

The Empyrean Trail

"There is no royal road to science, and only those who do not dread the fatiguing climb of its steep paths have a chance of gaining its luminous summits."-Karl Marx

□ MENU



Dialectics: An Introduction

WRITTEN BY ANTONIO WOLF

Special thanks to Daniel-Pascal Zorn and Alan Ponikvar, who indirectly have been a great aid in providing notions and ideas that moved me to consider key structures I would have taken much longer to realize in my lone trajectory through Hegel's works. In particular, Zorn's emphasis on reflexivity, and Ponikvar's emphasis on the character and relation of speculation and understanding.

Hegel is a philosopher known for his difficulty and speculative depth, but finding a mere entry point from which to learn the system is itself a difficult endeavor when the most fundamental aspect of his system, his method, is obscure. I hope that this article accomplishes the aim of clarifying dialectics in a way that very few articles do. The commentators that do have a grasp of the method and follow it throughout are unfortunately not known in popular discourse, nor are their works the first to come up in a search engine inquiry, nor do they spend much time on the method itself. What I write here is in no way an original conception or secret knowledge; however, as far as I am aware, there is no one essay which people can look to for an introduction to Hegel's logical method. I set my task here merely as a condensed exposition of dialectics for others in hopes of sparing them from what should not be a long arduous road just to reach the door. Credit, first and foremost, goes to Hegel himself, who despite all claims made to the contrary is not mysterious or secretive about his 'method' at all.

If this introduction is too confusing due to technicality, perhaps my **[beginner's introduction](https://empyreantrail.wordpress.com/2017/09/04/beginners-introduction-to-dialectics/)** (<https://empyreantrail.wordpress.com/2017/09/04/beginners-introduction-to-dialectics/>) is more helpful. It is less focused on technical detail, and it is meant to cover a different set of questions pertinent to the method.

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The So-Called 'Method'

There truly is no such thing as dialectic as a method in the usual sense that people think of a method. Unlike the common understanding of what a method is, such that one merely has to follow the *generally right form and steps* applied to content, Hegel's dialectics are not an application. The first thing to do before considering dialectics is to rid ourselves of this common notion of method as a correct *general formula* indifferent to content, for such a notion is unhelpful for this task. That there is no formula, however, is *not to say there is no method*. There is indeed a way which Hegel thinks, but it is not

an external formula. There is a formula we may give as *description* of method¹, but this will unfortunately prove a useless thing when it comes to being capable of thinking as Hegel does. Let it suffice for now to say this: formulaic application is of no help because the formula is itself a description of *thinking* rather than a thinking tool to bypass the work of thinking.

What is often called ‘dialectical method,’ I must repeat, is a method that exists neither in Marx nor in Hegel like the likewise mythical scientific method of hypothesis-experiment-conclusion does not exist for science in general. There is no formula to this ‘logic’—no set of rules to apply over and over. There is neither **{thesis-antithesis}-synthesis** nor **{abstract-negative}-concrete**. What is wrong with these formulas is not so much that they are wrong, but that they serve to confuse the matter for someone who does not already know that the formulas are only descriptions of *results of the method*. As a description the former formula is understandable to some degree, and the latter is even correct to a high degree in that it describes a pattern relation between the results produced. *The issue, however, is that people generally don’t understand that these are mere descriptions and not the process itself.* They conflate a processed result for the process that creates those results, and in thinking that Hegel’s method and dialectics are these descriptions, they are led to misunderstand that the form that results is the method itself.

In one sense, one can look to Socratic/Platonic dialectic and its process of attempting to arrive at truth as a form of dialectical method akin to Hegel’s. It is through a thorough and multifaceted inquiry into a concept by mutual interrogation of interlocutors who demand justification of claims by universal reason that Plato’s dialectic arrives at truths. In this rational dialogue, lacks are found in positions through the demand for justification, but an integration of what is true and rational in multiple and opposing positions is made as a positive result. In such dialectic, a knowledge claim is put through a gauntlet of merciless interrogation by reason from all available points of views in order that—clarification by clarification—those in conversation may come to agreement of the universal truth contained in the nebulous shadows of regular thought. These multiple perspectives engage each other not simply in an attempt to supplant each other as the definitive truth, but to constructively come together as differences that may reveal themselves to be compatible, for they contain aspects of truth even if one-sided and incomplete. Like these dialectical dialogues, Hegel’s dialectics involve multiple perspectives, a demand for coherence, a constructive unity of truths, and a demand for definitively final reasons (absolute explanation).

From within, Hegel’s method truly appears as no method and can never appear as such. One must merely engage the *Science of Logic* or *Phenomenology of Spirit* with one consideration to see this truth: to think only with what is given in the object to be thought. The method is our thinking put into this absolute straitjacket, constrained to think only what is available in its content. This thinking thinks *through*, thinks *with*, and thinks *about* what is thought in the object only with what is found in the object itself. It thinks all that it can think with its given content, and only with what is there explicitly and implicitly can it move onward. Since the object is what is in question, and it is the only standpoint which we may take to consider it, our thinking is forced to think this object from within. *However*, insofar as we are capable of noticing implicit structures and movements which the object itself is not explicit about, we may use what is implicit as a way of advancing. In doing so, we do not break our requirement to think only with what is available, but simply call up what is already there as yet another possible and valid movement of thinking. Hegel’s method demands that we think all that is possible with our content.

1. For a formulaic exposition of the method, see **[this \(https://empyreantrail.wordpress.com/2017/09/04/beginners-introduction-to-dialectics/#formula\)](https://empyreantrail.wordpress.com/2017/09/04/beginners-introduction-to-dialectics/#formula)** section of the Beginner’s Introduction.

Immanent Critique

Concerning what we may properly term dialectical in Hegel at all, we may more clearly begin with calling the method of dialectics as such *immanent (internal) critique*, but this must not be confused as the entire method which Hegel employs. Immanent critique is nothing but critical analysis of concepts and objects from within. This kind of analysis does not use any conceptual resources outside of its concept/object to critique it; it does not presuppose a form to which it must conform. By this, it is meant that one basically follows the train of thought set by the concept, the relations already within it, and those that it brings up of its own content and their relations. The content being investigated leads the investigation itself, and the immanent critic has but one job: to see from the standpoint of this content. No consideration or criticism from outside can be admitted into this court of reason, and the defendant is the absolute witness that must give but one account: the account of itself.

This analysis can be said to ask one question and one question alone: *is what is before us absolute?* In simplified terms, what is aimed at by such an analysis can be considered three things: testing coherency, testing stability, and testing for a claim to logical/material independence, in other words testing for a claim of being a coherent absolute. Immanent critique, however, only reveals the success or failure of meeting these demands. It does not and cannot provide for the advance beyond the moment of failure revealed in a dialectic—that is, it cannot account for Hegel’s developmental advance.

Beyond the immanent critique of concepts—the dialectical moment²—is the speculative thinking which turns dialectical thinking itself into an object of inquiry. *Speculation* makes the turn beyond a dialectic, enables the *sublation* (the cancelling/suspending/preserving of the contradiction) of it, and is the advance towards a new concept with which to begin another dialectic. Hegel’s method thus advances through immanent critique and speculation as necessary moments.

