



The Marxist “ Contradiction Within the Very Essence of Things ” and the Notion of *potentia simul contradictionis*

Andrew Robinson

Volume 11, numéro 2, 1955

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1019930ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1019930ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Laval théologique et philosophique, Université Laval

ISSN

0023-9054 (imprimé)

1703-8804 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Robinson, A. (1955). The Marxist “ Contradiction Within the Very Essence of Things ” and the Notion of *potentia simul contradictionis*. *Laval théologique et philosophique*, 11(2), 206–212. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1019930ar>

The Marxist "Contradiction Within the Very Essence of Things" and the Notion of *potentia simul contradictionis*

One of the most significant features of the Marxist approach to the phenomena of nature is the strangely unqualified assertion of a "contradiction *within the very essence of things*." ¹ This basic principle of dialectical materialism is in turn extensively applied, in the Marxist scheme of history, to the study of social life and its necessary evolution. The affirmation that "development," both natural and historical, "is the 'struggle' of opposites" ² runs like an unbroken thread through the whole intricate fabric of Marxist materialism. According to the late Joseph Stalin, the dialectical method, as distinguished from Metaphysics, holds "that the process of development from the lower to the higher takes place not as a harmonious unfolding of phenomena, but as a disclosure of the contradictions inherent in things and phenomena, as a 'struggle' of opposite tendencies which operate on the basis of these contradictions." ³

It is not enough to see that the unqualified assertion of a "contradiction *within the very essence of things*" is false; since it is a notion that is fundamental in the teaching of Marx and his disciples and so freely taken for granted by so many, we must also account for the reason why such a statement can take on the appearance of truth.

As it stands, this assertion is false, but may refer to a truth which it was not meant to convey — a truth that should help us to understand how the mind can be led to construct such a phrase.

Whereas a thing cannot be and not be at the same time and in the same respect, may it not be possible to find a contradiction within things inasmuch as they are in potency to be or not to be? Our reply to this question will be based on an examination of the Aristotelian notion of *potentia simul contradictionis*.⁴ In this way, it is hoped that

1. " 'In its proper meaning,' LENIN says, 'dialectics is the study of the contradiction *within the very essence of things*.' " (JOSEPH STALIN, *Dialectical and Historical Materialism*, chapter IV of the *History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union* (Moscow 1939), published separately in the *Little Lenin Library*, Vol.25, Intern. Publishers, N. Y., 1940, p.11. The reference to LENIN is *Philosophical Notebooks*, Russian edition, p.263.

2. LENIN, *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, in *Selected Works*, Vol.XI, pp.81-82, International Publishers, New York, quoted by JOSEPH STALIN in the work mentioned above, p.11.

3. JOSEPH STALIN, *op. cit.*, p.11. (in the *Little Lenin Library*, Vol.25, Intern. Publishers, N. Y., 1940).

4. ST. THOMAS, *In IX Metaph.*, lect.9, (edit. Cathala) nn.1868-1870.

a partial explanation may be given for the false teaching that nature actually develops through the opposition of contradictory forces.

In order to understand the nature and reality of *potentia simul contradictionis*, we must consider the primary meanings of the word 'potency' (*δύναμις*) :

'Potency' means : [1] a source of movement or change, which is in another thing than the thing moved or in the same thing *qua* other ; e.g. the art of building is a potency which is not in the thing built, while the art of healing, which is a potency, may be in the man healed, but not in him *qua* healed. 'Potency' then means the source, in general, of change or movement in another thing or in the same thing *qua* other, and also [2] the source of a thing's being moved by another thing or by itself *qua* other. For in virtue of that principle, in virtue of which a patient suffers anything, we call it 'capable' of suffering ; and this we do sometimes if it suffers anything at all, sometimes not in respect of everything it suffers, but only if it suffers a change for the better. [3] The capacity of performing this well or according to intention ; for sometimes we say of those who merely can walk or speak but not well or not as they intend, that they cannot speak or walk. So too in the case of passivity. [4] The states in virtue of which things are absolutely impassive or unchangeable, or not easily changed for the worse, are called potencies ; for things are broken and crushed and bent and in general destroyed not by having a potency but by not having one and by lacking something, and things are impassive with respect to such processes if they are scarcely and slightly affected by them, because of a 'potency' and because they 'can' do something and are in some positive state.¹

