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On dialectic (1): What is dialectic

[This is part one of a three-part article series.]

[On dialectic (2): Re-visiting dialectic]

[On dialectic (3): Alternatives to dialectic]

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Contents

1 - Abstract

This article, the first in a three-part series, examines the shifting meanings of dialectic across philosophical traditions. Today the term is used ambiguously and often stretched beyond clarity. Rather than fixing a single definition, the study traces how successive thinkers introduced, expanded, or dismantled key "building blocks" of dialectic—for example, from Zeno's paradoxes to Socratic questioning, from Hegel's logic of development to Marx's historical materialism, and from Engels's naturalization to Adorno's negative dialectics and beyond. By mapping these transformations, the article shows both the constructive power of dialectic and the fragmentation that undermined its coherence in the twentieth century. Its constructive aim is to identify minimal conditions for keeping "dialectic" meaningful as a philosophical method. Part Two investigates claims about dialectic in nature and the sciences; Part Three considers alternative approaches.

2 - Introduction

Dialectic is commonly described as a method of reasoning that advances understanding through the confrontation of opposites (Ollman, 1993; Rescher, 1977) [1]. Unlike deduction, which draws necessary conclusions from fixed premises, or induction, which generalizes from repeated observations, inference to the best explanation (IBE) selects the most plausible hypothesis among competing ones (Lipton, 2004). Dialectic, by contrast, proceeds by exposing tensions or contradictions within a given idea or framework and then confronting them through resolution, transformation, or sustained tension (Hegel, [1807] 1977) [2].

The historical overview presented in the Introduction may at first appear sprawling; that is intentional. Its purpose is to display how differently dialectic has been understood, and why a systematic framework is required. In the final part of this

[1] One might expect a study on dialectic to begin with a fixed definition. This article does not, because the term has undergone so many revisions and appropriations that its continued use requires justification. The task here is to track its transformations first, before asking whether a viable definition is still possible.

[2] Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* was first published in 1807. References are to the Oxford University Press translation (1977).

Introduction, I present such a framework by identifying the "building blocks" of dialectic that various thinkers added, removed, or transformed [3].

The roots of dialectic lie in ancient Greek philosophy. In Plato's dialogues, it appears as the Socratic method of cross-examination designed to reveal contradictions and stimulate insight (Vlastos, 1994; Cooper, 1997) [4]. Aristotle then distinguishes dialectic from demonstration, defining it as reasoning from widely accepted opinions toward plausible conclusions (Smith, 1997). In late antiquity, Neoplatonists such as Plotinus and Proclus reinterpreted dialectic as an ascent through layers of reality, stressing unity through negation (Armstrong et al., 2012).

During the Islamic Golden Age, Avicenna integrated Aristotelian dialectic into a broader system of logic, while Averroes transmitted it back to the Latin West through his commentaries (Gutas, 2001; Butterworth, 2007). In medieval Europe, scholastic thinkers such as Abelard and Aquinas developed dialectic into a structured practice of disputation (Marenbon, 1997; Stump, 2003). Renaissance humanist Peter Ramus attempted to simplify Aristotelian dialectic into a pedagogical tool (Ong, 1958).

In the early modern period, Descartes questioned its epistemic value and instead advocated the analytic method (Gaukroger, 1995). Kant, in the *Critique of Pure Reason* ([1781/1787] 1998), diagnosed dialectic as reason's tendency to generate antinomies when it exceeds its legitimate bounds (Allison, 2004) [5]. Hegel reimagined dialectic as a generative logic in which concepts develop through self-negation and transformation (Houlgate, 2005). Marx adapted this framework to historical materialism, emphasizing conflict within social relations (Marx, [1867] 1990; Ollman, 1993).

In the twentieth century, dialectic was reinterpreted by critical theorists. Adorno developed a "negative dialectics" that rejected synthesis and emphasized non-

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[3] The word "truth" here is used in its broad philosophical sense. I do not provide my own definition in this essay.

[4] I see a formal resemblance between Plato's description of the soul's ascent (Republic VI–VII) and Hegel's notion of sublation: both emphasize overcoming lower forms through a process of development. I have not seen this similarity discussed explicitly in secondary literature; it is my interpretive observation.

[5] Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* appeared in two editions (1781 and 1787). References here are to the Cambridge University Press translation (1998). Some scholars note that in the Prefaces, Kant already gestures toward shifts that resemble later dialectical transformations. A fuller treatment of this issue is deferred to section 4 (Kant → Hegel transition).

identity and contradiction (Adorno, [1966] 1973; Jarvis, 1998). Horkheimer and Adorno retained it as a method of critique in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* ([1947] 2002) [6]. Later, thinkers such as Žižek (1989, 2012) revived Hegelian dialectic through a psychoanalytic lens, while Jameson (2009) employed it as a hermeneutic strategy for interpreting culture and history. Beyond these figures, dialectical motifs also appear in critical realism (Bhaskar, 1993) and elements of post-structuralism.

Across this history, dialectic has never been static. It has been reshaped as method, metaphysics, pedagogy, critique, and cultural interpretation. These changes raise the central problem: has the concept become too fragmented to retain meaning?

To address this, the article proceeds by identifying what I call the "building blocks" of dialectic. Each philosopher introduces or removes structural elements that redefine its function. By tracing these pivotal shifts, we can evaluate whether the concept still names a viable philosophical method or whether it has dissolved into metaphor.

3 – Aim: Conceptual Mapping of Dialectic

The aim of this part of the series is to systematically compare and categorize the different meanings that philosophers have assigned to the term "dialectic" throughout its history. This conceptual mapping will provide the foundation for the subsequent analyses, which will focus on identifying inconsistencies within the concept, the undue extension of the term to domains beyond its original scope, and the confusion of dialectic with other ideas on the basis of superficial resemblance.

4 – Building Blocks of Dialectic

Given the historical background of dialectic, one can identify many building blocks. Some of these are relatively simple strands in which dialectic is treated as a method or logical technique (*simplicus*), while others are more complex system-building

[6] "Totalizing systems" refers to frameworks that aim to give a complete account of reality, often minimizing contradiction or contingency. Critical theorists use the term to describe, among others, fascism and orthodox Marxism. Both are criticized for suppressing particularity under rigid conceptual totalities. Expanded examples will be taken up in the twentieth-century section.

enterprises where dialectic becomes embedded in a comprehensive philosophical framework (*compositum*) [7]. These can be listed and grouped as follows [8] [9]:

A. Classical and Early Traditions

1. Socratic Dialectic (*simple method of questioning*)
2. Platonic Dialectic (*structured ascent toward truth*)
3. Aristotelian Dialectic (*formalized debate and logical testing*)
4. Buddhist Dialectic (*logical analysis and debate traditions*)
5. Neoplatonic Dialectic (*metaphysical systematization*)
6. Islamic Dialectic (*kalam and philosophical disputation*)

B. Medieval and Renaissance Traditions

7. Scholastic Dialectic (*disputation in medieval universities*)
8. Ramist Dialectic (*humanist simplification of dialectical method*)

C. Early Modern Transformations

9. Pre-Kantian Critique (*dialectic as critique of metaphysics*)
10. Kantian Dialectic (*transcendental critique of reason*)
11. The Modern Redefinition of Dialectic: Kant or Hegel? (*transition point, highlighting tensions before Hegel*)

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[7] *Simplicus* is a coined technical term (from *simplex, simplicis*), used here to denote a non-composite theoretical structure. *Compositum* is the classical Latin term for a compound or composite structure. For consistency with certain English and Latin nouns (e.g., *species, series*), both *simplicus* and *compositum* are treated as invariant in plural form.

