

The Rebounding of Dialectical Thinking in Turbulent Times

By Otto Laske

To my students

Abstract

In this paper, I reflect on the journey that led me to CDF as taught at IDM.

Introduction

To take the mystery out of the term “dialectical thinking” right away let me say it is the kind of thinking that adults grow into only once they have mastered formal logic, approximately in their middle twenties (depending on the culture). The emergence of dialectical thinking is under threat in technological cultures highly wedded to purely formal logical thinking, most of which lie in the Western hemisphere. In Asia, dialectical thinking is common sense, while in the West it has remained the thinking of a small minority. In a time of turbulence, might that change? For a decade now, IDM has been introducing a new kind of thinking harking back to a very long, if not ancient, tradition: the dialectical tradition. The benefits of that tradition will become clear as I continue these reflections.

What is dialectical thinking?

Dialectical thinking is not a “method” but a way of thinking. It is not something that “replaces” logical thinking but centrally depends on it. One might see it as “presuppositionless” thinking as Hegel did, namely, as based on the stance of being utterly self-critical and taking nothing for granted (especially oneself), and then “looking and seeing” how a concept that is in focus – say, “customer value proposition” or “quadrant” -- develops in one’s own or another person’s mind through further reflection. As a result, **one can not take dialectic itself for granted either** as one does when saying “you should think dialectically”. Rather, since dialectic is not a method one can only propose “let’s see what happens when we reflect on the concept we are using here; where it might move our thinking”. **In short, the outcome of dialectical thinking is unpredictable, and whether dialectics will result is also unpredictable.**

Also, dialectical thinking is more than “keeping two ideas in mind simultaneously” (R. Martin, 2007). Much more. It is based on seeing two ideas as being in opposition with, or even excluding, each other, and *harnessing this negativity* – Sartre’s *négativité* (1943) – *for moving thought forward, especially “deeper”*. Acknowledgement of negativity in a thinker creates what

Basseches, in his book Dialectical Thinking and Adult Development, called a *motion in thought* (Basseches, 1984). In terms of this definition, an inference such as “humans are mortal, Socrates is a human, therefore Socrates is mortal” is NOT a motion in thought. It is a tautology, saying the same thing in several different ways. The world, including the scientific world, is full of such tautologies which, from a dialectical point of view, are dialectical errors.

What cognitions should psychology explore?

When concerning oneself with dialectical thinking in teaching and research one is led to the interesting question about psychology: WHAT KINDS OF THINKING SHOULD DEVELOPMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY EXPLORE, tautological or dialectical kinds of thinking? As broad evidence shows, developmental psychology so far has chosen the safe, conventional, route of focusing on tautological thinking which ends up with very abstract concepts called “meta-systematic” (Commons, Fisher, and their students). Such concepts are very wide-scoped, but they lack life and power since they have been drenched of their life blood: negativity. In the sciences, and increasingly in politics, these concepts reign supreme. They set up a dichotomy between “experience” and “thinking”, where *thinking* means tautological logical thinking.

This then brings all the minds hungry for experience onto the scene. Not having any alternative to the logical thinking they have absorbed with mother’s milk, they fall off the cliff into a kind of daze which they call “holistic thinking” and begin envisioning “non-dual experiences”. These specialists in “intuition” then assume they have moved far away from logical tautological thinking. But alas, from the vantage point of dialectical thinking they have simply switched to the abstract alternative of tautological thinking where, as Hegel’s says, “all cats are grey”. They are then beginning to look for a “synthesis” of where they came from and ended up in, and find it in *perspectival relativism* (thinking in multiple but only externally related perspectives). In contrast to the “external skepticism” this relativism implies Hegel spoke of “immanent skepticism” in which the dynamic of concepts is followed by dialectic reflection simply by letting go of unwarranted presuppositions (such as multiple perspectives).

Returning to Piaget In order to go forward

When further reflecting on modern relativistic thinking old traditions of dialectical thinking, whether Asian or Western, become more highly interesting. In the beginning of this century, there are also historical factors which spur on the rebounding of dialectical thinking. Its last flowering occurred in Europe in the 1930s, amidst deep economic disruption and the growing menace of war which promptly came (Frankfurt School). The value of money changed from morning to evening, with wide gyrations of stocks and government budgets similar to today’s more global casino scene. **So**

why is psychology insisting that thinking should be defined and researched as formal logical thinking which is partly at the root of these problems? What slumber is psychology caught in today, including integral psychology?

Historically, the answer lies, I think, in that developmental psychology has forgotten Piaget or else pays no more than lip service to his work. While Piaget was not strictly a Hegelian (although given his subject he might have been), Piaget understood himself not as a psychologist but as a GENETIC EPISTEMOLOGIST. This is a very different self-understanding from understanding oneself as a “psychologist”, since the former researches *knowledge* and the latter *behavior*. And since human behavior [in contrast to rat behavior] follows knowledge, it is clear that if you never deal with knowledge as intrinsically dialectical, or make epistemology -- the theory of knowledge -- into nothing more than a theory of meaning making, you are unlikely to make any dialectical motions in thought.

