Contradiction as Advance: Dialectical Thinking & Psychology

Michael Caplan / Nov. 24 & Dec. 1, 2024

Preamble to the workshop

I come to this material neither as a psychologist nor an academic, but an interested layman, sometimes with a personal stake in the matter. (I've included an Addendum, should you be interested in my background and some rather colourful reasons for my affinity for the dialectical.) This has been tremendously beneficial, because I've had to rearticulate the relevant concepts for myself, in my own words. I've sketched out my working sense of a few key terms, below. We can address them in the first session and refer to them as we go along. Some phrases selected from Giegerich's writing follow, mentioning dialectical relationships of various kinds.

Introduction

The term "dialectical" is imported from philosophy, where it's commonplace, much studied, and often disputed. I can try to address some of these questions if they come up, to the best of my ability, but I am aiming instead to capture something of the essence of the notion, specifically as it relates to what Wolfgang Giegerich calls "true psychology". In any case, it has always seemed to me best to approach such complex ideas as freshly and directly as possible, while of course relying on relevant sources for insight and direction.

We certainly get a feel for it from reading Giegerich, where "dialectical" appears regularly, frequently associated with words like "alchemical" and "uroboric" (after the mythological snake, Uroboros, eating its own tail). But when we try to grasp it, it often eludes us. Why does Giegerich insist on the centrality of this philosophical idea to psychological thinking? What sort of interpretive strategy *is* psychology, that it strives for fidelity to our real lives and real human behaviour while depending so crucially upon a slippery notion like dialectical thinking?

"Dialectic" was originally Plato's term for the back-and-forth of critical reason that characterizes the Socratic inquiry after truth. The medieval Scholastics began to systematize it, attempting to support religious revelation with rational argumentation. Its crowning achievement was, of course, in the 19th-century work of Hegel, at the highpoint of reason's self-confidence. The notion was then faced with the subsequent crisis of reason, deconstructed by his inevitable successors and undermined by the brutal march of history. Perhaps he wouldn't have been surprised, however, that not only has dialectic *not* disappeared, but that it has been brilliantly clarified and powerfully furthered by another generation of thinkers, able to take into account the profound challenges since his time.

Etymologically, the term stems from the Greek *dia* "across, between" and *legein* "to speak" (hence *logos*). *Dialegesthai* simply meant "to converse, discuss, argue", and *dialektos*, "talk, conversation, speech", as well as referring to the distinct languages of particular regions. For this workshop, we, in our various "dialects" (some fluent in this language, others less so) and across our distances of background and expertise, will be speaking about *speaking-about*, thinking about thinking. For in psychology, as James Hillman writes, "We are thinking about thoughts, not about things, or about the effect of thoughts upon our experience of things."[1] An education in dialectical thinking is ultimately an initiation into the nature of thinking as such.

Contradiction　　The Latin *dicere* is from "to speak", and *contra* means "against". Giegerich often goes back over a topic from an opposing angle, speaking against his prior formulations. But he is not merely layering positions to bring out the depth of real-world phenomena (itself, clearly valuable) or to identify their unifying factors. He is going further, raising contradiction to the level of a defining principle: "Such is [...] the logical life of the soul," he writes; "[...] it is one single act or attitude that in itself moves in opposite directions and thus is self-contradictory".[2] Self-contradiction facilitates the conceptual movement he calls *recursive progression*, and this alone makes dialectical thinking possible. So, in our *speaking about speaking*, we're specifically concerned with the function of *speaking against*. We're asking why self-contradiction is necessary, that is, how the recursive can actually help us to progress in our understanding.

Natural　　What dialectical thinking as such contradicts and subverts is the "natural mind". (We'll leave aside for now the question of their dialectical resolution – it's the alchemical goal, the Stone!) Hegel refers to this as "the Understanding" or finite thinking. Giegerich sometimes employs the alchemical term, *unio naturalis*, for the still-unbroken unity of thinking with itself and its objects, the innocent, unquestioning state of mind that takes it all naturally, naturalistically. It is a "day-world perspective, [...] informed by the undialectical, binary opposition of subject and object [...]".[3] It's a creaturely view, concerned with navigating material existence, and it is the positivist view of the physical sciences. And we naturally *resist* the contra natural. As Markus Gabriel explains, "natural consciousness is least of all inclined to busy itself with accounting for the structure of its own reflection". It "must have an experience of 'rupture' [...] an experience of skeptical 'confusion'", for "without the engine of skeptical disorientation, absolutely no impulse to philosophize would arise in natural consciousness".[4] This "confusion" may derive simply from a philosophical temperament, a skeptical orientation in the individual. Historically, it required the break with mythological consciousness achieved by the pre-Socratics, first establishing our tradition of self-inquiry. It may also be occasioned by a personal breakdown that arrests life's forward motion and provokes a turn, often desperate, to reflection and speculation.

