

Foreword: Edward Conze and the Law of Non-Contradiction

Graham Priest

Until a few years ago, I knew of Edward Conze (1904-1979)—as do most people who know of his work—only as the renown Buddhist scholar, responsible for many erudite works on the subject and for his translation of the 8,000 line *Prajñāpāramitā Sutra*.¹ Thus it was that I was amazed when I met Holger Heine in San Francisco in 2004, and he told me that Conze, in a prior incarnation, had been a Marxist scholar and activist. Even more surprisingly, in the 1930s Conze had written a book on the Law of Non-Contradiction from a Marxist perspective. The book had almost fallen into oblivion because of Hitler's purges. Mercifully, the odd copy still existed. Holger had one, and was working on its translation into English. The present volume shows that the work has come to fruition.

As is now becoming visible, the early decades of the 20th century witnessed a remarkable phenomenon, in the shape of a crop of philosophers who were starting to think the unthinkable: the Law of Non-Contradiction might not be as firm and foundational as Aristotle—and, under his influence, most Western philosophers—had taken it to be. In Austria, Meinong was not scared to challenge it.² Impossible objects could be expected to have impossible properties. (How else does one know that the objects are impossible?) Notoriously, this unleashed Russell's wrath.³ In Poland, 1910, Łukasiewicz, partly influenced by Meinong, and with a knowledge of the contemporary developments in logic, published a book subjecting the Law to a penetrating analysis.⁴ A little further to the east in Russia, though less well known, Vasil'ev was developing the idea that, though the Law may hold at this world, it fails at others, and constructing his "imaginary logic" as the logic of such worlds.⁵

The one major tradition in Western philosophy which had taken on the Law before this time was that of Hegel and his successors in dialectics, notably Marxists such as Engels.⁶ (Anglo-Hegeleans, such as Bradley, never really took the dialectics on board.) By the 1930s, Marxist dialectic in Russia was degenerating into the formulaic nostrums of Stalin's diamat. But—thanks to Holger—we can now see that it was surviving in a much more thoughtful form in Ger-

many. Conze knew his Marx and Engels backwards; but he also knew of Meinong and Łukasiewicz. (He was an outstanding linguist as well as scholar.) Drawing on these elements and others, he wrote what is perhaps the definitive analysis and critique of the Law in the Marxist tradition. Whether one agrees with much of it will depend, of course, on whether one agrees with the Marxist perspective from which he was coming. But much of his analysis transcends that particular framework. And together with the other works from this period, it shows that the *Zeitgeist* was laying the ground—as an artillery barrage softens up defensive lines before a frontal assault—for the full-blooded challenges to the Law that were to commence 20 or 30 years later, with the advent of modern paraconsistent logics.

Driven out of Hitler's Germany by his certain fate if he stayed there, Conze moved to England, with some periods of time also spent in the US. It was then that his nascent interests in Buddhism blossomed. Indeed, he became a Buddhist of sorts. However, he never relinquished his Marxism (and his left-wing activities got him into trouble in the US too). At first glance, this might seem surprising. Marx famously called religion the opium of the people.⁷ He had Christianity and Judaism primarily in his sights. But regimes that have styled themselves 'Marxist' are well known for their suppression of religion—and this includes the suppression of Buddhism in Maoist China and Tibet. On closer inspection, though, the two views can be seen to have much in common. Indeed, the current Dalai Lama has even described himself as a Marxist (though not, of course, a totalitarian⁸).

For a start, Buddhism is a materialist religion. There is nothing beyond the working-out of the laws of the natural world. (Even Buddhists who subscribe to karma take this to be a purely natural phenomenon.) Nor is there any eternal/immaterial soul. A central plank of Buddhism is the thought that the illusion that there is such a thing is a major root of suffering. Buddhism is also an atheist religion: there is no god, no creator, no "higher power" to which we must answer. Of all of this, Marx would have approved.

Next, and perhaps most importantly, both Buddhism and Marxism are views of compassion. They both recognize that suffering occurs, that this is a bad thing, and that we should take steps to get rid of it. Marx was well aware that in a class-society, and especially capitalism, life is unpleasant for the majority of the people. They are exploited by the relatively small number of people in the "ruling class"; much of the wealth that they produce is "creamed off", so that they live under relatively impoverished conditions; and their living and working conditions leave little space for the development of a well-rounded human being. Even members of the ruling class, though they certainly live under much more pleasant conditions, are deformed *qua* human beings: the need to make profit pushes more important activities into the background and causes the corresponding abilities to atrophy.⁹ It is hardly clear what kind of society Marx envisaged for after the revolution (as opposed to the directions in which various dictators actually took it); what is clear is that Marx envisaged a society where there is no exploitation or oppression, and where full social justice is

maintained.¹⁰ Any Buddhist would agree that such is a good thing.

Third: though Buddhism answers some questions, it has never attempted to answer all questions. In particular, it has never been imperialist about the natural sciences (in the way that creationism is, in Christianity). It accepts the results of the natural sciences as telling us about the world in which we live, and how it works. By the same token, it is perfectly open to a Buddhist to accept that Marx' socio-political analysis, and, in particular, his account of the dynamics of capitalism, tells us about the social world in which we live, and how it works.

