

The Owl, the Fox, and the Mole: Hegel, Feuerbach, and Marx— Three Men, Three Moments, and a Movement from Stars to Soil

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Abstract

Perhaps the most useful paradigm through which to view Marxist theory is provided by the concept of “dialectical materialism,” as employed in works such as the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* by Karl Marx. In this essay, I will demonstrate that a valuable way to learn about this concept is by thinking of the process through which Marx arrived at his conception of dialectical materialism by way of the Hegelian dialectic. Specifically, I posit that Marx repurposes the Hegelian dialectical model of point, negation, and negation of negation, in such a way that it serves his materialist ends; and that, generally, this is what is meant by “dialectical materialism.” I propose that this approach, together with a critical analysis of both Hegel’s philosophy, and then Ludwig Feuerbach’s criticism of Hegel, is what allows Marx to convert the theory and speculation developed by predecessors into actual, particularly political, praxis. That is to say, we can think of Hegel’s idealist, speculative philosophy as the “point,” Feuerbach’s materialist criticism of Hegel as the “negation,” and Marx’s criticism and sublation of both philosophies into material reality as the “negation of the negation.”

Marx’s main issue with Hegel’s philosophy—particularly as it is expressed in Marx’s early works such as the *Manuscripts*—is that it is, as abstraction, inherently divorced from practical application. Moreover, the further we follow the Hegelian system, the further removed we find ourselves from reality. Notably, as we shall discover, this way of thinking lends itself to hierarchical presuppositions in the way we organize society, thus upholding and perpetuating existing oppressive power structures. Marx generally agrees with Feuerbach’s criticism as it is presented in “Towards a Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy.” His primary contention with Feuerbach, however, arises from his assertion that Feuerbach’s approach to criticism has been unknowingly baited into the same realm of abstraction, wherein the criticism becomes self-satisfied in having successfully criticized; not realizing that it, too, has also established itself in the realm of theory exclusively, and does nothing to address the material impacts of just such abstraction. In fact, it has become subsumed by the abstraction it criticizes.

To elucidate the dynamic between these three figures, I will begin the discussion with a parable of my own devising wherein I envision the three thinkers analogously as animals

awakening one after another on a given night: the owl, the fox, and the mole. Hegel is the owl who flies high above the ground so that he may take everything in from above; Feuerbach is the fox who climbs the tree and attempts to catch the great bird and drag it back down to his den; and Marx is the mole who watches the chase in the trees for a while, before returning to his work of digging the dirt and reshaping the earth. This parable is intended to illustrate how Marx learned from the philosophical discourse between his predecessors, and how this provided him with the education he needed to go on to develop a system based thereon which produces actual, material change—namely, dialectical materialism.

Keywords: Feuerbach, Hegel, Marx, Abstraction, Criticism, Dialectical Materialism, Idealism, Sublation

Introduction

Perhaps the most famous passage to come from 19th century philosopher Georg W.F. Hegel is found in the Preface to his treatise *Philosophy of Right*: “The owl of Minerva, begins its flight only with the onset of dusk” (2014, 27). There is much to unpack in so few words. For the moment it is sufficient to consider what those words tell of how Hegel viewed philosophy in general, namely, that a complete and well-defined philosophical purview of a state of affairs is only observable in hindsight and from a bird’s-eye view. In other words, philosophy, like the wings of an owl, is what allows us to transcend the binds of earthly existence toward something greater—to take flight, observe the world as it has come to be from “above,” and bring ourselves closer to the stars. As we shall soon see, others will reject this outlook, preferring instead to have boots (or paws, as it were) on the ground, to look ahead to what ought to be, and to do what is needed to make manifest an envisioned world.

