Chapter 1

Sartre’s Critique of Empiricism

The issue of relativism emerges in a twofold way in Sartre’s later philosophy—as a problem that appears to infect his own approach to the relations between history, knowledge and praxis as well as a concern that motivates that very project. By way of beginning, I will examine his own concerns with the problem of relativism and attempt to discern the basis and significance of those concerns. For in seeing clearly what Sartre was trying to avoid, it should be easier to discern the character of the position he came to embrace as a result.

Near the beginning of the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, Sartre writes,

> The totalising thought of historical materialism has established everything but its own existence. . . . contaminated by the historical relativism it has always opposed, it has not exhibited the truth of History as it defines itself. . . . In other words, we do not know what it means for a Marxist historian to *speak the truth*. Not that his statements are false—far from it; but he does not have the concept of *Truth* at his disposal.¹

As is apparent from the above passage, Sartre’s own concerns with the problem of relativism emerge in connection with the failure of historical materialism to adequately establish its own epistemological basis as a theory of history. By failing to adequately understand itself, it has been “contaminated” with a form of relativism which makes nonsense of its
own claims to truth. This, in turn, places the problem of relativism at the very heart of the Critique. For Sartre attempts there to rethink the philosophical foundations of that theoretical tradition in the light of this shortcoming. In fundamental agreement with the Marxist critique of capitalism and the materialist conception of history, he takes issue only with the inability of the tradition to account for its own existence—to account for its own existence as a theoretical knowledge of history. As is evident from the title, Sartre’s Critique bears more than a mere passing resemblance to Kant’s own Critique of Pure Reason. Beginning with a specific theoretical tradition, in the one case, that of mathematics and a newly emerging natural science, in the other that of a Marxist approach to history, they both attempt to establish the conditions of the possibility of their validity. What Kant attempted to do for the natural sciences, Sartre attempts for one approach within the Human Sciences—to establish “on what conditions... the knowledge of a History is possible.”

The External Dialectic

Sartre is not, of course, the first to have engaged in a philosophical reflection on the epistemic status of historical materialism. Marxism has its own history of dealing with this issue. This, indeed, constitutes much of the problem. For its own understanding of itself has been fundamentally flawed, “contaminated,” as Sartre has it, “with the historical relativism it has always opposed.” Consequently, the tradition has not only failed to account for itself (resulting, at worst, in only a naivety as regards the epistemological status of its own claims) but has instituted an account which has denied it access to the very concept of truth.

The major example of this is, of course, Engels’s concept of a ‘dialectic of nature’. Characterized by an understanding of the historical dialectic of human action and thought as an effect of a more encompassing dialectic of nature itself, Engels’s approach came to dominate Marxist philosophical reflection among the “orthodox” of the Second International.
And, for Sartre, it has served as the paradigmatic instance of Marxism’s own misconception of itself since his first detailed criticisms of it in the 1949 essay, “Materialism and Revolution.” Taking it to task on various fronts in both that essay and the Critique, the charge that the position undermines its own epistemic status stands out, on the front end, as Sartre’s most telling criticism.

How could a captive reason, governed from without and maneuvered by a series of blind causes, still be a reason? How could I believe in the principles of my deductions if it were only the external event which has set them down within me and if, as Hegel says, “reason is a bone”?4

If the dialectical processes which account for human history have the status of natural laws, controlling human action and thought as passive effects of a natural process external to them, then what becomes of our ability to know all this? What becomes of the dialectical rationality that is responsible for uncovering that truth? All knowledge and every reasoned inference, whether dialectical or not, are without exception reduced to the status of effects of a natural process which, in and of itself, is neither true nor false, reasonable nor unreasonable. Contrasting claims ultimately possess the same ‘validity’. They are all necessary in the way that every effect is necessary in relation to its cause. The most that could be said for the dialectical rationality which Marxism embodies is that it has “a practical advantage over contemporary ideologies in that it is the ideology of the rising class.”5 But this sort of subjectivism goes nowhere in restoring anything like “truth” to the historical materialist’s claims. As a blind weapon or expression of the class struggle, the claim that Marxism is the ideology of the rising class would itself be undercut. For how could one know such a thing?