Insofar as Marx and Hegel engage in such an activity, there is no difference—there is no ‘idealist’ or ‘materialist’ dialectical method. This is not to say there is no fundamental difference between Marxists and Hegelians, but that difference is certainly not dialectics themselves—not if Marx is using such a method as that which Hegel himself uses. Marx directly denies using ‘Hegel’s mystified dialectics’, but this is suspect due to how *Capital*’s own theory is systematically structured just as Hegel’s own method would require, barring some external injections made by Marx due to other theoretical commitments (labor theory of value being one such commitment). I shall not expand further on the comparison of Marx and Hegel’s methods here; for now, the focus shall be on dialectics as such.

2. By ‘moment’, nothing special or esoteric is meant. Moments for Hegel are merely positions we conceptually inhabit for only a moment, after which we are forced by thinking to move on.

Dialectics

That there is no dialectical method as a formula is not to deny that there are such things as *dialectics*. Dialectics is the plural of dialectic. This may seem like a strange or pedantic point, but it seems many do not understand this; most people speak of *the* dialectic and do not distinguish the method as a whole from the mere moment of dialectic.³ This equivocating confusion of the term expands dialectics too far, and it is this expansion to the level of Hegel's entire method and system which makes it become so general as to be meaningless. Because of this confusion, 'dialectics' from here on specifically concerns the technical meaning of *contradictory inner opposition*. It is often repeated that dialectics drive the method, and this is true in a *very specific sense*,⁴ but the method of Hegel does *not presuppose* dialectics as its motor nor are they the entirety of it. The method discovers dialectics in the content it investigates; thus, dialectics are a result themselves. It is, therefore, best to be introduced to the method through the abstraction of the *dialectical moment*. However, there is an important issue to bring up first since it is important to the comprehension of dialectics—*contradiction*.

3. Now, regarding '*the dialectic*', what is often meant by this is actually not incorrect *if we mean it in the Platonic dialectic sense*; however, this is almost universally confused with *dialectics* in the very specific sense of contradiction which they have as a moment in Hegel.

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4. This is tied to the famous claim that contradiction is the generator of change/motion by Marxists, but this is true only in the sense that a Hegelian contradiction is a concept that is already conceived as moving. Take the example of the *commodity*, where the very *being* of a commodity is its relation and movement of exchange with another commodity. The movement engagement here comes from the commodity's own concept as an object with no use-value but exchange; therefore, its conception and reality is only in the movement of exchange which testifies that in being useful to others things are useful to me.

About Contradiction

The contradiction which dialectics deals with is often treated by many philosophers as if it is the contradiction which formal logic terms as the law of non-contradiction: A cannot be A and not-A at the same time, or A cannot be true and false at the same time, or in the case of what **Paul Redding**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IppVW6XY5bM>) calls the Aristotelian concept of contradiction in term logic: A cannot instantiate a property/attribute and its opposite⁵ at the same time. Hegel does not deny any of these laws, and his contradictory claims do not break them, which baffles the reader who assumes Hegel is simply ignoring them.

The common notion of contradiction assumes an absolute opposition in contradictory terms. They are incompatible and cannot be had at one and the same moment of utterance, thought, or being. In this kind of thinking, things must be one or the other, not both or neither—either the object is or it is not; it is one or it is the other. Hegel's contradictions are, if one can say such, *rational contradictions* which are not nonsense or paradoxical in the sense of a brute contradiction merely stating both are true without explanation. Yes, opposition is generated, but it is a necessarily developed and wholly rational opposition which is taken to constitute a unitary whole rather than a determining position of one over another. The opposites are indeed separate and different, yet united and identical as an absolute whole. Hegel can get away with this because his oppositions are not taken as absolute and apart from each other, the logical development being all the proof required to know this is the case.

Hegel considers his logical contradictions as multiple points of views of the same thing—the Absolute. Thus, in truth, they are not absolute incompatible *positions* themselves.⁶ Being and Nothing are indeed separate and different, yet they are each aspects (moments) of understanding the Absolute of which they form and of which they are parts; thus, they are also the same and united as this absolute. But that is not where the common logician sees a problem—that is not an issue of contradiction like '*Being is Nothing*'. How does this make sense? '*Being is Nothing*' in that it falls into Nothing in merely being itself. This seems contradictory when we seek to understand which is more fundamental, since each seems to be the ground of the other—the enabling content or form of each other. Both are in inseparable unity with their opposite as one absolute unity; this unity does not collapse their difference, but rather *necessitates it*. This difference, however, does have a peculiar mirror reflection structure such that both opposite sides can be seen as each other in inverse depending on from which side it is being investigated: Nothing from its side looks like Being as much as itself, and Being from its side looks like Nothing in the same manner. The reason is that they are actually one unity as an absolute concept, i.e. *Being is itself and its opposite* when we inquire into it. '*Being is Nothing*', however, is not a concept which we think immediately; it is a reflection on the concepts. To be able to say this, we had to already have taken the position of each concept to see this is so, and we could only do this by inhabiting them for a moment in which they alone are considered. In this sense, the law of non-contradiction holds true: we cannot *think* both concepts in one single moment.

Hegelian contradiction exists insofar as there are multiple and opposing *immanently necessary* positions from which things can be looked at and comprehended. When we think of A, yes, we really do think of A alone; it just so happens that the whole truth of A is also what A is not, its non-being—its opposite—and this too must be looked at and comprehended as part of A's totality and ultimate absolute truth. In order to think at all, thought must develop through one-sided concepts which define each side of A momentarily, and in order for things to be at all there really have to be different parts to the whole of reality. A and not-A indeed cannot be thought at one single moment from one single perspective, but we can see that A and not-A are both aspects of A as absolute from different perspectives at different moments. When speaking of actual concepts, this makes far more sense than with formal abstractions. Being and Nothing are both parts, or aspects, of the Absolute of reality, but they certainly are very different and real moments of this absolute. An apple *is* an apple and cannot be otherwise from this moment or standpoint; however, it just as much *is not* an abstract undifferentiated whole, nor is it any single one of its parts as a whole, and further, each part is not any of the other parts as well—from the perspective of each part, they are Being, whereas the others are *their* non-being, Nothings.

5. *Opposite* here is meant in the sense of 'setting against' rather than the typical meaning of an essential incompatibility of terms or things.

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6. *Position* is quite a telling term in the relation of opposition. To be positioned against each other, things must stand upon a same ground of relation. The absolute in the relation is treated as the ground of the other, but in the dialectical contradiction, this ground is found to be equally claimed by both positions. Contradiction is this claim of absoluteness, but this is resolved by seeing a further term or factor, the 'ground', from which the two claims naturally arise.

The Dialectical Moment

With contradictions as moments of the absolute, we can return to considering the dialectical moment.

By a dialectic, it is to be understood that this must always mean a relation of *inner contradiction*, and *only* inner contradiction; dialectics are not about contradictions in general, but only these *necessary* inner contradictions. For clarification, let us say that a dialectic is shorthand for a dialectical relationship. **To think dialectically is to think in and through internal contradictions of concepts.** This aspect of dialectics regarding *thinking* must be emphasized, for as mentioned earlier in the comparison to Platonic dialectic, there is a kind of moving discourse going on between the concepts caught in their immanent relation. A Hegelian dialectic is not a dialectic in merely being seen in its immanent contradiction, but is a dialectic also in the Platonic sense, in that it is a moving and developing inner discourse of concepts such that they cannot help but become their opposite and their opposite become them and back again. This active and moving dialectic is best seen rather than described, and that shall be done in the examples later in this article. For now, I shall continue using the term *concept* (nothing special is meant by it here) exclusively as the object of dialectics because even material objects and activities are only intelligible as concepts which we think through to comprehend the world. Insofar as anything is intelligible, it is conceptual and it is its concept alone which we can elaborate in universal structures of thought.