In this essay, I will explore Hegel’s philosophical system as it relates to two of his successors and critics: Ludwig Feuerbach and Karl Marx. By exploring the succession and interaction of the ideas of these three I will clarify the Marxist conception of dialectical materialism. I propose that, by thinking of the three thinkers as three moments in a Hegelian dialectic—that is, Hegel, Feuerbach, and Marx as point, negation, and negation of negation, respectively—we can trace the development of dialectical materialism. Beginning with a parable that will serve to illustrate by analogy the dynamic between the three figures, I will then explore relevant aspects of the philosophies of each thinker individually, and the ways in which they relate to their predecessor(s), where applicable. I close with a discussion of dialectical materialism as Marx conceived of it, including how the philosophical chain of succession herein detailed led to its conception. But first, the parable:

The Owl, the Fox, and the Mole

Not long after the sun has dipped below the far-off hills, the wise old owl first stretches his furthest-most feathers toward opposite horizons and drops deftly away from his perch to scan the forest floor from above.

The Owl, the Fox, and the Mole

Far below, in a tree trunk burrow, the fox's keen ears twitch the rest of him awake at the sound of a "hoot" announcing the owl's inaugural flight this night. The fox's stomach growls, as does he.

As his head emerges from his cozy den, his sharp eyes instantly lock onto the silent silhouette of pitch-black wings gracefully gliding against the dimming dark purple of the dusk sky above. He wastes no time clawing his way up the bark of the nearest tree and leaping limb-to-limb, tree-to-tree, attempting to drag the great bird back down away from the stars. The hunt is underway.

Several times during the chase, the fox breaches the forest canopy, snapping at tail-feathers in the full glow of moonlight. In his ravenous resolve, the fox fails to notice his prey luring him ever further from the forest floor below, too preoccupied with his pursuit to look down.

Meanwhile, many metres below the treetop chase, the young mole is the last of the three to stir. He blinks his bleary eyes and tunnels his way upward to drink in the brisk night air. Once he breaches the surface, his head swivels skyward to observe the starlit spectacle overhead. He observes with interest, and he learns from the dizzying dance of the duo so high up. He admires their ability and agility—but only from his earthbound vantage can he also see its futility.

After a while, he tires of the aerial display, which doubtless will continue till morning to no avail, and so returns to his nightly work of digging around in the dirt.

By the time dawn threatens to break, the owl and the fox are forced to return to their homes, exhausted and hungry—another night wasted, fruitless. Only the mole retires happily, with a belly full of grubs, having shifted and reshaped the earth in a way that will make his world an even better one to live in tomorrow.

The owl is an analog for Hegel. This leaves the fox and the mole: Feuerbach and Marx, respectively. First, the owl remains in continuous flight throughout the night, scanning the earth from above, representing Hegel's philosophy of idealism. Briefly, Hegel's philosophical system is founded on considering finite experiences to be pointing toward a greater, intelligible reality, accessed by reason alone.

The fox's pursuit of the owl, then, represents Feuerbach's critique of Hegel, and the continued attempts to pull the bird out of the sky reflect Feuerbach's materialist inclinations, and his criticism of Hegel's idealism. A fundamental element of this criticism is concerned with rejecting the abstraction from material reality which Hegel's system requires.

Finally, the mole—Marx—is the one to notice, from his earthbound perspective, the fox's growing distance from the ground, of which the fox is unaware. This is intended as a nod to Marx's criticism of Feuerbach's criticism of Hegel: it has been unwittingly baited

into the same distance from material reality as its object of criticism. That is, Feuerbach's criticism, as Marx saw it, had essentially become the very abstraction it criticizes.

The mole's earthbound perspective on this scenario allows him to observe and learn from the maneuvers of the two overhead, recognizing the futility of the chase, before resolving to return to his nightly work of digging around in the earth. Marx engaged with the ideas of his predecessors, especially those of Feuerbach and Hegel, but only to the extent to which they could inform and be translated into material applications.

