

# HISTORICIZING THE STUDY OF DIALECTICS IN PHILOSOPHY

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## **Abstract**

*This study historicizes the philosophical notion of dialectics. This endeavour developed from the contributions of early Greek philosophers like Parmenides and Zeno, through Socrates' contribution to Hegel, Marx, and beyond. The issue that this essay aims to examine is whether the discourses on dialectics have developed beyond Hegel and Marx, who are recognized as having brought the discourse to its zenith. The investigation also discovered that some philosophers after Hegel and Marx replied to them, either through rebuttals, full or partial agreement, or disagreement, and this accounts for the continuation of the conversation on the topic. Feuerbach is one of the thinkers who have made this critique, and the main argument behind it is that Hegel's dialectics "reduces nature and man to the position of the status of everlasting helpless servants to reason". In the same line, the article also makes the case, and finds that Hegel's spiritual dialectics is correct, that transcendence flows logically if we accept it, and hence it is counterproductive to human materialist growth in Feuerbach's view. The study concludes by attempting a recap of the basic argument on the phenomenon under review.*

**Keywords:** Dialectics, History, Dialectical Materialism, Man, Nature.

## **1.0 Introduction**

The history of philosophy is concerned with the exposition of philosophical opinions, systems, and schools of thought in philosophy and this study also concerns itself with the lives of philosophers. The fact that the enterprise of philosophy is vast and transverses all the epochs in human history have necessitated a historiographical chronicling of the philosophical opinions and systems that have evolved in history as well as the rebuttals, counter opinions, and transformation of such doctrines and systems. To this end, Turner (2007) argued that in every generation, the problems, issues, and subjects of discourses present themselves in different shades and perhaps, anew to individual

philosophers. That accounts for the history of influence, be it personal, racial, or climate amongst others, which bears on the generation that must be studied for the meaning and value of each doctrine or system in question to be properly understood and appreciated.

Consequently, the task of the historian of philosophy or anyone interested in the historical rendition of philosophy according to Turner (2007) is twofold: the first involves setting forth, as it were, the lives and doctrines of philosophers, systems, schools of thought taking cognizance of the need to examine their sources. The second has to do with tracing the genetic connections between doctrines, systems, and schools and to evaluate their contributions to philosophy.

The importance of reminiscing these doctrines or theories is in the fact they are a contribution to the truth as well as the vehicles that are used in the task of conceptualizing and arriving at truth. Again, it must be noted that the perspectives that we get from historicizing these ideas serve to advance solutions to contemporary existential problems, makes any study that is tailored in that direction germane. Nichols (2006) corroborated the above when he argued that historicizing philosophical doctrine, as well as the historiography of the same, is imperative because the study of the history of philosophy has both practical and instrumental values for contemporary and continental philosophy. This is because contemporary philosophy, for the most part, would not be possible without a history of the ideas and the understanding of the arguments that have been put forward by the historical figures that birthed and contributed to those ideas.

This study engages in a discourse on the historical study of dialectics in philosophy. To achieve this aim, the trajectory of this chapter proceeds from a preliminary discourse on the scholarly appraisal of the concepts of dialectics and history to a discourse on the historical rendition of the study of dialectics from Plato through Kant. The discourse further proceeds from an attempt at a discourse on the high point of the study of dialectics as evident in the thoughts of Hegel and Marx to the evaluation of the historical study of dialectics which takes cognizance of the discourse beyond Hegel and Marx.

## **1.2 Scholarly Appraisal of the Key Concepts**

To enhance a lucid understanding of the subject under consideration, certain concepts are clarified. The concepts attracting clarification here are dialectic and history. Dialectics, on the one hand, is of Greek origin. Robin Smith (1999) captures the Greek origin of the concept of dialectic better when he alluded to the fact that the word dialectics is got from the Greek *dialegein* which means to argue or converse. Away from the etymological definition, Maybee (2020) defines dialectics as a term that is used to describe a method of philosophical argumentation that has within its kernel, some sort of contradiction between two opposing viewpoints. In classical philosophy, dialectics have come to be understood as an exchange proposition which is rightly called the thesis, the rebuttal of the same proposition which is rightly called the antithesis that results in an assertion or a new thesis that changes the direction of the discourse and is rightly called the synthesis.

