



It is perhaps fittingly contradictory that *The Routledge International Handbook of Dialectical Thinking* should open with the statement that “no single, dominant definition or model of dialectical thinking currently exists.” Nor, its editors argue, “should this be the case, since the concept of dialectic is a fluid one that has emerged over centuries of development in human thought.”¹ The contradiction arises, however, when, on the same page, they acknowledge that “dialectical thinking is, today, commonly associated with a triadic model where a thesis [...] is countered by an antithesis [...] which is ultimately resolved by the generation of a synthesis.”²

The problem with this statement is that, contrary to their initial declaration that dialectical thinking cannot and even *should* not be defined in any specific way, the editors proceed to endorse a problematic and long-discredited³ conception of dialectic that, unfortunately, will resurface repeatedly throughout the book. It is, therefore, doubly regrettable that the editors, first, feel they are unable to provide a proper definition of dialectical thinking, yet then go on to establish a spurious “synthesis” model of dialectic that is uncritically accepted and employed by the majority of the book’s contributors,⁴ thus undermining its claim to be a handbook of dialectical thinking at all.

So, what’s wrong with “synthesis”? In a word, nothing—the “synthesis of opposites,” “resolution of conflict,” “harmonization of opposing ideas,” “integration of oppositions”—all these are legitimate endeavors that can lead to beneficial outcomes, as demonstrated throughout the book. They’re simply not dialectical. And the problem isn’t just the form, i.e., the triadic formula of “thesis–antithesis–synthesis” (TAS)—which the editors rightly point out has a long (and erroneous) history of association with the 19th century dialectical philosopher, G.W.F. Hegel. As they explain, TAS does not appear in Hegel’s work at all, but, in fact, predates him, appearing, instead, in the late 18th century writings of J.G. Fichte—specifically, his book, *Science of Knowledge*, which contains countless references to “synthesis.” One word notably absent from Fichte’s work, however, is *dialectic*—an absence that should come as no surprise since Fichte never claimed to be a dialectical thinker ... but it should signal significant problems for anyone hoping to maintain a synthesis model of dialectic, since, in shifting their paradigm of dialectical thinking from Hegel to Fichte (in order to hold onto the formulaic conception of dialectic as TAS), the handbook’s editors (and most of its contributors) have, inadvertently, abandoned dialectic itself, as well. This is because the most serious error wasn’t believing that TAS was Hegelian in origin, but that TAS (or synthesis-thinking, more generally) was dialectical at all—so, taking a leap back to Fichte addressed only the minor problem of attribution, rather than the much more significant need to define dialectic accurately and authoritatively in the first place ... and, in that case, the initial instinct to appeal to Hegel proves to have been correct.

¹ *The Routledge International Handbook of Dialectical Thinking*, edited by N. Shannon, M.F. Mascolo & A. Belolutskaia (2025) p. 3.

² *Handbook of Dialectical Thinking*, p. 3.

³ See G.E. Mueller, “The Hegel Legend of ‘Thesis–Antithesis–Synthesis’,” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 19, no. 3 (JUN, 1958). Reprinted in *The Hegel Myths and Legends*, edited by J. Stewart (1996). **SEE ALSO:** T.W. Adorno, *An Introduction to Dialectics* (2017) pp. 46–55; A. R. Buss, *A Dialectical Psychology* (1979) p. 78.; W. Kaufmann, *Hegel: A Reinterpretation* (1978) pp. 153–162; H. Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution* (1955) p. 49; T. McGowan, *Emancipation After Hegel* (2019) pp. 11–14; J. Ritsert, *Summa Dialectica* (2017) sections I.5 & II.9.

⁴ We include here synthetic, integrative and harmonizing models of dialectic, which cover dialectical thinking as discussed in nearly all chapters of the *Handbook*.

