

# Contradiction as Advance: Dialectical Thinking & Psychology

Michael Caplan / Nov. 24 & Dec. 1, 2024 / Online workshop, session 2

## *The central dialectic of psychology (some additional thoughts after the workshop)*

I've added this section after mulling over the questions and discussions in our second workshop session, during which I presented the below Introduction, a reiteration of some of the references to dialectic from Giegerich, and the two examples at the end. This proved more than enough, so we didn't get around to revisiting the keywords, included here. But what jumps out at me now is the one dialectic *essential* to psychology – its very Concept, Giegerich might say: “It is vital for psychology to understand this dialectic. You look at the phenomenal in order to see something else!” (*WiS*, 311). It is about *how we see the real*: as the phenomenal *and* as something else, through the phenomenal *to* something else.

This short statement of Giegerich's represents the fulcrum on which psychology's unique action depends, the very heart of its methodology. And even this founding contradiction, between the “phenomenal” and the “something else”, between the real as it appears and the “other picture” (Jung) that looms up, is thoroughly, absolutely dialectical in Giegerich's “true” psychology. (This is why it is a truly *psychological* psychology.) Whereas Freud proposed infantile sexuality *as* the other picture, or Jung and Hillman, the archetypes, or other psychologists and theorists their own versions of what's *really* going on in the real, true psychology is “not permitted to invent a positively existing psyche [or any positively existing truth – MC] *behind* psychological phenomena. The phenomena have nothing behind them” (*DAP*, 43-44). Here is psychology's alchemical Stone, what its opus requires and its operations make possible: to see something else in phenomena, but not something behind them – for there is “nothing behind them”. In order for psychology to “see something else”, it must nevertheless “look at the phenomenal” exclusively. It may work only with what's given (although that includes all the theories and ideas *about* what's given, which are also given).

It's natural enough to imagine something standing behind the everyday world, imparting meaning to it. Every variety of mythology – from the earliest ancestor tales to pantheons of deities to Platonic Ideas, even including Freud's fantasies about drives and Jung's beliefs about eternally recurring patterns – has imagined something *else* giving form to the phenomenal. How is “true psychology” unlike these? Because rather than imagining a *different* world behind this one, it sees *this world* differently. (This is, I would suggest, what Giegerich intends by speaking of psychology as “post-metaphysical”.) Rather than imagining a god who takes the shape of a human, as in mythological thinking, psychology – like Christianity's notion of Christ as at once fully human and fully divine – recognizes two realities exhibiting an impossible mathematics: 100% + 100%, both the one and the other at all times, depending strictly on how it's seen. And dialectical thinking is indispensable because it works through such seeming contradictions. It teaches psychology to see phenomena *doubly*: in their concreteness and actuality and, at the same time, as soul, as meaning.

We have our identity as Jungians (or should I say: as psychologists, which would be the same thing) if in everything we experience One changes to Two for us; if we experience not only ourselves, our patients, and Jungian psychology, but also every particular phenomenon and each individual statement as double-bottomed, bottomless. But then the reverse applies too: each person, no matter of what psychological school, for whom One has changed to Two in the way he sees the world, each person who on his own theoretical base penetrates so consistently into the depths that he plunges into the bottomlessness of his own ground, is *ipso facto* a “Jungian” even if he has never heard of Jung (*CEP* 1, 170)

To me, this is among Giegerich's most provocative, nearly mystical statements, but it is strictly, soberly conceptual. It is about how our sense of worldly realities (“every particular phenomenon”) is transformed by an interpretive recognition of their “bottomlessness” – which he also alludes to when he speaks of their *inner infinity*, self-character, or even subjectivity. This is why he and Hillman value the term “eachness” (from William James): because this work is about articulating the *psychological identity* of phenomena, their “soul” (“immanent animating living principle”, in Angelica Nuzzo's phrase), their very reason for being – that is, for their coming to us, their appearing (*phainomenon* “that which appears”).

Discerning as much, however, requires the greatest possible fidelity to what is actually present, in and as the real. Giegerich even goes so far as to say (*CEP* 2, 94) that “Western mankind owes reality worship [...]”! Indeed, how could a psychologist hope to understand a case without its details, without the facts of the matter? What would there be to analyze and interpret? Yet, as we know, the question is precisely *not* about these things, as such: “So you have to truly devote yourself to the phenomenal and yet at the same time *not* intend it as your object” (*WiS*, 311). How vital is this “not”! “For psychology is not about life and life phenomena, not about people and their development or behavior, but it is about ‘the soul,’ the ‘logical life,’ the dialectics operative *within* such life phenomena, *within* people’s behavior” (*DAP*, 2).