Here I offer a static definition of the *moment* of internal contradiction in Hegel's method that can be termed *dialectical*. I must emphasize this is only a moment, for as mentioned already, dialectics include the movement of these contradictory ideas. I first want to deal with the static appearance of a dialectic prior to exposing its movements.

Dialectical relationships: Such relations are of the kind of contradictory concepts that in their content, structure, meaning, or existence necessarily presuppose, generate, or require their opposite. To have one is to have the other. To think through one leads to thinking of the other. To change one is to change the other. This is the famous 'unity of opposites' dialectics is described as by many Marxists. Such 'materialist' relations are: {Worker—capitalist}; {[use-value]—[exchange-value]}; {material—ideal}; {positive charge—negative charge}; et cetera.⁷

The worker and the boss have no meaning or existence without each other—necessarily develop into each other in the thinking of their concept—and if you have one, you know you have the other; if you lack either one, you've also lost the other. The distinction of use-value and exchange-value is the opposition of 'useful for me' and 'useful for someone else', that is, that which is *used by me* cannot be used by someone else and vice versa; thus, they are seemingly mutually exclusive. The commodity, however, proves that things can be useful for me in being useful to others. This distinction in a commodity also reveals the *essentially* social reality of the very conception of what is useful for *me* as one necessarily implying an opposition against usefulness for other social beings. In relations of this kind, the content is paramount: a change in one content is a change in its other—e.g. a change of one term must change an entire dynamic of relations and terms, or that a change in relations necessarily changes what is related. In dialectics, form and content are inseparable, and this is one of the reasons formulaic application is impossible.

This relation of inner contradiction, in a strict sense, is all that a dialectic can be *as merely a moment of Hegel's method*. Hegel's method is *more* than just the dialectics that arise, though they are important as moments to it. While from the standpoint of dialectics alone we do not get anywhere other than a confusion of having generated two contradictory positions that seem to be vying for exclusively absolute status insofar as we remain within the dialectic's content, Hegel's method goes beyond and transcends this seeming incompatible contradiction. In the method, the movement towards a new dialectic is made through the *speculative* step which provides the beginning of a new dialectic. In this manner, one dialectic necessarily becomes a plurality or series of dialectical relationships which do not simply follow one after another, but also are constructed atop each other as much as they are merely digging into what is already there.

The logical movement (thinking) which generates one dialectic sees their unity as itself being and generates another dialectic—appears to our conscious experience as an inner analysis of these concepts, the development of one from the other and back again and *this very movement between concepts* as a concept itself. It is what pushes thought onward insofar as the analysis generates more concepts to continue. This movement of concepts, however, is not *merely our* subjective movement in thought such as one imagines in a mere arbitrary given definition, but is the movement of an objective *concept structure* itself; it is not our mere subjective fancy—something that will become apparent in the examples. Why does thought move from dialectic to dialectic, contradiction to contradiction? To simplify it a bit: *because insofar as we are **thinking** them, we cannot stop thinking until they are fully rationalized, that is, until we have at last attained absolute explanation—until there is nothing left to think, or rather nothing left to question.*

In the sphere of thought, the clash of contradiction forces thought to move of its own accord by the power of reason, to seek a resolution to contradiction. This is nothing alien to us; it is already what we do in reasoning. Problems arise, so we seek explanations, and in the explanation, we find the ground of the problem as well as a solution. It must be noted that it is not always the case that contradiction is immediately apparent; as mentioned above, contradictions are first generated without their being assumed. Thought keeps moving so long as the drive of reason to find ultimate reasons to ground things thinks a concept which from within points to a reason beyond its own immediacy. This is why contradiction generates movement: things constituted by a contradiction by their own content/nature /being point and connect to something beyond them.

7. Keep in mind here that these opposed terms are not detachable from each other, and in fact are what make each other possible such that one term ceasing to relate to or overtaking the other is the

destruction of both; they exist essentially only as the opposite of their opposite.

Speculation/Recollection

After dialectics comes *speculation*. The discourse of dialectics tends to correspond to a mode of thinking which in German Idealism has a specific technical name: *understanding*—the thinking which analyses and separates. Dialectic, however, also has an element of reason in that there is a unification through noticing a necessary link of dependency between opposing moments in a split dialectic. It is with this mode of thinking which immanent critique is carried out to its final limit in dialectical *self-contradiction* merely by what originally seems a simple analysis determining the specificity of a concept in its assumed independence. Not only do we find opposite claims rationally viable as absolutes of reason such that Being is absolute just as much as Nothing, and both are just as much a failure, but we also find an shifting identity which baffles the understanding—what things *really are* is found to be something other than themselves. In this seeming self-destruction of reason, we find a ‘negative reasoning’ at the heart of the dialectic moment—a reasoning that seems to destroy the very possibility of any absolute truth.

While a normal contradiction would be the dual claims that Being or Nothing are absolute, the moving dialectics of Hegel add another layer: Being is Nothing, and Nothing is Being. What is to be absolutely opposed itself cannot remain identical to itself under rational investigation. Not only are Hegel’s dialectics external contradictions, but they’re also internal self-contradictions. In this falling of one into the other, we find ourselves collapsing absolute distinctions and saying seemingly irrational things: *What is itself is also the opposite of itself*, e.g. Being is Nothing. With this impasse the understanding can go no further as it is stuck in bafflement at what reason has necessarily generated.

Against the analytic thinking of understanding, its attempts to make absolute distinctions, and against its negative reasoning’s bafflement, speculation is a turn upon the process and product of the understanding—the dialectic as a whole—which takes as its object the *thinking* of the dialectic itself. For example, in the paradox of Being and Nothing’s assumed difference yet content/form identity, we find that the impasse of this dialectic is overcome by turning to the movement occurring in the relation of these thoughts to each other. By recognizing this total movement as itself a thought, Becoming, and returning to understanding in order to differentiate it through analysis, progress is made with no external resources.

One can consider two ‘modes’ or moments in which the thinking of Hegel’s method may be said to function: *immersive (understanding)* and *recollective (speculative)*. In the immersive mode of thinking, one is engaged directly with the immediate content and form of what is being thought. For example, in thinking Being one is led to think Nothing, and in thinking Nothing one is led to thinking Being. In this immersed mode, however, one is stuck forever bouncing from one thought to the other and back again endlessly. In the recollective mode of thinking, one takes a step back from the immersed mode and

thinks of what has been thought before—one looks upon its entire process structure as a whole. Here, two considerations are possible depending on which mode of thinking we ultimately hold to: the understanding and its law of non-contradiction or speculation and its acceptance of this contradiction. When normal reflection stands back and considers the dialectic's self-contradiction, it is baffled by its breaking the fundamental law of the understanding's form of reason, the law of non-contradiction. Speculation, however, looks upon the dialectic and accepts the products of necessary thinking as one absolute movement which forms the unity of these thoughts. It is from this mode of thought that sublation is realized as the unity of the opposed elements. Stepping back from Being and Nothing, we see in their total system of movement the moment of vanishing which is called Becoming, and understanding returns to analyse Becoming into its parts as Coming-to-be and Ceasing-to-be.