Sartre’s arguments here are of a recognizable form. They accuse Engels’s own assertions of undermining their implicit claim to validity. If what Engels says is true, then no sense can be made of them “being true.” This form of argument, in a variety of manifestations, is the most historically pervasive
kind of criticism leveled against relativistic epistemological positions. What they implicitly assert on the one hand (a claim to truth), they make impossible with the other. The argument with Engels is a bit more involved, though, because his position is not explicitly relativistic. As Sartre notes, conceiving the dialectic uncovered by historical materialism as a law of nature does not take a position on the problem of knowledge so much as it “avoids” it. But as the position it implicitly takes affords no autonomous status to knowledge as a process irreducible to the nonepistemic developments of nature, it makes knowledge itself completely relative to the natural forces which produce it. And this undermines its potential truth, inasmuch as no place can be found for “truth” in the account of nature given there—only an infinite series of natural events, external to one another, combined according to the ‘logic’ of a dialectic that produces beliefs in the same way as it produces chemical reactions.

For this reason, Sartre notes, it is also implicitly an absolute idealism. In offering a knowing account of a world where knowledge cannot be found in its own right, Engels places himself in an impossible position outside the world, knowledgeable of it, but for this very reason no longer a part of it. Dialectical materialism becomes, thus, a “transcendental” or “external” materialism, for it “allow(s) the world to unfold itself by itself . . . to no one.” Knowledge, consequently, finds itself in the position of this “no one,” in absolute, contemplative transcendence of the world. “We are offered two thoughts,” Sartre writes,

neither of which is able to think us, or for that matter, itself: the thought which is passive, is really only the delayed effect of external causes, while the thought which is active, synthetic and desituated, knows nothing of itself and, completely immobile, contemplates a world without thought.

As a relativistic account of thought as a product of nature, the external dialectic ends in scepticism, unable to account for the rationality of its own position. As contemplative idealism, it offers an account of everything but itself. Either way
it fails to give an account of knowledge which could justify the sort of validity to which it must itself lay claim.

**The Dialectic as a Matter of Fact**

The external dialectic is, therefore, untenable because of its sceptical consequences. And yet, to say this much is only to tell half the story. We know that Engels’s position undermines itself by making it impossible for us to understand how and in what sense it could be true. But we do not know precisely why this is so. Certainly, the reduction of human subjectivity to an object of nature alongside other objects of nature—Engels’s crude materialism—may be faulted. For Sartre especially, it is the transcendence of our status as objects that is the necessary condition of there being objects for anyone. And so to cite Engels’s reductivist materialism as the source of his epistemological difficulties is not incorrect. But, in this context, there is more to be said. For, in addition to offering an impoverished picture of what the dialectic is, Engels commits a more general mistake in how he attempts to uncover it. “Engels’ mistake,” Sartre writes, “was to think that he could extract his dialectical laws from Nature by non-dialectical procedures—comparison, analogy, abstraction and induction. In fact, dialectical Reason is a whole and must ground itself by itself, or dialectically.”

In order to fully understand Sartre’s criticism of the external dialectic it is necessary, therefore, to understand this more general criticism of the attempt to ground dialectical reason nondialectically.

Engels attempts to ground the laws of the dialectic by induction from nature. On the basis of a set of particular empirical regularities which, purportedly, express or embody a kind of dialectical logic, Engels wants to abstract a set of laws that hold universally. Granting that such generalizations might, in principle, attain a very high level of probability, rendering them all but certain, Sartre, nevertheless, goes on to ask where this sort of move would lead to. Clearly, he answers, “To a discovery of the laws of Reason in the universe, like Newton’s discovery of gravitation.”

The
laws of dialectic would have the same status in nature as does the law of gravity: a de facto principle of empirical regularities, for which it makes no sense to ask why. As a matter of fact, we happen to find nature behaving in a way consistent with the laws of gravity and of the dialectic. It just so happens. Things fall down and opposites interpenetrate. Engels himself finds three general dialectical laws. And it is just as irrelevant to ask, Why these three and not more, or perhaps others? as it is to ask why the law of gravity, as opposed to something else, holds throughout nature. In the context of analytically deriving the laws of the dialectic, the dialectic itself necessarily assumes the contingent status of an empirical matter of fact.