This is where the Owl of Minerva makes her ascent, for reflection itself is our first and preeminent self-contradiction. The Owl’s flight arrests forward movement, normal progression, willfulness (“ego”). But her motion is not to be read naturalistically, as occasioned by the close of day, or even metaphorically as the conclusion of a moment in time when things become clear. Psychologically speaking, her upward flight *generates* the dusk; or rather, the two aspects of the whole image are co-originary, constellating one another. For, when we engage in the *activity* of reflection, we are not merely spectators but creators, and ultimately responsible for our speculations. And yet, only through such interpretive interventions on our part may the phenomenon be, as Giegerich puts it, reflected back into *itself*. Only by our “reading of the signs” may its soul-sense emerge, using *our* words to give it *its* say (as Jung counseled about interpreting dreams).

Hegel’s famous “tarrying with the negative” is just this *acceptance* of being immobilized in one’s ability to understand, as thinking loses its “natural” mind and undergoes the “death” of its prior identity. Fortitude is needed to tarry thus, to hold in thought the inherent tensions that make each real phenomenon what it is, to go over and over its constituent elements in all their apparent oppositions and contradictions – to “say” the phenomenon (once more per Jung’s counsel about dreams) again and again “as best you can”. This is the poverty, as well as the inexhaustible richness of psychology: it has nothing but the phenomenal real to work with.

So we are stuck. We can move neither forward nor back. But if we do not try to steal away from this hopeless situation by means of some defense mechanisms, if instead we honestly endure our being stuck, paradoxically something will start to move. A reversal takes place. At first, *we* had tried to be the ones giving the answer to the identity problem. Now we are immobilized, and what is left to us is to listen to what the hopeless situation may tell us. (*CEP* 1, 155)

## *Introduction to the 2<sup>nd</sup> session*

The practice we refer to as “dialectical thinking” makes us question our assumptions at every turn, yet somehow it also allows us to better orient our thinking toward the real – an apparent contradiction that encapsulates all that is both beguiling and frustrating about the notion. We sense that it can move us toward the core, toward the very soul of some matter of importance, in a way other forms of thinking, other ways of interpreting phenomena cannot. Yet we encounter great difficulty when trying to articulate it. I go through this all the time, even though I’m giving this workshop – and even though I feel myself perhaps unusually at home in this territory and comfortable with its laws. (For whatever reasons, the sort of intellectual dancing it calls for is the kind my mind enjoys performing. That’s why I’m always happy to try thinking about some matter “dialectically”, like a batter welcomes the pitcher’s throw. As I put it last session, I’m drawn to the educational notion of “teaching the controversy” – bring it on!)

So, when *do* we turn to what we think of as a “dialectical” approach, even though we might not be able to define it readily? When do we feel a need to understand something “dialectically”? When do we sense that “dialectics” might be best suited to the task? What sort of matter seems to call for it?

Isn’t it always when a question confounds the kind of response that natural thinking allows for? Isn’t it always when we’re stopped short, when the progression of things – including the habitual progression of thought – is arrested and requires us to reorient? Isn’t it, in short, when a reality challenges our capacity to think it?

The reality of hunger only challenges the capacity to think of acquiring an appropriate food source. The reality of moving through space only challenges the capacity to think of how best to use one’s body to get somewhere. Neither of these forms of thinking require us to challenge thinking itself, let alone to investigate its very nature. Such thinking happens below our own awareness, and at one with its actions in the world of positive reality. It’s only when we learn a new physical activity, like driving, that we must interrogate our own reactions and bring them under conscious control, and then only to become able to forget them once driving becomes “second nature”.

But there are clearly other kinds of realities, no less urgent and sometimes matters of life or death, that call for another kind of thinking. In Hegel’s view, philosophy itself began with the need, arising first with the pre-Socratics, to think about the relationship between being and thought, as such. A chasm suddenly appeared to those ancient Greeks that had never needed addressing before in human history. (Why such a question arose there and then is, of course, critically important but not something to get into right now. Suffice to say it would have been, in psychological terms, essential to the soul’s own project.) Although on a completely different scale, this was not totally unlike what happened to me during the youthful breakdown I mentioned before, with its depersonalization, the feeling of radical disconnection between the physicality of my body and my immaterial mind, my “I”.

So, matters calling for dialectical comprehension are those that challenge our very ability to think them, and that will inevitably kick larger our thinking itself, compelling us to transform our “natural” orientation by means of a contra natural logic, in order to accommodate what we discover. And we *discover* by attending with utmost fidelity to the phenomenon, which teaches us how to think it.