A Common Mistake: Dialectics And Development

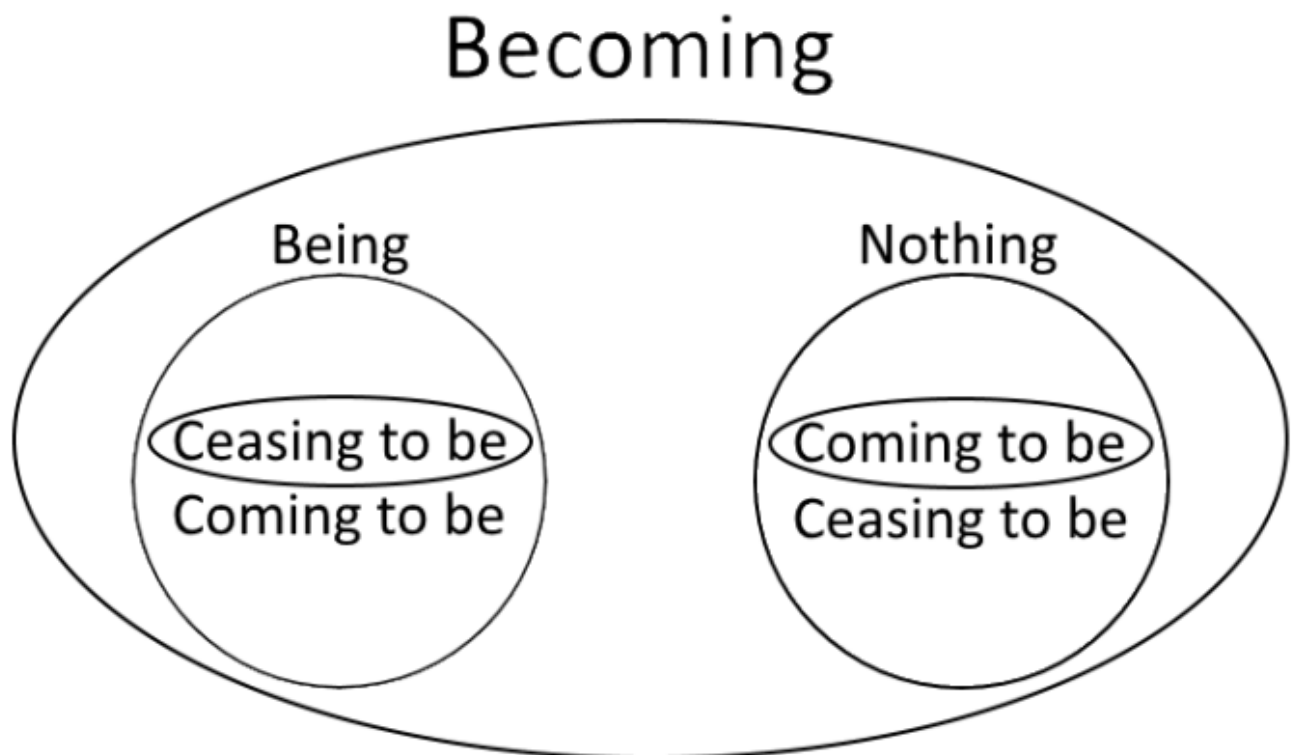
The number one problem I have seen with people trying to comprehend dialectics and people who try to 'use' the so-called method is the inability to comprehend the difference between dialectic as contradiction, and dialectic as development. The former is the moment of the seeming collapse of meaning in self-contradiction; the latter aspect is the method's inherent drive towards constructive systematicity, manifesting in 'organic' concepts which show a developmental unity. Not only do people not understand the *logical necessity* of the method, they do not understand what the organic relations of development rightfully belong to because of this inability to conceive necessity. I have already significantly covered dialectic as inner contradiction, so here I shall expand on developmental dialectic.

Developmental Dialectic

Developmental dialectic can be compared to Plato's dialectic as constructive dialogue in which participants put forth different considerations of a problem or conception, and where each side critiques the logic of the others. When all sides have shown some positive truth as well as failure, a new conception which can take the positive truth in each side may arise as the positive product of what otherwise would have been a negative conclusion of aporia with all sides showing measures of truth as well as falsehood. Hegel's developmental dialectic, however, moves through *necessary* systematic conceptions which develop themselves out of an inner content's self-expansion in its being articulated. It is not simply a synthetic unity, but rather an organic unity which generates itself as a totality in all its parts: every piece shows itself as a piece of the system to which it necessarily belongs.

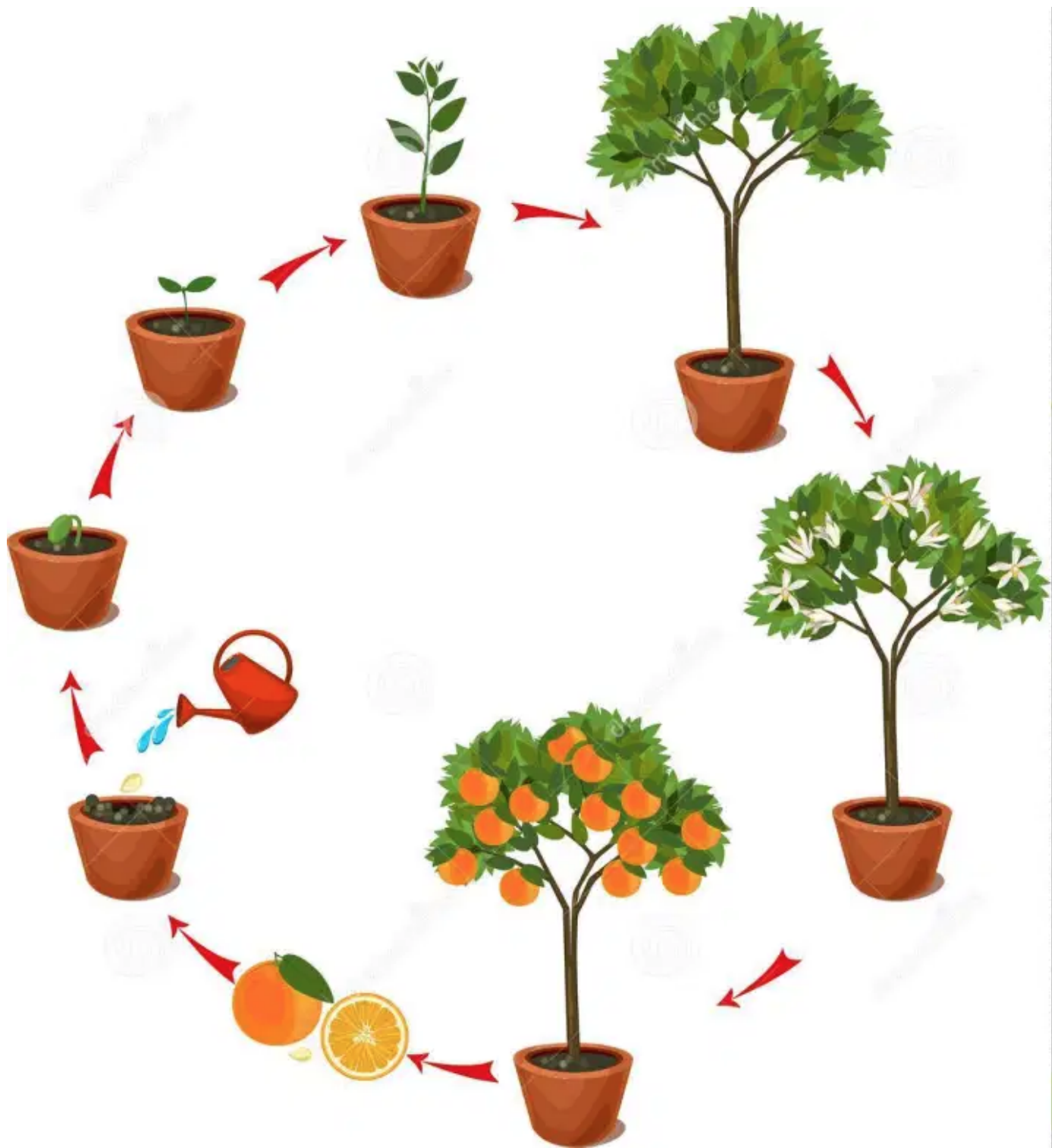
This is easiest to see within pure logical concepts like Becoming, where the immanent difference is