Adorno described dialectic as “the epitome of Hegel’s philosophy,”⁵ and acknowledged him as “the great founder of dialectics,”⁶ while Marx praised him as “the first to present its general forms of motion in a comprehensive and conscious manner.”⁷ Hegel himself explained that his system of thought “sets out a new elaboration of philosophy”⁸— one in which “an altogether new concept of scientific procedure is at work.”⁹ That concept is dialectic—and dialectic, for Hegel, is decidedly *not* a synthesis. We know this not only because Hegel does not use the word “synthesis” to describe the workings of dialectic, but also because he explains that “the sense most closely attached to ‘synthesis’ is that of an external gathering of things externally at hand.”¹⁰ (And the same could also be said of “integration,” “harmonization,” and other pseudo-dialectics employed in the *Handbook*.) “Synthesis,” Hegel says, “easily conjures up the picture of an *external* unity, of a *mere combination* of terms that are *intrinsically separate*.”¹¹ Hegel is here identifying the main problem with trying to see synthesis, integration, harmonization, etc. as dialectical: i.e., their presupposition of opposed elements (dualities, dichotomies, etc.) in need of being brought together and unified, while the result of such a unification could only be what he describes as “a *neutral* unity, or a *synthesis*, that is, a unity of terms that are originally separate, [and therefore] only externally conjoined.”¹²

Adorno explained that he, too, had an “aversion towards the concept of synthesis,”¹³ which he said he found to be “profoundly suspect,”¹⁴ while he regarded the “creaking triadic scheme”¹⁵ of TAS as nothing more than an “external intellectual game of juggling contradictions”¹⁶—a game he called “absurd and superficial,” and thus “entirely misleading.”¹⁷ We could also mention here Gadamer’s account of TAS as just “a few rickety concepts,” whose combination he described as an “artificially formulated” construction.¹⁸

If dialectic is not a synthesis or bringing together of things that are separate and opposed to each other, then how does Hegel explain it? At its simplest, he says dialectic is “nothing more than the regulated, methodically cultivated spirit of contradiction that is inherent in every human being.”¹⁹ Now, normally, logical thinking attempts to *avoid* contradiction at all costs, rather than embrace it, as Hegel does in this statement. In fact, the principle of *non*-contradiction is usually considered to be one of the inviolable “laws of thought,” yet Hegel’s philosophical career began with his public defense of the thesis: “Contradiction is the rule of the true,”²⁰ while, later, in his philosophical *Encyclopedia*, he wrote even more forcefully:

There is *nothing at all* anywhere in which contradiction, i.e., opposed determinations, cannot and should not be demonstrated; the abstracting [activity] of the intellect is the

⁵ T.W. Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies*, translated S.W. Nichol森 (1993) p. 9.

⁶ Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, translated by R. Livingstone (2008) p. 5.

⁷ K. Marx, *Capital*, translated by B. Fowkes (1975) vol. 1, p. 103.

⁸ Hegel, *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Outline*, preface to the first edition.

⁹ Hegel, *Science of Logic*, translated by G. di Giovanni (2010) p. 9.

¹⁰ *Science of Logic*, p. 72.

¹¹ *Science of Logic*, p. 520 (Hegel’s emphasis).

¹² *Science of Logic*, p. 698 (Hegel’s emphasis).

¹³ Adorno, *An Introduction to Dialectics*, translated by N. Walker, (2017) p. 55.

¹⁴ Adorno, *Introduction to Dialectics*, p. 46.

¹⁵ Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, p. 6.

¹⁶ Adorno, *Introduction to Dialectics*, p. 46.

¹⁷ Adorno, *Introduction to Dialectics*, p. 55.

¹⁸ H.-G. Gadamer, *Hegel’s Dialectic*, translated by P.C. Smith (1976) p. 112.

¹⁹ J.P. Eckermann, *Conversations of Goethe*, vol. 2. translated by J. Oxenford (2012) pp. 35–6.

²⁰ *Miscellaneous Writings of G.W.F. Hegel*, edited by Jon Stewart (2002) p. 171.

holding on to *one* determination by force, [which is] an effort to obscure and to eliminate the consciousness of the other [opposed determination] that **lies within it**.²¹

While not thesis–antithesis–synthesis, there is, in fact, a triplicity to Hegel’s thought, beginning with the above-mentioned intellect or understanding (*Verstand*). “[I]ts principle is identity,”²² he says—“*Everything is equal to itself; A=A*”²³—by which the intellect differentiates, defines and holds things apart—hence Hegel’s characterization of it as “**abstract**”—from the Latin, *abstraho*: to drag away, remove (forcibly), detach, separate.²⁴ This principle, however, “instead of being a true law of thinking,” Hegel says, “is nothing but the law of the *abstract intellect*.”²⁵ It is this abstraction that enables us to apprehend things “in terms of their determinate differences,”²⁶ and we employ it, he says, in our consideration of nature, in mathematics, geometry, education, the law, the functioning of the state, and even in philosophy itself, which “requires, above all, that each thought should be grasped in its full precision and that nothing should remain vague and indeterminate.”²⁷