Conceived as a method, dialectic has been described as an attempt to resolve a disagreement through rational discourse. As a concept, it is employed as a method of discovering and describing the truth about reality. Deducible from the above definitions is the fact that dialectics has to do with some form of conversations on the one hand. And these conversations involve some form of

contradictions. On the other hand, dialectic can be seen as a method of arriving at the truth of realities and this is understandable within the context of the dialectical method of Socrates as made accessible to us in the writings of Plato.

History plays a very important role in human thought. Etymologically, the word history according to Candelaria & Alporha (2018) is from the Greek *historia* which connotes inquiry or research. Away from the etymological definition, history has come to be defined as the description of events that concern the past of humankind and are recounted in sequential order. This was later systematized and developed into a discipline by Herodotus and Thucydides who are reputed as the founding fathers of history.

Little (2020) tried to answer the question of what constitutes the intellectual task of all that historians do. In this sense, he argued that, firstly; historians are interested in providing a factual description of events and answering the "what" questions like what happened? What events took place during a particular period and what are the circumstances surrounding these events? Secondly, the historian is also interested in the 'why' question, why did the event occur in the first place? Third, the historian is interested in the 'how' question. Finally, the historian is interested in accounting for the human meanings and intentions that can be said to be in the background of a given series of historical actions with the intent of helping readers to make sense of the events and actions within the context of the rationale, motives and state of mind of those involved in the process.

### **1.3 Dialectics in Philosophy: A Historical Rendition**

At the beginning of the discourse on the development of dialectics are the contributions of ancient Greek philosophers. To this end, Smith (2002) argued that dialectics began with Parmenides whose views were instrumental in setting the road map as well as the agenda for the discourse of the same. The philosophical position of Parmenides as quoted by Smith (2002:11) is "both simple and mystifying: being is, whereas not being is not and cannot either be thought or said. Consequently, any expression that being is not, or that not being is must be dismissed as nonsense". It is from this thinking that Parmenides argued against change since it will presuppose the coming into being of what hitherto has not been or is 'not being'.

The impact of Parmenides' thought on Greek philosophy is felt through its defense by Parmenides' follower and disciple, Zeno of Elea who sets out to defend the views of his master, Parmenides, from the contradictions and absurd elements that it has been accused of. He argued against the belief in the possibility of motion and stated that such belief is far more absurd and self-contradictory (11). Zeno's argument as Smith (2002:12) captures it, "takes a particular form: beginning with premises accepted by his opponents; they derive conclusions that the opponents must recognize as impossible". It is following this that Aristotle declares that, in presenting this form of argument, Zeno became the inventor and originator of 'dialectic'. In Zeno's argument, one notes three basic characteristics: the first of the three features is that it is directed at someone else; the second is that it takes its start from premises accepted by the other party; and the third, is that its aim is the rejection of a view of that other party. These three physiognomies can serve as a rough definition of a dialectical argument. Hall (2005) and Robin Smith (1999) corroborated the above when they argued that Aristotle credited the invention of dialectics to Zeno of Elea with specific reference to the paradoxical arguments that Zeno advanced against motion and multiplicity because of the

contradictory consequences that can be deduced from them.

All that we know about Socrates (469-399) is what we can glean from the writings of Plato. This is because Socrates is not reputed to have written anything. However, Socrates used a method that is similar to the dialectic that is referred to as *Elenchus*. This method proceeds from questions and these questions requires the interlocutor to either contradict or refute a position that one has made uncritically while revealing the inherent error at the same time. This type of dialectical debate that Socrates engaged in was intended to inspire genuine knowledge and was for pedagogical purposes. Reminiscing on the meaning that dialectic takes in the thoughts of Plato, we can state that dialectics, as deduced from the thoughts of Plato is somewhat vague and varies in the different dialogues he wrote. Plato as cited by Roland Hall (2005) conceived dialectic as the supreme method of philosophy on the first front; the coping stone of the sciences on the second front and the final stage in the formal education that a philosopher king is expected to go through on the third front. Here, Plato, as Nicolae Sfetcu (2022) argued presented dialectic as the most effective way of arriving at truth.