necessarily unpacked into Coming to Be and Ceasing to Be, and within each of these moments we necessarily unpack Being and Nothing as their own moments. However, in this mere analytic deconstruction of Becoming we miss the important necessity of Becoming in its contained totality arising from these deconstructed pieces. Hegel shows in the logic how Being generates Nothing, Nothing generates Being, and how Becoming is generated in their unity. In this manner, the concept of Becoming appears as something like the following diagram, a triad construction in which both individual moments generate each other and their mutual movement generates Becoming in a way that Becoming is nothing but the moving unity of the entire system of Being and Nothing:



To give a more concrete example, take the concept of a living being as an orange. Oranges are fruits *produced* by an orange tree. Their production requires pollination of their flowers due to a sexual difference which requires the unity of male and female gametes. This process of reproduction only occurs at a level of maturity which the plant has reached after a growth process in which the biological development subsumes inert materials such as earthen minerals, water, and sunlight into its own structural and living parts. This is possible only in the existence of a capacity of life which exists as the seed which engages its life process with the actualization of its necessary conditions. This *essential* life process is entirely contained as a potentiality in the genetic plan of the organism. This seed, however, is itself the product of the fruit. This seed does not in our world appear out of some otherworldly existence, does not spring fully formed from mere dead dirt, does not arise in a magical production from

another species of plant wholly unrelated to it. The orange *as orange* is something produced only by its species, regardless of its many varieties. This total *self-generation* and perpetuation of oranges as a species life cycle is the *Concept* of the orange as such, it's essential truth and being.



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Notice something: nowhere here do I mention *contradictions*. It is not because there are none, but rather because the mere concept of dialectical contradiction at this level of conception no longer makes any sense to speak of. Hegel says the following

The more conventional opinion gets fixated on the antithesis of truth and falsity, the more it tends to expect a given philosophical system to be either accepted or contradicted; and hence it finds only acceptance or rejection. It does not comprehend the diversity of philosophical systems as the progressive unfolding of truth, but rather sees in it simple disagreements. **The bud disappears in the bursting-forth of the blossom, and one might say that the former is refuted by the latter; similarly, when the fruit appears, the blossom is shown up in its turn as a false manifestation of the plant, and the fruit now emerges as the truth of it instead. These forms are not just distinguished from one another, they also supplant one another as mutually incompatible. Yet at the same time their fluid nature makes them moments of an organic unity in which they not only do not conflict, but in which each is as necessary as the other; and this mutual necessity alone constitutes the life of the whole.** But he who rejects a philosophical system [i.e. the new philosopher] does not usually comprehend what he is doing in this way ; and he who grasps the contradiction between them [i.e. the historian of philosophy] does not, as a general rule, know how to free it from its one-sidedness, or **maintain it in its freedom by recognizing the reciprocally necessary moments that take shape as a conflict and seeming incompatibility.**

—Phenomenology of Spirit, §2 [Emphasis added]

To think of the plant as nothing but a contradictory set of *absolute negations* which supplant each other is to misunderstand the reality and truth of the plant. Yes, *there is self-opposition* in the plant as a whole, and as such there is self-contradiction, however, in concrete terms this is near the most *banal and empty intellectual masturbation* one can engage. It is to state the obvious in merely simpler and stranger terms which—while true—are utterly superfluous and without explanatory value. The bud is *negated* by the blossom, thus the essence of the bud—what it should be—is in contradiction to what it is, etc. One can play this ridiculous rephrasing of what is common and everyday in many other ways which are equally unhelpful, such as the contradiction of Being and Becoming in that we find that the truth of what a plant is is nothing but a Becoming which merely seems a stable enduring independent Being because we mistake the relative permanence things seem to have for us. **The tree is *not* just a tree, but the entire life cycle of its species, hence is both one and many at once.** This truth, however revolutionary it was 200 years ago, is for the most part already common in our day. We all know that things have life cycles, that even the mountains come and go, the the world came to be and shall cease to be. Why, we have come to far as to think the universe itself comes and goes according to an underlying reality which we do not yet comprehend, but which physics promises to one day penetrate into and discover.

Misunderstanding Development

I'm going to make an example of this issue by considering a blog by an unknown Marxist, John Laurits. The reason I'll use his blog as an example is because it is exactly the kind of confusion which I long noticed in my engagement with Marxism, i.e. this is a *very common* (mis)conception of dialectics as a moment and a method.

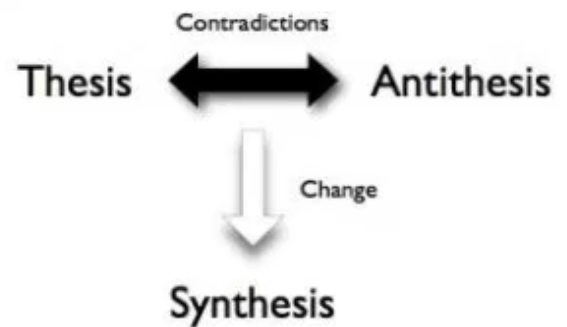
John Laurits (<https://www.johnlaurits.com/2017/dialectics-history-marx-repair-manual/>) made a very nicely illustrated guide to dialectical materialism. Now, Marxists have their own notion of dialectical

method which is very different to Hegel's in general despite their claims of being heirs to it, and this is unfortunately based on wide and huge misunderstandings of the method. Laurits is no typical uneducated fool—he has a philosophy degree. It is, therefore, a testament to the ignorance that exists of this method that a graduate with a good head on their shoulders should misunderstand so disastrously. Laurits says the following:

The Dialectical Method

The beating heart of Marx's theory of history is the *dialectic*. Dialectics are a way to think critically about systems or processes by understanding how they *become*. There is no exact recipe but it can be helpful to think of a dialectic as three parts — **thesis**, **antithesis**, and

synthesis. A *thesis* can be anything a person chooses. Closely examining the thesis shows that it cannot be separated from an opposing force that negates the thesis — this is the *antithesis*. Conflict between the opposing forces develops into contradiction that must be resolved by the *synthesis*, a new state that integrates the conflict into a more developed whole. This is simpler than it seems — here are a few examples of dialectics at work:



