

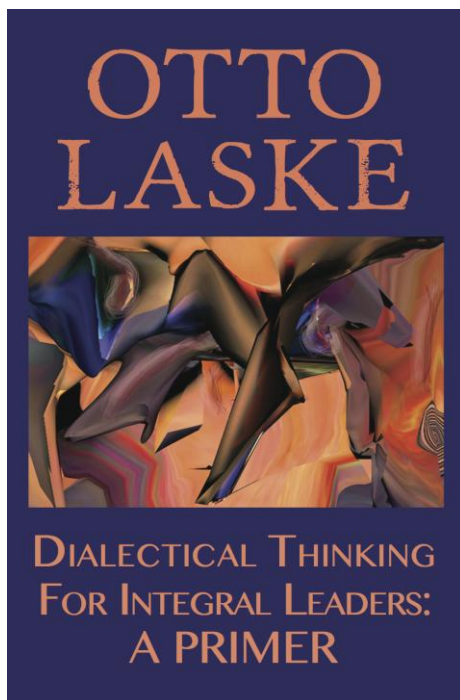
8/31 – John Stewart reviews Laske on Dialectical Thinking

August-November 2016 / Book Reviews

[Download article as PDF](#)

John Stewart

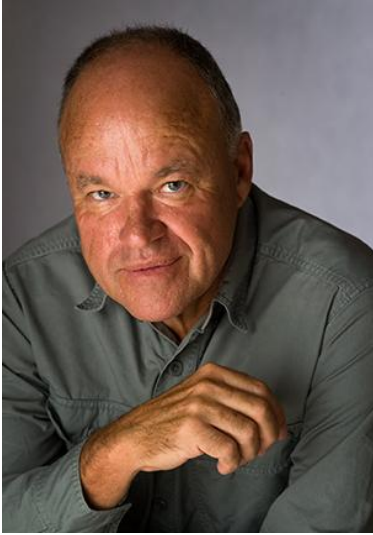
Otto Laske, *Dialectical Thinking for Integral Leaders: A Primer*. Tucson: [Integral Publishers](#), 2015.



Gregory Bateson famously said:

“The major problems in the world are the result of the difference between how nature works and the way people think.”

This statement of Bateson’s identifies a serious issue for humanity.



John Stewart

If our thinking does not enable us to build effective mental models of reality, we will be unable to understand the causes of the environmental and other crises that are threatening human civilization. More importantly, our mental models will be of little use for developing strategies to resolve these crises. Without an appropriate match between the complexity of our thinking and the complexity of the world, leaders in government and in business will fail to meet the complex challenges that face them every day in their work. It is no exaggeration to acknowledge that the future of human civilization depends on the development by humanity of thinking that better reflects how nature and the rest of the world work.

Increasingly people are becoming aware of the causes of this mismatch between current thinking and important aspects of reality. They are seeing that it is due to the serious limitations of the linear, rational, analytical thinking. It is true that this kind of thinking has powered industrialization and science over the past three hundred years. Science and technology has demonstrated an astounding ability to enable us to manipulate and rearrange parts of the world for our own ends. But it is becoming clear that this ability is limited to only a small proportion of reality and nature. This thinking enables us to understand and manipulate only those aspects of reality that are mechanistic and relatively simple. Unfortunately, most of the natural world is not simple and analysable. As a consequence, mental models built with analytical, rational thinking cannot adequately reflect most of reality, the majority of which is complex and ceaselessly changing.

Consistent with these limitations, science has been very poor at understanding our complex social and economic systems and enabling us to manage them effectively. Scientific psychology has provided only simple and trivial insights into how our minds actually work. And the mismatch between linear, scientific thinking and the complex ecosystems that constitute our natural environment is threatening our existence: scientific ecology has proven unable to understand and predict the complex impacts of our actions on the natural world.

The stark mismatch between our thinking and much of reality is perhaps seen most easily when we compare our natural environment with those parts of reality that are built by our current thinking. Humans can design only things that are understandable to our thinking. As a result, things built by humans look nothing like the complex, ever-changing processes we find in nature. If we walk through a modern human city we will be surrounded by buildings with features that are very rare in nature: straight lines, smooth surfaces, and rectangular shapes. We will also see machines that are made of parts that interact linearly with each other in highly constrained and predictable ways, and technologies that can be ‘thought through’ with logical, analytical thinking. What we find in a city is nothing like what we will see in a walk through a typical forest. There is very little in the complex, buzzing confusion that will surround us in such a walk that is understandable with analytical, rational thinking. What we see in a typical forest certainly could never be mistaken to be a product of human engineering.