Reflection　　Paradigmatic emblem of philosophy for Hegel and often mentioned by Giegerich, the mythic Owl of Minerva is said to fly upward at dusk, for in the silvery moonlight reflections become possible and insight conceivable. In the course of time, however, there is no pause, no dusk. 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). The nature of nature is to progress, but something else unfolds in that contra natural realm Giegerich calls the *absolute negative* and which "come[s] about only *through a logical act*, through the *negation* of externality, of space as such".[5] And nothing is more *absolutely* dialectical than reflection's "placeless space" (to borrow a term from the phenomenologist of music, Victor Zuckerkandl). Here, "Mirror on mirror mirrored is all the show" (Yeats, "The Statues"), yet it is nevertheless our very home, where the "I" lives and encounters "the world". The two sides, subjectivity and objectivity, exist in unbreakable mutuality, dialectically dependent upon one another for their very existence *as* consciousness. And we regard ourselves in our own creations.

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",[6] says Giegerich. Psychology is about "the 'logical life,' the dialectics operative *within* [...] life phenomena, *within* people's behavior".[7] Hillman used Jung's term *fantasy*, aiming to counter its trivialization in conventional discourse and raising it to the level of what Giegerich means by "what our real behavior thinks": "Behaviour may never be taken on its own level, literally. It is always guided by imaginal processes and expresses them".[8] Psychology's reality-principle hinges on the difference between "living in a dream world" (self-deception, immaturity, neurosis) and owning up to (making one's own, *owning*) the "dreams" one is necessarily always-already living.

Psychology   We may understand ourselves through this or that philosophy (including dialectical ones, like Hegel's), or through explanations from biochemistry or economics, theology or politics; any of these may be useful, revealing, enlightening. But Giegerich demonstrates how dialectical thinking constitutes precisely psychology's *difference* from these others. For what he calls "true psychology" – psychology true to its Concept or Notion (another Hegelian expression), true to *itself* – is thoroughly dialectical, implicated in doubleness and recursion at every level. 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.

Logos   In words designating disciplines like musicology, anthropology or ontology, the suffix "-ology" means "the study of" (music, humanity, being). Each *logos* of this type is *explicative*: it seeks to lay out the structure and workings of its object, to unfold it before the gaze of a subject. However, a *logos* that is itself a logic (of any kind: mathematical, formal, dialectical, even musical) is *implicative*: its discipline must be enacted. We come to understand it only by doing it, by subjectively going through it. The idea of psychology as a *logos* of the first sort treats "the psyche" as a field of objective inquiry and functions as a natural science of predictable behaviours. Psychology as a *logos* of the second sort is *true* psychology, the logic of *psyché* as such, in that it is *psychological* psychology – noun and adjective forcing thought back upon itself, a reflection upon our very reflecting, a *logos* about this *logos* itself, about its own logic and language, its own sense. Uroboric.

Soul   No other interpretive approach works the way psychological analysis does, because none seek to address the "soul" of their subject matter. (Hegel's privileging of "Spirit" gives his dialectics a some-what different orientation, although the commonality is profound.) This is not so mysterious as it might seem, however, if we employ Plato's foundational, yet unexceptional definition of *psyché* as an "immanent animating living principle".[9] This will apply whether we're speaking mythologically or metaphorically, about beings or about ideas: to use the word "soul" is to indicate *that which animates a living reality from within*. (In this sense, the notion of Spirit is the "soul" of Hegel's system.) Giegerich definitively conceives his approach as a psychology *with soul*. And if soul has a dialectical logic, we must become able to *think dialectically* to make sense of it. By making psychological sense, we *make soul*, to cite Hillman's extraordinary revisioning of psychology as "soul-making".