[8] In this article, contemporary traditions such as phenomenology (e.g., Merleau-Ponty), structuralism, and post-structuralism (e.g., Derrida and Deleuze) have not been examined directly. The reason is that these traditions cannot be regarded as internal continuations of the Hegelian–Marxian dialectical tradition; rather, they should be treated as parallel, and at times incompatible, lines of thought. Moreover, most of these perspectives do not claim validity or applicability within the domain of nature and the natural sciences, and therefore do not find a place within the analytical framework of this article series, which seeks to reconsider the relationship between dialectic and science.

[9] Certain late 20th-century thinkers — such as Roy Bhaskar, Margaret Archer, Andrew Sayer, and others in the critical realist tradition — do incorporate dialectical reasoning while departing from the Hegelian–Marxian paradigm. Their approach reconfigures dialectic around concepts such as ontological stratification, emergence, and emancipatory critique, often with a view to integrating scientific realism and social theory. Likewise, figures such as Jürgen Habermas and Alain Badiou offer alternative reconstructions of dialectic: the former grounds it in communicative rationality and discourse ethics, while the latter formalizes it through set theory and the logic of the event. Some of these perspectives, while distinct from both classical dialectics and post-structuralist critique, fall outside the scope of this section.

D. Hegelian Break and Aftermath

12. Hegelian Dialectic (*systematic unfolding of Spirit*)
13. The rupture introduced by Hegel
14. Marxian Dialectic (*historical materialism*)
15. Engelsian Dialectic (*dialectics of nature*)

E. Contemporary Reinterpretations

16. Transformative Reinterpretations outside System-Building
17. Adorno's Critical-Theoretical Dialectic (Frankfurt School)
18. Jameson's Attempt to Modernize Dialectic
19. Žižek's Attempt to Modernize Dialectic

A. Classical and Early Traditions

4.1 — Socratic Dialectic

Socratic dialectic builds upon earlier philosophical inquiry by introducing the methodical questioning approach of *elenchus* (refutation), which challenges assumptions and exposes contradictions. This building block enables rigorous examination of prevailing wisdom, fostering intellectual humility and encouraging critical evaluation of thoughts and values. By acknowledging the limitations of human knowledge, Socratic dialectic promotes self-reflection and recognizes that true wisdom lies in admitting one's own ignorance.

According to Plato's dialogues, especially *Apology* and *Gorgias* (Plato [c. 427–347 BCE] 1997), this method is central to Socratic philosophy. Scholars such as Robinson ([1941] 1953) and Brickhouse & Smith (1994) analyze the function of the *elenchus*, while Vlastos (1991) explores its implications for moral philosophy. Importantly, Socratic dialectic introduces contradiction not in order to resolve or synthesize it, but to destabilize premature certainty and open the path for deeper inquiry.

Socratic dialectic marks the shift from assertion to questioning, destabilizing certainty through contradiction and opening the way for deeper inquiry.

4.2 — Platonic Dialectic

Plato builds upon the Socratic method by adding a metaphysical dimension that explores the nature of reality and the Forms. For Plato, dialectic is the process of

philosophical inquiry that seeks to ascend to the highest level of understanding, grasping the eternal and immutable Forms that underlie the world of sensory experience [10] (Plato [c. 427–347 BCE] 1997, *Republic*; Cornford [1935] 1941).

Plato's dialectic involves a method of collection and division, where concepts are analyzed and categorized to reveal their essential nature (Plato [c. 427–347 BCE] 1997, *Phaedrus*; Robinson [1941] 1953). In addition to the Socratic elements of questioning, dialogue, critical thinking, *elenchus*, intellectual humility, and self-reflection, Plato's dialectic adds the crucial element of hypothesis and theory development. Abstract concepts are systematically examined and refined through dialectical reasoning (Vlastos, 1991).

In this way, Plato moves dialectic from ethical dialogue toward a metaphysical ascent. Contradiction is not merely exposed in interpersonal debate but embedded within an ontological hierarchy [11], where the movement from the world of appearances toward the Forms structures the inquiry. Through this process, Platonic dialectic aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of reality, knowledge, and the human condition.

Platonic dialectic transforms Socratic questioning into a metaphysical ascent, embedding contradiction within a hierarchy of Forms.

4.3 — Aristotelian Dialectic

Aristotle develops dialectic into a systematic method distinct from both rhetoric and demonstration. In the *Topics* and *Sophistical Refutations*, he uses *endoxa*—reputable opinions—as the starting point for constructing arguments and testing prevailing views [12] (Aristotle, [384–322 BCE] 1984, *Topics*; Smith, 1997). Unlike

[10] In later discussions, we will see that Hegel views the world as dynamic, in contrast to the Platonic emphasis on eternity and immutability. The question arises whether any philosophers before Hegel also conceived the world in dynamic terms. I maintain that Hegel was not the first to do so. It is also worth noting that Plato's notion of eternity and immutability carries an additional dimension—namely, essentialism.

[11] The idea of the "internality of contradiction," however one defines "internal" and "external," can already be found in Plato.

[12] Before Aristotle, reasoning was generally treated within broader discussions of epistemology, rhetoric, or dialectical practice, without a fully formal system. Aristotle's innovation lay in distinguishing dialectical reasoning from formal logic (*organon*), which introduced systematic rules of valid inference independent of epistemic content.

demonstration (*apodeixis*), which seeks certainty through first principles, dialectic operates within the realm of plausibility, evaluating competing positions through structured debate and reasoning.

Aristotle's dialectic contributes key building blocks such as categorization and syllogistic reasoning, where concepts are classified and arguments are systematically constructed to test validity (Aristotle, [384–322 BCE] 1984, *Prior Analytics*; Striker, 2009). In this way, dialectic becomes not merely a tool of disputation but also a means of cultivating critical reasoning and systematic inquiry into philosophical problems [13].

Placed between Plato's metaphysical ascent and later scholastic and modern reinterpretations, Aristotle's approach represents a decisive shift: he anchors dialectic in logical structure and argumentative practice, laying groundwork that subsequent traditions would either refine or react against.

Aristotle redirects dialectic from metaphysical ascent toward structured reasoning with endoxa, categorization, and syllogism, grounding it in plausibility rather than transcendence.

4.4 — Buddhist Dialectic (e.g., Nāgārjuna)

Buddhist dialectic, particularly as developed in the Madhyamaka tradition of Nāgārjuna, approaches contradiction not as a problem to be overcome but as a tool for undermining false certainties. The method of *prasaṅga* (reductio ad absurdum) exposes the untenability of opposing positions without supplying a final resolution, emphasizing instead the emptiness (*śūnyatā*) and dependent origination of all phenomena [14] (Garfield, 1995). This refusal to close debate stands in marked contrast to the dominant Western trajectory from Socrates through Engels, where contradiction is typically directed toward resolution, whether in the form of clarified concepts, logical consistency, or dialectical "laws of nature."

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[13] By integrating dialectic into his wider philosophical framework, Aristotle elevated it beyond an exercise in disputation, giving it a constructive role in philosophical inquiry and education.

[14] Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (c. 2nd–3rd century CE) is the classical text of Madhyamaka dialectics. Its method of *prasaṅga* avoids proposing positive theses, instead showing that any fixed position collapses under analysis. See Garfield (1995).

Yet, while distant in historical and cultural context, the Buddhist refusal of closure bears a structural resemblance to certain modern Western reconfigurations of dialectic. From Adorno's *negative dialectics* to Žižek's revival of Hegelian contradictions within psychoanalytic materialism, we find a common insistence that contradiction should remain open-ended, destabilizing premature syntheses and exposing the incompleteness of thought [15]. Unlike these Western approaches, however, the Buddhist project is soteriological: its dialectical method aims not at system-building or social critique, but at liberation from attachment to views.

Buddhist dialectic thus introduces a unique twist in the history of dialectical thought: it demonstrates that contradiction can be mobilized not to reconcile or systematize, but to unsettle, dissolve, and transform perspectives. In this sense, it shifts dialectic away from resolution toward deliberate non-closure, a stance later echoed—though with different aims—by critical theorists from Adorno to Žižek.

