200 Years of Friedrich Engels
A Critical Assessment of His Life and Scholarship
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Engels’ Conceptions of Dialectics, Nature, and Dialectics of Nature

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Engels’ name stands and falls today with a variety of his contributions to socialist thought and Marxist philosophy. Yet there is one particular component of the Marxist body of thought that has been subject to a group of controversies for quite some time for which Engels is usually held responsible: dialectics and dialectics of nature. It is curious and ironic that a theoretical contribution to an intellectual tradition within the history of European political philosophy could be perceived and depicted as a major distortion of that tradition. In Engels’ case, this irony is captured by the phrase “the Engels problem.” In this chapter, I will first briefly summarize what “the Engels problem” is about and lay out its connection to the reception history of Engels’ dialectics. Then, I will delve into the general outlines of Engels’ dialectics and focus on his intentions, tasks, and purposes in pursuing dialectics in some of his prominent works on this theme from 1870s to 1880s, most notably in *Anti-Dühring* and the *Dialectics of Nature*. In the final section, I will briefly discuss some of the open questions of Engels’ natural dialectics.

1 The Engels Problem

The so-called Engels problem is perhaps as old as a footnote in Georg Lukács’s 1923 book *History and Class Consciousness*. Lukács (1971, 24) famously claimed there that “Engels – following Hegel’s mistaken lead – extended the [dialectical] method also to the knowledge of nature.” On Lukács’s (1977, 175) reading, Engels’ dialectics was misleading insofar as Marx’s dialectical method was limited to “historical-social reality,” while “natural knowledge” lacks “crucial determinations

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