

Dialectical Thinking and Humanistic Psychology **Rowan**

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Dialectics is a form of thought which goes back a long way. In the West, Heraclitus in Ancient Greece was aware of it, and in the East, there are a number of thinkers who practised it, the *Tao-Te-Ching* being a good example of dialectical writing. Dialectics is not the same as dialogue, and the Ancient Greeks, for example, were not dialectical thinkers in the modern sense, even though they were very interested in dialogue. In more recent times the greatest exponent of dialectics is of course Hegel: "vision-logic evolutionarily became conscious of itself in Hegel". (Wilber 1998, p.132) Many Hegelians followed his example; the most famous of these was Marx, though Engels and Lenin actually made more use of it, and Mao-Tse-Tung made contributions too. The British Hegelians, such as Bradley and Bosanquet, were more right-wing politically, so there is nothing essentially left-wing about dialectics. Adorno (1973) and others emphasised negative dialectics.

The first characteristic of dialectical thinking is that it places all the emphasis on *change*. Instead of talking about static structures, it talks about process and movement. Hence it is in line with all those philosophies which say - "Let's not pretend we can fix what we perceive now and label it and turn it into something stiff and immutable - let's look instead at how it changes." So it denies much of the usefulness of formal logic, which starts from the proposition that "A is A, and is nothing but A". For dialectics the corresponding proposition is "A is not simply A". This is even true for things, but much more obviously true for people.

But the second characteristic, which sets it apart from any philosophy which emphasises smooth continuous change or progress, is that it states that the way change takes place is through *conflict* and *opposition*. Dialectics is always looking for the contradictions within people or situations as the main guide to what is going on and what is likely to happen. There are in fact three main propositions which are put forward about opposites and contradictions.

1) The interdependence of opposites

This is the easiest thing to see: opposites depend on one another. It wouldn't make sense to talk about darkness if there were no such thing as light. I really start to understand my love at the moment when I permit myself up understand my hate. In practice, each member of a polar opposition seems to need the other to make it what it is.

2) The inter-penetration of opposites

Here we see that opposites can be found within each other. Just because light is relative to darkness, there is some light in every darkness, and some darkness in every light. There is some hate in every love, and some love in every hate. If we look into one thing hard enough, we can always find its opposite right there. To see this frees us from the 'either-or' which can be so oppressive and so stuck. Mary Parker Follett, a great and recently rediscovered writer on management who was a closet Hegelian, used to say – "Never let yourself be bullied by an either-or".

3) The unity of opposites

So far we have been talking about relative opposites. But dialectics goes on to say that if we take an opposite to its very ultimate extreme, and make it absolute, it actually turns into its opposite. Thus if we make darkness absolute, we are blind - we can't see anything. And if we make light absolute, we are equally blind and unable to see. In psychology, the equivalent of this is to idealise something. So if we take love to its extreme, and idealise it, we get morbid dependence, where our whole existence depends completely on the other person. And if we take hate to its extreme, and idealise it, we get morbid counter-dependence, where our whole existence again depends completely on the other person. This appreciation of paradox is one of the strengths of the dialectical approach, which makes it superior to linear logic.

A good symbol for these three processes is the Yin-Yang symbol of Taoism. The interdependence of opposites is shown in each half being defined by the contours of the other. The inter-penetration of opposites is expressed by having a black spot in the innermost centre of the white area, and a white spot in the innermost centre of the black area. The unity of opposites is shown by the circle surrounding the symbol, which expresses total unity and unbroken serenity in and through all the seeming opposition. It is, after all, one symbol.

Practical implications

The lessons of the dialectic are hard ones. It tells us that any value we have, if held to in a one-sided way, will become an illusion. We shall try to take it as excluding its opposite, but really it will include it. And if we take it to its extreme, and idealise it, it will turn into its opposite. So peace and love, cosmic harmony, the pursuit of happiness and all the rest are doomed, if held to in this exclusive way. This is of course what constructivism also says, but from a different angle.

The only values which will be truly stable and coherent are those which include opposition rather than excluding it. And all such values appear to be nonsense, because they must contain paradoxes. As a psychotherapist I practice humanistic psychology, which comes from existentialist and phenomenological roots, but also incorporates dialectical thinking. It takes from Hegel, Goldstein and Maslow the concept of self-actualisation, and this is one of those paradoxical concepts that are so characteristic of dialectical thinking. The concept of the self is self-contradictory, paradoxical and absurd. The self is at the same time intensely personal and completely impersonal; completely individual and just part of a field. And this is why, when we contact the self in a peak experience, our description of what happened is invariably a paradoxical one. When put into words, it breaks out of the realm of common sense. The whole idea of a peak experience, where we get taken out of ourselves into the realm of ecstasy, was written about at length by Maslow (1987), one of the few thinkers able to do it justice.