4.5 — Neoplatonic Dialectic

Neoplatonists, such as Plotinus and Proclus, developed a dialectical method that extended and transformed Plato's ideas, emphasizing ascent to the ultimate reality, the "One." In Neoplatonic dialectic, the process of abstraction and negation aims to transcend the multiplicity of the sensible world and grasp the unity and simplicity of the divine (Plotinus, [250] 1966; Proclus, [440] 1970).

Whereas Plato directed dialectic toward the realm of eternal Forms, Neoplatonism radicalizes this movement by positing a principle beyond being itself. Negation thus becomes the highest mode of intelligibility, guiding the soul toward a reality that cannot be positively defined but only approached through withdrawal and abstraction [16].

To their predecessors' dialectic, Neoplatonists added the building blocks of negative theology and hierarchical emanation, conceiving reality as structured by

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[15] While Buddhist dialectic and modern Western traditions such as Adorno's *negative dialectics* or Žižek's Lacanian-Hegelian approach share a formal emphasis on non-closure, their aims diverge. In Buddhism, dialectic serves a soteriological purpose (liberation from suffering and attachment), whereas in Western critical theory it functions as a tool of philosophical critique and social analysis.

[16] In Neoplatonism, the "One" is conceived as ineffable, transcending even being and thought. The method of negation (*aphairesis*) and negative theology reflect this stance: the divine cannot be described by affirmations, only by stripping away determinations. This contrasts with Plato, for whom dialectic culminates in grasping the highest Form (the Good), still within the domain of being.

successive levels flowing from the One (Dillon, [1977] 1996; Gersh, 1978). In this way, Neoplatonic dialectic functions less as logical inquiry than as spiritual ascent, aiming at union with the One rather than conceptual clarification.

Neoplatonic dialectic thus marks a decisive turn: it relocates the goal of dialectic from metaphysical knowledge of Forms to mystical union with a transcendent principle beyond being.

4.6 — Islamic Dialectic

Islamic dialectic, as developed by thinkers such as Al-Farabi, Ibn Sina (Avicenna), Ibn Rushd (Averroes), and Mulla Sadra, integrated Aristotelian logic with Islamic theology and philosophy. Across these traditions, dialectic was used both defensively, to articulate and safeguard Islamic theology, and constructively, to explore philosophical questions (Al-Farabi [c. 950] 1985; Ibn Sina [1027] 2005).

Distinct emphases emerged within this tradition. Rationalist thinkers such as Averroes stressed logical precision and Aristotelian commentary, while Mulla Sadra introduced more mystical elements through his doctrine of "trans-substantial motion" (*al-ḥarakat al-jawhariyah*), which posits that reality is in a state of continual dynamic transformation (Mulla Sadra, [1630] 1981; Kalin, 2003).

To their predecessors' dialectic, Islamic thinkers added the building blocks of *dalāla* (indication) and *taklīf al-bayān* (burden of proof) [17], which placed emphasis on the responsibility of the claimant to provide evidence and on the precise analysis of language in argumentation (Wolfson, 1976; Ibn Rushd [12th century] 2001). This enriched the dialectical method with features drawn from theology, law, and philosophy, producing a tradition that fused rational demonstration with the possibility of mystical ascent.

Islamic dialectic thus represents a distinctive turn in the history of dialectical thought: it hybridized Aristotelian logic with theological debate and, in some strands, extended dialectic into metaphysical and mystical dimensions.

[17] In Islamic theology and jurisprudence, *dalāla* refers to the way in which a statement indicates or implies meaning, while *taklīf al-bayān* assigns the burden of proof to the one making a claim. These concepts shaped dialectical practice by linking argumentation not only to logical validity but also to linguistic precision and responsibility in debate.

B. Medieval and Renaissance Traditions

4.7 — Scholastic Dialectic

Thomas Aquinas and other medieval scholastics developed a dialectical method that combined Aristotelian logic with Christian theology. While diverse in style and emphasis, scholastic dialectic generally employed formal disputation—through methods such as *quaestiones disputatae* (disputed questions) and *quodlibetal* debates—to clarify doctrine and resolve objections (Aschbach, 1860; Thomas Aquinas, [1265–1274] 1920). To their predecessors' dialectic, medieval scholastics added the building blocks of authoritative citation and the synthesis of faith and reason, where arguments were constructed through close engagement with sources such as Scripture and Aristotle [18]. Scholastic disputation thus formalized contradiction as a pedagogical exercise for doctrinal clarification rather than as a means of transformative discovery.

Scholastic dialectic represents a decisive moment in the history of dialectical thought: it institutionalized reason in the service of authority, producing a rigorous but bounded intellectual system that would later face sharp criticism for contributing to Europe's intellectual stagnation.

Scholastic dialectic systematized contradiction within a framework bound by authority, shaping medieval thought but also contributing to Europe's intellectual stagnation.

4.8 — Ramist Dialectic

Petrus Ramus and certain Renaissance humanists critiqued and reformed Aristotelian dialectic, promoting a more practical and pedagogical approach. Ramus argued that dialectic should focus on natural reasoning and everyday

[18] Scholastic dialectic tended to subordinate reasoning to authoritative sources such as Scripture, the Church Fathers, papal decrees, and established dogma. Early modern and modern critics frequently highlighted this reliance. Francis Bacon (1620) faulted the Scholastics for building knowledge on received authorities and verbal disputation rather than empirical investigation (*Novum Organum*, I.63–65). Ramus (1543) denounced their appeal to *auctoritas* as a corruption of dialectic. Descartes (1637) rejected dependence on external authorities in favor of self-evident reason. Bertrand Russell (1945) summarized Scholasticism as "essentially based upon authority — Aristotle, the Bible, and the Fathers of the Church." For detailed historical analyses, see Gilson (1955) and Pieper (1964).

experience rather than abstract logic (Ramus 1543; cf. Ong 1958). To their predecessors' dialectic, Ramus and his followers added the building blocks of methodus and simplification, treating dialectic as a structured tool for communication, persuasion, and education [19] (Ramus 1543; cf. Sharratt 2004).

Ramus's reforms transformed dialectic into a didactic method that emphasized clarity and binary structure, prioritizing accessibility and pedagogy over metaphysical depth.

Ramist dialectic redefined dialectic as method, emphasizing binary structure, pedagogy, and accessibility over speculative or metaphysical concerns.
Footnotes

C. Early Modern Transformations

4.9 — Pre-Kantian Critique

René Descartes, John Locke, and David Hume, prominent philosophers of the 17th and 18th centuries, reshaped the intellectual environment in which dialectic would later be redefined. Rather than developing dialectic directly, each introduced methodological critiques that undermined traditional metaphysics and logic. Descartes emphasized methodic doubt, using systematic skepticism to establish a firm foundation for knowledge, in deliberate contrast to Scholastic disputation (Descartes, [1641] 1984). Locke stressed empirical observation and the limits of human knowledge, challenging speculative dialectic and insisting that inquiry be grounded in experience and sensory data (Locke, [1689] 1975) [20]. Hume extended

[19] Ramus critiqued the complexity of Aristotelian classification and advocated strict dichotomous division as a pedagogical method. His methodus simplified conceptual organization by reducing categories to binary branching structures, enhancing clarity and memorization (Ong, 1958). A historical complication arises from Aristotle's own examples, many of which appear in binary form (e.g., animate–inanimate, cold-blooded–warm-blooded). Over time, some readers confused Aristotle's examples with his method, reinforcing dualistic schemes that persisted for centuries. Binary classification continued well beyond Ramus, especially in biology, until Carl von Linné (Linnaeus) introduced more complex taxonomies in the mid-18th century.