With regards to the fact that Plato's understanding of dialectic varies in his dialogues, Smith (1999) argued that in the *Republic*, dialectics connotes a method that establishes in some ways, 'non-hypothetical' conclusions while in the *Sophist*, it passes as a method that is used for discerning and determining definitions through the division of genera into their species. In the *Phaedrus*, Plato spoke of dialectic as a "process of union and multiplication", in *Parmenides* as Sfetcu (2022) argues, Plato showed the working of dialectic in discourse and how it is used in the search for probable answers to posers through the refutation of non-conforming answers and the answer that is preferred, though more plausible or arrived at, though never true in the sense of absolute certainty, is that which is not falsified. And in the *Cratylus*, Plato conceived and used dialectics basically for cognitive purposes.

In sum, with regards to Plato's conception, it can be argued in line with the thoughts of Sfetcu (2022) that Plato's dialectic includes several methods of reasoning such as the method of consequence and the method of division. It must also be noted that the dialectic, for Plato, should not be concerned with such questions that have to do with reconciling the prevailing difference between the sensible and intelligent world and those that seek to answer the question of how two planes of reality that are somewhat distinct can be harmonized.

Aristotle also lent his voice to the discourse on dialectic. Hall (2005) argued that dialectics was first systematized and placed on a sound footing by Aristotle in his *Topics* which he advanced as a manual for discovering and finding arguments for and against given theses or positions as "the claim that every pleasure is good" (2005: 99). Drawing from his knowledge of the several debates on these theses in Plato's academy, Aristotle elected to advance methods for dealing with such claims and positions. Smith (1999) intimated that Aristotle's concept of dialectical argument proceeds by questions and answers, with the aim of refutation and that nothing can be established scientifically and philosophically through it. The *Topic* is organized and reads like a handbook or a training manual for dialectical debates and was not so much of a treatise on dialectic. He was later to distrust and devalue dialectic and favour sense perception as an empiricist and it has been argued that it is his rejection and the development of formal logic that ran dialectic out of the scene of western philosophy in the medieval period to the final third of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

A critical look at the history of dialectics from Plato to Aristotle reveals that while dialectics is the best means or method of philosophical investigation for Plato, dialectics for Aristotle is no more than a tool for testing hypotheses. Fink (2012) corroborated the above when he argued that Plato and Aristotle seem to stand on a very wide divide. This, for him, is because while Plato conceives dialectics as the best means for philosophy, in its tasks of reaching truth, Aristotle denies the fact that access to philosophical insight can be got through dialectics having granted dialectic as a "little more than the function of testing propositions..." (Fink, 2012: 1).

In the enlightenment period in the history of philosophy, Kant contributed to the discourse on dialectics and his brand of dialectics is what he referred to as transcendental dialectics. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant announced that the meaning that dialectic has taken in the ancient period of philosophy was the 'logic of illusion' and hence, proposed a kind of dialectics that analyses antinomies. There is the dialectics that he referred to as transcendental dialectic. Michelle Grier (2006: 193) in his commentary of Kant's understanding of dialectics corroborated the fact that Kant sees dialectic as "logic of illusion". In his dialectics, Kant presented the antinomies of pure reason. These antinomies as Kenny (2006) argues are a pair of arguments that leads to contradictory conclusions. It is with these sets of antinomies (thesis and antithesis) that Kant demonstrated the fact that any attempt, for the most part, by reason to form notions of the world in its entirety was bound as a matter of necessity to lead to an irresolvable contradiction.

