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LEVEL: 10

[Forematter]

The Logical Structure of Dialectical Systems

[URL: LogicOfDialecticalSystems]

SECTIONS (& perhaps subsections):

I An Abstract Definition

II Examples

III Consequences of Understanding Morality Non-dialectically

Addendum/Appendix: The Ways of Relating Perspective on Speech and Writing

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

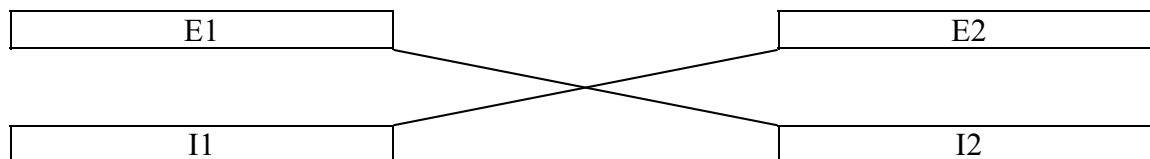
In this essay I describe the abstract logic of dialectical systems. I recognize that my description may be too abstract (not to mention tentative) to be of much use by itself. Even so, it will be helpful for the reader's general understanding of dialectical structures if I point out certain abstract, general features of them, and in any case I mean this description to be used in conjunction with the other references within this work to other, specific dialectical systems, shown in §II.

I An Abstract Definition

A dialectical system is a group of epistemic domains and the methods associated with those domains that have the following characteristics:

- the foundations of each of the epistemic methods can be undercut by at least one of the other methods; and
- there is no logical priority among these methods or domains such that in case of a conflict, one is to be believed over another.

The following figure depicts visually the logical structure in the case of two epistemic approaches:



[Until I am able to show the four causal links graphically, I must ask the reader to draw them in as follows: $E1 \rightarrow I2$; $I2 \rightarrow E2$; $E2 \rightarrow I1$; $I1 \rightarrow E1$.]

The two columns, with the numbers “1” and “2”, respectively, represent the two epistemic domains. They might be “theory” and “practice”, for example, since both theory and practice help us understand reality. Or they might be “my understanding” and “your understanding” of a situation.

The upper and lower rows, with the letters “E” and “I”, respectively, represent this knowledge as externalized and internalized, respectively. By “externalized” I mean formally, concretely represented, or at any rate knowable through a given method. It is the part of knowledge that lays claim on something outside itself. I think of it in terms of the three validity claims Habermas gives. It could be a scientific claim, i.e., a claim to describe some external objective reality. It could be a moral claim, i.e., a claim that others will agree to be governed by the norm given. It could be a claim about one’s own internal experience – not the experience itself but the externalized description of that experience.

By “internalized” I mean knowledge in what we might call its raw form, undigested, intuitive, unorganized. In a scientific theory, for example, it could be all the assumptions, both manifest and latent, that the scientist holds about what theories look like. For a post-Newtonian but pre-Einsteinian scientist, such an assumption might be that theories have to do with location of objects in fixed time and space. Of course this assumption remained unconscious,¹ until Einstein recognized its contingency and put it to good use by suggesting the alternative assumption that time and space were relative to each other and to one’s own frame of reference.

II Examples

For the sake of saving space, the description presents only the four basic elements. It doesn’t indicate the causal connections or the row and column names; these are as in the diagram found in the previous section.

A. The dialectic of moral belief

Formal representation of moral beliefs and/or principles	Actual decision and action
Interpretation / reconstruction of this decision, i.e., trying to express its nature externally. “Immanent critique” of a moral position.	Interpretation of a situation: intuition (=interaction of personas) is formed by moral beliefs & principles, i.e., trying to express one’s understanding of the situation as a final decision

B. The dialectic of personas in moral discourse

SELF-PORTRAIT

The I examines itself
as it thinks it is seen,
resting its fingers
on its temples,

¹Apparently Newton himself recognized that he was making this assumption, but of course he had no experimental evidence to call it into question. It apparently then became and remained a latent assumption of scientists until Einstein’s work.

stares into its own eyes,
 declares: What lies,
 you broken, divine
 pain-bound, ethereal,
 excrement, perfection...