The Owl

Hegel's philosophy is a culminating product of post-Kantian German idealism and purports to be all-encompassing and entirely self-contained. The observable world is a reflection of the mind; "truer" reality is accessed in thought. Knowledge, for Hegel (2014, 12), must "examine, apprehend, and conceive the reason actually present in nature. Not with the superficial shapes and accidents of nature, but with its eternal harmony, that is to say, its inherent law and essence, [it] has to cope." Knowledge is formed by way of abstraction from phenomenal experience to universal intelligible forms in reason. Here can begin the construction of a universal philosophical system. Hegel (2014, 12) describes the fate of the immediate as "the plight of [them] who cannot see the woods for the trees." And so, the owl understands that he must breach the canopy of trees to better observe the whole of the forest from above.

Structurally, the Hegelian system is a "dialectic." Every idea is intrinsically tied to its own contradiction, and the pair in contradiction produces a new idea which incorporates its predicates and accounts for the contradiction—a process called "sublation." The most basic example, which he provides in the *Encyclopaedia Logic*, he summarizes: "Nothing, if it be thus immediate and equal to itself, is also conversely the same as Being is. The truth of Being and of Nothing is accordingly the unity of the two: and this unity is Becoming" (Hegel 2001, 71). Hegel begins with the idea of Being. We innately have an account of being by virtue of our awareness of our own being and of the world around us. To have an account of Being, he argues, is to also have an account of its inverse: Nothing. For example, if we take a determinate, finite instance of being—say, me or my being—this automatically points to moments in the past and the future of nothingness: before I was born and after I die. The contradiction is then resolved when we consider that between the moment of Nothing and the moment of Being, there is a movement that must take place, a process of generation or elimination. This is how we arrive at the idea of Becoming. Becoming, as such, is predicated upon, while also serving to resolve the contradiction between, Being and Nothing; and it *sublates* the two opposing ideas within the result. In this way, we can think of the Hegelian dialectic as a movement of three moments: a point, a negation, and a negation of the negation. In the example provided, these moments would be Being, Nothing, and Becoming, respectively.

Importantly, even at this early point in the discussion, one might already recognize some ways in which in a system ideas are not subservient to the individual. But the reverse might

lend itself to the entrenchment of hierarchical, fatalistic, and politically passive worldviews. These elements, as they are criticized by Marx and Feuerbach, will be described in greater detail; however, here I will introduce an example to work with henceforth: the State.

In *Philosophy of Right*, regarding the purpose of the text as a whole, Hegel (2014, 21) affirms that “this treatise, therefore, in so far as it deals with a political science, shall be nothing other than an attempt to *comprehend and portray the state as an inherently rational entity*.” This is noteworthy because we see that Hegel’s notion of the state and how it operates and governs its constituents is as an entity that is rational *in itself*; that is, the very *concept* of state is rational, and not only those people of whom the state is comprised. What this means is that Hegel understands a government’s regime and a nation’s structure to presuppose a purely rational, conceptual framework. We might be able to access and understand the state’s various mechanisms by way of reason, but the principles to which it adheres—and which it imposes on the populace—are to be considered axiomatic. It is as though the state is an invisible, conceptual force, hovering over the tangible world, dictating how everything operates. As such, we see how the owl may have a vested interest in flying high above the ground. This notion will prove crucial in the discourse to follow.

The Fox

As discussed above, the fox’s attempts to drag the bird out of the sky represent Feuerbach’s materialist criticism of the abstraction inherent to the Hegelian system. Respecting the very outset of Hegel’s idealist project, Feuerbach levies a protest against his predecessor’s approach with regards to the idea of Being. He voices his point of contention in the following:

I take the notion of being from being itself; however, all being is determinate being—that is why, in passing, I can also posit nothingness which means “not something” or “opposed to being” because I always and inseparably connect “something” with being. If you therefore leave out determinateness from being, you leave being with no being at all. (Feuerbach 2012a, 186-7)

Feuerbach’s main issue has to do with a fundamental tenet of idealism: namely, the position that abstraction from determinate phenomena to universal objects of reason and understanding somehow constitutes a movement toward reality, truth, and knowledge. For Feuerbach, all notions of being are contingent on there being determinate instances of being, and any abstraction to a more universal concept is just that: abstraction. That is to say, Feuerbach’s argument is that the idealist way of thinking does not move us toward truth and knowledge eternal, extant only in the intelligible realm, or what have you; rather, it constitutes from its outset a departure from the reality of lived, material existence.