At the background of Kant's transcendental dialectics is the thinking that paradoxes arise when the supposition is made that truths that can be arrived at or known through reason must be capable of representation in the forms of what Paul Guyer (1987) refers to as human sensibility, spatiality, and temporality. Elsewhere, Paul Guyer (2005:46) stressed that Kant in his transcendental dialectic argued that:

there are conflicts between the limits of spatial and temporal representation and the demands of the reason that will condemn reason to incoherence unless the spatial and temporal characteristics of objects are recognized as mere features of how they appear to us, leaving open at least the possibility that as long as reason refrains from interfering within the realm of sensible appearance itself, it can formulate indemonstrable but coherent conceptions of how objects such as God or our wills are in themselves.

Put differently, misperception arises when it is thought that propositions which are confirmable by reason alone can also be confirmable by the senses. Proceeding from his reduction to three species (which he also referred to as the logic of illusion or the ground of illusion), all the illusions or sensitive illusions that pass under the semblance of those that are intellectual, Kant presented his four antinomies. This antinomies as Kenny (2006) presents them include one: the series of items next to each other in time and space come to an end on the one hand (the thesis) and go on forever on the other hand (anti-thesis); two: the series of items which are part of each other comes to an end on the one hand (the thesis) and continues forever on the other hand (antithesis); three: the series of items caused by another end in a free, and in an event that is natural and uncaused on the one hand (thesis) and continues forever on the other hand (antithesis) and four: the series of items contingent upon another goes on forever on the one hand (antithesis) and ends with a necessary being (thesis) on the other hand.

While a lucid and exhaustive discourse on these antinomies lies beyond the purview of this paper following from the fact that the scope of the present paper goes beyond Kant's transcendental dialectics, it remains to state here that Kant considers both sides of each of the antinomies (the thesis and antithesis) to be in error. The thesis, as Kenny (2006: 290) argues, is "the error of dogmatism, the antithesis of the error of empiricism". It must also be noted that the third antimony in Kant's transcendental dialectics differs from the first two in the sense that while the thesis and antithesis are rejected in the first two antinomies, the thesis and antithesis are accepted as true in the third antimony and represents an attempt to reconcile the long-debated differences between freedom and determinism. In the final third, Kant used his transcendental dialectics in the critiques of natural theology. This can be seen in his consideration of the arguments that have been advanced for and against the existence of God in the fourth antimony and leaves open the question of whether God, which he called the necessary being, is to be found in the world on the one hand or outside the world on the other hand as it causes or creator.

Following Kant's transcendental dialectics, philosophers that came after him, especially those of the German idealist tradition like Fichte, Schelling, Schleiermacher, and most importantly, Hegel. In fact, for Fichte and Hegel as Allen Wood (2010) argued, Kant's Antinomies provided an archetypal for a new kind of constructive transcendental philosophy. For Fichte, it is the "synthetic method" and for Hegel, it is dialectics. Hegel also accepted Kant's demonstration of reason's necessary self-contradictoriness in their thoughts. However, as Hans-Georg Gadamer argues, "in contrast to Kant, they evaluated it positively" and "further developed it into a triadic notion of the thesis, an opposing antithesis, and a resultant synthesis" (Smith, 1999:233). The above and the fact that Hegel dismissed Plato's dialectics as dialectics that are impure because they proceeded from the assumed proposition that is not based on or derived from each other according to 'internal necessity' is in the background of Hegel's development of his brand of dialectics. Hegel's dialectic and that of Marx will be the subject of consideration in the next section.