The conundrum of how Kegan’s work relates to Basseches’ work

In 1982, Kegan made an important step beyond E. Erikson by following his teacher Kohlberg and formulating a notion of developmental stage that could be researched empirically through semi-structured interview. (It does not seem that he recognized social-emotional interviewing as a template of fruitful conversations generally as it has been seen and taught at IDM since 1999.) Kegan was followed in his innovation in 1984 by Basseches who, using a similar qualitative research methodology, focused his attention on “thinking”, not “experience”, as did Kegan. Both researchers thought of what they were researching as COGNITION, but did not reflect further on how their two different notions of cognition actually related. They worked out of sight of the classical philosophical tradition.

Having led my early intellectual life in Frankfurt School seminars (1956-66) that were part of this tradition, I could not simply let the matter rest where it ended in 1984. I have thought about the best way of pursuing psychology for many years, studying both its clinical and developmental branches. Then in 1997, becoming fully aware of the split between Kegan’s and Basseches’ work in my study on developmental coaching, I decided it was time to put them together dialectically as A and non-A, and thereby make a first step toward a “synthesis”, however weak (“Transformational effects of coaching on executives’ professional agenda”, 1999).

When Kegan spoke to me of “cognition” and Basseches did likewise, I knew from my dialectical training that they were not only not speaking of the same thing, but that **there was an usurpation of motions in thought for the sake of experience [self-awareness] in Kegan’s work**, which left him no choice but to incorporate what he called “cognition” in what is plain social-emotional

meaning making. (He did not honor the separation of meaning and truth Hannah Ahrendt was speaking of.) Unfortunately, Basseches, for his part, remained content with an exclusive focus on cognition as dialectical thinking, without making any attempt whatsoever to link cognitive to social-emotional development.

Reflections on Kohlberg School research

As a result of my Frankfurt School training, I approached both Kegan's and Basseches' work as PHILOSOPHY, and decided that, in taking on their work, I needed to return to Frankfurt School teachings, which were about philosophy, and thinking more generally, as a lens on the real world. Thus the question arose for me: what real world is either philosopher – dressed up as a researcher – really talking about? Are they talking about the same world? And if so, shouldn't an attempt be made to generate some motions in thought to bring them together in their antithetical but un-dialectical ways of defining COGNITION?

The first step I then took was to separate in thought "meaning making" and "sense making." In this I followed an old philosophical tradition, emphasized by Hannah Ahrendt, who made it clear that "truth" (making sense) and "meaning" (meaning making) had always been kept separate in Western philosophy. In saying so she was not denying that these two activities of consciousness are engaged in by the same human mind. She was only pointing out that it was a *philosophical faux pas* – and I would add with Bhaskar (1993), a *dialectical error* -- to mix them up, and to leave one unrelated to the other. In short, Ahrendt was thinking holistically as well as dialectically.

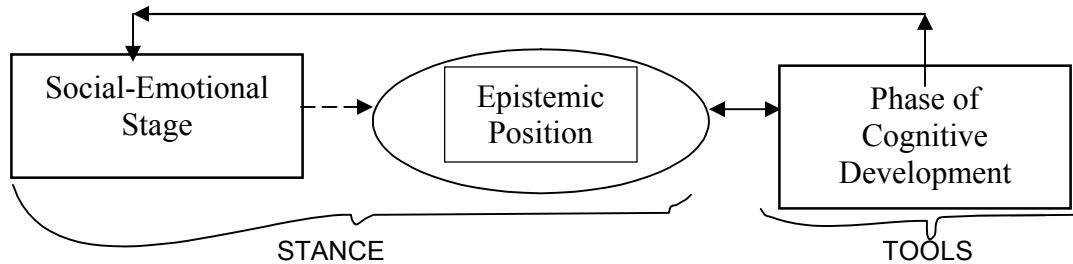
In a next "logical" step, I then wondered how these two "opposites" which make up a whole only together, might be linked, outside of being, of course, intrinsically related through their common ground, human consciousness. When writing volume 2 of Measuring Hidden Dimensions (2007-2009), it seemed to me that one obvious *external* link between them might be the development of reflective judgment (or, as I called it with reference to Piaget, epistemic development). This kind of development, according to King and Kitchener (1994), has to do with how the human mind changes over the life span in dealing with uncertainty. ("Uncertainty" is, of course, one of those abstract concepts mentioned above because it intrinsically is linked to its opposite, certainty, and cannot be thought without it.)

The way K&K see epistemic development is that a young human cannot fathom uncertainty, or at least replaces dealing with it by the thought that "somebody" – mother, teacher, priest – etc. will "know the truth". As this assumption gradually crumbles and finally breaks down in adolescence, at "higher stages of reflective judgment" new cognitive tools are required to stave off panic and deal with uncertainty intellectually, for instance, through hypothesis formulation and testing, as

exercised in the sciences. The need to “think clearly about uncertainty”, I thought, required both social-emotional maturity such as is possible at Kegan stage 4, as well as tools for making dialectical *motions in thought* first spelled out by Basseches.