This power of abstraction, however—what Hegel calls the intellect’s “strict either/or”²⁸—is not only its strength, but also its weakness. Intellectual thinking “is not something ultimate,”²⁹ Hegel says; on the contrary, “it is finite, and, more precisely, it is such that, when it is pushed to an extreme, it overturns into its opposite.”³⁰ This is what Gadamer describes as “radicalizing a position until it becomes self-contradictory.”³¹

This realization—that ordinary logical thought “must fall into the negative of itself, [i.e.] into contradiction”³²—Hegel says, provides us with the insight that “the nature of thinking itself is dialectic.”³³ Marcuse strengthens this point when he writes: “Dialectic in its entirety is linked to the conception that all forms of being are permeated by an essential negativity, and that this negativity determines their content and movement.”³⁴

In this way, we can see that dialectic is not what Hegel describes as “an extraneous art,”³⁵ it is not some esoteric method to be applied at will, but, instead, simply the intellect’s letting go of its own predilection for non-contradiction—i.e., the convention of identity-thinking in terms of fixed, rigid determinations. The way Adorno explains this point is to say that “dialectics means to break the compulsion to achieve identity, and to break it by means of the energy stored up in that compulsion and congealed in its objectifications.”³⁶ For this reason, we should not think about dialectic “as something brought to bear on thought-determinations from outside,” Hegel

²¹ *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Outline, Part One, Science of Logic*, § 89, remark (Hegel’s emphasis in *italics*; emphasis added in **bold**).

²² *Encyclopedia Logic*, § 80, addition.

²³ *Encyclopedia Logic*, § 115, remark (Hegel’s emphasis).

²⁴ *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, 2nd edition (2012) pp. 14–5.

²⁵ *Encyclopedia Logic*, § 115, remark (Hegel’s emphasis).

²⁶ *Encyclopedia Logic*, § 80, addition.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Encyclopedia Logic*, § 32, addition.

²⁹ *Encyclopedia Logic*, § 80, addition.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Gadamer, *Hegel’s Dialectic*, p. 31.

³² *Encyclopedia Logic*, § 11, remark.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ H. Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution*, 2nd edition (1955) p. 27.

³⁵ *Encyclopedia Logic*, § 81, remark 2.

³⁶ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, translated by E.B. Ashton (1973) p. 157.

suggests, “but rather as *inherent in them* themselves.”³⁷ “What is dialectical,” he says, “is the passage of such determinations into their opposites.”³⁸ And “this does not occur,” he explains, “by comparing one determination externally with another,”³⁹ or as “the result of hunting about it externally to find its opposite.”⁴⁰ That kind of external approach would bring us back to the dialectical fallacy of thesis–antithesis–synthesis, while “true dialectic,” Hegel says, “peers into such a definition as is provided by the intellect and contemplates what is contained therein, whereupon it results that, *without anything being brought in from the outside*, the definition, by its very content, contradicts itself.”⁴¹

Note that Hegel is *not* saying that one thing is contradicted or negated by another, but, instead, *contradicts itself*. It is this conception of *self*-contradiction that Marx called “the source of all dialectics,”⁴² while, to Adorno, it was the motor of “dialectical movement”, which

does not arise by taking an initial proposition and externally supplementing it with the opposed proposition. It arises when the contradictory moment is discovered in the proposition originally expressed, when it is shown that the proposition, which initially presents itself [...] in a fixed and congealed form, is a field of internal tension, exhibits a particular kind of life within itself, so that the task of philosophy is, in a sense, to reconstruct this life within the original proposition.⁴³

Hegel calls this discovery of internal contradiction the “**dialectical** moment.” This is the second stage of his triplicity of thought, which he describes as “the self-sublation [*Sichaufheben*] of these finite determinations [of the intellect] on their own part, and their passing into their opposites.”⁴⁴ Dialectic is thus “this *immanent* [process of] going beyond [such determinacy] wherein the one-sided and limited character of the determinations of the intellect presents itself as what it is, namely as their negation. Everything finite is this, the sublating of itself [*sich selbst aufzuheben*].”⁴⁵