Dialectical thinking promises to *raise reality up into thought*, to make reality *thinkable*; and it does so by *making thinking real to us*, by bringing thinking “down” to the level of an activity, something we *do*, that is in our own hands, so to speak. Recall Hillman: “We are thinking about thoughts, not about things, or about the effect of thoughts upon our experience of things.”

In this session, I’ll go back over some of what I mentioned last time – not dialectically, to challenge or contradict it, but simply to fill it out a bit more. But I will begin where I ended, with a selection of references from Giegerich. I’ll then touch on my keywords again (quoting a relevant passage from the previous text in red), in the hope that their cross-connections may be further illuminated. And I’ll conclude with two topics calling for dialectical comprehension that we can “practice” on a bit, guided by their phenomenology, by *how they appear to us and as us*: the “I” and the body/mind relation.

### Some examples from Giegerich, again

In the examples from Giegerich I gave in the first session, he comes at dialectical realities from both directions: as dualities that together constitute phenomenological *wholes*, and as wholes constituted *by* their internal duality. First, some of the dualities I cited, which one must become able to think together in their unity:

- “inner and outer” (CEP 3, 29)
- “openness and closure” (CEP 1, 15)
- “reception and production” (CEP 5, 170)
- “perception and production” (CEP 5, 175)
- “the semantic and the syntactical” (CEP 4, 283)
- “‘being gripped’ and ... ‘grasping’” (SLL, 41)
- “closing in on’ and ‘leaving totally free’” (SLL, 236), and
- “the literal-factual and the imaginal” (CEP 3, 328).

None of these pairs is the same; they are not interchangeable. Some of their dualities are directly opposing (openness and closure), others are otherwise related (semantics and syntax). Each configuration of meaning differs, because dialectics is a *logic of content*. But analyzing them will always follow this general pattern: How is each item in each pair alike and different from its other, dependent upon its other, and constituted by its very relationship with its other? What sort of *whole* does each pair together therefore constitute? And what does that tell us about the phenomenon or activity it delineates?

This leads to the other kind of examples, which are singular but each to be *understood* as internally dialectical, and which included:

- “intellectual, poetic, artistic productivity (i.e., that it is at once subjective and objective, production and product, active and passive)” (CEP 5, 313)
- “the standpoint of psychology” (DAP, 26)
- “the soul” (CEP 3, 29)
- “human existence” (CEP 1, 261), and
- “reality” (SLL, 200).

Each of these items is constituted by the appearance within it of a two-ness that generates its very appearance, its phenomenological reality as such. Soul, psychology, creative productivity, human existence and, by this account, even reality exist only by virtue of the ongoing *co-existence*, the ceaseless *co-constituting* of their two “sides” or, as Hegel would say, their two *moments*. Human reality *is* both its natural and its contra natural aspects. Only the contra natural practice of dialectical thinking, however, can reveal as much, because such comprehension is beyond the “natural mind” – the *unio naturalis*, naturalism, finite thinking, Hegel’s “Understanding”.

## Some keywords, again

*Text in red is from the Keywords section of the first workshop session, on which the following expands.*

**Contradiction** Self-contradiction facilitates the conceptual movement he [Giegerich] calls recursive progression, and this alone makes dialectical thinking possible. Why must we return and retrace our steps from a different angle? Because thinking is itself sequential, occurring *chronologically* and proceeding *linearly*. Even going back over the same material is going forward in time and in thought. So, reality's complications and oppositions must be allowed to *sequentially subvert* the linearity of discourse – that is, thinking must be allowed to contradict itself, one perspective to undermine another. Through this process, successive interpretations of a given phenomenon may, with discipline, be held in mind to deepen and enliven one another, and thinking become capable of the mercurial mobility necessary to “think the real”.

**Natural** It “must have an experience of ‘rupture’ [...]”. So, why *contradiction*? Ultimately, because the situation we find ourselves in gives us no other choice – *it* has contradicted *us*. (This even applies to the sudden rupture with mythological certitude that marked the beginning of philosophy in ancient Greece.) The experience of rupture occasions a turn to another sort of thinking, sometimes in desperation, because the habitual moves of the “natural mind” prove inadequate and cannot advance. So, instead of remaining stuck in opposition, thinking submits to the fullness of what the phenomenon displays, listens to what the situation tells us, attends to all that its reality presents, even if seemingly opposed or contradictory. (This work takes time; it took philosophy more than two millennia.) Thinking may thereby facilitate its own gradual transformation, even against our resistances.

