starting points and prunes and trains Leibnitz's philosophy to grow out of them. Others adopting the same approach identify mistakes in Hume's or Kant's formulation of their positions which, if removed, magically produce the writer's own view. Accompanying this practice there is the unfounded belief that what a philosopher