What can we do about the mismatch identified by Bateson? Are humans capable of developing new patterns of thinking that match the ceaselessly changing, interpenetrating systems we find in the real world? Can we develop mental models that are capable of guiding our societies to form sustainable relationships with the natural environment on which they depend? Can the thinking of the human mind match the complexity of our societies and economic systems? Can it therefore enable leaders in government and business to generate strategies that enable them to succeed in the complex and challenging circumstances they face continually?

If so, can this new level of thinking be taught? Can the mental processes, movements-in-thought, shifts in attention and other skills that constitute this new thinking be transmitted between individuals? If so, how can it be spread quickly enough, particularly amongst our leaders? Will it enable humanity to win its dangerous race between ‘the getting of wisdom’ and the destruction of our environment and our societies?

These issues were at the back of my mind for many years after I had read the work of Gregory Bateson and other systems thinkers. My reading and thinking had primed me to be continually on the lookout for answers to these questions. But for many years I did not come across any research or practices that pointed even remotely to a way forward. Then I read a book review by Sara Nora Ross in the June 2009 issue of the *Integral Leadership Review*. It was a review of Otto Laske’s *Manual of Dialectical Thought Forms*. Reading the review produced a visceral reaction in me. My fingers and toes actually tingled with excitement. Had someone done it? Had they produced a manual for the kind of meta-systemic thinking that Einstein is reputed to have implied is needed to correct the crises caused by analytical, rational thinking? If so, it was a major contribution to what was needed to avoid the collapse of human civilization this century.

I immediately ordered a copy of the book that contains the *Manual of Dialectical Thought Forms*. The 175 page *Manual* is actually a part of Laske’s larger 668 page book *Measuring Hidden Dimensions of Human Systems: Foundations of Requisite Organization, Volume 2* (IDM Press, ISBN 978-09776800-6-1). I quickly found (somewhat to my surprise) that the *Manual* delivers on its promises. It actually does systematically describe the kinds of mental movements-in-thought and related mental processes that constitute the capacity to build useful mental models of complex reality as it transforms through time.

I spent much of the next six months working through Laske's book. My goal was to build the kinds of mental processes that generated the book and that embody the methods of thinking identified in the Manual. I was not starting with a blank slate. I had spent most of my intellectual life developing mental models of complex, large-scale evolutionary processes. These included models of the evolution of cooperative organization at all levels from molecular processes to human societies. But Laske's book was invaluable for enabling me to begin to see the actual mental processes that constituted my complex thinking, to identify blind spots and other limitations in my thinking, and then to correct them.

Since then, I have recommended Laske's book without hesitation to people interested in higher thinking. It is unique. But it is not an ideal vehicle to *introduce* people to dialectical thinking. At nearly 700 densely packed pages, it is too long, detailed and daunting for the average educated and intelligent reader. The book is immensely important – humanity urgently needs to develop thinking that can deal with complexity. But to kick-start this development, a shorter introduction to the acquisition of dialectical thinking is essential. In response to this need, Laske has now produced the book which is the subject of this review: *Dialectical Thinking for Integral Leaders: A Primer*.

The Primer is a concise and stimulating introduction to the power of dialectical thinking and to its acquisition. First the book demonstrates the need for dialectical thinking by identifying the limitations of analytical, rational thinking. Analytical, rational thinking is narrow and limited because it can only model (and therefore understand) simple systems. In order to find parts of the world which are simple enough for it to model, analytical thinking generally has to focus down on particular isolated phenomena, and ignore the complex, multi-layered context in which all phenomena are embedded. It then has to attempt to represent the phenomena by building a simple, mechanistic, reductionist model that linear thought is capable of 'thinking through' and tracking.

With such an approach, rational thinking can work only where (a) the complex context in which phenomena are embedded has little or no influence on how the phenomena unfolds and can therefore be safely ignored; (b) phenomena can be approximated as being comprised of objects and parts that don't change through time and that have fixed attributes – i. e. where the fact that all 'objects' are processes that are changing ceaselessly can be ignored; and (c) the interactions and relationships between the parts can be treated as if they are mechanistic, rather than as comprising complex, co-evolving interrelationships that constitute larger processes and systems.

If all these conditions are met, rational thinking can be used to build a mental model that will enable reasonably accurate predictions about the phenomena it is focusing on. However these conditions are rarely met, hence the limitations of reductionist, mechanistic thinking. In the limited circumstances where these conditions are met at least approximately, science is king. Where they aren't, current science tends to criticize attempts to make sense of phenomena as unscientific, but contributes very little to understanding them. In most areas of interest to human beings (e.g. the complex functioning of our societies, our psychology and our interpersonal relationships), current science is relegated to the status of a carping, irrelevant bystander.