#### **1.4 Dialectics after Kant: From Hegel to Marx and Beyond**

Just like idealism which came to its highest point in the thoughts of Hegel, the discourse on the concept of dialectics after Kant seems to have reached its crescendo in the thoughts of Hegel (1770-1831). Hegel's dialectics, as is the case with any other dialectic, rest on the contradictoriness of opposing views. Hegel's dialectic process as Stumpf & Fieser (2015) argues reveals a *triadic* movement. This triadic structure of the dialectic process is described as a movement from *thesis* to *antithesis* and in the final third, to *synthesis*, after which the synthesis becomes a new thesis, and this process continues until it ends in the Absolute Idea. What Hegel seems to be advancing from his dialectical analysis is that thought is not static and that it moves. One can also deduce the fact that in this scheme, contradictions does not negates nor stops the advancement of knowledge; rather, it does acts on a positive note and serves to trigger human reasoning. In a bid to illustrate the dialectical method of Hegel, Stumpf & Fieser, (2015) further showed that the first basic triads of Hegel's dialectic are the triad of *Being*, *Nothing*, and *Becoming* which are synonymous with the thesis, antithesis, and the synthesis.

Regarding the process involved in Hegel's dialectics, Maybee (2020) explicated the three stages in Hegel's dialectics. According to her, in the first stage, concepts or forms seem to have a stable definition or determination. In the second stage, which Hegel calls the dialectical is a moment of

instability and a one-sided restrictedness, and the moment that was fixed in the first stage changes to its opposite and it's a process that Hegel calls self-sublation; a concept Maybee (2020) stresses is critical and crucial in Hegel's dialectic. The third stage is the positively rational moment and this moment grasps the unity of the opposition between the first two stages and is the positive result of their transition.

The primary objective of Hegel in his dialectic is to show that there exist some forms of connection between the various categories that are involved in the constitution of our experience. Hegel taught that this connection is such that any category, if properly analyzed, will be found to lead to another, and any attempt to make recourse to the first while refuting the second will lead to some contradiction; and the category that is arrived at leads to the third and this process continues until we reach the goal or end of the dialectic. In the same vein, Hegel's dialectics is intended to show that history progresses in a logical, rational process from a lower to a higher level of existence according to the dictate of the absolute spirit. Unah& Okoro, (2002:158) corroborated the above when they averred that in essence, "Hegel takes dialectics to be the actual participation of the absolute reason in human history". They further argued that Hegel's dialectics is a logic of double negation were the absolute as pure thought alienates or objectifies itself into nature and human history as the first point of negation. Then it reclaims itself as pure thought which depicts the second point of negation. Hence, through the instrumentality of the triadic motion of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis, the absolute continues to manifest itself in human history.

In the first volume of the *Capital*, Marx (1994) argued for the above and stressed that he was determined to right the wrong that dialectic have suffered in the hands of Hegel by turning it right side up from the position of standing on its head that it had in Hegel's thought. To quote Marx (1994: 14-15),

My dialectic method is not only different from the Hegelian, but is its direct opposite. To Hegel, the life process of the human brain, i.e., the process of thinking, which, under the name of "the Idea," he even transforms into an independent subject, is the demiurgos of the real world, and the real world is only the external, phenomenal form of "the Idea." For me, on the contrary, the ideal is nothing else than the material world reflected by the human mind, and translated into forms of thought.... The mystification which dialectic suffers in Hegel's hands, by no means prevents him from being the first to present its general form of working comprehensively and consciously. With him, it is standing on its head. It must be turned right side up again if you would discover the rational kernel within the mystical shell.

This is how Marx progressed and moved away from the idealist dialectic of Hegel to his dialectical materialism. Even though Marx believed that Hegel was instrumental to the development of a general historical law in the form of dialectic, Marx showed that his dialectics is not only different from that of Hegel but is the stark opposite of the same. Despite stating that Hegel is the architect of modern dialectics, Marx (1977: 100), stressed that his dialectics differs from Hegel in the sense that while Hegel's dialectics is idealistic in their orientation, his dialectics is materialist. Again, while Marx elected to combine Hegel's dialectical method with the temper of materialism that he championed at that time, having adopted the thesis, antithesis, and synthesis framework, he rejected the fact that ideas or consciousness is the force behind the triad. The originality of Marx is in the fact

that in contradistinction, he demonstrated that history is in development and that being is irreducible to knowledge. His originality is also found in the fact that he preserved dialectical movement both in Being on the one hand and in Knowledge on the other hand.