Dialectic   Despite its scholarly and technical definitions, it seems to me that "dialectic" always means, at its most functionally basic level, "to think over" some matter. Whether multiple voices are "thinking over" the nature of Beauty or Justice in the Socratic dialogues, or Hegel is allowing a simpler concept to effect its own logical self-overcoming, or Giegerich is going back over a topic he's already considered from a different position, dialectical thinking *reconsiders* and then reconsiders *again*. In the more advanced, formalized sort of dialectics, two things that initially seem opposed or incompatible are seen as true at once – not, however, merely as paradoxical or as balanced opposites, but as aspects of the dynamic self-realization of a greater truth. Dialectics reveals "structures that are successively caught in the process of gaining a meaning by over-coming their inner contradiction".[10] Even once a dialectical concept is fully articulated, it is not solved "but can be made productive as a harmonic dis-unity in motion", in the words of Katrin Pahl.[11] This approach discloses the very nature, the very identity of its subject matter as unidentical *with itself*, which results in a sort of thinking-in-motion as alive as its subject matter. And its subject matter is "alive" because of its own internal contradiction, which is precisely its *soul*, its "immanent animating living principle".

> *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*

Some examples from Giegerich

(I have only used page references to the *Collected English Papers*, *The Soul's Logical Life*, and *Dialectics and Analytical Psychology* in the list, below. Bibliographic details are in the endnotes.)

Dialectics is omnipresent in Giegerich. He mentions dialectical sublation, living dialectics, absolute dialectics, and "the logical motor of dialectical contradiction" (*CEP 4*, 310).

Among other **dualities**, he refers to "the dialectics of" or "the dialectical logic of":

"inner and outer" (*CEP 3*, 29)

"openness and closure" (*CEP 1*, 15)

"reception and production" (*CEP 5*, 170)

"perception and production" (*CEP 5*, 175)

"finite versus infinite, soul versus spirit, humility versus height" (*CEP 3*, 349)

"the semantic and the syntactical" (*CEP 4*, 283)

"utopia and realization" (*CEP 2*, 237)

"'being gripped' and [...] 'grasping'" (*SLL*, 41)

"[Artemis] and her Other, the unity of killing huntress and victim" (*SLL*, 251)

"'closing in on' and 'leaving totally free'" (*SLL*, 236)

"the literal-factual and the imaginal" (*CEP 3*, 328)

"'projection' and 'integration into consciousness'" (*CEP 4*, 348), and

"the soul's [...] making *itself*, AND [...] our indispensable contribution" (*CEP 5*, 130).

He spells out the **inherent internal dialectic of certain singular items**, for example:

"true thoughts (i.e., that they are their own subjects and yet mine, fundamentally 'non-I' *and* 'I')" (*CEP 5*, 46), and

"intellectual, poetic, artistic productivity (i.e., that it is at once subjective and objective, production and product, active and passive)" (*CEP 5*, 313).

He also refers to those **singular terms, understood *as* internally dialectical**, which are central to the entire approach, such as:

"the absolutely closed, hermetically sealed [alchemical] vessel" (*CEP 5*, 400)

"the standpoint of psychology" (*DAP*, 26), and simply

"the soul" (*CEP 3*, 29).

And speaking **most comprehensively**, he references the dialectical nature of

"human existence" (*CEP 1*, 261)

"what being-human in the fullest sense of the word means" (*CEP 6*, 14), and even

"the logical (dialectical) constitution of reality" (*SLL*, 200).

Giegerich enjoins us to "follow the psychotherapeutic [...] method of allowing oneself to be taught by the real".[12] If reality is dialectically constituted, psychology is a *contra natural realism*.

Addendum: Dialectics and me

I'm Capricorn with Capricorn rising, born, so I'm told, on a full-moon eclipse. My father was a proud but non-observant Jew, and I still have his Tarot deck and psychic reading cards ("What shape am I holding now?"). My mother was a gentile German who grew up under Nazism (although my grandmother forbade antisemitic speech in the home), later fled the Communist East (her sister had distributed some satire about the government), and came to Canada where she met my dad (the families got along famously, and the first to welcome her was his German uncle-by-marriage who'd been in Dachau). I myself have no religious affiliation, despite a couple of experiences for which "religious" is the most apt description. And I'm comfortable in my independence, having never been very conventional in my politics (too individualistic), my work (it's why I have my own company), or my intimate life (don't get me started).

These details are not relevant to the workshop, but I offer them as a sort of human-very-human warrant for my interest in doubleness and contradiction, because I have no official standing to present a workshop on dialectical thinking. Whatever understanding I have is self-taught, if also hard-won. I'm not only fascinated by what's covered by our use of the word "dialectical" in relation to history, culture, and consciousness. I also have that legacy of dramatic and familial dualities, and have at times been faced with psychological crises (including a nine-month, LSD-triggered period of paranoia and depersonalization at age 19) that demanded just this sort of response, the fluid transformation of rigid thinking.