With its multiple connotations and notable lack of an English equivalent, the German verb *aufheben* (usually translated as “to sublimate”) can be difficult to understand, but its meaning “must be grasped with precision,” Hegel says, because “sublation and what is sublating [...] constitute one of the most important concepts of philosophy.”⁴⁶ In the dictionary, *aufheben* has many contrasting definitions, but Hegel is most interested in two, the first being negative: “clearing away” or “negating,”⁴⁷ he says, as in the case of a law being repealed or an institution abolished—both are said to have been “sublated” (*aufgehoben*). But “what is sublating,” Hegel says, “does not thereby turn into nothing.”⁴⁸ This is because *aufheben* also has the positive meaning of “to keep,” “preserve” or “save”—so that what is sublating is negated without being destroyed or forgotten, but is instead kept and *preserved*. “This dual sense in linguistic usage,

³⁷ *Encyclopedia Logic*, § 41, addition 1 (emphasis added).

³⁸ Hegel, *Lectures on Logic*, translated by C. Butler (2008) p. 73.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.* (Emphasis added.)

⁴² Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, p. 744 (footnote 29).

⁴³ Adorno, *Introduction to Dialectics*, p. 55.

⁴⁴ *Encyclopedia Logic*, § 81.

⁴⁵ *Encyclopedia Logic*, § 81, remark 2.

⁴⁶ *Science of Logic*, p. 81.

⁴⁷ *Encyclopedia Logic*, § 96, addition.

⁴⁸ *Science of Logic*, p. 81.

according to which one and the same word has a negative as well as a positive meaning, must not be regarded as a coincidence,” Hegel says. Rather, it should be taken as a sign of “the speculative spirit of our language that transcends the either/or of mere understanding.”⁴⁹

For Hegel, Gadamer says, the originally negative connotation of *Aufhebung* (“sublation”)

comes to imply [the positive] preservation of all the elements of truth, which assert themselves within the contradictions, and even an elevation of these elements to a truth encompassing and uniting everything true. In this way dialectic becomes the advocate of the “concrete” or mediated truth over against the one-sided abstractions of the intellect.⁵⁰

This dialectical transcendence of the intellect brings us to the third mode of thinking alluded to by Hegel above: the **speculative**. He describes dialectic as “*negatively rational*”⁵¹ because it sees the negative or self-contradictory nature of things, while he calls speculation “*positively rational*”⁵² because it has the power to see beyond ordinary ways of thinking. Heidegger went so far as to describe the speculative nature of Hegel’s logic as “the most powerful thinking of modern times.”⁵³ Speculative thought embodies “the principle of totality,” Hegel says, “and shows itself to reach beyond the one-sidedness of the abstract determinations of the intellect.”⁵⁴ The “struggle of reason” (*Vernunft*)—both dialectical and speculative (negative and positive)—he says, “consists precisely in overcoming what the intellect has made rigid.”⁵⁵

We have now seen that, rather than the spuriously dialectical triplicity of TAS (or any kind of “synthesis thinking” more generally), Hegel employs a differently triadic approach to thought, one with dialectic at its heart—i.e., ADS: abstract, dialectical and speculative—in which the intellect *abstractly* separates and defines things without contradiction, while reason is, first, *dialectical* in recognizing the contradictions inherent in the one-sided abstractions of the intellect, and, second, *speculative* in seeing beyond one-sided oppositions to their unity. What is visible to speculative thinking, Hegel says, “is the concrete unity of just those determinations that count as true for the intellect only in their separation and opposition.”⁵⁶ The unity of speculative thinking is “concrete” (literally: “grown together”) because it results from mediation—the mediation of passing through the dialectical moment of self-negation so that it is what Hegel describes as “the negation of negation” or “concrete, *absolute* negativity.”⁵⁷ It is in “grasping opposites in their unity,” Hegel says, “or the positive in the negative, that *the speculative* consists. It is the most important aspect of dialectic, but for the still unpracticed, unfree faculty of thought, [it is] the most difficult.”⁵⁸

Hegel does not claim to have invented or discovered dialectic, but, instead, attributes its discovery (in its modern form) to Kant⁵⁹—Kant’s discovery being that “the contradiction posited in the realm of reason by the determinations of the intellect is *essential* and *necessary*.”⁶⁰ Hegel

⁴⁹ *Encyclopedia Logic*, § 96, addition.