What is crystal clear and makes Marx's dialectic stand out is the systematic manner he works out his theory as well as the way he used it to study the capitalist society. In fact, it is doubtful if Marx could have reached his understanding of capitalism without the instrumentality of dialectics. Again, Marx (1958: 20) argues that dialectic is in "its essence critical and revolutionary" reveals that there exists some form of necessary connection between knowledge and action.

Contrary to the argument that Marx inverted Hegel's dialectics, Marx only revolutionized it through his critique of the idealistic and mystified temper of Hegel's dialectics and the fact that this form of dialectics as presented by Hegel became the model in Germany in the 1830s through 1840. To this end, Marx sought to reform it with the intent that it would take cognizance of the fact that "every historically developed form" is in a state of flux and is changing; the need to show this transitory and changing aspect of society is at the background of Marx's engagement in the discourses on dialectics.

A critical study of the philosophical perspectives on dialectics in history reveals that dialectics have moved beyond Hegel and Marx. Beyond Hegel and Marx are further discourses that can be said to be reactions and counter-reactions to the positions of Hegel and Marx. As early as 1883 after the demise of Marx, Engels, who can be rightly described as the closest to Marx in terms of intellectual acquaintance extended the matrices of the dialectical method to encompass nature and transformed dialectics into three laws (Wilde (1991:291). While it seems accurate to argue that the position of Engels as captured above has nothing to do with Marx, Engels laid claim to the fact that the position had the endorsement of Marx- a position that will seem less plausible to any critical reflective historian seeing that the dialectical standpoint if one grant, method of Marx and Engels are incompatible.

Besides Engels, Theodore Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Herbert Marcuse have also kept the discourse on dialectics alive in the post-Marxian era. Ludwig Feuerbach has also kept the discourse alive through his rejection of Hegel's dialectics and his postulation of the dialectics of nature which defends a symbiotic rapport between man and nature. Mention must also be made of Merleau-Ponty and Jean Paul Sartre who all worked out the fusion of existentialism with Marx dialectics with the temper of humanistic dialectics.

## **1.5 Concluding Reflections**

In this study, an attempt has been made to historicize the study of dialectics in philosophy, this attempt account for the conception of dialectics from Socrates to Plato and Aristotle. It also accounts for Kant's transcendental dialectics which informed, and to which Hegel reacted as well as the materialistic dialectics of Marx. It must also be noted that beyond Hegel and Marx, who has been considered and credited with being the architect of dialectics in the modern era, several philosophers as we have argued in the foregoing have responded to them, either in terms of rebuttal, total or partial agreement and disagreement. Following from the above, this attempt does not arrogate to itself the claim of having presented an exhaustive historical rendition of the study of dialectics.

As we conclude this discourse, it is imperative to state that we have identified some of the criticisms that have been put forward against dialectic as one of the systems that have been developed and contributions made to the discourse in history. In his critique and transformation of Hegel's thoughts, Ludwig Feuerbach, a young Hegelian of the left-wing temper disagreed with and rejected what Hegel presented as dialectic. The reason for his disagreement is that Hegel's concept of dialectics as Unah, J. I and Okoro, B.C (2002:158) capture it "reduces nature and man to the status of eternal helpless servants to reason". It is also argued that if we grant that Hegel's spiritual dialectics is right then, it follows logically that transcendence precede, and hence, it is inimical to human materialist development in the thinking of Feuerbach.

Hegel's rejection of the law of non-contradiction which is one of the revered laws of thought has earned his dialectic and dialectics, in general, the rebuttal of being illogical and absurd. To this end, Karl Popper (1962) argued that the acceptance of Hegel's and other dialectical position's rejection of the law of non-contradiction either in part or as a whole of a logical theory will lead to the breakdown of science and rationality. However, the above critique has also been rebutted by Inoue Kazumi (2014) and Priest (1989) who have defended the rejection of the law of non-contradiction in Hegel's scheme and by extension, the schemes of other dialecticians. These rebuttals are what make for the continuation of the discourse on dialectics.

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