[20] Although Bacon sharply criticized traditional dialectic as practiced by the Scholastics, he may be seen as reformulating aspects of dialectical inquiry within his new empirical method. His systematic elimination of prejudices ("idola"), reliance on structured observation, and method of gradual induction parallel certain dialectical aims of confronting error and refining knowledge, even though he explicitly opposed Scholastic disputation. In this sense, Bacon's *Novum Organum* contributed decisively to the transformation of scientific reasoning in early modernity. See Bacon ([1620] 2000); Gaukroger (2001).

this critique by exposing the limits of both rationalist deduction and inductive generalization, arguing that human knowledge is inherently probabilistic and that reason itself confronts irresolvable limits (Hume, [1748] 2000) [21].

Although they did not employ dialectic as a method of conceptual inquiry or system-building, Descartes, Locke, and Hume cleared crucial ground for Kant's later re-envisioning of dialectic. Their work destabilized inherited assumptions and shifted philosophy toward questions of epistemic foundation and limitation, thereby shaping the context in which dialectic could be transformed.

Descartes, Locke, and Hume did not practice dialectic directly, but their critiques of knowledge laid the groundwork for Kant's redefinition of it.

4.10 — Kantian Dialectic

Immanuel Kant's views on dialectic are primarily outlined in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, where he developed a distinctive approach to dialectic as a critique of metaphysics. In the *Transcendental Dialectic*, Kant analyzes reason's tendency to generate *paralogisms* (false inferences in rational psychology) and *antinomies* (contradictions in rational cosmology[22]), as well as its reliance on Ideas such as God, freedom, and immortality. These Ideas, while lacking constitutive validity, retain a regulative function in guiding inquiry (Kant, [1781/1787] 1998).

To his predecessors' dialectic, Kant added the building blocks of transcendental critique and the delimitation of reason's legitimate use. Dialectic, for Kant, is not a constructive method for producing knowledge, but a diagnostic framework for exposing the inevitable illusions of reason when it exceeds possible experience. By redefining dialectic in this way, Kant established a more modest and rigorous understanding of the relationship between the human mind and reality (Kant, [1781/1787] 1998; see also Allison, 2004) [23].

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[21] Hume's *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* was first published in 1748 under the title *Philosophical Essays Concerning Human Understanding*. While it revises material from his earlier *Treatise of Human Nature* (1739–1740), the *Enquiry* stands as an independent and more accessible work, and is usually cited by its 1748 publication date. Noting these dates matters for intellectual history: Hume had already rejected induction in 1739–1740, yet Europe continued to follow Bacon's inductive method from 1620 well into the mid-20th century.

[22] Rational cosmology (Vernunft-Kosmologie) is, for Kant, the branch of metaphysics that deals with the world as a whole, distinct from the empirical science of astronomy.

[23] Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* appeared in two editions (1781 and 1787), often referred to as the A and B editions. The *Transcendental Dialectic* treats three major topics: paralogisms, antinomies, and the Ideal of Pure Reason. These distinctions are important: while the antinomies illustrate

Through this process, Kant's dialectic aimed to provide a nuanced account of knowledge and reality — one that treats contradiction not as an engine of development but as a structural illusion, signaling the necessary limits of speculative reason.

Kant redefined dialectic as a critique of reason's illusions, exposing its limits rather than constructing new knowledge.

4.11 — The Modern Redefinition of Dialectic: Kant or Hegel?

If dialectic underwent a decisive transformation in modern philosophy, the question arises: who should be credited with redefining it — Kant or Hegel? Kant, in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, confined dialectic to a diagnostic role within epistemology (Kant, [1781/1787] 1998; see also Allison, 2004). In the *Transcendental Dialectic*, he treated it not as a method for constructing knowledge but as a systematic illusion: reason overreaches itself, producing paralogisms and antinomies when it attempts to transcend empirical boundaries (Kant, [1781/1787] 1998; see also Guyer, 1987). For Kant, dialectic thus functioned to expose failure and clarify the limits of rational inquiry.

Hegel, by contrast, redefined dialectic by introducing its generative dimension. Contradiction, rather than a mere boundary signal, became the engine of development: concepts unfold by negating and preserving themselves in a process of sublation (Aufhebung). Dialectic thereby became the logic of "becoming" itself — capable of generating knowledge, concepts, and even history through the dynamic interplay of negation and transformation (Hegel, [1807] 1977; [1812–1816] 2010; see also Pippin, 1989; Ollman, 1993).

This shift marks a fundamental break. Whereas for Kant and his predecessors dialectic remained diagnostic, clarifying or limiting thought, with Hegel it becomes constitutive: a principle that produces the movement of thought and reality. Many interpreters therefore regard Hegel, not Kant, as the architect of dialectic in its fully modern sense (Taylor, 1975) [24].

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contradiction, the paralogisms expose false self-inference about the soul, and the Ideas of reason function regulatively rather than constitutively. Together, these analyses show that dialectic, for Kant, is not a method of discovery but a critique of reason's inherent illusions.

[24] Some scholars note continuity between Kant and Hegel: Kant's recognition that reason necessarily generates contradictions already suggests a dynamic model of thought. But the decisive

With Hegel, dialectic was redefined from a diagnostic tool into a generative logic, transforming its very meaning compared to Kant and all predecessors.

D. Hegelian Break and Aftermath

4.12 — Hegelian Dialectic

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's views on dialectic are central to his philosophical system. He developed a distinctive approach that emphasizes the dynamic and historical nature of reality and knowledge. Hegel's dialectic is characterized by the unity of opposites, where contradictions are not anomalies but necessary moments in the unfolding of being and thought. For Hegel, contradiction is ontologically constitutive: it is the very essence of determinate being, and thus the principle through which reality develops (Hegel, [1812–1816] 2010).

A crucial aspect of Hegel's dialectic is his emphasis on immanence, where development is driven by internal contradictions and negations rather than by external causes (Hegel, [1807] 1977). The self-undoing of each stage compels its transformation, leading to more comprehensive and self-aware forms of knowledge and reality. This immanent logic demonstrates how reality and thought move forward not by resolution from outside but by necessity from within.

Another important aspect is the principle of the transition from quantity to quality [25]. Hegel claimed that gradual quantitative changes, such as increasing current in a metal causing incandescence or heating water triggering phase transitions, can lead to qualitative transformations. These two examples remain his only explicit cases and are widely criticized—if charming—for not mapping neatly onto logical categories. In Hegel's broader dialectical framework, the point is that reality

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innovation lies in Hegel's claim that contradiction is not an error to be corrected but a productive force, driving conceptual, historical, and ontological development.

[25] Hegel introduces the transition from quantity to quality (*Der Übergang der Quantität in Qualität*) in his *Science of Logic* (Hegel, [1812–1816] 2010) through two memorable illustrations: metals glowing under heat (incandescence) and water changing state (ice ⇄ water ⇄ steam). Though evocative, these examples remain his only explicit instances and are often seen as metaphorical rather than strictly logical. A more precise framing understands the principle as one of threshold effects or scale-dependent transformation: when quantitative variables cross certain critical points, qualitative outcomes emerge. This interpretive reconceptualization offers clearer analytic traction than Hegel's metaphoric analogies.

undergoes self-driven structural change. Still, a more precise interpretation recasts these moments in terms of the non-linear and dynamic [26] nature of reality, or scale-dependent thresholds, where gradual change crosses tipping points and yields fundamentally new qualities.

At this point in the *Science of Logic*, Hegel introduces the notion of the "thing with its measure" (ein Ding mit seinem Maß). This is not a "system" or "phenomenon" in the modern sense but a logical unity of quality and quantity. A thing is what it is by virtue of its measure: its quality is sustained only within a determinate quantitative range. Once this measure is exceeded, the thing ceases to be what it is and becomes something else. For Hegel, this illustrates the dialectical necessity of transformation: a "thing with its measure" embodies the interpenetration of quantitative and qualitative determination. Importantly, this category is still situated within the *Logic*; Hegel is not yet speaking of empirical systems with complex internal mechanisms but of the logical form that empirical examples are meant to illustrate [27].