- *The caterpillar (thesis) cannot be understood without the butterfly (anti-thesis). Everything “caterpillar-ish” — leaf-munching, climbing plants, segmented body etc. — contains an opposing “butterfly-ish” force that negates the caterpillar. Conflict of the opposing forces develops the contradiction that collapses the caterpillar system to a new state — the chrysalis (synthesis).*
- *A power plant (thesis) relies on coal from a nearby mine. The coal that produces energy is also turning the mine into an empty mine (antithesis) which negates it. Conflict between the opposing tendencies of plant and mine develop an internal contradiction in the system which eventually collapses to a new state that either uses a different energy-source or shuts down (multiple synthesis possibilities).*

Besides the false triadic formula this introduction has already refuted, the examples are the most telling of the misunderstanding. In the first example—the caterpillar—the error occurs in being unable to disentangle a strict sense of dialectical contradiction from a developmental sense of dialectic. Development does not occur because of some *given* other at the end, such that nature first posits caterpillars and then somehow has dictated that caterpillars *must become* butterflies, and that this *must* occur through a synthetic moment of the chrysalis. Not only is this a strange interpretation of the formula —it puts the synthesis as the middle moment of development when normally it would be {caterpillar + chrysalis} → butterfly (the synthesis being the last moment which unites the first *immediate* two), but it misunderstands contradiction as a mere given opposition instead of as a moment by moment *necessary* link. The obsession with *contradiction* seems to be due to a failure to disentangle the *dialectical moment* from *the dialectic as constructive dialogue*. When we disentangle the moment as not identical with the method, we then can see where and when it makes sense to speak in terms of one or the other.

With *empirical concepts* it is a tough sell to make Hegel's method seem valuable with the concept of 'contradiction', since as already stated, it does not seem to make sense or add an explanatory depth. To speak of the caterpillar as one posit, then the butterfly as an opposing posit of the caterpillar, and to call this a *contradiction* seems to be nothing but a contrived stupidity masquerading as intellectual profundity—I certainly condemn it as such. To speak of dialectical contradiction (self-contradiction) here is to speak in unnecessary cryptic language which must be explained in order to make clear that one is not speaking insanity, but once explained it appears as something which truly never needed to have been explained since it never had to be said. The caterpillar *develops, generates, and becomes*—it is in these terms that constructive dialectical development can be spoken of in terms which make sense. Negation and contradiction are structures in all of these terms, but they are so simple as to be as irrelevant as describing a caterpillar in terms of atomic composition and movement. One loses sight of the level of being which we are interested in. Empirical concepts are mixes between pure a priori structures as well as given experiential elements. These experiential elements are, in overwhelmingly large part, purely contingent structures with no metaphysical necessity as such except for their fundamental structures as a natural being. While caterpillars as caterpillars are conceptually structured in a form that seems to be eternal, the reality is that the genetic form suffers from constant *external* conditional pressures which slowly change its existence. The caterpillar, slowly over long times or quickly in environmental shocks, survives only to *become* something it originally is not. What once was an unviable mutation becomes the only viable one and lives on to become the dominant expression of the species.

Concerning the second example, the power plant, this *does not even fit the organic conception* of Hegelianism; it is a mere arbitrary concept externally united by its equally arbitrary thinker. It is, in fact, an overdressed contrivance of the author. The example is an even worse example than the caterpillar, for it even more clearly is dressed in terms which are obviously unnecessary. A *coal* power plant requires coal; coal mining depletes a mine in extraction; with its source depleted, the power plant requires a new source of coal, it shuts down, and/or a new source of energy is sought. *Nowhere* here is contradiction or negation needed explicitly in order to conceive this analysis. Nowhere is dialectic in any technical sense required or wanted for explaining anything. Power plants are not beings in themselves or for themselves—they are because we will them to be, and they are as whatever we will them to be, i.e. they are utterly contingent and arbitrary constructions with no internal logic.

It is said by some that dialectical thinking is best learned by observing it in action, so here are three examples of a very basic level. Here, hopefully, the activity of dialectic shall become apparent in the movements.

Example 1: Becoming, Being and Nothing

The dialectic of Being is very visible when it comes to being given an example of dialectics online; many cite this rather short and dense dialectic to give a typical *thesis-antithesis-synthesis* example, but nothing could be further from the truth. The true order of the dialectic is not **{Being-Nothing}-Becoming**, but rather it is the inverse order. Becoming is intelligibly prior to Being and Nothing in their abstract forms, and it is the latter concepts that sublimate Becoming as a unity of Existence (Determinate Being). In order to make intelligible *how* it is possible that Being and Nothing can become each other, we must consider them as they arise *from* Becoming rather than consider Becoming's arising from them.

Sublation equally means "to keep," "to 'preserve'," and "to cause to cease," "to put an end to." Something is sublated only insofar as it has entered into unity with its opposite. – Hegel, *Science of Logic*

[Comment:] Now, from where did this new concept, sublation, come? The answer is simple: from the content we have developed. Sublation is a concept describing the relation which the structure of Becoming has towards Being and nothing; it unites, cancels, and preserves them all at once.

In Becoming, we immediately can discern two parts—Hegel calls them *moments*—that comprise the definition of the concept of Becoming: Being vanishes to Nothing, it is *Ceasing-to-be (Being)*; Nothing vanishes to Being, it is *Coming-to-be (Nothing)*. Both *Ceasing/Coming-to-be* are *sublations*—they are immediate unities of Being and Nothing on their own. Hence, they *self-sublate* and are in internal unity with their opposite—e.g. Being *is* its vanishing from Being to Nothing (hence it is truly *Ceasing-to-be*); it includes its opposite explicitly and negates itself into it from within itself. *Ceasing-to-be* in itself becomes *Coming-to-be* and vice versa immediately; thus, we have *Ceasing-to-be (Being)* and *Coming-to-be (Nothing)* transitioning in themselves simultaneously and immediately.

They have *already* been each other, and thus paralyze each other in their restlessness; this paralysis is the *paralysis of Becoming as a whole, being both of its moments at once*. The moment they become the other they immediately are themselves again. Being, in becoming Nothing, is merely itself again. In Becoming, *Ceasing-to-be* and *Coming-to-be* do not happen such that we have one first, then the second and back again, but instead we have both together at the same moment as distinct moments which are also indistinct as both moments are Becoming itself in themselves. Each moment of Becoming is already the totality of Becoming itself.

Being and Nothing are now differentiated by this simple definition as being *inverse moments* in Becoming. There is a problem, now clear, in that their difference has been collapsed by their definition. Being and Nothing, defined now as *Ceasing/Coming-to-be* which comprise Becoming, show another new problem: they *presuppose* a further determinate difference of Being and Nothing. If Being and Nothing are merely *Coming/Ceasing-to-be*, then we see that we in fact *have not made a true separation of Being and Nothing yet*. Being is defined as its mere vanishing to Nothing, and Nothing the mere vanishing to Being. We have lost Being and Nothing as distinct concepts; content and form forces the incessant vanishing of *Coming/Ceasing-to-be* into each other and erases their distinction in regard to

each other. What is the Nothing into which Being vanishes, and what is the Being into which Nothing vanishes? So far, we have merely defined one vanishing in the process of vanishing into yet another vanishing. However, this cannot do, for vanishing must vanish *into* the components that vanish.