The mystery, the self deception:
 look at me for a moment,
 turn your face from these reflections
 of self-love and self-loathing:

I, too, have a mirror

— Revan Schendler (1995)

1. Norms I am willing to accept and that I believe you will accept 2. My explanation / clarification of my moral views (stimulated by your own proposals)	1. Norms you are willing to accept and that you believe I will accept 2. Your explanation / clarification of your moral views (stimulated by my proposals)
1. Personas, both my own and my introjected version of you, in discourse 2. My re-interpretation / re-introjection of you based on my finding out about your moral beliefs	1. Personas in discourse: both your own and your introjected version of me 2. Your re-interpretation / re-introjection of me based on your finding out about my moral beliefs

xx

C. The dialectical arrangement of privileged moral positions

This diagram does not show a dialectic *per se*. It is related to the above dialectical system (of moral belief) in this fashion: each cell in the table below gives the moral system that results from privileging the corresponding cell in the dialectical system above. By “privileging” I mean cutting the dialectical cycle in such a way that the cell is the unmoved mover (i.e., the uncaused cause) of the subsequent cells in the cycle.

I am very fond of this diagram, because it seems to me to indicate that all the disputes among these various philosophical-moral positions simply reflect the failure to recognize the underlying dialectical system at work. In other words, it reconciles them without denying any of them.

Note that I am not yet certain of the proper terms, particularly for the positions in the left-hand column.

Legalism / modernism	Decisionism
Transcendentalism; postmodernism	Intuitionism

D. The dialectic of talking to oneself

My self / mind / thoughts – my responses to the reconstruction and interpretation of that which is spoken	My speech as actually spoken
Reconstruction and interpretation of that which one has spoken	Formulation of speech; the general, evanescent form of what one wishes to say.

My basic idea here is that speaking something aloud gives one's thought an external reality that one can then examine from the outside, so to speak.

E. Kohlberg's analysis of earlier theories of moral psychology

Morality is a matter of behavior, not reasoning, and in particular, behavior that is obedient to authority	People do disobey authority (cheat) to varying degrees
Interpretation / reconstruction of results in terms of settled patterns of moral behavior [unable to find any consistent pattern]	"Cheating" tests

F. Kohlberg's theory of the development of moral reasoning

Morality is a matter of coordinating claims; neo-Kantian criteria for judging moral reasoning	People <i>do</i> (all, and cross-culturally) respond to moral dilemmas in certain ways
Interpretation / reconstruction of people's responses in terms of a developmental sequence of reasoning structures	The "Defining Issues Test"

G. Habermas's justification of discourse ethics

Discourse ethics is moral; everyone <i>should</i> accept discourse ethics	The critic <i>does</i> accept discourse ethics as a result of being confronted with performative contradictions relying on the presuppositions of argumentation
Presuppositions of argumentation	Critical test of discourse ethics: can a critic be persuaded through use of "performative contradiction"?

See Engländer (2000) for a non-dialectical understanding of Habermas's discourse ethics, leading to what he believes to be a refutation of them.

H. The Dialectic of Morality

E1: Externalized principles / theories of what is moral	E2: The decision and its consequences
I1: Moral intuitions	I2: The situation we find in the world

- I1→E1: The attempt to sum up one's moral intuitions in a way that can be reliably held and communicated
- E1→I2: Interpretation of the moral principles as to how they apply in the situation encountered. The situation of I2 does not in itself say that it presents moral problems; only our interpretation of it can do so.
- I2→E2: The analysis of the situation to reach a final decision. This decision need not be in accord with the principles of E1.
- E2→I1: Interpretation of the decision and its consequences: Am I happy about what happened? What is apparent to me now? What did I notice? Can I still look everyone in the eye? – all of this on an intuitive level, even if we can make some of it explicit.