This distinction matters for assessing the scope of Hegel's dialectic. While Hegel believed the logical structures revealed in the *Logic* also expressed the truth of reality, his empirical illustrations (water boiling, metals glowing) do not demonstrate a genuine internal drive in the natural world. They are threshold effects dependent on external conditions. Thus, when Engels later extended the dialectical principle into the natural sciences as a universal law, he blurred the line between Hegel's logical categories and empirical processes. By Hegelian standards, the dialectic legitimately extends beyond "thing with its measure" into higher categories (Essence, Concept), but it does not follow that dialectic extends unproblematically into physics, chemistry, or biology. To avoid conceptual inflation, one must preserve

[26] The distinction between "non-linearity" and "dynamism" is important but often blurred in dialectical debates. Dynamism refers to the inherent tendency of being to move or transform; non-linearity refers to disproportionate or threshold-driven effects, where small causes can trigger major shifts. Hegel's treatment of quantity and quality clearly illustrates non-linearity (thresholds and qualitative leaps). It also suggests a form of logical dynamism, though his physical examples fail to establish any genuine internal drive in nature. In other words, Hegel's dynamism differs from the modern concept. What he presents as an immanent drive is, in fact, externally mediated threshold behavior, not the kind of self-organizing change we now call dynamism.

[27] In Hegel's *Science of Logic* (1812–1816), the "thing with its measure" (Ding mit seinem Maß) represents the culmination of the section on Measure. It signifies a logically simple unity of quality and quantity: a thing is defined by the quantitative relations that sustain its quality. Once those relations shift beyond a limit, the thing becomes qualitatively other. This is not a "system" in the modern scientific sense but a category of thought/being.

boundaries between what counts as internal contradiction and what is merely external conditioning [28].

Hegel also added the building blocks of historical and contextual unfolding, treating dialectic as a process inseparable from concrete cultural and temporal conditions (Hegel, [1807] 1977). His method of negation — including the "negation of the negation" — reveals contradiction as the constitutive engine of development. It is within this framework of German Idealism that Hegel's dialectic achieves coherence, even if his terminology and examples sometimes remain open to charges of looseness or overextension.

Only after outlining these features should we note the familiar tripartite formula of "thesis–antithesis–synthesis" [29]. Though widely used as a heuristic shorthand, it was not Hegel's systematic terminology, but rather a later interpretive simplification.

Through this dialectical method, Hegel sought to provide a comprehensive and systematic understanding of reality, knowledge, and history. In redefining contradiction as a generative principle, Hegel transformed dialectic into a logic of development — a break from all previous traditions that had treated contradiction as an error, a limit, or a rhetorical device.

Hegel redefined dialectic as a generative and ontological principle, turning contradiction into the engine of reality itself.

4.13 — The rupture introduced by Hegel

A decisive break occurs in the development of dialectical thought with the transition from pre-Hegelian to Hegelian models. In earlier traditions — Socratic (Plato, 1997), Aristotelian (Aristotle, 1984; see also Smith, 1997), Neoplatonic (Proclus, 1970),

[28] This helps explain why later extensions, such as in Engels' *Dialectics of Nature* or in Levins & Lewontin's *The Dialectical Biologist*, encounter difficulties. Engels universalized the quantity–quality transition into a natural law, while Levins & Lewontin expanded "system" to such breadth that everything could be redescribed as "internal." Both moves risk collapsing the boundary between logical categories and empirical processes, thereby weakening the analytic clarity of dialectic.

[29] The well-known formula "thesis–antithesis–synthesis" is often used for expository convenience in describing Hegel's method. Hegel himself rarely, if ever, employs these terms systematically. The formula originates primarily from later commentators, such as Fichte and 19th-century interpreters, as a heuristic reconstruction rather than a faithful representation of Hegel's logic. See Taylor (1975).

and Scholastic (Aquinas, 1920; see also Wallace, 1981) — dialectic functioned primarily as an epistemological tool: it clarified concepts (e.g., "What is courage?"), delimited phenomena (e.g., "What is day?"), and tested opinions. Dialectic in this sense was a method of definition, critique, or disputation, largely subordinate to logic or pedagogy (Rescher, 1977) [30].

Hegel, by contrast, redefined dialectic on two decisive fronts. First, he transformed it from a tool of clarification into a generative principle — no longer confined to delimiting concepts but building a systematic account of knowledge, reality, and history (Hegel, [1807] 1977; see also Taylor, 1975; Pippin, 1989) [31]. Contradiction was revalued from being a logical flaw into the driving principle of conceptual development. Second, through his famous material illustrations (incandescence in metals, phase transitions of water), he opened the possibility of treating dialectic not only as a logic of thought but as operative within the material world itself [32]. This move created the conditions for Marx and Engels to extend dialectic into dialectical materialism — while simultaneously provoking rejection from analytic philosophers such as Frege and Russell, who redefined logic precisely by excluding contradiction (Frege, [1879] 1967; Russell, [1900] 2010).

Thus, Hegel marks not just a continuation but a rupture: dialectic ceases to be merely a method of conceptual clarification and becomes both a system-building principle of thought and a candidate explanatory principle of material reality. This rupture provided the platform from which Marx would launch his own transformation of dialectic into a materialist framework, a development we turn to next.

With Hegel, dialectic shifted from epistemological clarification to ontological and material generation — a rupture that reshaped its entire philosophical trajectory[33].

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[30] Earlier traditions of dialectic, from Socratic questioning through Scholastic disputation, employed contradiction as a means of testing opinions, sharpening definitions, or guiding pedagogy. Dialectic here remained within epistemology and rhetoric, not as a principle of reality itself.

[31] The Hegelian redefinition of dialectic is not simply an extension of prior methods but a transformation into a generative logic: contradiction and negation become the immanent motors of conceptual and historical development.

[32] Hegel illustrates the transition from quantity to quality through material examples, notably incandescence in metals and phase transitions of water. Though these examples are problematic as logical analogies, their inclusion signals Hegel's willingness to treat dialectic as operative beyond thought — a move that later enabled materialist reinterpretations.

[33] I have been as neutral as humanly possible in the main text. However, in the footnotes I have, from time to time, allowed myself the liberty of personal reflection. The following is one such instance.

4.14 — Marxian Dialectic

Karl Marx's use of dialectic is rooted in his critique of capitalism [34] and his attempt to analyze the dynamics of historical change. Marx's approach is deeply indebted to Hegel, but reoriented through Feuerbach's materialism [35] and through engagement with British political economy. Instead of centering on abstract philosophical concepts, Marx's dialectic emphasizes the material conditions of society, particularly the structures of production and class relations. In this sense, his work redirected the dialectical tradition toward the analysis of concrete social realities (Marx, [1867] 1990).

A central feature of Marx's method is immanence: the contradictions that drive historical change are not imposed externally, but arise within the capitalist system itself [36]. The exploitation of labor, the concentration of wealth, and recurrent crises are not anomalies but structural contradictions. Marx argued that these contradictions generate both the instability of capitalism and the possibility of its transformation through class struggle, where the working class becomes the agent of its own emancipation.

Marx also employed Hegel's notion of the transition from quantity to quality, applying it to economics rather than metaphysics. Gradual quantitative changes in capital accumulation, he argued, can culminate in qualitative shifts — such as intensified exploitation, crises of overproduction, or revolutionary transformations

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Hegel was immensely productive, but precision was never his strength. He was careless with terminology, reckless in his choice of examples, and endlessly indulgent in "stretchable" interpretations. His claim that quantity and quality can transform into one another—illustrated with the tired example of ice, water, and steam, or even with the crude analogy of birth and death—is not profound but sloppy. These illustrations collapse under scrutiny, even within the eccentric logic of his own German idealism. Hegel was a pioneer and often innovative, but too often he lapsed into little more than intellectual gibberish.