A further distinction is made between an active potency that is rational and one that is irrational.² The first thing to be noted in this division is that an irrational active potency is determined to act in the presence of its object, provided that it is not impeded either by some indisposition in the subject or by some exterior obstacle ; fire, for example, always acts upon a suitably combustible object. But the active potency that is rational is not determined in this way ; it is not necessary, for instance, that a builder actually engage in building whenever appropriate materials are to hand. The reason for this difference is that an irrational active potency does not extend to contrary effects. And since in reality contraries cannot exist simultaneously in the same subject, the irrational cause must be determined to one or the other ; for without such a naturally held determination it would not act at all. But a rational active potency is not determined to one or the other of contrary effects. If it were necessary that a cause of this kind act whenever possible, it would simultaneously produce the contrary effects to which it may extend — something

1. *Metaph.* V, ch.12, 1019 a 15-37.

2. *Ibid.*

that is impossible. Briefly, the natural or irrational agent is determined *ad unum* in the manner of nature, while a rational agent *qua* rational is at liberty to determine itself.

But what is the meaning of the expression *determinatum ad unum* as it applies to natural agents? And why is it that rational potencies are not determined in this way?

In the first place our attention must be drawn to the fact that the form which is in the mind differs from the form which is in things and in each case the mode of receiving and of informing is different. For the intentional form is received in the mind according to the mode of knowledge, in which case the union of known and knower is not subjective but objective. The knowledge of one contrary does not destroy the knowledge of the other but is rather an aid to know either. In one intentional species, contraries are, in a way, grouped together, one being known through the other; just as the species of health which is in the intellect is a means of knowing both health and sickness.¹ In the same way, God knows evil through the form of good which is its contrary.²

But the form which is received in things is for the *esse* of the whole; and since the being of one contrary is removed by the being of the other, it follows that they cannot be together in the same subject. If they were, the whole would have *esse* and *non-esse* at the same time through each form and its contrary. In other words, the *being* of one contrary is incompatible with the *being* of the other, but the *knowledge* of one is not opposed to the knowledge of the other. Contraries are opposed in physical reality but not in the mind.³

This, of course, is not a sufficient explanation of the active indetermination of the rational potency to opposites. The indifference of this potency or power refers not only to the order of knowledge but also to the order of action. In fact, when we speak of a *potentia ad utrumlibet*, what is primarily signified is the power of acting with freedom — and the will is the subject of this liberty. A brief consideration of the freedom of the will should bring out the actively indeterminate character of the rational potency. The meaning of the expression *potentia simul contradictionis* will then be clarified before it is applied in another way to the real passive potency.

1. "Haec autem forma quae est in anima, differt a forma, quae est in materia. Nam contrariorum formae in materia sunt diversae et contrariae, in anima autem est quodammodo una species contrariorum . . . Sanitas autem, quae est in anima, est quaedam ratio, per quam cognoscitur sanitas et infirmitas" (ST. THOMAS, *In VII Metaph.*, lect.6, n.1405).

2. "Sic autem est cognoscibile unumquodque, secundum quod est. Unde, cum hoc sit esse mali, quod est privatio boni, per hoc ipsum quod Deus cognoscit bona, cognoscit etiam mala; sicut per lucem cognoscuntur tenebrae" (ST. THOMAS, *1a Pars*, q.14, a.10).

3. "Esse autem unius contrarii tollitur per esse alterius; sed cognitio unius oppositi non tollitur per cognitionem alterius, sed magis juvatur. Unde formae oppositorum in anima non sunt oppositae" (ST. THOMAS, *In VII Metaph.*, lect.6, n.1405).

"Radix libertatis sicut subjectum est voluntas, sed sicut causa est ratio."¹ The internal root of freedom is to be sought in the indifference of the judgment that moves the will objectively, for the will follows upon intellectual knowledge according to the axiom "nil volitum quin praecognitum." Since the will follows the intellect, the judgment of the intellect that this or that is to be done or that the will must act or not act cannot be determined *ad unum*. If it were, the will would not be able to command the intellect to substitute one judgment for another opposed to it. To say that the will is free, then, means that it can accept or refuse the judgment of the intellect, which moves the will in the order of specification by presenting to the will its object.