Of course, this does not mean that a Buddhist must accept everything that Marxists say. For that matter, Marxists come in many varieties, and they often have very significant disagreements with each other. In exactly the same way, different Buddhists disagree amongst themselves. Zen Buddhists, for example, have no use for the intricate cosmology of Tibetan Buddhism, with its hells, demons, and celestial beings. But given the commonalities between the two views, it would seem clear that one can fashion a view of the world—natural, social, and ethical—which incorporates enough of Buddhism and Marxism to be legitimately called both. At least, so, I am sure, Conze saw it—as do I.

It might be thought that a rejection of the Law of Non-Contradiction is part of this commonality. Certainly, if one reads canonical texts of Marx-Engels and of the various Buddhisms, it is common enough to find apparently contradictory assertions (and Conze himself showed a good deal of sympathy with the thought that Mahāyanā Buddhism dispenses with the Law¹¹). There are interpretations in each tradition which reinterpret these contradictory assertions in such a way as to render them consistent. Thus, the great Buddhist logicians Dignāga (5th century) and Dharmakīrti (7th century) endorsed the Law, and in the schools which they influenced, including some of the Tibetan schools, contradictions are often defused by appealing to devices such as the theory of two truths: one contradictory is a conventional truth; the other is an ultimate truth. And when modern formal logic finally made an impact on the Soviet Union, it was not uncommon for theorists to analyse talk of contradictions consistently, simply as conflicting tendencies.¹² Indeed, these moves do seem the best way to analyse some of the contradictions concerned. However, it seems to me that there are versions of both Marxism and Buddhism—arguably core versions—which do not adhere to the Law of Non-Contradiction; where some of the contradictions, at least, are to be taken at face-value—and where there are good theoretical reasons for doing so.¹³

The role of contradiction in Buddhism and Marxism may be contested. What may not be contested is that Conze's book on the Law of Non-Contradiction marks an important episode of intellectual history. Effectively lost since the 1930s, it is now happily found and made accessible in Holger's translation. It cannot have been an easy book to translate. Its very length, alone, must have made the project daunting. We should all, therefore, be particularly grateful to him for his careful and loving labour; and to both him and his publisher, Lexington Books, for exposing this fascinating intellectual and historical document.

Notes

1. Conze (1979), *The Large Sutra on Perfect Wisdom*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
2. E.g., Meinong (1904) "Gegenstandstheorie", in *Untersuchungen zur Gegenstandstheorie und Psychologie*, edited by A. Meinong. Leipzig: Johann Ambrosius Barth; translated into English as "The Theory of Objects" (Meinong 1960), ch. 4 of Chisholm (1960) *Realism and the Background to Phenomenology*, Allen & Unwin. See also Routley (1980), "Three Meinongs", ch. 5 of *Exploring Meinong's Jungle, and Beyond*, Canberra: Research School of Social Sciences, ANU.
3. Russell (1905), "Review of *Untersuchungen zur Gegenstandstheorie und Psychologie*" *Mind* 14, 530-8.
4. The book has not yet, unfortunately, been translated into English, though a German translation exists: Łukasiewicz (1993), *Über den Satz des Widerspruchs bei Aristoteles* (tr. J.Barski, ed. N. Offenberger) Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag. Łukasiewicz wrote a paper containing important parts of the book. This has been translated into English, Łukasiewicz (1971), "On the Principle of Contradiction in Aristotle", *Review of Metaphysics* 24, 485-509.
5. E.g., Vasil'ev (1912-13), "Logika i Metalogika", *Logos* 1-2, 53-81; translated into English by V. Vasyukov, as "Logic and Metalogic", *Axiomathes* 4, 329-51, (Vasil'ev 1993). See also Priest (2000), "Vasil'ev and Imaginary Logic", *History and Philosophy of Logic* 21, 135-46.
6. Engels (1962), *Anti-Dühring: Herr Eugen Dühring's Revolution in Science*, Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House.
7. As he puts it in the Introduction to his *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, 'Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people.'
8. http://fora.tv/2008/07/26/Dalai_Lama_s_Thoughts_on_Marxism. (Accessed September 2008.)
9. This comes out most clearly in Marx' 1844 Paris manuscripts, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, Moscow: Progress Publishers (Marx 1959).
10. For his scattered comments on the matter, see pp. 244-52 of McLellan (1980), *The Thought of Karl Marx*, 2nd. ed., London: Macmillan.
11. See Conze (1962), "Buddhist Logic", ch. 4 of *Buddhist Thought in India: Three Phases of Buddhist Philosophy*, Allen & Unwin.
12. See Lobkowitz (1961), "The Principle of Contradiction in Recent Soviet Philosophy", *Studies in Soviet Thought* 1, 44-51.
13. See Priest (1989), "Dialectic and Dialetheic", *Science and Society* 53, 388-415, and Deguchi, Garfield, and Priest (2008), "The Way of the Dialetheist: Contradictions in Buddhism", *Philosophy East and West* 58, 395-402.