This line of thought, as I have noted, is more general than that which limits itself to Engels’s reductivist materialism. For one need not embrace an ontology such as Engels’s to regard the dialectic as something to be empirically discovered as a de facto principle of human history. Take, for instance, the case of Gurvitch’s “dialectical hyper-empiricism.” As Sartre reads it, this approach does not attempt to limit itself to either analytical or dialectical modes of thought exclusively, but is ready to employ both when appropriate. “The object itself dictates the method, the manner of approach. . . . His [Gurvitch’s] dialecticism is thus itself an empirical conclusion.” Here there are no obvious ontological commitments, whether materialist or otherwise. And yet, the same insistence on the dialectic as an empirical discovery is maintained. The dialectic emerges once again as a de facto principle of the way things just happen to be, with the exception that with Gurvitch it need not hold everywhere but only here and there, as the case may be.

Sartre’s rejection of Gurvitch’s “hyper-empiricism” should not, therefore, be sharply distinguished from his rejection of Engels’s external dialectic inasmuch as they both involve an attempt to ground dialectical reason analytically; an attempt which leads to an empirical understanding of the dialectic itself. The dialectic becomes a de facto principle of nature as a whole (with Engels) or of specific aspects of human history (with Gurvitch) depending on how the facts
present themselves. Such an empiricism is, moreover, no accident within the Marxist tradition. Engels's and Gurvitch's approaches are both symptomatic of a general tendency toward empiricism inherent within the tradition, arising from difficulties with the equivocal status of the dialectic as "both a method and a movement in the object."\textsuperscript{14} For 'the dialectic' is both a form of knowledge, a specific style of reasoning, and an objective process animating and controlling human history—the object known in its historical development as well as the knowledge of this object. Before the materialist turn is made with Marx, this 'doubling' does not constitute a major problem. With Hegelian idealism, the object of thought is, after all, only an alienated objectification of thought itself. Knowledge of the dialectic is ultimately a matter of self-consciousness, and "consciousness can see the strict necessity of the sequence and of the moments which gradually constitute the world as a concrete totality, because it is consciousness itself which constitutes itself for itself as absolute knowledge. . . ."\textsuperscript{15} When thought and its object are identified in this idealist fashion, the necessity of the developmental sequence of the object is intelligible to thought as the necessity of its own rational development. Our understanding of the object known is only a disguised understanding of ourselves and so the doubling of the dialectic is merely apparent. In fact, there is only the unfolding of Reason itself. Both the object and subject of the dialectic are, therefore, intelligible as rationally necessary processes.

For Marxists, however, this doubling results in an antinomy which Sartre refers to as a "contradiction between the knowledge of Being and the being of knowledge."\textsuperscript{16} Through its rejection of idealism and consequent affirmation of the irreducibility of material existence to thought, our knowledge of the dialectic ceases to be an adventure of self-consciousness for Marxism, and becomes only a partial aspect of the material dialectic to which it belongs. Knowledge of the dialectic becomes "subject to the dialectic as its law,"\textsuperscript{17} insofar as it is a material being or material praxis embedded within a historical dialectic that outruns it on all sides. And insofar as the historical dialectic is no longer reducible to
reason, working itself out within history, our knowledge of
the dialectic comes to lose sight of its own unique status as a
rational process. Its rational necessity is subordinated to its
material contingency as a product of the historical dialectic.
"If," as Sartre observes,

thought were no longer the whole (as with Hegelian
idealism), it would see its own development as if it
were an empirical succession of moments, and this
lived experience (le vécu) would appear as contingenc
and not as necessity. If thought were to under-
stand itself as a dialectical process, it could not formu-
late its discovery except as a simple fact.18