⁵⁰ Gadamer, *Hegel’s Dialectic*, p. 105.

⁵¹ *Encyclopedia Logic*, § 79.

⁵² *Encyclopedia Logic*, § 82.

⁵³ M. Heidegger, *On Time and Being*, translated by J. Stambaugh (1972) p. 6.

⁵⁴ *Encyclopedia Logic*, § 32, addition.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Encyclopedia Logic*, § 82, addition.

⁵⁷ *Science of Logic*, p. 89.

⁵⁸ *Science of Logic*, p. 35 (Hegel’s emphasis).

⁵⁹ *Science of Logic*, p. 157.

⁶⁰ *Encyclopedia Logic*, § 48, remark (Hegel’s emphasis).

says that this discovery—that contradiction is real—must be regarded as “one of the most important and profound advances in the philosophy of recent times.”⁶¹ Kant’s mistake, however, according to Hegel, was in relegating this real contradiction to just a few special cases of thought alone (which he called the “antinomies of pure reason”⁶²), when instead, Hegel says (emphatically), we find antinomy (i.e., direct contradiction) “in *all* objects of all kinds, in *all* representations, concepts, and ideas.”⁶³ Marcuse explains this important point by saying:

If dialectical logic understands contradiction as ‘necessity’ belonging to the very ‘nature of thought,’ it does so because contradiction belongs to the very nature of the *object* of thought, to reality [itself. . . .] The given reality has its own logic and its own truth; the effort to comprehend them as such and to transcend them presupposes a different logic, a contradicting truth.⁶⁴

That “different logic” is dialectic, while “ordinary logic,” Hegel says, is “in error in supposing that the mind is something that completely excludes contradiction from itself.”⁶⁵ This is why dialectical thinking cuts against the grain of ordinary (non-contradictory) analytical thought, and why we have seen Hegel characterize it as unfamiliar and difficult⁶⁶ . . . but it is, by no means, impossible. This is because it is in the mind or the human spirit [*Geist*], Hegel says, that “contradiction as such comes to light.”⁶⁷ The mind “has the power to preserve itself in contradiction and, therefore, in pain”⁶⁸—which may seem like an odd thing for Hegel to say, especially when he adds that, as living beings, it is our “privilege [...] to feel pain.”⁶⁹ But, “[t]o endure pain,” he says, “means that we preserve ourselves in spite of the negative that is in us.”⁷⁰ In other words, the mind “can endure the negation of its individual immediacy [...] i.e., it can maintain itself affirmatively in this negativity.”⁷¹ What this means, Hegel says, is that “[t]he other, the negative, contradiction, division thus belong to the nature of the mind. In this division lies the possibility of pain.”⁷²

The mind is able to endure this pain of contradiction, Hegel says,

because it contains no determination that it does not recognize as one posited by itself and consequently as one that it can also sublimate again. This power over all the content present in it forms the basis of the freedom of the mind. But in its immediacy, the mind is free only implicitly, in concept or possibility, not yet in actuality; actual freedom is thus not something that exists immediately in the mind, but something to be produced through its [own] activity. Thus [...] we have to regard the mind as the producer of its [own] freedom.⁷³

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² I. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 2nd edition, pp. B455–B488.

⁶³ *Encyclopedia Logic*, § 48, remark (Hegel’s emphasis).

⁶⁴ Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man*, Routledge Classics (2002) p. 146 (Marcuse’s emphasis).

⁶⁵ Hegel, *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences, Part Three, Philosophy of Mind*, § 382, addition.

⁶⁶ In his lectures on the history of philosophy, Hegel talks about “the thorns and thistles of the dialectic.” Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy, 1825–6*, vol. II, translated by Brown, Stewart & Harris (2006) p. 198.

⁶⁷ Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Spirit, 1827–28*, translated by R.R. Williams (2007) p. 67.

⁶⁸ *Philosophy of Mind*, § 382, addition.

⁶⁹ Hegel, *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Outline, Part 2, Phil. of Nature*, § 359, addition.

⁷⁰ *Lectures on the Philosophy of Spirit*, p. 67, fn. 21.

⁷¹ *Philosophy of Mind*, § 382.

⁷² *Philosophy of Mind*, § 382, addition.

⁷³ Ibid.