There is a logic of paradox, which enables the intellect to handle it without getting fazed, and its name is the dialectic. It is complex because it involves holding the spring doors of the mind open - hence it often tries to say everything at once. But it shows how we do not have to give up in the face of paradox and abandon the intellect as a hopeless case.

How does one actually use dialectical thinking in everyday life? Some say that dialectics is not for everyday life at all - it has to do with 'ideas of the horizon' where we are dealing with concepts that are at the very limits of human thought. For everyday life,

they say, formal logic is good enough. But I think humanistic psychology has shown us that you can use dialectical thinking even for walking, or driving, or eating, or playing tennis, or any other everyday activity. Here are some of the principles of the dialectic for both humanistic psychology and, I believe, practical philosophy.

Principle 1: *TAKE NOTHING FOR GRANTED*

This is one of the most important principles of humanistic psychology. All the time one is questioning the fixed categories, the rigid 'shoulds', the congealed knowledge that stops one seeing the world. Our beliefs are the greatest obstacle to clear perception, and the more we can unfocus from them, the more we can let in. Fritz Perls, one of the classic humanistic writers, was particularly clear about this.

Principle 2: *THE IMPORTANCE OF SPONTANEITY*

Again a crucial concept, which dialectical thinking makes easy to understand and easy to do, intellectually, emotionally and intuitively. Spontaneity is obviously a paradoxical quality, which you can only aim at by letting go. The great writer about this was Jacob Moreno, another exponent of humanistic psychology. In recent times there have been many writers on games and sports who have made use of such insights.

Principle 3: *THE TRANSFORMATION OF QUANTITY INTO QUALITY*

This important idea states that by simply adding things, we can eventually arrive at something quite different. In therapy, going intensively into one side of a conflict often brings us more vividly into the other; and if we push the whole conflict hard enough and far enough, a whole new vision may appear. Gestalt therapy is particular good on this, and the work of Beisser is often quoted here. But psychoanalysts like Aaron Esterson (1972) have also used such ideas.

Breaking patterns

So the main practical application of the dialectic is in breaking fixed patterns of thought and behaviour. Every time you adopt a regular and unaware pattern of washing, dressing, eating and so on, you are avoiding reality. But if awareness of these activities increases, the amount of play involved in them is also likely to increase. Taking responsibility for our actions is choosing our life, and this usually feels good. You can be responsible and playful at the same time, and this is one of the paradoxes in which dialectics delights. Carl Rogers used to write about this particularly well; James Bugental and Alvin Mahrer were other writers in the humanistic-existential tradition who made much of it. In management theory Mary Parker Follett (Graham 1995) made it central in her thinking.

Further reading

Esterson, A. (1972) *The leaves of Spring: A study in the dialectics of madness*, London: Penguin Books

An excellent account of how to use a dialectical approach in detailed research on a family. Very detailed and explicit, relating a dialectical approach to the day-to-day practice of dealing with the family.

Graham, P. (ed)(1995) *Mary Parker Follett: Prophet of management*, Boston: Harvard Business School Press

Marvellous collection of her writings, with helpful and up-to-date comments by people like Peter Drucker, Rosabeth Moss Kanter, Warren Bennis and others.

Hampden-Turner, C. (1981) *Maps of the mind*, London: Mitchell Beazley

A brilliant account of how dialectical thinking can be used to illuminate different fields of psychology. At first this looks like one of those "Meet 144 Great Thinkers" books, but as soon as you start reading, it becomes clear that it is Hampden-Turner's own book, bouncing his ideas off other thinkers.

Maslow, A.H. (1987) *Motivation and personality (3rd edition)* Harper & Row

The best edition to approach his work, because it includes some supporting material written later, and by others.

Philosophy in Brief

John Colbeck

Love love: unconditional love is above and beyond moral judgements of good and evil.

Hate hate: it destroys its hosts and their values. They will not be 'naturally selected'.

Criticise criticism: it is parasitic on construction.

Judge judging: judgements are boomerangs.

Praise praise: it makes both parties better, stronger.

Question questions: every question implies (folds in) assumptions.

Negative negatives: look for and promote the positive assumptions implied.

Make assumptions: there can be no conclusions or decisions without them.