Notably, this criticism of Feuerbach’s is not a purely academic one. There are demonstrable material implications of his contention when we apply it to, say, our example of the State. On this, he posits the following:

Every system is only an expression or image of reason, and hence only an object of reason, an object which reason—a living power that procreates itself in new thinking beings—distinguishes from itself and posits as an object of criticism. Every system that is not recognized and appropriated as just a means, limits and warps the mind for it sets up the indirect and formal thought in the place of the direct, original, and material thought. It kills the spirit of invention. (Feuerbach, 175-76)

Feuerbach's worldview contrasts starkly with that of Hegel. In the context of the State, the notion that governance and societal order are a function of some system of pure reason gives rise to some problematic implications. This way of thinking lends itself readily to the preclusion of anti-monarchist sentiments, for example; if we internalize the idea that the State is a manifestation of reason, it is easier to accept any political and societal reality into which we are born. Conversely, if we conceive of the state as being a product of those who uphold it, not only are we better equipped to recognize systemic injustices, but suddenly there are tangible objects towards which we can direct dissent (in the form of those people who uphold the unjust systems). Only a materialist analysis of the state fosters progressive political thought, because only the materialist paradigm includes an awareness that the State is what the people make of it. It is for this reason the fox so hastily climbs the tree, and desperately tries to pull the bird back down to earth.

The Mole

The owl's graceful flight and the fox's agility and determination, even in the topmost branches, are to be admired. Surely, however, as much as their dance is a spectacle to behold, the mole knows they will ultimately have nothing to show for it come morning.

Karl Marx wore many hats, often all at once: he was a historian, a political economist, a journalist, and a philosopher—although “student of philosophy” might be a better description for the latter. I draw this distinction because, from very early on in his writings, Marx advocates for thinking of theory as valuable only insofar as it serves to inform praxis. In an early article entitled “For a Ruthless Criticism of Everything Existing,” Marx (1978d, 13) calls for exactly what the title would suggest, clarifying that his meaning is “ruthless in two senses: The criticism must not be afraid of its own conclusions, nor of conflict with the powers that be.” Not long before, in his dissertation, Marx (1978d, 9) posits that “it is a psychological law that the theoretical mind, once liberated in itself, turns into practical energy, and turns itself against the reality existing without it.”

The sum of the sentiments expressed in these excerpts speaks to Marx's view on philosophy, namely, that it should be a theoretical means to a practical end. That is, philosophy is valuable insofar as it inculcates in its student a ruthlessly critical mind, ultimately leading to enactment of material change in kind. It is primarily in this way that Marx deviated from his predecessors—the mole turns away from the spectacle up in the trees, having gleaned what he could from their movements, and decides to redirect his efforts to actually reshaping the earth.

With regard to Hegel, Marx was more or less wholly in agreement with the criticisms levied by Feuerbach. For example, in the introduction to his essay “Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*,” Marx (1978a, 53) addresses both of the examples touched on above—Being and the State—in the following passage: “*man* is not an abstract being, squatting outside the world. Man is *the human world*, the state, society.” In this respect, he agrees with Feuerbach’s assertions that the idea of Being has no content without determinate instances, and that the state is no more nor less than the sum total of the social production of its constituent populace.

That said, Marx’s departure from Feuerbach stems primarily from his assertion that Feuerbach’s criticism had unwittingly established itself at the same level of abstraction as that which it sought to criticize, and that the criticism was essentially identical to its object in this way. In the “Theses on Feuerbach” Marx (1978e, 143) states that “the chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism—that of Feuerbach included—is that the thing, reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of the object or of *contemplation*, but not as *human sensuous activity, practice*, not subjectively.” That is to say, for Marx, the point of materialist criticism is to act critically so that criticisms may have a transformative material impact on the world. In other words, Feuerbach’s criticism is inadequate *because* it is immaterial, in that it has seemingly become self-satisfied with having criticized only, without having incited any attempt to rectify the flaws it points out in the real world. This is why the mole views the fox’s hunt of the owl as ultimately pointless, and why he turns to focus his efforts on breaking and reforming the ground instead.