Two Senses of Rational Necessity—Husserl and Sellars

The key to Sartre's concern here is with reason's loss of
necessity. Within an empirical framework, dialectical reason
becomes a de facto series of givens. Principles of inference
become more-or-less general formulas for observed empirical
regularities. Now, it is impossible at this point to specify fully
what Sartre means by "necessity" in this context. Sartre's
own understanding of necessity, consistent with his philosop
hy of practical freedom situated within the constraints of a
social, historical and material world, will take some time to
flesh out. But, by following through on some initial clues in
the first chapter of the Critique, its broad outlines can begin to
be seen. For clearly, Sartre is concerned with the kind of
rational necessity which goes with the drawing of inferences
and the giving of reasons. He writes, "we must stress this
crucial fact: Reason is neither a bone nor an accident. In other
words, if dialectical reason is to be a rationality, it must pro-
vide Reason with its own reasons."19 Reason demands its
own reasons—it must be justifiable as a valid form of
thought. And this implies a critique, in Sartre's and Kant's
sense of the term as a critical justification of the limits and
extent of the validity of reason. Dialectical reason, if it is to be
a form of rationality, must be capable of giving a rational
account of itself—one consistent with its status as a practice
of drawing valid inferences and producing true assertions. If
all that can be said of the utterances of Marx and Engels is that they are one de facto series of utterances in a discursive field of other equally contingent series, then all are equally unjustifiable with respect to each other. Within such an account it makes no sense to even speak of reasoning as valid or invalid. But as a form of reason, the dialectic must have these concepts at its disposal. It, therefore, demands an account of itself which preserves for itself at least as much necessity as goes with the giving of reasons that are justified, and because of that, rationally compelling.

At this point two rather different parallels suggest themselves: one to Edmund Husserl’s refutation of psychologism, and another to Wilfred Sellars’s argument against “the myth of the given.” Beginning with Sellars, one finds, as with Sartre, an emphasis on the impossibility of capturing in any empirical account of knowledge that which is crucial to it as knowledge. In his essay, “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind,” he writes, “The essential point is that in characterizing an episode or a state as that of knowing, we are not giving an empirical description of that episode or state; we are placing it in the logical space of reasons, of justifying and being able to justify what one says.” Sellars makes this point in arguing against the epistemological idea of “the given”: the idea that claims to knowledge may be authorized or justified by a simple appeal to immediate observational states of mind or, as he puts it, “self-authenticating non-verbal episodes.” Like Sartre, Sellars argues that knowledge cannot be adequately treated as a matter of fact. The perceptually given, for Sellars, cannot count by itself as knowledge because, as a de facto state of affairs, it is understood as occurring apart from a context of having reasons for holding it as authoritative in relation to any epistemic claims. And this indispensable context is not one of simply having more facts at one’s disposal, but of having one’s facts ordered in relation to each other in a normative way. One must know that this perceptual state of affairs is the right sort of thing to count as a certain type of knowledge. The point is that knowledge has a dimension of authority that cannot be captured in any empirical account. The perceptually given only counts as
knowledge when it is recognized as appropriate to authorize a particular assertion, carrying with it an epistemic commitment of some kind. If I do not know anything about when it is appropriate to utter an assertion about some state of affairs, my simple “presence” to that state of affairs can hardly count as knowledge of it. Knowledge always presupposes this prior level of epistemic norms—this “logical space of reasons”—which constitutes the authority of our epistemic claims to justify and be justified by other claims or appropriate states of affairs.

Rational necessity is, therefore, at least in part a matter of normative necessity, as when one says that someone’s argument is valid and so ought to be accepted. Not that it will in fact persuade everyone or anyone, but given its validity, it ought to. It constrains one not in the way a cause constrains its effect, or a locked room constrains one’s movements, but in the way an imperative constrains one’s actions. The rational necessity of asserting to Q on the basis of “If P, then Q and P” is a matter of doing the right thing; of constraining one’s actions to a norm. Sartre himself hints at this point in a passage concerning the failure of Marxism to critically account for itself where he mentions the need to “distinguish it [Marxism] from conservative ideologies which are mere products of the universal dialectic . . . [so that] thought as the vehicle of truth can recover what it has lost ontologically since the collapse of idealism, and become a Norm of knowledge.”22 Dialectical reason, in other words, must be more than a de facto product of the historical dialectic, discovered by empirical methods of observation. It must present itself as a Norm, according to which our assertions must be constrained if they are to count as knowledge—if they are to be a “vehicle of truth.” If dialectical reason is interpreted empirically, the account undermines its normative character and so strips it of its rational necessity. And, as Sartre says following Hegel, “Reason once more becomes a bone, since it is merely a fact and has no knowable necessity.”23

Husserl’s refutation of psychologism in the Logical Investigations is also useful to consider here. His arguments against construing the laws of logic as laws of mental activity,
properly studied by psychology, involve showing this position as a relativistic and ultimately sceptical theory that "goes against the self-evident conditions for the possibility of a theory in general."24 Like the positions of Engels and Gurvitch examined by Sartre, psychologism treats the laws of reason as empirically given matters of fact. And it is precisely here, in its empiricism, that it goes astray. Indeed, Husserl goes so far as to extend his critique to the position of relativism in general, taking it, as he says, in "the widest sense of the word, as a doctrine which somehow derives the pure principles of logic from facts."25 For such a move amounts to undermining the necessity that belongs to the laws of logic essentially. As with dialectical reason for Sartre, the laws of logic for Husserl, cannot be founded on matters of fact without sceptical consequences which are self-defeating for it as a theoretical position.