Actually, there are two kinds of freedom involved in the acts of the will: One belongs to the order of specification and therefore concerns the object, while the other belongs to the order of exercise and concerns the agent. (a) In the order of specification, the will is free with regard to the particular, limited good presented to it by the intellect. The will can reject the judgment of the intellect that this good is to be pursued and accept a substituted judgment that it has commanded the intellect to form, viz. that this other good is to be sought. And since what is evil can be presented as a good in certain respects, the will, through the indifference of the practical judgment of the intellect and its own power over this judgment, is the *potentia factiva contrariorum*; in itself it is not determined to one or the other of these contraries. (b) The second kind of freedom, which belongs to the order of exercise, concerns the agent and not the object, for it is the agent who decides whether to act or not when an object has been presented. This freedom is none other than the liberty of contradiction. The will is not only free to accept or refuse an object presented as an end in the order of specification but is also free to suspend its very act of willing. In other words, the will can accept or refuse a judgment to do this or that, but can also accept or refuse a judgment to act or not to act. There is a freedom of contrariety with regard to the objects willed and a freedom of contradiction with regard to the act of willing, itself.

It should be recalled that the expression "rational potency" applies to both the intellect and the will in so far as the judgment of the practical intellect is indifferent and the act of the will free. A doctor can, by his art, induce health or sickness, which are contraries; and he can apply his art or not, which are contradictories. And although the art of medicine is for the sake of health, choice must intervene in order that the art as well as the will to use the art be determined to an effect; for the will and the intellect are, in themselves, indifferent with regard to the effects in their power.

1. ST. THOMAS, *Ia IIae*, q.17, a.1, ad 2.

A rational potency, then, belongs to an agent that operates with reason and choice ; choice being that free act of the will through which the indifferent judgment of the practical intellect becomes determined in the order of exercise.¹ The root of the actively indeterminate character of this potency is found in the very nature of the intellect, which is not prevented from knowing one thing by knowing another. But knowledge is a power or a principle of action or motion, from the fact that one has knowledge of something to be made or done and acts in accordance with this knowledge. Then if by the same intentional form or by the same exemplar, opposite things can be known, it follows that they have one and the same principle. The likeness of this principle is found in each of the opposite effects that can proceed from it, as these effects are actually produced. This is what distinguishes the rational agent from the irrational ; the form by which the natural agent operates is not an intentional form but a form in nature. Since it is impossible for contrary forms to be at once in the same proximate subject, the natural agent cannot produce effects that are formally opposed ; the likeness of the active irrational potency will be found in only one effect, according as this kind of cause is determined by its form to produce something similar to itself.²

Quite differently, however, is the *potentia simul contradictionis* verified in nature as distinct from mind. The first thing to be emphasized here is the indetermination of the natural subject ; while under one form it remains in potency to an infinity of others. Similar to the intellect, whose capacity to know is not exhausted when it has received one intentional form, matter's potentiality to form is not exhausted by the form it may actually have. The difference between the intellect, as that which receives intentional forms, and matter, as the subject of natural forms, lies in the fact that the union of knower and known is objective, while the union of matter and form is subjective.³ This means that in the immaterial reception of a form the intellect does not become entitatively the thing which is known through this form ; neither the intellect nor the known object loses its identity — in the act of knowledge neither is suppressed. That which is known through the intentional union remains another object and is not taken into the

1. "Necesse est, praeter potentiam rationalem, quae est communis ad duo contraria, poni aliquid, quod appropriet eam ad alterum faciendum ad hoc quod exeat in actum. Hoc autem est appetitus aut prohaeresis, . . . idest electio quae pertinet ad rationem." (ST. THOMAS, *In IX Metaph.*, lect.4, n.1820) ; "Potentia rationalis est, quae cum ratione et electione operatur" (CAJETAN, *In II Periherm.*, lect.11, n.4).

2. "Manifestum est igitur quod potentiae rationales contrarium faciunt potentiis irrationalibus ; quia potentia rationalis facit opposita, non autem potentia irrationalis, sed unum tantum. Et hoc ideo est, quia unum principium oppositorum continetur in ratione scientiali, ut dictum est" (ST. THOMAS, *In IX Metaph.*, lect.2, n.1793).

3. Cf. P.-E. DROUIN, *L'Entitatif et l'intentionnel*, in *Laval théologique et philosophique*, Vol.VI, n.2, Québec, 1950.

intellect entitatively or subjectively. But when matter receives a form there results a third thing which is the composite of both in the entitative order. And since form confers first act upon the subject (matter) which receives it, and upon the resulting composite, it is impossible that matter be simultaneously the subject of contrary forms. But if matter cannot simultaneously have contrary forms, it still has a similarity to the intellect in that it can be the subject of contraries successively. In other words, just as the root of active indetermination is the capacity of the intellect to know opposites through one form, the root of passive indetermination is the capacity of matter to be the subject of opposite forms. And because the presence of one form is simultaneous with the privation of the opposite form, matter is at the same time a potency to *esse* and to *non-esse*. In order to manifest this potentiality to opposites a further proportion can be seen between the will's freedom of contradiction and the appetite of matter in the entitative order.