I discovered the work of James Hillman in 1991 and Wolfgang Giegerich very shortly thereafter, and have remained seriously engaged with their ideas ever since. But I came to Hillman out of personal need, and his notion of "pathologizing" was saving to me – his profoundly Jungian recognition of *soul value* even in our pathologies, of meaning in the madness and his intimations of a method. Giegerich has immeasurably advanced that method, working from the same basis: "even in a despicable symptom", he's said, "there is some soul substance [...]. Some seed, some meaning or telos".[13]

I do have a degree, a BFA in contemporary dance (1987) – although I've never been a dancer, either. (My first professional performance was actually in 2016, at the age of 57. It was very minimalist.) I studied dance to gain a different perspective on my original love, theatre. And I went on to explore many dimensions of the medium, from traditional European clowning to performance art, corporate special events to community celebrations, and most recently, online dramatic readings. I also started singing in public in 2006 (down-home music – country, blues, folk, standards), which I'd only done with friends (and at home) previously.

Although I do enjoy sharing and indeed honouring this idiosyncratic background of mine, my intention is ultimately conceptual. If my personal history has any bearing on my affinity for dialectics, my creative pursuits point toward my primary overall interest: *liveness* itself.

In both its more practical and more theoretical instances – in the midst of singing, for example, or at the height of abstract theorizing – the *living moment* is, from moment to moment, dialectically constituted *by* its two "moments": action and reflection, doing and thinking. Additionally, with my performance background, I tend to think of thinking in what is indeed a kinetic and scenic way, in analogy with physical motion and spatial placement, employing naturalistic images to progress *contra naturam* toward dialectical logic. Most importantly, activity *embodies* thought. Our actual lives represent the thinking *as which* we exist, as Giegerich might say. Action "always enacts an idea", insisted Hillman; "To forget this is to take action literally".[14] And thinking itself is an activity (pure activity, Giegerich might add, which he designates by the word *actuosity*). This interest in *liveness* is what led me to my workshop topic, and I hope the connections become clear.

Notes

Wolfgang Giegerich, *Collected English Papers*

Vol. 1 (New Orleans: Spring Journal Books, 2005)

Vol. 2 (New Orleans: Spring Journal Books, 2007)

Vol. 3 (New Orleans: Spring Journal Books, 2008)

Vol. 4 (New Orleans: Spring Journal Books, 2010)

Vol. 5 (New Orleans: Spring Journal Books, 2013)

Vol. 6 (New Orleans: Spring Journal Books, 2013)

1   James Hillman, *Anima: An Anatomy of a Personified Notion* (Dallas, Texas: Spring Publications, 1985), 149.

2   Wolfgang Giegerich, *The Soul's Logical Life: Towards a Rigorous Notion of Psychology* (Frankfurt a/M: Peter Lang GmbH, 1998), 237.

3   Wolfgang Giegerich, *Working with Dreams: Initiation into the Soul's Speaking About Itself* (New York: Routledge, 2021), 109.

4   Markus Gabriel, *Transcendental Ontology: Essays in German Idealism* (London and New York: Continuum International Publishing Group/Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2011), 22.

5   Wolfgang Giegerich in Wolfgang Giegerich, David L. Miller and Greg Mogenson, *Dialectics and Analytical Psychology: The El Capitan Canyon Seminar* (New Orleans, LA: Spring Journal Inc., 2005), 16.

6   Wolfgang Giegerich, "The Burial of the Soul in Technological Civilization," in *Collected English Papers*, Vol. 2, 204.

7   Giegerich, *Dialectics and Analytical Psychology*, 2.

8   James Hillman, "An Essay on Pan", in *Pan and the Nightmare* (Dallas, TX: Spring Publications, 1972), 41.

9   Angelica Nuzzo, *Approaching Hegel's Logic, Obliquely: Melville, Molière, Beckett* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2018), 37.

10   Angelica Nuzzo, "The Language of Hegel's Speculative Philosophy", in *Hegel and Language*, edited by Jere O'Neill Surber (New York, NY: State University of New York Press, 2006), 86.]

11   Katrin Pahl, "Speculative Rhythm", in *Hegel and Language* , edited by Jere O'Neill Surber (New York, NY: State University of New York Press, 2006), 240.

12   Wolfgang Giegerich, "The Opposition of Individual and Collective", C.G. Jung Page online seminar (Oct. 6, 1998, 07:53:47), accessed 1998, URL unavailable.

13   Wolfgang Giegerich, "The Opposition of Individual and Collective", (Oct. 5, 1998, 18:56:34).

14   James Hillman, *Re-Visioning Psychology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 117.