[34] Marx's dialectical method provided a systematic framework for analyzing capitalism, its internal contradictions, and its historical development. Its influence extended well beyond philosophy into economics, political science, sociology, historiography, and critical theory.

[35] Feuerbach's critique of Hegelian idealism — particularly his emphasis on sensuous human existence and species-being — served as a transitional influence. Marx radicalized these themes, but Feuerbach's role highlights that Marx's materialism was not without precedent.

[36] The emphasis on immanence — contradictions arising within a system rather than from external pressures — marks continuity with Hegel, but redirected toward economic and social structures.

(Marx, [1867] 1990) [37]. By extending this principle to the dynamics of capitalism, Marx sought to capture its non-linear and crisis-prone character.

Marx thus assembled several building blocks already present in earlier thought: from Hegel, the emphasis on contradiction and development; from Feuerbach, the primacy of material conditions; from classical economists, insights into labor, value, and capital. His distinctive move was to fuse these elements into historical materialism, a framework in which social change is understood as the outcome of material production, class conflict, and systemic contradiction (Marx, [1845–1846] 1970; [1867] 1990).

Marx managed to reassemble existing strands — Hegelian contradiction, Feuerbachian materialism, and classical economics — into a new and effective materialist framework for analyzing "capitalism and class struggle".

4.15 — Engelsian Dialectic

Frederick Engels' views on dialectic emphasized the objective presence of contradictions in nature and society, arguing that contradictions are inherent to things and processes themselves (Engels, [1878] 1969; see also Reuten, 1997). For Engels, dialectic was not simply a method of thought but a reflection of real structures of change and development. A key principle in his account was the transition from quantity to quality, where gradual quantitative changes culminate in sudden qualitative transformations (Engels, [1878] 1969; see also Ilyenkov, 1977).

Unlike Hegel, who illustrated this principle largely through logical and conceptual examples, Engels grounded it in the natural sciences [38]. He cited the phase transitions of water, magnetic polarity reversals, the existence of allotropes (different structural forms of the same element), hydrocarbon addition reactions, and the systematic relations expressed in the periodic table as empirical instances of dialectical transformation. Engels also extended this principle to society, noting,

[37] Marx's use of the quantity–quality transition illustrates his adaptation of Hegelian categories to political economy, rather than an innovation of his own.

[38] A vast body of literature within orthodox Marxism, especially in Soviet philosophy, emphasized Engels' extension of dialectic to nature. Here, dialectic was interpreted not only as a logical or critical method but as an objective law governing matter itself. Thinkers such as Joseph Dietzgen, Georgi Plekhanov, and Evald Ilyenkov advanced this view, and many Soviet scientific works were framed as validations of dialectics in nature. This essay, however, does not pursue that line, since its focus is on the epistemological and logical status of dialectic within the history of thought.

for example, how the accumulation of wealth beyond a certain threshold transforms money into capital (Marx & Engels, [1848] 1976).

Through such examples, Engels expanded dialectic into a universal explanatory framework, treating it as a law that governed not only society but also nature itself. His emphasis on immanence maintained that contradictions and transformations arise internally within systems, whether in physical processes or social relations (Engels, [1878] 1969). This marked a departure from both Hegel's conceptual logic and Marx's historical materialism, situating dialectic instead as an ontological principle of matter and motion (Hegel, [1812–1816] 2010; see also Reuten, 2002).

Engels' work in *Anti-Dühring* exemplified this extension, critiquing static and metaphysical modes of thought while emphasizing the dynamic, contradictory, and transformative character of reality (Engels, [1878] 1969). Yet this very extension raises enduring philosophical questions: does invoking contradiction in physical processes amount to dialectic in any meaningful sense, or are such analogies metaphorical? Can quantity–quality transformations in chemistry or physics truly be considered dialectical if they lack the immanent conceptual development central to Hegel's method? And if dialectical laws operate in nature independently of human cognition or society, what ontological status should be ascribed to them?

Engels' distinctive contribution was to universalize dialectic as an ontological law of nature, grounding it in natural science as well as society — but this move introduced deep philosophical ambiguities that remain unresolved.

E. Contemporary Reinterpretations

4.16 — Transformative Reinterpretations outside System-Building

Although many contributions to dialectic aim at major systematic transformations, others introduce more localized but influential modifications. The following three figures represent distinct modes of reinterpretation — existential, methodological-political, and cultural — that expanded the reach of dialectical thought beyond system-building.

4.16.1 - Kierkegaard: Dialectic and the Leap of Subjectivity

Søren Kierkegaard critiques Hegelian dialectics for neglecting individual subjectivity and existential experience. While Hegel's dialectic unfolds impersonally through conceptual necessity, Kierkegaard emphasizes the unique and irreducible experience of the individual before God. For Kierkegaard, the "leap of faith" confronts paradoxes that cannot be mediated or synthesized rationally but must be endured existentially (Kierkegaard, [1849] 1980).

It is important to note that Kierkegaard himself did not describe the leap of faith as dialectical. The reinterpretation came later: thinkers such as Jean Wahl, Karl Jaspers, and Paul Tillich characterized Kierkegaard's paradoxical leap as a form of "existential dialectic." In their usage, "dialectic" no longer meant a logical resolution but rather the lived confrontation with irreducible contradiction.

4.16.2 - Lukács: Reification and Totality in Marxist Dialectic

Georg Lukács extends Marxian dialectics by introducing the concept of "reification": the process by which human social relations under capitalism take on the character of things, appearing autonomous and unchangeable. In *History and Class Consciousness* ([1923] 1971), Lukács argues that reification conceals the historical construction of reality and that dialectic must recover the *totality* behind these frozen appearances.

Here, "totality" is not a restatement of Hegelian synthesis. For Hegel, synthesis was the logical resolution of contradictions within conceptual development. For Lukács, by contrast, totality is a methodological principle: every social phenomenon can only be understood within the historical whole of capitalist society. Rather than dissolving contradictions, totality situates them within a broader structural horizon, enabling both critique and revolutionary praxis. This methodological move has had wide influence, though not without problems [39].

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[39] The concepts of *reification*, *totality*, and *non-closure* each grapple with the problem of how societies obscure or reveal their own structures. For Lukács, reification is the process by which relations between people appear as relations between things under capitalism, making human activity seem fixed and unchangeable. His methodological response is "totality": understanding each phenomenon only within the horizon of the whole. In contrast to Hegelian synthesis, totality does not resolve contradictions but situates them in a determinate historical context. The poststructuralist idea of "non-closure" resonates here: both reject the fantasy of ultimate reconciliation. But there is an important difference—non-closure stresses openness and contingency, while Lukács insists on historical determinacy, locating contradictions in the capitalist mode of production.

4.16.3 - Gramsci: Cultural Hegemony as Dialectical Struggle

Antonio Gramsci expands Marxian dialectic by emphasizing "cultural hegemony": the process by which dominant classes secure consent through ideological leadership as well as coercion. In *Prison Notebooks* ([1929–1935] 1971), Gramsci integrates dialectic with cultural analysis, showing how class struggle operates not only at the level of material production but also through struggles over cultural meanings, institutions, and intellectual authority.

For Gramsci, hegemony is dialectical because it is a struggle of contradictions within the cultural and institutional superstructure. This broadens the scope of dialectic beyond economics into culture, highlighting the contested and dynamic nature of ideology.

Kierkegaard, Lukács, and Gramsci each reinterpreted dialectic outside system-building: Kierkegaard existentially, Lukács methodologically and politically, Gramsci culturally. Their contributions illustrate the adaptability of dialectic as a tool for addressing paradox, social structures, and cultural struggles.