However, the Primer shows how this understanding of the limitations of analytical, rational thinking enables us to identify what it fails to represent adequately in its models. More importantly, it shows us what higher-level thinking has to include if it is to develop better models of complex reality. It enables us to see the other aspects of reality that we have to give attention to if our thinking is to match complex phenomena.

The Primer does this by describing four classes of ‘thought forms’ that constitute dialectical thinking. Laske refers to these classes as the four ‘moments of dialectic’. They identify what dialectical thinkers need to include if they are to build useful mental models of complex phenomena. Each moment of dialectic in turn comprises three thought forms which summarize the seven thought forms that are described in detail in the Manual and that are set out in Appendix C of the Primer.

The four moments of dialectic are:

- Context: This class of thought forms reminds us that our models should reflect the multi-layered contexts in which all phenomena are embedded.
- Process: This class guides our thinking to recognise that all aspects of reality are ceaselessly changing. In reality, there is no such thing as an object with fixed attributes. There are only processes.
- Relationship: These thought forms direct our attention to the complex interrelationships between the processes that comprise most phenomena, including their coevolution as part of larger processes and systems.
- Transformation: This class of thought forms guides us to integrate our use of the Context, Process and Relationship thought forms to represent the fact that reality comprises interpenetrating, coevolving, complex systems-in-transformation.

Laske shows how these four moments of dialectic and associated thought forms can be used to scaffold thought processes that can match the complexity of reality. An individual can use the moments of dialectic (and thought forms) to guide their attention to take account of those parts of reality that are inadequately modelled by analytical, rational thinking.

Of course, this is a lot easier said than done. A key difficulty is that it requires awareness of one’s own thought processes. Individuals need to be able to see how their current thought processes operate and then use the moments and thought forms to identify and correct any inadequacies. But very few people yet have the capacity to stand outside their thinking and treat it as object in this way. Some forms of meditation have the potential to develop this capacity. However, at present they are used more often to create desirable internal states and feelings, not to improve thinking capacities.

Laske has developed and delivered sophisticated approaches that can overcome this challenge. He has established an organization (the Interdevelopmental Institute) that offers training programs in dialectical thinking. These programs scaffold the development by students of the ability see their own thinking through the lens of the moments and thought forms. They do this by taking students through an intermediate step that is easier to achieve and which in turn makes it easier to stand outside one’s own thinking and evaluate it. This first step trains students to

assess the thinking of others using Laske's framework. Students are required to interview another person and to listen carefully to the interviewee's responses. In real time as the interview proceeds, students then use the thought form framework to identify which forms are being used and which are underdeveloped or absent. In its most developed form, the student interviews the other person systematically to build up a comprehensive picture of their mental operations in the context of the thought form framework. As well as facilitating the development of dialectical thinking in the student, this ability to assess the level of thinking of others is also extremely valuable for coaches, consultants and team leaders, as discussed further below.

This teaching strategy makes use of the fact that it is much easier to learn to evaluate the thought processes of another. But mastering this also greatly facilitates the student's ability to see their own thinking as object through the lens of the framework.

It is more difficult to incorporate this kind of staged learning process in a book. But the Primer also seems to make use of this kind of approach. It gives detailed examples of the thinking of individuals and teams, and illustrates how the thought form framework can be applied to them. In order to follow and understand this material, the reader has to attempt to treat the thinking of others as object using the lens of the moments and thought forms. The Primer builds on and deepens this learning experience by setting exercises for readers that invite them to apply the thought form framework in a variety of circumstances where it is particularly powerful.

Furthermore, the Primer focuses its exercise and applications on scenarios that commonly arise in corporations and other business organizations. This is despite the fact that dialectical thinking can be profitably used in all areas of human existence, including family relations, politics, social issues, environmental challenges, economic crises, and so on. This focus on business applications is a particular strength of the Primer, given that the use by business of dialectical thinking will be essential if it is to spread across humanity quickly enough. Any innovation that provides a competitive edge for business will rapidly attract interest, resources and funding. For all its failings, our economic system can be very effective at finding and amplifying innovations that assist corporations and other businesses to achieve their goals. And it is increasingly clear that dialectical thinking can provide a strong competitive advantage: the business conditions encountered by senior executives in major corporations are already demanding that they develop effective mental models of their complex, ever-changing business environments. Very few executives can yet meet these demands. Nearly all are floundering and failing. They are flying by the seats of their pants and pretending that they know what they are doing. In these circumstances, once some businesses discover that their executives can be trained and coached in complex thinking, their competitors will have to quickly follow suit or be left behind. In this way our economic system can drive the spread of the new level of thinking that is needed to overcome the problems that the economic system has helped create and has often exacerbated.