I. The ways of relating perspective

The reconstruction / interpretation of the experience as clarification and reconciliation of the personas and a discharge (release) of the painful emotions	Find blocked discourse, conflict, and dissociation; apply therapeutic discourse
The human mind automatically functions to reconcile the personas, except when painful emotion creates dissociation	My (or your) new experience

J. Piaget's genetic epistemology

Have, modify structure	Preserve structure; digest
Be acted upon; interpret the world as threat (or opportunity); survival or non-survival is interpretation of the world. Cast about for new ways of encountering the world	Act, move, experience the world, apply the structure (but to an unknown reality)

K. The dialectic of Taoism [very drafty first thoughts meant as a place-holder for better analysis]

The Tao that cannot be told; the eternal way	The 10,000 things; the Tao that can be told
Desireless	Desiring

Note that neither way is bad; they are just different modes of experience.

L. Theory and practice

A mente humana automaticamente funciona reconciliar as personas, exacto que a emoção doloroso pode criar a dissociação	<i>minha</i> (ou <i>sua</i>) experiência de unidade novo
a reconstrução / interpretação da experiência como o esclarecimento [esclarecimento?] ea reconciliação dos personas e o soltamento das emoções dolorosos	procure [discourse: discutir?] bloqueado e a desociação e on conflito; aplique [?] [discourse] terapêutico

I hope my Portuguese translation is comprehensible.

III Consequences of Understanding Morality Non-dialectically

In the basic figure of dialectics, here are the four elements

Formal representation of moral beliefs and/or principles	Actual decision and action
Interpretation / reconstruction of this decision, i.e., trying to express its nature externally. “Immanent critique” of a moral position.	Interpretation of a situation: intuition (=interaction of personas) is formed by moral beliefs & principles, i.e., trying to express one’s understanding of the situation as a final decision

[Jumping ahead a bit here:] As with all dialectical structures, the infinite path of this dialectic can be broken by removing any one of the four causal connections. This removal represents a *privileging* of the first position in the resulting chain. If we remove the vertical connection in the right-hand column, for example, this leaves a simple causal chain that runs from the top-right element (“Actual decision and action”) to the bottom-left, to the top-left, and finally ending at the bottom-right element. In this view, the entire moral domain derives from the top-right element; removal of the link has resulted in a logical structure in which that element has been privileged, so that it alone is not susceptible to contradiction by the other elements.

The moral position that privileges this (top-right) position is “decisionism”: the belief that in the

end morality is defined by what we decide to do, not our post-hoc intuitions or principles about our reasons. Similarly, the moral position privileging the bottom-right position is “intuitionism”, that privileging the bottom-left position is “transcendentalism”, and that privileging the top-left position is “legalism” or “modernism”. Figure xx below shows these positions.²

Legalism / modernism	Decisionism
Transcendentalism; postmodernism	Intuitionism

In short, I believe that what is generally understood as a conflict among these separate approaches can be better understood as a dialectical relationship among all of them. Each of them surely provides a critical stance with its own power, but none is sufficient to define morality by itself.

Addendum/Appendix: The Ways of Relating Perspective on Speech and Writing

Art lies in the resistance of the medium.

— [the source is unknown to me]

When two personas attempt to reach a settlement, language is not necessary. In this addendum I want to hold firm to this fundamental / foundational observation: while the ontology of a/m/sj may include the use of language as a tool, a/m/sj are not constituted by it.

Let me give a concrete example of non-linguistic settlements: my relationship with my [now late] cat, Happy.

[Presentation of this material, or perhaps only a reference to the material in [“Case Study: Our Relationships with Animals and Other Moral Patients – and Rocks?”](#).]

The point of this story is: 1. Happy and I developed an I-Thou relationship out of what was initially an I-you relationship (at least on my part; not then knowing Happy well, by definition, I can’t know or recall his attitude toward me). Like Adam, I dreamed, and found the dream was true. 2. Happy and I reached a true agreement³ on where he would sleep. The agreement extended into the future, was fairly well understood by both of us, etc. 3. The agreement was not based in language. It’s true that I talked to Happy, both while we made the agreement and also beforehand, but the connection here was not the words themselves but the feeling tone they communicated. I said them not so that Happy would understand them but

²June 20, 2002: I am not yet convinced that these names are accurate. I would appreciate your ideas on the matter.