4.17 — Adorno's Negative Dialectic

Theodor Adorno's dialectic is defined by its negative orientation, emphasizing the non-identity between concepts and reality. For Adorno, thought and language inevitably fail to capture the complexity of the world (Adorno, [1966] 1973). Dialectic thus becomes a method for exposing contradictions in modern capitalist society, particularly the ways dominant ideologies legitimize oppression and domination.

Unlike earlier philosophers who sought to build dialectic into positive systems, Adorno's project is marked by systematic withdrawals. His *negative dialectics* rejects three classical features:

Reification, however, is not unique to capitalism but only one form of the universal tendency of societies to naturalize their structures, whether through tradition, religion, or status. The concept of the commodity should remain strictly within economics, not be elevated into a metaphysical master key for culture, politics, or consciousness. Lukács and Adorno overextend the term, and in doing so commit a kind of conceptual imperialism: they universalize a historically bounded category to explain everything. This overreach produces distortions, such as the claim that Enlightenment rationality is inherently totalitarian or that reproduction itself is reducible to economic calculation. These are not genuine insights but artifacts of a flawed conceptual inflation.

1. Synthesis — contradictions must not be reconciled into a higher unity.
2. Totality — coherent systems of thought are treated as ideological masks of domination.
3. Historical-teleology — dialectic is stripped of the belief in progressive development [40].

Through these withdrawals, Adorno redefines dialectic not as a path to reconciliation but as a practice of permanent critique, keeping contradiction alive as resistance against the violence of conceptual closure.

This stands in stark contrast to his predecessors. Kant deployed dialectic as a *critical boundary-policing tool* to clarify the limits of reason. Hegel reconceived dialectic as a *generative logic*, capable of building systems and tracing the development of thought and reality. Marx transformed dialectic into a *historical-materialist method*, linking contradiction to social and economic structures, particularly class struggle.

Adorno, however, offers neither clarification, nor system-building, nor historical grounding. Instead, he strips dialectic of constructive orientation and leaves it as pure negativity, a refusal to reconcile, progress, or redeem.

This orientation becomes explicit in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (with Max Horkheimer), where dialectic is no longer about epistemology or "truth", but about diagnosing reason itself as a historical disaster. They argue that Enlightenment rationality inevitably degenerates into instrumental reason, a form of calculation serving domination rather than liberation. Their infamous thesis that "Enlightenment is totalitarian" pushes this claim to the extreme: rationality itself is treated as complicit in oppression, culminating in fascism, capitalism, and technocratic control.

This move amounts to an intellectual declaration of war on science. By collapsing distinctions between emancipatory uses of science (medicine, democratic institutions, human rights discourse) and its abuses, Horkheimer and Adorno conflate method with misuse. Worse still, their argument is self-undermining: they

[40] The term "historical-teleological" is warranted because Adorno's negative dialectics rejects both (1) the historical unfolding of reason or class struggle as intrinsically progressive, and (2) the teleological belief in a final synthesis or redemption. His is a dialectic without a destination — aimed at sustained negativity rather than resolution.

deploy rational critique to argue against rationality, relying on the very Enlightenment tools they seek to delegitimize. In doing so, they risk turning dialectic into a rhetoric of suspicion without constructive resources, leaving only despair in place of critical progress. Yet precisely in its negativity, Adorno's project inspired whole fields of cultural critique, from postwar aesthetics to media studies, where dialectic was retooled less as a path to "truth" than as a lens for diagnosing domination.

Adorno's negative dialectic has undoubtedly influenced philosophy, cultural theory, and political critique. But it also represents a decisive rupture: the abandonment of dialectic as a vehicle of knowledge or emancipation, and its recasting as a mode of relentless negation. Whether this transformation should be seen as philosophical depth or as a dead end remains one of the sharpest debates about his legacy.

In contrast to Kant's limits, Hegel's system-building, and Marx's historical materialism, Adorno and Horkheimer recast dialectic as pure negation — a war on Enlightenment reason that collapses science into domination, undermines its own method, and risks leaving philosophy with critique but without hope.

4.18 — Fredric Jameson's Attempt to Modernize Dialectic

Fredric Jameson, in *Valences of the Dialectic* (2009), seeks to adapt dialectic to the complexities of late capitalism and postmodernity. He argues that dialectic must function both analytically and narratively, helping us grasp the totality of social contradictions that define contemporary life. Central to this project is his notion of cognitive mapping — a mode of interpretation designed to orient individuals within the vast and often opaque networks of global capitalism, allowing them to perceive their own position within larger economic, cultural, and geopolitical structures (Jameson, 2009).

In addition, Jameson introduces the building block of utopian critique, the search for latent utopian impulses embedded in cultural forms. Unlike Adorno's emphasis on negation, Jameson reads even mass culture as unconsciously expressing longings for alternative social arrangements. These "utopian traces" reveal both the constraints of the present and its unrealized possibilities (Jameson, 2005).

By combining cognitive mapping with utopian critique, Jameson retools dialectic into a cultural hermeneutics suited to the opacity of globalization. He inherits

Adorno's suspicion of totality but turns it toward interpretive and narrative practices that emphasize historical possibility rather than despair.

Yet, this adaptation raises questions. Unlike the canonical developments from Kant through Engels, which progressively added epistemological, ontological, historical, and material dimensions to dialectic, Jameson introduces no comparable conceptual innovation. Instead, his use of the term "dialectic" may serve more as a gesture of affiliation within the tradition of critical theory than as a rigorous philosophical extension.

Jameson reinterprets dialectic as a narrative and cultural hermeneutics for late capitalism, drawing on cognitive mapping and utopian critique. Whether this constitutes a genuine philosophical development or primarily a rhetorical continuation of the tradition remains an open question.

4.19 — Slavoj Žižek's Attempt to Modernize Dialectic

Slavoj Žižek attempts to revitalize dialectic by integrating Lacanian psychoanalysis, Hegelian logic, and Marxist critique. For Žižek, contradiction is not a moment to be sublated into unity but an ontological constant: reality itself is structured by incompleteness, impossibility, and antagonism (Žižek, 1989; Žižek, 2012).

Drawing on Lacan's concept of the *Real*, Žižek introduces structural impossibility as the core of dialectic: closure is always blocked, synthesis forever deferred. His dialectic centers on how subjectivity and ideology emerge from failed symbolizations, gaps, and trauma rather than from progressive conceptual reconciliation. He further develops the idea of the *parallax view* — the irreducible gap between perspectives that cannot be unified into a higher synthesis. For Žižek, reality is constituted by oscillation between incompatible viewpoints, not by their eventual resolution (Žižek, 2006).

To clarify this departure, one can compare Žižek's notion of "failed symbolization" with Gestalt psychology's concept of the "unfinished gestalt." Both begin from psychic tension in the face of incompleteness. Yet Gestalt assumes closure is possible: the mind seeks and often achieves the integration of fragments into coherent wholes. Žižek, in contrast, radicalizes incompletion, claiming the Real ensures that closure is impossible in principle. The comparison reveals a crucial point: if dialectic is stripped of synthesis, then Žižek's method resembles psychology rather than philosophy. His framework, however provocative, risks

ceasing to be a dialectical logic and instead becomes a psychoanalytic model of subjectivity.

This commitment to structural incompletion aligns Žižek, perhaps unintentionally, with Adorno's negative dialectic and Jameson's cultural hermeneutics. All three reject the classical dialectical trajectory of reconciliation, replacing it with open-ended contradiction, unresolved negativity, or symbolic opacity. But this trajectory raises a decisive question: at what point does the rejection of synthesis amount to the rejection of dialectic itself?

Žižek's defenders argue that his work preserves the "spirit of contradiction" central to dialectic, even if it abandons its logical form. His critics counter that what remains is not dialectic but a rhetoric of paradox and incompletion — an intellectually fertile psychology, perhaps, but no longer a philosophy of dialectic.