It has been explained that liberty of contradiction stems from the power of the will to accept or refuse the judgment of the intellect to act or not to act, and that this dominative power arises from the fact that the judgment is not determined *ad unum*. If the judgment of the intellect were absolutely determined, as the judgment of the instinct in the brute, the will would not be free but bound by this judgment. In a similar way, if the natural form actualized its subject absolutely, there would be no real potency in matter for another form; the potency of matter to another form would be nullified.¹

Accordingly, there are two things to be considered in order to understand how matter is a *potentia simul contradictionis*: First, the fact that matter is at the same time a subject of form and of the privation of all the forms which are in it potentially; secondly, that the form which is actually present is not wholly and necessarily determined to the subject. If matter is to be a real potency to being and to non-being, it must at least be possible for the forms which are in it potentially to be realized in it in act. And this is possible only if the form which it has at any time is exceeded by the indetermination of the subject. For if the natural form were necessary, its non-existence would be impossible; we could no longer call matter a *potentia ad esse et non esse* and the term 'privation' would be devoid

1. "Unde dicendum est quod possibilitas materiae ad utrumque, si communiter loquamur, non est sufficiens ratio contingentiae, nisi etiam addatur ex parte potentiae activae quod non sit omnino determinata ad unum; alioquin si ita sit determinata ad unum quod impediri non potest, consequens est quod ex necessitate reducat in actum potentiam passivam eodem modo" (ST. THOMAS, *In I Periherm.*, lect.14, n.9). — In the case of an agent that is perfectly determined, the form by which the agent operates is necessary. The lack of perfect necessity in the operations of natural agents is thus primarily due to their own lack of determination, which is rooted in the *possibile non esse* of the form in virtue of which they act.

of meaning, since the subject would not have any aptitude to be in act by a form other than the one it had.

The use of the expression *determinatum ad unum* applied to natural agents is therefore subject to qualification. The active potency in nature is not perfectly determined *ad unum*, but only for the most part. This imperfect determination comes from the contingency of the form by which the natural agent operates, the same kind of form as that which the agent is able to cause in the subject. It is because the form is not absolutely determined to exist or not to exist that there is possibility in matter. This means that the natural composite, which is what it is by its form, is not perfectly determined either, but carries within itself a potentiality for the existence of something else, which is simultaneously a potentiality for its own non-existence. In this qualified sense there is a contradiction within the very essence of material things ; for matter, which is at the same time, a potency to be and to be not the subject of this form or that, is of the essence of natural things. But this is not an actual contradiction, for it refers to a lack of determination with regard to the future, not to the present. The potency to being and to non-being is simultaneous in matter (which is the subject of both form and privation), yet it is not a potency to each in the same respect : Matter is a potency to be, in so far as it can receive another form ; it is a potency to non-being, in so far as it can lose the one that it has. The existence of the new composite and the non-existence of the old are simultaneously possible in the potentiality of the subject which is common to both. And since matter is incorruptible, this potentiality always remains.¹

But although the struggle, as it were, goes on in this way, we are not thereby justified in thinking that it is a random affair or a sequence that necessarily and inexorably leads nowhere ; that tomorrow it shall be as if it had never been. Natural causes are more successful than not and the accidents that sometimes arise from their failures, or accompany their successes, are all subordinated to the direction of a higher cause — a cause that, with perfect wisdom, reaches “ a fine usque ad finem fortiter, et disponit omnia suaviter ” (*Sap.*, VIII, 1).

ANDREW ROBINSON.

1. “ Sed eorum quae naturaliter quandoque sunt quandoque non sunt, eadem potentia est ad contradictoria, scilicet ad esse et non esse : quia quod aliqua quandoque sint et quandoque non sint, habent ex materia, inquantum subiicitur privationi vel formae. Sic igitur idem sequitur quod prius, scilicet quod opposita possint simul inesse eidem. In eo enim quod est generatum, remanet materia potens non esse : et ita, cum sit incorruptibile, simul erit potens esse et potens non esse ” (ST. THOMAS, *In I de Caelo et Mundo*, lect. 29, [edit. Spiazzi] n. 284).