**Reflection** Yet *we can fly upward as Minerva's owl and thereby generate the dusk ourselves – even though the reflective image below only appears to have stopped time, which still rushes onward (and sustains our very reflecting)*. Reflection, although a cessation of “natural” activity and forward movement, is itself of course an activity. Even if we just hold one term of any opposed pair in mind, we discover that thinking is inherently in motion, composed of internal relationships and not static entities. Thinking “inner” necessarily also means thinking “outer” – they implicate and depend upon one another to form the notion of physical space; and in the final analysis, all mental forms are interconnected. (This is the gist of Hegel's Logic, which is really nothing less than a phenomenology of thinking.) And while thought is pure activity – Giegerich speaks of it as *actus* (“Whatever cannot be thought in terms of a thing-like substrate, but needs to be thought as ongoing performance or enactment is ‘actuose’” – CEP 4, n. 3, 292) – and while reflection itself is “made of” nothing *but* thought, reflection nonetheless allows enduring patterns to appear, in the very midst of time's flow. Indeed, what is the “I” but an enduring pattern, encountering other patterns in that placeless space, that non-place, that contra natural “realm” Giegerich calls absolute negativity? To discern those patterns faithfully, to sketch out their shapes, is the work of reflection – it is what Minerva's Owl *sees*. To read them for what they together signify, for their inner logic, is the work of dialectical thinking – her speculative *wisdom*.

**Thinking and reality** The work of psychological interpretation is that of catching up with *the thinking we do with our lives*: “the only thing that really counts is what our real behavior thinks”, says Giegerich. “What our real behavior thinks” – the inner conflicts, questions, and contradictions it embodies – constitute its truth, its soul. And the truth not only “will out”, as per Shakespeare, but already *is* out, if you look at human realities with an eye to *whatever* they show (even despite their authors' intentions), with the cold *albedo* look of Minerva's Owl. This is why it is essential that whatever is given *by* the phenomenon be *received* by us, that what is offered by reality be *admitted* (both allowed entrance into thought and avowed as actually the case). Willful blindness, through denial or neurotic dissociation, is the psychologist's very target. We are trying to *think the real*, whether “the real” is consciousness (Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*), thinking itself (Hegel's *Science of Logic*), or a dream, a text, or a life situation, collective or personal. We are trying to understand the *sense* of that which presents itself *as* a phenomenon, the meaning *in* what appears – and in *how* it appears. This isn't because everything in reality makes sense, or that it will all make sense. Instead, psychology's wager,



great as it is, is *only* that that which is indeed *made of sense makes sense*, that there *is* meaning (even in our sense of meaningless) – because “the meaning of phenomena (that is, *that* they have a meaning) is a fundamental methodological presupposition of my work. [...] This is the only condition under which psychology is possible. Psychological phenomena are *events of meaning*. And to be events of meaning is their nature” (CEP 3, 175).

**Psychology** And psychology’s phenomenological notion of reality is absolute: it is *that which appears to us and as us*. As Giegerich and Hillman both declare, there is no exit, no escape. Psychology is concerned with the inherent doubleness of phenomena, even ourselves; with the world as we create it through our very ideas, but that we never chose and must take up in the midst of its ongoing life; with reality insofar as we help to form and influence it, and yet, in order to do so, whose givenness and inescapable necessity we must also accept. Psychology represents a (re)cognition of how reality appears both *to us* and *as us*, and entails taking responsibility for our response to what reality asks of us, whether in the interpersonal, cultural, or conceptual domains, whether on the level of our actual human interactions, cultural activities, or our very thinking. No matter if the “presenting problem” – that which has occasioned the rupture in the “natural” course of things – presents itself on the literal couch of the therapy room or on the figurative couch of our speculative theorizing, psychology’s approach will be the same: a disciplined fidelity (indeed, a *discipleship*) to the *logos of psyché* as it displays itself through the phenomena of our actual lives.

**Logos** [...] its discipline must be enacted. We come to understand it only by doing it, by subjectively going through it. If we turn to dialectical thinking when faced with a rupture and motion is arrested, when we are compelled to re-flect (look again, “bend back”) because we cannot flex our usual action muscles, how does this *return us* to “the real”? Because psychology never truly leaves it. For all its Underworld vision (Hillman), its absolute-negative interiorization (Giegerich), its affirmation of Hegel’s “Inverted World”, it is finally “a speculation in the service of, and thus rigorously bound by, the real phenomenon that has become one’s *prima materia*” (Giegerich, “Jungian psychology as metaphysics?”, *International Journal of Jungian Studies*, 2014, 6). For a psychology with soul, as Jung and Giegerich and Hillman intend, soul is real, even if not positively existing, and “real” isn’t, as we’d previously presumed, mere positive, natural existence:

The *union* of opposites (or the resolution of the contradiction) is precisely the prior reality, and a *reality* from the outset, not something to be created. What has been there from the beginning is allowed to catch up with consciousness, to come home to consciousness. (DAP, 5)

**Soul** No other interpretive approach works the way psychological analysis does, because none seek to address the “soul” of their subject matter [...] *that which animates a living reality from within*. Giegerich’s manner of employing the word “soul” is appealing because of its insistent negativity, appropriate to today’s abstract stage of thinking. Following Giegerich’s lead and our own contemporary sensibility, we say that *our* “soul” is *not* the old-fashioned, reified, metaphysical, mythological soul! The “not” comes naturally to us. It is even the key operator in the dialectical logic of psychological thinking. (Recall: “you have to truly devote yourself to the phenomenal and yet at the same time *not* intend it as your object”.) But soul, being itself dialectically constituted, is always found in contra natural movement, even if this goes contra the skepticism that is our second nature today. Our commitment to the “not”, however essential, nevertheless exposes us to a danger, however obscured: that we become unable to articulate and defend a contra natural realism that *includes* soul. Natural thinking cannot, as we know, think an outside that is inside and an inside that is outside, an identity that is different from itself, a movement that goes in opposite directions at once. But does not reality itself demand something other than, *more than* naturalistic thinking and the “natural mind”, which cannot hope to do justice to *that which appears to us and as us*? The word “soul” continues to hold out a certain profound promise, despite its anachronism. So, what then really *is* this “soul” that is *not* “soul”?

**Dialectic** This approach discloses [...] the very identity of its subject matter as unidentical *with itself*[...].

The Philosopher's Stone in alchemy is, as we know, "the stone that is not a stone". Giegerich breaks down this notion: "1. The stone is a stone. 2. The stone is not a stone. 3. Despite being not a stone, it is not anything else nor simply nothing at all, but nevertheless a stone. And only as this *in itself* (inwardly) negated stone is it the *philosophers' stone*" (CEP 4, 367). Thus, he affirms, "the 'not' does land us somewhere. We do arrive. Where? Of course back at the starting point. But at a transformed starting point, because it has absorbed the negation [...]". We should therefore find ourselves, in the end, able to talk about the soul that is not soul, that is not anything else altogether or simply nothing at all, yet that is nothing other than soul; about the "something else" that is not something else, which is found in the phenomenal that is not the phenomenal yet is nothing other than the phenomenal; and by means of a methodology that is not a methodology, yet is also just that.

*And if the soul is an unknown that seems to elude our attempts to understand it, this is because we have as yet no language and no method appropriate to the phenomenology of its reality.*

– Evangelos Christou, *The Logos of the Soul*

The mind needs to learn to easily make the complex logical, dialectical movements that are required if an understanding is to be truly psychological and if the logical level of soul is to be reached at all. It needs to acquire truly psychological categories and forms of thought, and thorough practice in working with them.

– *The Soul's Logical Life*

The human mind is naturally inclined by the senses to see itself externally in the body, and only with great difficulty does it come to understand itself by reflection.

– Giambattista Vico, *The New Science of Giambattista Vico: Third Edition (1774)*

## Practice

Here are two dialectical challenges we might think about:

**The word "I"** The first-person singular pronoun could not be more universal: everyone says "I". But the word's sheer simplicity and generality are bound to their conceptual opposite, to the most singular sense of *being oneself*, of one's utterly unique, absolutely personal *experiencing*. These two truths co-exist in ceaselessly productive self-mediating relation. The word "I" is continually gathering under its banner all one's individual experiences, one's very identity, while these experiences fill the void of the word with its entire meaning – and an infinitely generative one, at that. Giegerich has often pointed out the dialectical relation between "dead letter and living spirit" (*WiS*, 72); there is no plainer, starker example than the word "I" and I, myself.

**Body/Mind** To refer again to my own experience, the question I faced during my youthful breakdown was how *think* the factual *reality* I felt compelled to accept (and this, of course, was a mark of my sanity): that, as a human being (and not an alien, as I did indeed sometimes almost believe), I am 100% material and 100% immaterial, two contradictory truths co-existing in ceaseless mutual generation. I saw that the very possibility of thinking in these terms (and of having the dissociative experience itself) only exists *within* the 100% that is immaterial, only *within mind*. And this was why *thinking* had to be kicked larger, why my capacity to comprehend reality conceptually had to become less naturalistic and more dialectical.