5 - Twists and Turns in the Concept of Dialectics

To synthesize the foregoing discussion, we may briefly track the key conceptual transitions that transformed the notion of dialectic across philosophical history. Each philosopher introduces or removes structural elements that redefine its function.

Zeno of Elea to Plato: Dialectic moves from paradoxical critique of motion and plurality toward a more systematic method, combining Socratic questioning with the theory of Forms to create a constructive ascent.

Plato to Aristotle: Dialectic shifts from metaphysical idealism to empirical and syllogistic reasoning, grounding itself in endoxa and structured disputation while preserving its dialogical core.

Aristotle to Neoplatonism: Logical inquiry becomes mystical ascent, adding hierarchical emanation, negative theology, and the vision of unity beyond being.

Neoplatonism to Islamic and Scholastic Dialectics: Dialectic is merged with theology, producing systematic traditions of disputation through figures such as Al-Farabi, Avicenna, Averroes, and Aquinas, where Aristotelian logic serves theological and philosophical ends.

Medieval Scholastics to Renaissance Humanism and Ramism: Dialectic is simplified into methodical and pedagogical tools, replacing dense metaphysical argumentation with binary clarity and didactic utility.

Pre-Kantian Critiques (Descartes, Locke, Hume): Dialectic is displaced by skepticism and methodological caution, undermining speculative metaphysics and preparing the ground for Kant's redefinition.

Kant to Hegel: A decisive redefinition occurs: Kant restricts dialectic to exposing reason's illusions, while Hegel transforms contradiction into the generative motor of thought, history, and reality itself.

Hegel to Marx: Dialectic is inverted from idealism to materialism, applied to class struggle and historical change as a critique of capitalism.

Marx to Engels: Dialectic is extended into nature itself, proposed as an objective set of laws governing physical and social transformation.

Engels to Frankfurt School (Adorno, Horkheimer): Dialectic is no longer a constructive method but becomes "negative dialectics," a critique of identity, domination, and false totality, where contradiction persists without resolution.

Kierkegaard, Lukács, and Gramsci: Outside system-building, Kierkegaard introduces existential paradox, Lukács develops reification and totality within Marxist dialectics, and Gramsci extends it into cultural hegemony and ideological struggle.

Frankfurt School to Jameson and Žižek: Dialectic drifts further from its classical function, reinterpreted as cultural mapping (Jameson) or ontological impossibility (Žižek). In both cases, it risks becoming a flexible rhetorical label, detached from its epistemological roots.

The history of dialectic resembles the construction of a grand building for reason: erected and expanded up to Hegel, redirected by Marx and Engels toward its surrounding grounds, and eventually dismantled by Adorno and later thinkers, leaving the concept fragmented and unstable.

6 - Conclusions

The concept of dialectic has undergone a series of deep and uneven transformations, stretching from ancient Greek philosophy to contemporary theory. Its early core lay in the rational examination of contradiction and the pursuit of conceptual clarity. Up to the Kant–Hegel transition, dialectic largely preserved its epistemological integrity, evolving from a method of inquiry and dialogue into a generative logic of thought and self-critique. From Hegel onward — particularly with Marx, Engels, and the Frankfurt School — this integrity fractured: dialectic was repurposed for historical materialism, social critique, or cultural analysis, often at the cost of its methodological and epistemological coherence. In more recent thinkers such as Jameson and Žižek, the term "dialectic" persists, but often as a flexible metaphor rather than a rigorously defined method.

This article has avoided offering a single formal definition of dialectic. Instead, it proposes minimal conditions for meaningful use. The historical trajectory shows both expansion and fragmentation, but against this background, certain conditions can be set for any contemporary use of the term. These conditions concern the cause, outcome, and structure of dialectical transformation:

1. **Generative contradiction (cause)** — internal contradictions must be the source of transformation, rather than external triggers or simple juxtaposition.
2. **Transformative discontinuity (outcome)** — the process must yield qualitative novelty, not just gradual modification or rhetorical contrast.
3. **Systematic method (structure)** — the transformation must follow a logic or procedure that develops concepts, rather than collapsing into metaphor or open-ended fragmentation.

Dialectic remains meaningful only when it entails contradiction as cause, discontinuity as outcome, and method as structure; without these, it dissolves into metaphor or ideological gesture.

7 - Postscript

The historical development of dialectic can be divided into three broad stages.

First (Zeno to Kant): Dialectic functioned as a simple tool for understanding phenomena and clarifying concepts. It remained largely uncontroversial, and in this article I have described its stages with minimal judgment.

Second (Hegel to Engels): Dialectic was expanded into a multi-purpose system. New structural components were added, and the tool was applied to increasingly broad domains. While its extension to new areas was not controversial, stronger claims — that all of nature and society must operate according to dialectical laws — provoked opposition. In this article I traced this development in detail but left its evaluation for the next two parts of the series.

Third (20th century, Horkheimer to Žižek): Dialectic underwent rapid transformation, often through the removal of components. This produced both creative reinterpretations and conceptual confusions. For this stage I provided not only description but also critical assessment.

The trajectory of dialectic may be summarized as *tool → system → fragmentation*, a pattern that frames both the historical overview of Part One and the analyses that follow in Parts Two and Three.

8 - Summary of the Next Sections

Part 2 of this article series offers a critical examination of the dialectical principle that quantitative accumulation leads to qualitative transformation — a core tenet of Hegelian dialectics — and evaluates its scientific validity. By analyzing seven widely cited examples from physics, chemistry, and biology, including phase transitions, incandescence, magnetic polarity reversal, allotropy, hydrocarbon series, the periodic table, and punctuated equilibrium, the next article argues that these phenomena are more accurately explained through continuous, externally mediated processes rather than through internal contradiction or ontological leaps. The analysis reveals that the “quantity-to-quality” transition, often invoked as a universal law, lacks empirical substantiation and methodological coherence when subjected to modern scientific scrutiny. The article concludes that while dialectic may retain heuristic or rhetorical value in certain domains, its extension into natural sciences (and most likely social sciences) as a lawlike explanatory framework is unwarranted and should be reconsidered.

Part 3 of this article series maintains that not all systemic transformations are dialectical, and many that appear so are quasi-dialectical transformations, better

explained by several other concepts, one of which is scale-dependent thresholds. To untrained eyes, quasi-dialectical transformations have a rudimentary resemblance to the Hegel-Engels dialectic, while they do not fulfil its requirements. Drawing from domains as varied as urban design, biological stability, artificial intelligence, and enzymatic systems, the article presents six cases of quasi-dialectical transformation. These transitions exhibit sharp discontinuities and systemic reorganization, yet remain intelligible without resorting to dialectical metaphysics. The article concludes by exploring the role of Inference to the Best Explanation (IBE) as a model for evaluating competing frameworks, and argues for a rethinking of dialectic not as a universal method but as one explanatory strategy among others.

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Appendix I

Birth and death years of the main philosophers mentioned in this article.

Name	Birth/death year
Zeno of Elea	-490 — -430
Plato	-427 — -347
Aristotle	-384 — -322
Plotinus	204 — 270
Al-Farabi	872 — 950
Avicenna	980 — 1037
Averroes	1126 — 1198
Thomas Aquinas	1225 — 1274
Ramus, Peter	1515 — 1572
Bacon, Francis	1561 — 1626
Descartes, René	1596 — 1650
Locke, John	1632 — 1704
Hume, David	1711 — 1776
Kant, Immanuel	1724 — 1804
Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich	1770 — 1831
Marx, Karl	1818 — 1883
Engels, Friedrich	1820 — 1895
Kierkegaard, Søren	1813 — 1855
Lukács, György	1885 — 1971
Gramsci, Antonio	1891 — 1937
Horkheimer, Max	1895 — 1973
Adorno, Theodor W.	1903 — 1969
Jameson, Fredric	1934 — 2024
Žižek, Slavoj	1949 —