³Or perhaps only a settlement. I was content with it, but Happy may have felt a need to be closer that was overridden by fear.

rather so that I could access and clearly express my feelings – so I could be true to them.⁴

So far I have said nothing about any role of language beyond that of helping one express non-verbal feeling tone. Clearly language has a greater role than that; what is it? In my view, language's first role is to help us externalize and, by its limitation, deliberately disrupt our understanding of the world. We talk in order to understand ourselves. Speech is not a perfect model of our internal experience. The process of speak-and-listen – a single term to denote the entire process of formulation into speech, the actual speech as speaker, and the interpretation of that actual speech – provides us with a means of viewing our internal experience from the outside. The feedback we receive from our speak-and-listen acts is imperfect, a distortion of our experience, and yet useful despite this distortion – in fact, even because of it. Let me return to Gestalt Theory's technique of the empty chair.⁵ My words spoken from one chair hang in the air as I switch chairs, enabling me to see my conflicts from the outside, as it were. If words were not external to me, or if they represented my mind perfectly, then the empty chair technique would not work, because any conflict I am unable to resolve in my own mind will, for the same reasons, be unresolvable through speech. Switching chairs would give me no purchase on my problem. But speech's very imperfection allows me to look at the situation afresh and thus to fashion a new response.⁶

So far, then, I've treated speech first as a means of centering on one's feeling tone and then as a means of internal dialogue to aid authenticity. It also aids us in settling conflicts with others in a similar way, although the feedback loop is twice as long, leaving aside one's continuing self-monitoring through speak-and-listen. But even with speech, the actual settlement is a matter of an experienced concordance, not the words themselves. This concordance is internal – for me, between me (as in, all my personas collectively) and my introjected persona of you. If we later disagree, the words themselves are a basis for new negotiation, but *they* are *not* the settlement itself.

Ditto with writing. Note that writing also communicates less feeling tone than speaking, distancing us from ourselves even further. But here again this is a tradeoff: even though it is possible to be slipperier with writing than with speaking (when one includes all the feeling tone communicated with speaking, not just the words), writing can be analyzed at a greater distance, longer, more carefully, than words.

⁴This practice came out of my conversations with my daughter Cathy about how she was raising her daughter Cally using the so-called “natural method”, a.k.a. “attachment parenting”, which I discuss in [another essay](#); suffice it here to say that Cathy talked with Cally from the moment of her birth, for the same reasons I described above for me and Happy. Eventually, of course, Cally started talking back in the way we commonly understand as cognitively structured language, while I never planned for or anticipated Happy doing so.

⁵Originally discussed in the essay, [Therapeutic Discourse](#).

⁶Hence the Gestalt Theory dictum, “If you find yourself stuck and don't know what to do, choosing to do anything is better than choosing nothing. Even if you choose badly, you'll be able to look at the problem afresh, with new information.

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS:⁷

Q: You give moral reasoning as an example of a dialectical system, and you point out that breaking its dialectical cycle at various points gives rise to the philosophies we term “intuitionism”, “decisionism”, “transcendentalism”, and “modernism”. But ever since the work of Quine and xx in the mid-20th century, philosophers have understood that absolute knowledge is not possible. What does your analysis add?

A: Let me first take issue with the assertion that philosophers understand that all these positions are inadequate. I’m sure many philosophers do, but by no means all. I’m not a classically trained philosopher, so this may be total bull-twaddle, but my impression is that many philosophers have, deep down, a sense that one of the positions really trumps the others. For example, transcendentalist philosophers (say) agree with the imperfections of modernism, intuitionism, and decisionism and yet deny any problem with transcendentalism. Meanwhile, of course, the decisionist philosophers are noting the imperfections of the other three positions without really granting the problems in their own position, and so on. This pattern of *almost*-complete relativism gives the impression that philosophers are open-minded about the problems of various positions – or at least 75% of the positions –, and yet none of those “partially open-minded” positions are truly dialectical. So the first contribution of my analysis is to note that all four positions are interconnected and that *none* can be privileged over the others. And naming the specific positions drives this point home. Even if someone believes deep down that h/her position is privileged, naming the positions demands a more direct response.