What I ended up thinking

In the form of a diagram, I expressed this thought as follows:



The Epistemic Interrelatedness of Social-Emotional Stage and Phase of Cognitive Development

As suggested by this diagram, all of Kegan’s and Loevinger’s theorizing [box on left], all of Basseches’s work [box on right] as well as Wilber’s thinking [which is trying to combine stance and tools through quadrant-based perspectivism] fill only a small niche of real-world consciousness as it matures over the life span. **Such consciousness encompasses all three elements, if not more, and while two of them have to do with attitude (Stance), the third one has to do with conceptual tools I call thought forms (Tools).**

A separate issue that came to the fore was K&K’s assumption, widely shared in developmental psychology today, that all thinking is “(reflective) judgment” – another way of saying that all understanding is *discursive* (Houlgate, 2006, 18; Kant, 1997). This is something that Kant had also assumed which had been shown by Hegel to make it impossible to understand how the fundamental categories of human thought – upon which dialectical thought forms are based – actually relate to, and imply, each other dynamically. Or simply put, it is an assumption that excludes dialectic from the very start, no questions asked.

Nevertheless, K&K’s research being at least thoroughly, although narrowly, empirical, I thought one could use it as a first approximation to researching cognition as *Understanding*, as long as one kept in mind that it ultimately precludes any notion of an extension of formal logical understanding into dialectical *Reason*.

Summary of my findings

I thought therefore that, hypothetically, one might assume that all three agencies implied by the diagram were engaged in complex feedback loops such that:

- Consciousness is a transformational system comprising many interrelated components all based on *focusing attention*.
- It is a self-limiting system that undergoes development, in stages or phases, or at least that is how one may tentatively conceive of it (until proven wrong).
- There is no direct influence of social-emotional on cognitive development.
- There is a direct influence of cognitive on social-emotional development, simply because meaning cannot be made without concepts.
- Social-emotional feeds epistemic development (dealing with uncertainty), in a way heretofore never researched.
- Epistemic development feeds cognitive development, which feeds social-emotional development, etc., also in a way never researched.

Limitations of King and Kitchener's research

It is here that the limitations of epistemic development as researched by K&K fully come to light. Simply put, if, as they suggest, the highest epistemic position (stage of reflective judgment) is defined by formal logical thinking [scientific hypothesis testing], then the natural extension of this thinking into dialectical thinking is obstructed, or cannot even be “thought”, let alone taught. Nor can it be accepted and acknowledged in research and society at large. However, this conveys a lack of appreciation of the dialectic of adult development itself, and is simply a dialectical error or *simplification terrible*. In short, *their work has just begun*.

What can be done about dialectical errors?

Those who have followed me so far will here begin to see what dialectical thinking in the sciences and in our society is up against. In developmental psychology research **dialectical errors** – reductionism (TF 17), perspectivism and relativism (TF 17), meta-systemic abstraction (TF28), missing links between intrinsically related elements of consciousness (TF 15), etc., – **abound**. In fact, anybody reading Basseches' “Dialectical thinking and adult development” (1984) in some depth could point them out.

It is here that the rebounding of dialectical thinking in volume 2 of Measuring Hidden Dimensions (2009) is notable. This rebound is accompanied by Bhaskar's (1993) and Houlgate's (2006) work on dialectic, Adorno's work being presently read only for its content, not its structure, and is thus for all intents and purposes *dead* (Laske, 2009, 447-8). As happened in the 1930s, the agents bringing about this rebound – some of whom are my students – are aware of living in a highly

fragile world determined by all four *Quadrants of Dialectic* (Process, Context, Relationship; Transformation) -- whose hallmark is transformation, not change, which is a mere epiphenomenon. These people are aware that innocuous seeming scientific “theories” (e.g., in developmental psychology) are obstructing a broader, more complex view of the human condition and hinder new insights into it by clinging to ideas now over 30 years old.

How to escape the many-layered trap of formal logical thinking?

As I have implied, following Basseches (1984), formal logical thinking only permits to think in terms of static systems, however many dynamic metaphors one may introduce to clean up dialectical errors. In terms of real-world consciousness, thinking in terms of static systems is a trap because the real world is not among them.

For a decade now, I have suggested a humble remediation of dialectical errors: *teaching dialectical thinking by going back to its source in Hegel's work*. I have formulated a curriculum in which dialectical thinking is not only a component but pervades all of the teaching. Following the diagram above, in teaching CDF I am pursuing a way of thinking and listening to others that is worthy of *Frankfurt School Hauptseminars*. I am not saying we should replicate those seminars. I am only saying that, in my own experience instruction in dialectical thinking outweighs societal pressures to remain confined to formal logical, thus tautological, thinking alone.

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