Husserl's arguments do not, however, turn on the normative status of reason. Normativity, he claims, is no part of the essence or "thought-content" of the laws of logic. Certainly, these laws have normative application. We can admonish someone for not reasoning as they should when they violate, say, the law of noncontradiction. But, the law itself is a purely theoretical proposition. The normative rule, which is its application, is just "the obvious, apodictic consequence of the law."26 Husserl grants that "the psychologistic logicians ignore the fundamental, essential, never-to-be-bridged gulf between . . . normative and causal regulation. . . ." But, he understands this gulf as secondary to that between "real and ideal laws."27 The laws of logic are ideal laws which concern eidetic relations among the concepts which form the objective conditions of the sense of truth itself. And "Truth . . . is 'eternal', or better put, it is an Idea, and so beyond time. . . . Each truth . . . is a case of validity in the timeless realm of Ideas."28 For Husserl, therefore, logical laws intrinsically possess the necessity of timeless eidetic relations.

There are, then, at least29 two senses of necessity which elude an empiricist conception of reason:30 a normative and an eidetic sense. When Sartre speaks of empiricist accounts
of dialectical reason failing to capture the necessity that is proper to it as reason, we cannot be sure, on the front end, how he means it. Surely, he must at least intend the sort of normative necessity which Sellars emphasizes as crucial to "justifying and being able to justify what one says." He may, however, intend the sort of eidetic necessity that Husserl elaborates as well. Something like this is suggested in the very way he formulates his project as an attempt "to establish the dialectic as the universal method and universal law of anthropology." The phrase universal law seems to imply that the normative force of dialectical reason is grounded in an eidetic intuition that holds independently of any socially-historical boundaries. In this way, Sartre's Critique would have the status of what Husserl calls a "regional ontology" or "regional eidetic science," analyzing the eidetic unity of the region of empirical studies that go to form the human sciences.

And yet, one also finds statements that seem to radically undermine this possibility, such as: "the universals of the dialectic—principles and laws of intelligibility—are individualized universals; attempts at abstraction and universalization can only result in schemata which are continually valid for that process." If the above statement is taken at face value, the timeless, eidetic necessity for which Husserl argues would be impossible for dialectical reason. The necessity of reason, its normative force, could not be grounded in an intuition of timeless ideal relations, but would exist only as a function of the historical process in which it is produced.

This question of interpretation is clearly crucial to my concerns in this essay. The question of epistemic relativism in Sartre's later philosophy hinges on how it is decided. The Husserlian option would effectively exorcise any specter of relativism. The other would apparently introduce some form of relativism, whether defensible or not, into the very heart of Sartre's epistemology. I will need, therefore, to return to this question as it forms the broadest parameters of the investigation.

For now, however, we may conclude by stressing the reducibility of the problem of relativism, for Sartre, to that of
empiricism. The issue of relativism as it is raised explicitly in his work, under the rubric of the historical relativism that has "contaminated" Marxism, is, at bottom, the issue of the empirical treatment of reason as a contingent matter of fact. Engels's external dialectic undermines its own epistemological foundation as a result of its empiricist approach to knowledge. It is relativistic in the general sense that Husserl gives to it as "a doctrine which somehow derives the pure principles of logic from facts." Sartre's rejection of historical relativism is, thus, the rejection of empiricism as an inadequate theory of knowledge. It is not, in and of itself, an acceptance of a conception of knowledge as independent of all social-historical determination. Knowledge, for Sartre, could still be a matter relative to specific social-historical contexts, as long as these contexts could be understood in a nonempirical manner. His own account of knowledge must, then, attempt to rethink the traditional Marxist question of the relation of knowledge and historical praxis in a way that avoids the pitfalls of empiricism. The question of relativism will hinge on just how this is accomplished and what sense of rational necessity can be preserved for dialectical reason within that account.