[Comment:] As an external reflection, it is also a curious contradiction if vanishing is ceaseless and thus enduring. It would be like a restlessness which is at rest in restlessness. Becoming, in being what it is, would itself *be*. Thus, unending vanishing is the opposite of itself. The *paralysis* of Becoming is itself a tell of what in truth Becoming is.

Through Becoming, we determined (defined) Being and Nothing as moments, but now Becoming's own moments are pointing us to Being and Nothing which *are beyond* Becoming as that into which Becoming's moments vanish. *As moments of Becoming, Ceasing/Coming-to-be vanish*. Into what? Being and Nothing. Becoming, because it is vanishing, vanishes itself into the background of Being and Nothing and leaves them in immediate unity once again, but just because Becoming has vanished into the background does not mean it no longer plays a role—far from it. But, you may wonder, how does this release us from falling back into Becoming when Being and Nothing were just Ceasing/Coming-to-be?

Here, a marvelous conceptual move has occurred: Becoming—the vanishing of Being and Nothing, themselves determined in it only as inverse vanishings into each other—*vanishes itself*. There are a few ways that Hegel gives us to comprehend this.

There is a possibility to err in this crucial movement, however, and what follows is why. Ceasing/Coming-to-be assume Being and Nothing to be distinct and separate in order to be vanishing into each other. However, Being and Nothing in Becoming are nothing but vanishings into each other ceaselessly, *but since Ceasing/Coming-to-be have vanished the distinction between Being and Nothing which they vanish into*, now we see that this *vanishes Being and Nothing themselves, and Ceasing/Coming-to-be vanish along with them*. If Being and Nothing, on which Ceasing/Coming-to-Be depend to *be* at all, have vanished in general, then the result of Becoming is a vanishing of the vanishing, and thus seems to just cancel everything by contradiction, return us to Nothing, and lead us back to Becoming again. If there is an advance, the result cannot be Nothing, but how do we make sense of Becoming's vanishing in this seeming contradiction? One must not be surprised that Hegel's contradiction here is *not* intended to function as formal contradiction and abstract negation. It's actually functioning like mathematical negative multiplication.

The answer from the text is, if I may say, *cheeky*. It's a literal consideration relying on key terms and phrases. Ceasing-to-be and Coming-to-be *vanish*, and in their vanishing *Becoming vanishes*. That is to say, their function is to vanish vanishing, to negate the negative, and thus they *are the positive*. Ceasing/Coming-to-be *are* Being and Nothing, for it is Being/Nothing which vanish Becoming. This is the *immanent* tell of the transition. If we wanted to make a reflective comprehension of the transition, we would need nothing more than to note the function of vanishing—i.e. vanishings role is to *vanish* into stable elements, not to endure; thus, Becoming must play out its function and *becomes* Being and Nothing. Notice that the *becoming of Becoming*—of vanishing vanishing—is stable resting elements of thought.

[Comment:] Notice that *this self-relating of Becoming in order to advance beyond itself is precisely following Hegel's logic: we must exhaust all possible relations of thought from analysis, reflexive self-operation, and of implicit function*. Whenever we run into a conceptual wall, we must exhaust all the possibilities of thinking a thought by using all possible relations and operations thinking is capable of making with said thoughts. If it is possible and intelligible, then we must do it.

The vanishings complete themselves and then vanish themselves away into what they have become. It is the truth of Becoming that *it become and vanish itself into Being and Nothing*. Now that the vanishing of Being and Nothing has vanished, they are a stable unity of distinct yet immediately united concepts. Being and Nothing are *not fully separate distinctions*, but instead keep the truth of Becoming: they are unseparated and thus one and the same in this unseparation, yet both *are*—each *is*—and thus are distinct in their unity. The result of Becoming is a unity of Being/Nothing, and thus this unity *is*. We now have a higher level of Being—*Existence*.

At last we have *a Being whose being is the immediate unity of Being with a non-being (Nothing)*—i.e. a Being whose being is in virtue of its non-being. This new Being is the vanishedness of Becoming, for the vanishing has vanished itself into the background—this, however, is not a disappearance of Becoming, far from it. Think closely on what Becoming is—the vanishing transition between Being and Nothing—and you shall see an interesting truth: *the transitioning differences and identities of all things are Becomings*. At the edge of conception where this new Being/Nothing resulting from Becoming are is Becoming itself, the moment where we find that a Being has immanent contact with its Nothing—its negation. Thus, Existence sublates Being, Nothing, and Becoming.

Becoming's inner movement's vanishing has revealed a strange yet undeniable truth following from the logical movements that have developed thus far: Being and Nothing are one and the same, they are inseparable, and they truly are different. Both Being and Nothing are (they are the same); both have Being. Now we can see Being is a being with a non-being—a Being with negation—and this negation is nothing other than another Being itself in its own right (they are different). Being is an immediate unity of beings which negate each other in virtue of being two beings which are not each other (they are inseparable). The entire development from Being/Nothing to the moments of Becoming have *not* been falsehoods or misunderstandings at all; on the contrary, they have further revealed the pieces to the baffling puzzle with which we started and now allow us to further make sense of just how all of these aspects of Being and Nothing can be true. *What vanishes in Becoming is also an incomplete concept of Being and Nothing as radically incommensurable concepts that cannot define themselves, and the resultant vanishedness makes way to the first real concept of Being as Existence.*

As Hegel explains in the text, the absolute basic form of determination (definition) is negation—of Being, which is negated. What negates Being? Nothing. But what is Nothing? A Being itself, but a being that is the non-being of the first Being. This unity of Being and Nothing is basic *Determinate Being*, or general *Existence*. This is the first concept in which we can finally begin to think about definable Being(s), however, there is at this point *no difference* between the determinateness of Being, and Being itself. Determinateness *is*, and Being *is determinate*. The contradiction of form/content forces thought's movement onwards.

The form of the path of relations which Becoming has traversed—its dialectical development—is unique to itself. If one attempts to impose the form of relations which pure Being develops on its way to Existence, one shall be terribly mistaken, for Existence has its own peculiar form of development—one which is not unlike a hall of mirrors reflecting its content and form as multiple determinations of determinateness itself.

As to what this development of abstract concepts becoming more determinate, or concrete, is necessary for... I'll leave that to your curiosity.

Example 2: The Commodity

A classical Marxian analysis is the commodity-{{(use-value)-(exchange-value)}} dialectic. A commodity, as an already empirically *given* and *determinate* concept, contains within it a tense contradiction between two concepts of value in the economic sphere: use-value, for what we desire a commodity in use, and exchange-value, for what we can trade or exchange it. How do we know that commodities contain these two concepts? Because they are necessary presuppositions for commodities to serve the actual economic role they do—i.e., the *meaning of a commodity is to be a use-value with exchange-value*. A commodity is something for which someone has a use or need, but which has no use for its holder other than to exchange for what they need. Notice also that a commodity *necessarily implies a plurality of commodities*, for in order to exchange, it requires another commodity to relate to it. Implied in *use-value*, due to exchange-value, is the *plurality of qualitative commodities*, for one does not trade a quality for the same quality and quantity.