It is worth noting here that it was the emergence of our market-based economic system that previously drove the spread of analytical, rational thinking. Despite its limitations in dealing with complexity, analytical thinking is far superior to the less structured, associative thinking that preceded it. However, analytical, rational thinking was of little use to the overwhelming majority of humans in the middle ages who were members of feudal and other social systems that seriously limited their freedom. These social arrangements prescribed in detail how they

should live all aspects of their life. Innovations often broke existing rules. As a result, the use of rational thought to come up with more efficient practices could be very dangerous. It was only with the rise of markets, merchants, trade and mercantilism that life conditions provided clear advantages for analytical, rational thinking and planning. Merchants who could use analytical, rational thinking to construct mental models of business opportunities reaped great financial rewards. And they helped create an environment in which others had to develop the capacity also if they were to survive in business. The culmination of this self-reinforcing process is that we now live in societies where analytical, rational thinking is often a minimum requirement to acquire and hold a relatively well-paid job. If complex human civilization survives long enough, the capacity to use dialectical thinking is also likely to often become a minimum requirement for successful participation in our economic and political systems.

Once dialectical thinking proves its unique value to business, all MBA courses will have to provide training in it. Coaching in dialectical thinking will become commonplace. The Primer will provide invaluable introductory material for these courses and for coaching. Consistent with this, the Primer focuses on a number of key business applications. Each of these applications will provide a unique competitive edge for any business that takes advantage of them. The business applications include:

- The training of dialectical thinking in executives whose work demands it, but who currently have little capacity to think dialectically.
- In the case of those executives who have developed some intuitive capacity to deal with the complexity that faces their business, the Laske framework can be used to significantly improve their thinking capacities. It can enable them to become conscious for the first time of the mental processes that constitute their intuitive capacities, to use the thought forms to identify any limitations in their intuitive approach, and to correct these comprehensively.
- Laske has developed a structured, formal process for assessing in detail the dialectical thinking capacity of individuals across the four moments of dialectic. This is invaluable in recruitment for ensuring that prospective employees are capable of developing the complexity of thought demanded by their jobs and careers. It also enables the design of individualized developmental programs that are tailored to the particular needs of each employee.
- The Primer provides tools and insights for executives and coaches who wish to scaffold higher thinking processes in others. In particular, Laske shows how to use the thought forms to generate ‘mind openers’. These are questions put to others that invite them to move their attention to areas that are currently absent from their thinking. If done well, this produces ‘aha’ moments for individuals, enabling them to ‘see’ and take account of phenomena that are highly relevant but which they ignored previously. In effect, the appropriate and skilful use of mind openers can scaffold an individual to think temporarily at a level of complexity that is well above their current level, as if they had the same abilities as their facilitator. These skills are obviously invaluable for coaches and facilitators. They are also essential for any executive or consultant who needs to persuade others with lesser thinking capacities to buy into complex strategies that would otherwise be ‘over their heads’. In the absence of such a capacity to scaffold others to

see what the dialectical thinker can see, a person capable of complex thought can end up being isolated, marginalized and relatively ineffectual in a modern corporation.

- Finally, the Primer focuses on applying Laske's framework to the leadership of teams. The capacity to lead teams effectively is critical in a modern business. Almost nothing can be achieved alone. Nearly every valuable goal requires the coordinated efforts of multi-skilled teams. Laske rightly gives significant attention in the Primer to the use of his dialectical approach to lead teams effectively.

Often this requires the skilful use of a combination of the tools and approaches I have sketched above. They need to be used to meet a fundamental challenge facing any team leader: team members are likely to operate with different levels of thinking. As a consequence, team members will interpret differently the nature of the organization they work in and its goals and possibilities. They will inhabit different worlds. If leaders are to maximize the performance of their team, ideally they need to know the particular way in which each team member models their work circumstances through time. They need to understand how each member 'does the world'. Ideally, the team leader needs to use this understanding of the capacities of each team member to temporarily scaffold their thinking to the level required, insofar as this is feasible. Where this is not possible, the leader needs to create an environment which manages the risks and downsides of any unavoidable shortfalls in levels of thinking.