From Stars to Soil

One important caveat we might ascribe to Marx’s criticism of Hegel is that he tends to agree with the inverse of the Hegelian system. That is, Marx admires the dialectical motor of the system, but has to turn it upside down. Instead of soil to stars like the owl taking flight, Marx saw value in the route of the mole leaving the open air to venture back down into the dirt. This inversion of Hegel’s system, while preserving the method of his movement, is evidenced by this passage from “Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*”: “if Hegel had set out from real subjects as the bases of the state he would not have found it necessary to transform the state in a mystical fashion into a subject” (18). We see in Marx’s thinking both the preservation of the dialectical moments and movement, but with a different proposed starting point.

Marx used Hegelian dialectical logic toward material ends. This is exemplified by his description of communism in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* as the “*positive* expression of annulled private property—at first as *universal* private property” whereby the community becomes the “universal capitalist” (1978c, 82-83). Existing capitalist society would be the Hegelian point, its inevitable abolition by way of revolution brought on by conditions created under capitalism would be its negation, and the establishment of a communist society in its place would be the negation of the negation. In this construct, the concepts of the individual capitalist and individual private property are sublated into the new communist reality in the form of the *universal* capitalist that is the

community, and *universal* private property which is communally owned. This is an example of what is meant by dialectical materialism: a reapplication of the Hegelian model whereby the moments, the movement, and the sublation they entail all correspond to material changes.

We can better understand the progression of ideas which led to Marx's conception of dialectical materialism by thinking of Hegel, Feuerbach, and Marx as the dialectical moments. Hegel's idealist philosophy, with its dialectic structure, represents the point. Feuerbach's materialist criticism of Hegel's abstraction constitutes the negation. Marx's development of dialectal materialism is, itself, the negation of the negation. It sublates the inverse of Hegelian philosophy by way of Hegel's own logic and Feuerbach's materialist criticism of Hegel. It removes the contradiction of abstraction from material reality common to both, by way of always translating theory and criticism into praxis. Dialectical materialism expresses the sublation of both of Marx's predecessors. The owl takes flight, the fox chases the owl up to where the owl is flying, and the mole stays firmly on the ground wherefrom he watches, learns, and gets back to digging. Indeed, whereas the fowl and canine spend their evening dancing among the starscape above, the mole is much more content whilst tunneling his way through the soil under the forest floor below.

Conclusion

In sum, the Marxist conception of dialectical materialism can be understood by way of employing the structure of the Hegelian dialectic whereby we think of Hegel, Feuerbach, and Marx as the three dialectical moments. To better illustrate this idea, I have analogously described the dynamic between these three thinkers with my parable "The Owl, the Fox and the Mole." That is to say, the dialectically-structured, idealist philosophy of Hegel—the owl flying high above the ground—represents the initial point in the movement. The materialist criticism levied by Feuerbach, which unwittingly resembles that which it is criticizing in terms of abstraction—the ravenous fox straying ever farther from the forest floor in an attempt to pull the owl out of the sky—represents the negation of the point. And the sublation of both the inverse of the Hegelian system and its dialectical structure, as well as the valid points made in Feuerbach's materialist criticism, in practical application by way of the novel conception of dialectical materialism in Marx—the mole who watches the chase, and then gets back to his digging—represents the negation of the negation and the sublation of both other moments. What differentiates dialectical materialism from the Hegelian dialectic is that the third moment of Hegel's system produces only abstract concepts devoid of content which are arguably further removed from material reality, whereas Marx's reinvention of the movement informs praxis and produces observable, material changes. It is for this reason I maintain that these three men are the three moments in the movement from stars to soil.

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