But the analysis goes beyond the mere recognition that the four positions are circularly interconnected and mutually subversive. Its other contributions lie in its noting the nature of the various interconnections: the distinction between the internal / ineffable and the external / effable, and of course the nature of how those two levels are related to each other; the concept of multiple epistemic sources and how none may be privileged; the way in which the external formulation of one epistemic reality can affect (subvert; correct; challenge; modify) the ineffable nature of another.

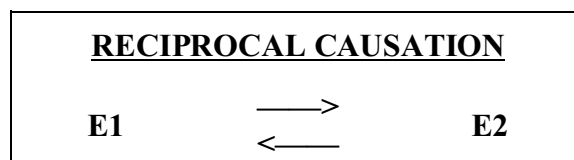
Q: Aren’t you just rehashing what Hegel said a long time ago?

A: It is true that Hegel invented the term, “dialectic”, and I am not suggesting that he misunderstood its nature. I believe the present work contributes to a clearer understanding of it.

⁷I am indebted to my colleagues Eve Cole, David Cole, Craig Grau, Richard Hudelson, David Pogue, and Bradley Thayer for pressing me on these issues. As always, good questions are more important than good answers, because the questions are harder to come by.

Q: To make the previous question even more specific, in what way do dialectical systems differ from any situation in which there is reciprocal causation?

A: Systems with reciprocal causation are already specified, i.e., they only have the upper row of the dialectical diagram:



Dialectical systems, however, acknowledge the presence of an in-the-end-mysterious ground of knowledge. Certainly if we are in a position to completely specify a system with reciprocal causation, we should do so, but we shouldn't then call it dialectical.

Q: How do you differentiate the internal and external worlds in practice?

A: xx

Q: Why do you draw connections among only two epistemic domains? Aren't there multiple such domains?

A: Yes, there are certainly many epistemic domains, if for no other reason than each human being is a unique domain. I have shown only two for simplicity of exposition.

Q: Why must there be multiple epistemic domains? Why not just one?

A: xx

Q: You seem to restrict the interaction among these four elements to just four, unidirectional arrows. Why just these four? Why can't there be connections from E1 to I1? Why not from I1 to I2, and vice versa?

A: [not sure all connections are possible, or make sense, but I need to look at the various possibilities more explicitly to be sure.]

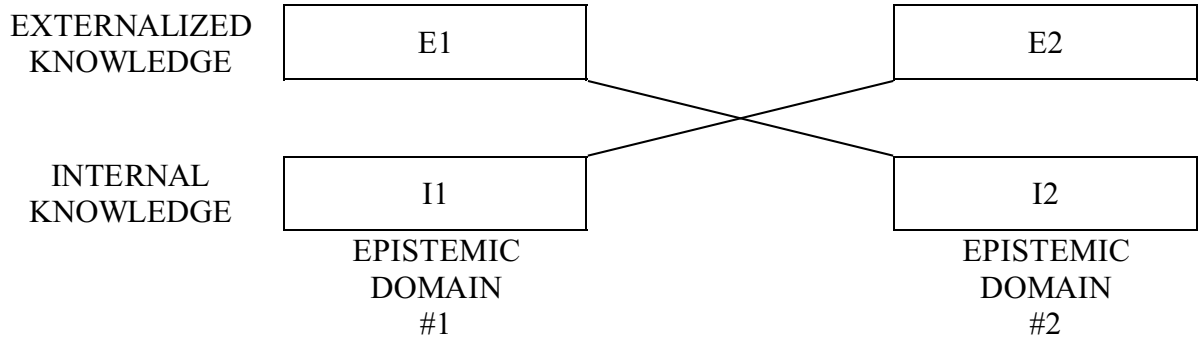
Q: If there are more causal connections than the four you show, why are you emphasizing just these four?