Above, we saw Hegel characterize non-dialectical thinking as “unfree”—“the still [...] unfree faculty of thought”—unfree because it is bound by the so-called “laws of thought,” compelled to avoid (self-)contradiction, and, therefore, unable to follow thought’s own immanent dialectical (and speculative) development. We have also seen him speak of the pain of negation and contradiction. But, as he memorably puts it in the *Encyclopedia*: “It is thinking that both inflicts the wound and heals it again.”⁷⁴ The abstract thinking of the intellect tries, unsuccessfully, to conceive of itself and the world in non-contradictory terms, while dialectical and speculative thinking reveal and resolve the contradictions inherent in both thought and reality.

This is what Hegel means when he says that the mind produces its own freedom. In fact, he goes so far as to declare that “the essence of mind is *freedom*”⁷⁵—freedom it achieves through thinking both dialectically and speculatively. “The mind is not an inert entity,” he says, “but is rather what is absolutely restless, pure activity—the negating [...] of every fixed determination of the intellect.”⁷⁶

[T]o rise above the[se] determinations and attain insight into their discord is the great negative [i.e., dialectical] step on the way to the true concept of [speculative] reason. But, when not carried through, this insight runs into the misconception that reason is the one that contradicts itself; it fails to see that the contradiction is in fact the elevation of reason above the restrictions of the intellect and the dissolution of them.⁷⁷

What Hegel is saying is that dialectical thinking’s dissolution of the restrictive thinking of the intellect and its embrace of contradiction is what creates the possibility of real freedom—freedom that “constitutes humanity’s truly inherent nature,”⁷⁸ and which “does not consist in static being, but in a constant negation of all that threatens to destroy freedom.”⁷⁹ The “concept of freedom,” Hegel says, “is the fundamental object and thus also the driving principle of [human] development.”⁸⁰ What speculative philosophy shows, he says, is that “freedom is the one authentic property of the mind,”⁸¹ so that “[r]eason is thought determining itself in absolute freedom.”⁸² And the way it determines itself, as we have seen, is dialectically.

Schelling said that “[t]rue dialectic exists only in the realm of freedom; it alone has the power to solve all riddles”⁸³—an ability that Marcuse called “the power of negative thinking.”⁸⁴ Apart from solving riddles, what Marcuse says this power is capable of achieving is liberation (*Befreiung*)—a word he borrows from Hegel.⁸⁵ “The liberating function of negation in philosophical thought,” Marcuse says, “depends upon the recognition that the *negation is a positive act*”⁸⁶—an idea

⁷⁴ *Encyclopedia Logic*, § 24, addition.

⁷⁵ *Philosophy of Mind*, § 382 (Hegel’s emphasis).

⁷⁶ *Philosophy of Mind*, § 378, addition.

⁷⁷ *Science of Logic*, p. 26.

⁷⁸ *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History, 1822–3*, translated by R.F. Brown, P.C. Hodgson & W.G. Geuss (2011) p. 88.

⁷⁹ Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History, Introduction: Reason in History*, translated by H.B. Nisbet (1975) p. 48.

⁸⁰ *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History, 1822–3*, p. 109.

⁸¹ *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History, Introduction*, p. 48.

⁸² Hegel, *Reason in History*, translated by R.S. Hartman (1953) p. 15.

⁸³ F.W.J. Schelling, *Philosophie der Offenbarung: 1841/42* (“Philosophy of Revelation”) (1977) p. 168.

⁸⁴ Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man*, p. 13.

⁸⁵ *Philosophy of Mind*, § 382, addition.

⁸⁶ Marcuse, “Note on Dialectic,” included in *The Essential Marcuse*, edited by A. Feenberg & W. Leiss (2007) p. 67. (Emphasis added.)

also borrowed from Hegel, who expressed the “simple insight” that

[t]he one thing needed *to achieve scientific progress* [...] is the recognition of the logical principle that negation is equally positive, or that what is self-contradictory does not resolve itself into a nullity, into abstract nothingness, but essentially only into the negation of its *particular* content; or that such a negation is not just negation, but is *the negation of the determined fact which is resolved*, and is therefore determinate negation[.]⁸⁷

It is determinate negation, Marcuse says, “that denotes the governing principle of dialectical thought,”⁸⁸ and “[t]he negation is determinate,” he says, “if it refers the established state of affairs to the basic factors and forces that make for its destructiveness [i.e., its destruction of human freedom], as well as for the possible alternatives beyond the status quo.”⁸⁹

Dialectical thought itself, therefore, becomes “necessarily destructive,”⁹⁰ Marcuse says.