These two values cannot be had at the same time. If we want the use-value, we must give up the exchange-value, and vice versa. The consuming aspect of the market wants use-value, and the selling side wants exchange value. Not only do commodities presuppose their own inner relation of value, but they presuppose the social structure of private property and the institution of right, as well as a system of social dependency in which persons are in need of the commodities of others while others are in need of the commodities which they hold. Thus, they are driven to the agreement of exchange to satisfy their needs. Quite a lot is presupposed in the mere concept of commodities, and quite a lot follows from its own specific development as the category of economic value.

Let us develop this concept of the commodity further. Commodities are use-values which can exchange for other use-values. In the relation of different qualities and quantities, however, *how* is this very exchange intelligible? If the direct substances and quantities in the exchange are themselves not directly comparable, a third term must be in operation in the relation which is equal; this third term is the concept of *value*. However, if we recall the plurality of quality use-values available for exchange, we will realize we have not yet exhausted the thinkable relations! We can relate one commodity to many and see one and the same value manifest in different qualities and quantities at once in the *relative form of value* (1 coat=20 linen; 10 carrots; 1 pound of iron, et cetera). From that relative form, not only do we see one value capable of manifesting as multiple qualities and quantities, but we also grasp that *one* of the forms can be used to stand in to represent the value of all others in its own quality and quantity. And where do we end? With the appearance of the universal commodity form which directly embodies value in itself—a use-value of exchange-value itself, for all others to measure against as *money*.

The development goes on from there.

Example 3: Freedom of Speech

An example of a simple yet concrete analysis of *only the negative dialectical analysis of the understanding* is a blog I once wrote on the concept of free speech. A simple summary of the analysis is that free speech is contradictory in its idea and its reality. Free speech, as a right, upon analysis leads us to ask what kind of speech actually enacts its condition of protection, and we find it is only dissenting speech of those in minorities or outside the status quo that actually fall under the need of such a protection of speech. Insofar as one speaks things in the acceptable range of popular or power discourse, there is no need for protection. The analysis moves forward and questions why speech—mere words—should give ground for censorship at all.

One finds that speech is not mere words—not just hot air—but is also activity with practical purpose to convey messages and create responses and actions. This action-related aspect of speech is what censorship aims to stop. If speech were mere words, nobody should ever fear speech, but speech has actual capacity to be a force that moves people to action, and action in the social sphere means real struggle for changing the dominant power and the structures of power themselves. Free speech, as it is known in the West, only protects dissenting speech as mere words, but it does not and cannot protect dissenting speech that aims to promote action to fundamentally change the status quo.

In the end, free speech does not concern itself with speech as a medium of social activity at all, for these are only mere words spoken to the wind. This is the contradiction: we are free to say what we want insofar as it doesn't lead to undesired results for the status quo. Free speech, when it is claimed to exist, only exists as *empty* speech—mere words to the wind with no power—for those who need it most; there is no capacity to make movement happen in this case, but it can happen. For example, this is why being a socialist during most of the last century was grounds for censorship and even imprisonment in the United States—because there was a real danger that socialist speech would be a force and spark a revolution if ignored. There is nothing more dangerous than ideas of dissent in a time where critical minds provide fertile soil to push contradictions to breaking points of action. Free speech, as such, is not an absolute right and exists within limitations of social and legal context.

The limits of free speech may make it seem weak, and its contradictions may make it seem like a useless practice and concept in all, but it is the reality of it. There is more to be said about it, but that shall suffice here.

As can be seen, the moments of abstraction-negation-concretion more or less show up, but this formulation is itself a dead abstraction that can tell us nothing about how to carry out a dialectical investigation and understanding of any subject matter. Dialectics are uniquely determined in form by their content, and their content by their form. No half-baked idea the likes of an abstract unity of opposites such as the eternal unity of Yin and Yang, good and evil, light and darkness, being and nothing, et cetera can pass itself off as a dialectical comprehension of the united terms. Only the penetrating power of reason, focused on conceptual purity and holding steadfast to a development of a

concept from its inner structure, can properly make intelligible *why* such terms are inextricably united at all and what could logically follow from their contradictory unity.

We may easily say of Hegel's method *correct* formulations of its general movements and result structures. {Abstract-negative}-concrete *is correct*. We can easily describe the movement also as one of {positing-understanding}-speculating, and we may describe it as *{thought-thinking}-thinking of thinking thought*. No matter how correct our description, however, it is almost useless for the intents of reading Hegel. I say *almost* because I do realize there is a value in at least providing the formulation as a springboard to then lead a direct dive into the actual thinking.

As Becoming shows, it is a myth that Becoming is the resultant sublation of Being and Nothing; it is the real first step as a sublation that transitions into Being and Nothing in unity which then sublates Becoming as a unity. The path from Being and Nothing through Becoming back to Being and Nothing is a conceptual ride that requires focus and patience to *think through* in order to comprehend how these ontological categories relate to each other and what they mean in themselves.

For a broader overview of Hegelianism, I suggest that one read **James Kreines** (<http://www1.cmc.edu/pages/faculty/jkreines/>)' articles—available online—and also to check out **Richard Dien Winfield's** (<https://archive.org/search.php?query=creator%3A%22Richard+Dien+Winfield%22>) various lectures on Hegel's works. **Andy Blunden** (<https://marxists.academia.edu/AndyBlunden>), a Marxist, provides some very good essays concerning the use of the Logic and dialectics for 'materialist' purpose. *Hegel's Philosophical Development* by **Richard Kroner** (<https://www.docdroid.net/Wmw7kOF/hegels-philosophical-development-kroner-richard.pdf>) is a great overview essay covering Hegelianism's genesis, aims, and structure.

SEPTEMBER 12, 2016**OCTOBER 29, 2017** · POSTED IN **CONCEPTS, HEGEL, MARX, PHILOSOPHY** · TAGGED **CC, DIALECTICAL METHOD, DIALECTICS, HEGEL, HEGELIANISM, INTRODUCTION, METHOD, PHILOSOPHY** ·

10 thoughts on “Dialectics: An Introduction”

1.



Greg Sadler says:

SEPTEMBER 12, 2016 AT 3:12 PM

Excellent! Very succinct and dead-on presentation here, that I think can be quite useful for others. Thanks for producing it.

Will share this a bit later on with my own Hegel-focused students and patrons!

REPLY

2. Pingback: **The Strangeness of Nothing – The Empyrean Trail**

3. Pingback: **The Method of Science | The Empyrean Trail**

4. Pingback: [Negative and Positive Dialectics | The Empyrean Trail](#)
5. Pingback: [Logic of Being and Nothing: A False Start | The Empyrean Trail](#)
6. Pingback: [Dialectics of Reflection & Immanence | The Empyrean Trail](#)
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10. Pingback: [அசடன் ஒரு பார்வை- அருணாச்சலம் மகராஜன் \(http://www.jeyamohan.in/107841\)](#)



Sam L. Jackson says:

AUGUST 20, 2020 AT 9:38 AM

To those saying there's no method:

Sometimes commentators go as far as to deny that Hegel has or aspires to a dialectical method at all. For example, Solomon writes: "Hegel has no method as such . . . Hegel himself argues vehemently against the very idea of a philosophical 'method.'" To see how deeply mistaken this view must be, one need go no further than the first edition preface of the Science of Logic, where Hegel gives a description of what he calls his "absolute method of knowing" and says that it is only by way of this method that philosophy is able to be "an objective, demonstrated science."

REPLY

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