A corporation that contains team leaders and members that have been trained in Laske's approaches can be far more effective than competitors that do not.

Laske's Primer outlines the enormous advantages to business and to individuals that can flow from the acquisition of dialectical thinking. However, dialectical thinking must overcome a number of sources of resistance if it is to spread widely:

- As is the case at any level of development, individuals at the analytical, rational level cannot see the limitation of their current thinking. For them, their thinking takes into account everything that they think is relevant. Because they cannot form mental models of what is absent from their thinking, they cannot 'see' mentally what is left out. They are like a dog that 'thinks' it is invisible to its owner when it puts its head under a couch. Because the dog is a 'slave' to its visual field, it is unable to mentally model what is going on outside its visual field. As a result it cannot 'see' mentally that it is in full view of its owner, and it cannot 'see' that its inability to 'see' this is a limitation in its ability to model reality.
- Mainstream science would claim it already takes into account the four moments of dialectic. It can point to where science explicitly deals with different contexts, processes, relationships and systems-in-transformation. A number of science textbooks are entirely devoted to understanding systems and related phenomena in a diversity of fields. However, on closer examination it is evident that the attempts made by mainstream science to deal with complex systems have largely been limited to developing analytical, rational models of them. These systems textbooks are filled with linear, reductionist, mechanical diagrams and models of systems. What passes for systems thinking in mainstream science is rarely dialectical thinking. Nearly always it is merely analytical, rational thinking about systems and processes. And analytical, rational models of

systems-in-transformation are inadequate and unable to provide a comprehensive understanding of complex phenomena. Hence the undeniable fact that mainstream science has failed to make significant contributions to our understanding of the complex phenomena dealt with by the humanities and social ‘sciences’.

- Some people who are introduced to dialectical thinking conclude that they already have this capacity to a high degree. When their attention is drawn to the moments of dialectic and the thought forms, they suggest that these are already reflected in their thinking. This position is particularly common amongst people who see some of the limitations of reductionist, linear, rational thinking, and who consider they have moved on from it. They consider they now take a more holistic perspective, and see that ‘everything is connected to everything else’. However, it is one thing to see that everything is connected. It is another thing entirely to see the particular ways in which things are connected, their particular inter-relationships and the particular ways in which the systems they constitute are organized and transform through time. It is this detailed mental modelling of systems-in-transformation that is essential if the thinker is to be able to see how complex phenomena will unfold and how they can be managed and influenced to produce particular outcomes. Seeing that everything is connected but failing to see the detailed consequences of the particular forms of connectedness that exist in the world will just get humanity into a bigger mess. The ultimate test of whether a person is thinking dialectically is whether they can in fact build complex mental models that equip them to understand and manage complex phenomenon in the real world. In my experience, very few people have yet developed this capacity to a high degree.
- It requires an enormous effort to develop oneself vertically in any domain, even if the development is supported by social scaffolding and if life conditions demand and reward it. Like other aspects of vertical development, the acquisition of dialectical thinking requires new capacities and skills, not just new knowledge. It cannot be acquired merely by reading words in a book, just as a person cannot learn to ride a bicycle by reading a manual. The individual has to undergo experiences and processes that reorganize their mind. A large part of this involves working internally on their own mental processes and movements-in-thought. Readers may understand everything in the Primer and be able to pass a detailed exam on its contents. But they will not be able to think dialectically until they have developed the mental processes and models that were used to generate the Primer. Fortunately the Primer is designed and structured to help the reader to do this.

For these reasons we can expect the take-off of dialectical thinking to be slow. But it is likely that these sources of resistance will be swept aside eventually as the enormous benefits of dialectical thinking are demonstrated in practice. Otto Laske’s work in general, and his Primer more specifically, are major contributions to the great step forward in human evolution that will occur with the spread of dialectical thinking.

About the Author

[John Stewart](#) is an Australian-based member of the Evolution, Complexity and Cognition (ECCO) research group of the Free University of Brussels. His main interest is the development of an evolutionary worldview that helps us understand who we are and what we should be doing

with our lives. Much of his work on the directionality of evolution and its implications for humanity has been published in key papers in international science journals. A number of his recent papers have focused on psychological development, including the future evolution of consciousness. He is the author of the internationally acclaimed book 'Evolution's Arrow: the direction of evolution and the future of humanity'. More recently he has finalized The Evolutionary Manifesto which outlines an evolutionary worldview and explores its relevance to humanity. His work on the development and spread of higher levels of thinking (including co-organizing the First Planning Meeting for the Second Enlightenment) is outlined [here](#).