Its function is to break down the self-assurance and self-contentment of common sense, to undermine the sinister confidence in the power and language of facts, to demonstrate that unfreedom is so much at the core of things that the development of their internal contradictions leads necessarily to qualitative change[.]⁹¹

Returning to Hegel’s critique of non-contradictory (analytical) thinking, Marcuse says (apparently with Hegel’s famous phrase “[t]he true is the whole”⁹² in mind):

Any fixed and isolated definition is incomplete and hence untrue, since it isolates the object from the proper possibilities through which it realizes itself and thus brings the [dialectical] movement that is the law of its being to a standstill. There is no aspect, no condition, no movement of the object [...] that is not determined by the whole within which its inner contradictions unfold, shattering each successive form of its identity.⁹³

Marcuse dramatically describes this unfolding as the “catastrophic dynamism”⁹⁴ of dialectic—catastrophic because it “reflects the unconscious destructiveness of nature, [and] the conscious destructiveness of history,”⁹⁵ both of which—the world and history—exhibit dialectical movement and development within themselves. Everything that exists, Marcuse says,

destroys itself in the process of its evolution, passing over into a new form in which the ‘limits’ or negativity of the old are transcended: what is new is thus the liberation of the old, a process of self-liberation. As liberation, freedom is essentially negation; as a process of liberation (subjectivity), the movement of objectivity constitutes ‘progress.’⁹⁶

⁸⁷ *Science of Logic*, p. 33. (Hegel’s emphasis.)

⁸⁸ Marcuse, “Note on Dialectic,” p. 68.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ Marcuse, “Note on Dialectic,” p. 69.

⁹¹ Marcuse, “Note on Dialectic,” p. 66.

⁹² Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ¶ 20.

⁹³ Marcuse, “The History of Dialectics,” included in *Collected Papers of Herbert Marcuse*, vol. 6, edited by D. Kellner & C. Pierce (2014) pp. 145–6.

⁹⁴ Marcuse, “The History of Dialectics,” p. 146.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

This progress towards (self-)liberation is what we saw Marcuse refer to above as going “beyond the status quo,” i.e., “qualitative change”—a prerequisite of which, he says, is “the ability of thought to develop a logic and language of contradiction.”⁹⁷ This is “the power of negative thinking” or dialectic in action, which Marcuse says “‘corresponds’ to reality only as it transforms reality by comprehending its contradictory structure. Here the principle of dialectic drives thought beyond the limits of philosophy,”⁹⁸—i.e., from thinking to doing, from theory to practice. Sartre said “dialectic is nothing other than *praxis*,”⁹⁹ and described it as “the living logic of action.”¹⁰⁰ One might even characterize this *praxis* as the “dialectics of liberation” ... but not Marcuse, who called this a “redundant phrase”—redundant because, he says, “I believe that all dialectic is liberation—and not only liberation in an intellectual sense, but liberation involving the mind and the body, liberation involving all of human existence.”¹⁰¹

To return, finally, to the problems of the *Handbook of Dialectical Thinking*, many of its most glaring errors—e.g., dealing in pseudo-dialectics and synthesis-thinking—could easily have been avoided if the book’s editors had started by taking a coherent position on dialectic, rather than resurrecting the dialectical fallacy of thesis–antithesis–synthesis—a “rickety” formula that would never have been accepted as being legitimately dialectical by anyone familiar with the works of dialectical thinkers such as Hegel, Adorno, Marcuse, etc., and which we have seen, has been soundly refuted by others.¹⁰² The editors (and their contributors) might have been aided in this project if their team hadn’t consisted entirely of psychologists, but had instead included a philosopher and/or sociologist versed in dialectics.