A:

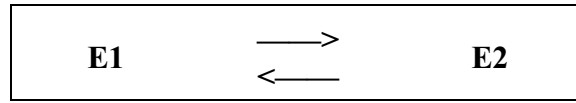
Q: To raise a broader question: why do we need recourse to the bottom (internal) positions at all? What problems drive us to that point? To use Wittgenstein's example of the bricklayers, why can't the meaning of "brick" be externally observable, regardless of the processing that goes on within the black box of the human brain?

A:

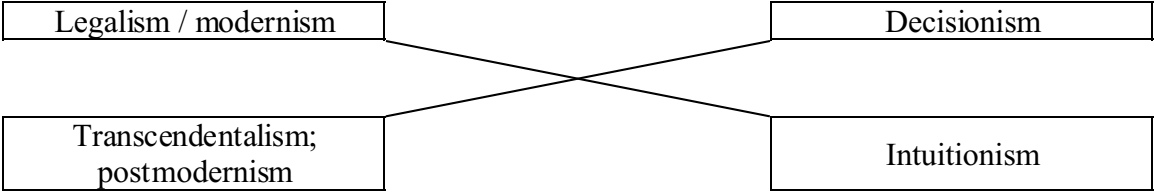
DIALECTICAL SYSTEMS: THE BASIC STRUCTURE



RECIPROCAL CAUSATION



**PHILOSOPHICAL POSITIONS RESULTING
FROM ABSOLUTIZING THE DIALECTICAL**



THE DIALECTIC OF MORALITY

Externalized principles / theories of what is moral	The decision and its consequences
Moral intuitions	The situation we find in the world

PERSONAS IN MORAL DISCOURSE

<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. (Formulated) norms I am willing to accept and that I believe you will accept2. My explanation / clarification of my moral views (stimulated by your own proposals)	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. (Formulated) norms you are willing to accept and that you believe I will accept2. Your explanation / clarification of your moral views (stimulated by my proposals)
<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Personas, both my own and my introjected version of you, in discourse2. My re-interpretation / re-introjection of you based on my finding out about your moral beliefs	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Personas in discourse: both your own and your introjected version of me2. Your re-interpretation / re-introjection of me based on your finding out about my moral beliefs

THE DIALECTIC OF TALKING TO MYSELF

My self / mind / thoughts – my responses to the reconstruction and interpretation of that which is spoken	My speech as actually spoken
Reconstruction and interpretation of that which one has spoken	Formulation of speech; the general, evanescent form of what one wishes to say.

KOHLBERG'S ANALYSIS OF EARLIER THEORIES OF MORAL PSYCHOLOGY

Morality is a matter of behavior, not reasoning, and in particular, behavior that is obedient to authority	People do disobey authority (cheat) to varying degrees
Interpretation / reconstruction of results in terms of settled patterns of moral behavior [unable to find any consistent pattern]	"Cheating" tests

KOHLBERG'S THEORY OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF MORAL REASONING

Morality is a matter of coordinating claims; neo-Kantian criteria for judging moral reasoning	People <i>do</i> (all, and cross-culturally) respond to moral dilemmas in certain ways
Interpretation / reconstruction of people's responses in terms of a developmental sequence of reasoning structures	The "Defining Issues Test"

HABERMAS'S JUSTIFICATION OF DISCOURSE ETHICS

Discourse ethics is moral; everyone <i>should</i> accept discourse ethics	The critic <i>does</i> accept discourse ethics as a result of being confronted with performative contradictions relying on the presuppositions of argumentation
Presuppositions of argumentation	Critical test of discourse ethics: can a critic be persuaded through use of "performative contradiction"?

FURTHER NOTES:

Dave Pogue says, "Context is a form of knowledge"; "Context is a dialectic".