In that spirit of interdisciplinary collaboration, we give the final word here on dialectic to a one-man interdisciplinarian: the philosopher and psychologist, William James, who, in his 1908 Oxford lecture, “Hegel and his Method,” explained that Hegel’s dialectic presents “the vision of a really living world, and refus[es] to be content with a chopped-up intellectualist picture of it.”¹⁰³ Hegel is accurate, James says, in arguing that “[t]here is a dialectic movement in things, [...] one that the whole constitution of concrete life establishes.”¹⁰⁴ As for his presentation of it—through his “dialectic method”—James says:

It is itself a part of the hegelian vision or intuition, and a part that finds the strongest echo in empiricism and common sense. Great injustice is done to Hegel by treating him as primarily a reasoner. He is in reality a naïvely observant man[. ...] He plants himself in the empirical flux of things and gets the impression of what happens. His mind is in very truth *impressionistic*; and his thought, when once you put yourself at the animating centre of it, is the easiest thing in the world to catch the pulse of and to follow.¹⁰⁵

That pulse, James says, is “the pulse of dialectic”¹⁰⁶—“the immanent self-contradictoriness of all finite concepts [which] thenceforth becomes the propulsive logical force that moves the world.”¹⁰⁷

⁹⁷ Marcuse, “Note on Dialectic,” p. 69.

⁹⁸ Marcuse, “Note on Dialectic,” p. 66.

⁹⁹ J.-P. Sartre, *Marxisme et existentialisme: controverse sur la dialectique* (1962) p.16.

¹⁰⁰ Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, vol. 1, translated by A. Sheridan-Smith (1976) p. 38.

¹⁰¹ Marcuse, “Liberation from the Affluent Society,” included in *Collected Papers of Herbert Marcuse*, vol. 3, edited by D. Kellner (2005) p. 76.

¹⁰² See note 3, above.

¹⁰³ W. James, “Hegel and his Method,” included in *A Pluralistic Universe* (1909) p. 92.

¹⁰⁴ James, “Hegel and his Method,” p. 90.

¹⁰⁵ James, “Hegel and his Method,” pp. 86–7. (James’ emphasis.)

¹⁰⁶ James, “Hegel and his Method,” pp. 106–7.

¹⁰⁷ James, “Hegel and his Method,” p. 95.

Concepts were not, in [Hegel's] eyes, the static self-contained things that previous logicians had supposed, but were *germinative* and passed beyond themselves into each other by what he called their *immanent dialectic*. [...] [S]o the dialectic logic, according to him, had to supersede the 'logic of identity' in which, since Aristotle, all Europe had been brought up. This view of concepts is Hegel's revolutionary performance[.]¹⁰⁸

From that performance, James singles out Hegel's presentation of "the category of negation" as "his most original stroke."¹⁰⁹

This dogging of everything by its negative, its fate, its undoing, this perpetual moving on to something future which shall supersede the present, this is the hegelian intuition of the essential provisionality, and consequent unreality, of everything empirical and finite. Take any concrete finite thing and try to hold it fast. You cannot, for, so held, it proves not to be concrete at all, but an arbitrary extract or abstract which you have made from the remainder of empirical reality. The rest of things invades and overflows both it and you together, and defeats your rash attempt. Any partial view whatever of the world tears the part out of its relations, leaves out some truth concerning it, is untrue of it, falsifies it. The full truth about anything involves more than that thing. In the end, nothing less than the whole of everything can be the truth of anything at all.¹¹⁰

We have given the final word on dialectic here to William James, who, it should be noted, was not himself a Hegelian, but it was perhaps his experience as a psychologist in addition to being a philosopher that gave him special insight into the dynamism of dialectical thinking—its immanent and "germinative" nature, as he described it—which was lacking in other commentators of the period, and thus remains a unique and valuable vision of dialectic to this day—a vision *not* of the balancing or bringing together of static concepts or points-of-view represented by synthesis-thinking, but of the dynamic oppositional and transformative potential that dialectic reveals within thought and reality themselves.

FURTHER READING:

T.W. Adorno, *An Introduction to Dialectics*

Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*

H.-G. Gadamer, *Hegel's Dialectic*

G.W.F. Hegel, *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Outline*, Part One: Logic

Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, preface

W. James, "Hegel and his Method," included in *A Pluralistic Universe*

H. Marcuse, "The History of Dialectics," included in *Collected Papers of Herbert Marcuse*, vol. 6

Marcuse, "Note on Dialectic," included in *The Essential Marcuse*

Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man*

Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution*

¹⁰⁸ James, "Hegel and his Method," pp. 91–2. (Emphasis added.)

¹⁰⁹ James, "Hegel and his Method," p. 93.

¹¹⁰ James, "Hegel and his Method," pp. 89–90.