

The path of cognition

By Corinna Lotz

Dialectical cognition

In this final session I want to demonstrate how a materialist, dialectical approach works in terms of thinking. In other words, I'm talking about the process, the activity and practice of cognition, how we develop a deep understanding of a thing or phenomenon that has a material, objective existence.

Understanding how and why our global reality can change rapidly, even overnight, in a fundamental way, and how we need to act, is our challenge. The coronavirus pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine have transformed the world irrevocably with consequences yet to unfold.

If we are to act in a world in constant change and transformation, it's essential that we develop our own, independent outlook – in opposition to the method of thinking passed down to us and reinforced in schools and universities.

As we have discussed, the dominant philosophical outlook very much reinforces the status quo. It encourages us to think that the capitalist system is both permanent and natural and that revolutionary change is dangerous and can never succeed. In Britain, empiricism separates out thought processes that are connected to each other in actuality.

Reality is examined in a static, unchanging, non-historical way and we're encouraged to hold a binary, fixed view of the world. Something is either one thing or the other. Contradictions are viewed as a problem of thought rather than a natural phenomenon.

Let's now look at the way our cognitive process operates through objective dialectical laws. These are summarised as the unity, interpenetration and transformation of opposites. We can understand them in the following way:

We can only exist as a part of, **in unity and conflict** with nature and society. Our unity with the world is primary. Nature and society **interpenetrate** and interact with us and in us. We breathe in oxygen and breathe out carbon dioxide.

The **transformation** of a quantity into a new quality and vice versa is another law-governed process. For example, plants use solar energy, water and carbon dioxide to create chemical energy and oxygen through the process of photosynthesis. So a quantity of sunlight is transformed into a new quality – chemical energy in the form of carbohydrates. Or, an oppressed nation **transforms** itself into a new "quality" of independence.

The aim of a materialist, dialectical approach is to capture the movement of the real in our thinking. I will explain how we achieve this through a sequence of logical thought concepts and categories. Achieving this will enable us to conceptualise revolutionary change.

Matter in motion

Before we start to elaborate the process and practice of cognition, I'd like to explain the concept of self-movement. All phenomena, including society, nature and thought are in constant motion. You'll soon see why this is important.

Everything is in motion because it exists in time and space. So things are at one point and another point at the same time. In this way, they exhibit contradiction. Take a wooden table, for example. It appears stable but forces of decay within the wood, will left to their own devices, eventually overwhelm its inner structure. The table will fall apart.

As we, and society, are part of matter in motion, self-movement includes everything from the firing of neural networks in our brains, the exchange of commodities, to the reflexive self-consciousness of human beings in society.

All biological life is also characterised by self-movement. Examples include the formation of galaxies, a sprouting seed and a growing child, natural human creativity and talent, the arising of social movements.

Paul Dirac, one of the founders of quantum mechanics, explaining the motion of elementary particles, remarked: "the state of no motion is the state of no particles". In other words, motion is an inherent property of matter.

Starting to think

It is self-movement, for example, like clouds gathering in the sky, or a person saying hello to you, which will stimulate our senses. This sensation, this energy, this form of matter in motion, is our initial, thinking connection with the real world outside of us.

The 17th century English philosopher John Locke, who we met in an earlier session, put forward the idea that sensations coming into us from the outside are the source and starting point of knowledge. We can sum this up as: "I feel therefore I am". Most, but not all, philosophers now accept this fundamental thought.

Our physical presence and activity in the world give rise to psychological and mental activity.

For example, we hear on the news that tanks are assembling on the borders of Ukraine. Or there is evidence of a growing economic crisis. We become aware that something has changed.

So the process of cognition always has a particular, **finite** starting point. You see your friend's face, which looks pale. She starts coughing. This is the starting point for a process of thought.

We have identified that she appears unwell. There is something different in herself. So, any identity contains **difference** within itself. This transition of identity into something different is what we call **negation**. A transformation of one thing into its opposite. Health into possible illness. This single moment, the moment of identifying difference, is the beginning of **analysis**.

The term '**negation**' as we saw in earlier sessions, does not mean obliteration or cancelling out. There is an interruption and a connection at the same time. She is still your friend, with the same face that you recognise, but is different. As we shall see, this is the first of further negations.

The arising of difference may jar our consciousness. It may appear simply as insignificant, a chance anomaly, *wrong* or out of place, because it does not fit in with our earlier understanding. It is easy to dismiss it rather than grasp it as the beginning of something utterly new and different, which requires further examination.

It is a new moment because something in the world beyond our thought – in your friend's existence – has changed into something different. In practice, we think like this every day at some time or other.

This way of understanding '**identity**' is of course fundamentally different from the formal, or Aristotelian 'law of identity' or $a = a$. (see earlier session)

In formal logic something can only be equal to itself and cannot contain change or difference. But, on closer examination, this can only be true as an abstraction. In the material, physical world true, concrete identity, as Engels wrote in *Dialectics of Nature*, "includes difference, change [as] ... shown in detail by natural science".

Diving deeper

At this point of the process, all we can and should say is that something has changed out there. Our 'lack of' or 'absence', of knowledge can be described as an 'Other' – something not yet in existence, which however, is beginning to emerge. The assembling of tanks and troops on Ukraine's border is a case in point. As that moment there was no attack.

From the mass of tanks and troops to the invasion was a leap from quantity to quality, from the non-existent invasion to the actual invasion. In other words, from not-being in transition to being. Trying to find out more, drives us back to further examination, seeking more indications of what is happening. This striving to find out more constitutes a second negation, whereby the 'difference' in thought relates back to a new moment in the changing world.

In trying to develop our understanding of the new, we are driven to dive deeper by the fact that our knowledge is incomplete. Our lack of knowledge is a negative force, compelling us to seek out new identities, quantities, qualities, causes and contradictions. This is a third moment in the logical sequence that began, as you recall, with the simple identity of the thing.

Analysing something in transition from identity to difference, as in observing the gathering of Russian tanks, we gain an understanding, which, however, is incomplete. Now the new causes and quantities fill out, enrich our concept to make it more complete. We are now forming a further, more complex concept than we began with.

We are negating further 'identities' or causes, properties and features from a constantly changing and evolving totality into thought and our existing knowledge, in our quest to understand a new phenomenon.

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In dialectical cognition, we now evaluate, adjust, and even possibly overturn our previous knowledge, as we extend or expand our earlier concepts. It is here that our subjective existence as thinking human beings comes to the fore. We seek to develop new concepts that embrace the new and track it as a source of development.

Negation of negation

We have arrived at the application of the third law of dialectics, the **negation of negation**. What does this mean? This is a two-fold process. The thing that we are studying and our investigation of it may seem to repeat earlier events and knowledge. For example, the invasion of Ukraine in some respects is the same as the invasion of Chechnya in 1994 or Czechoslovakia in 1968.

But it is not. It is a negation of those events because while it seems to be the same kind of action, there are entirely new circumstances. The Soviet Union no longer exists. Ukraine has been independent since 1991. Putin's invasion is something different and new. So, we are developing a new concept of it. We study the parts of this phenomenon which may include the internal political trajectory in Russia, the country's relationship with its Soviet past, its perception of a 'threat from the West' via Nato, the desire of former satellite states to look to Brussels rather than Moscow and so on. In developing our knowledge, we have synthesised our individual and collective historical knowledge with the moment that we have just negated. Therefore, it is a negation of the negation, both in reality and in our thought.

If we consciously embrace, rather than exclude, contradictory opposites – the old knowledge and the new – which is often quite challenging, the impulse from reality enters and enlivens thought. In this way, we enrich and deepen our knowledge. Instead of empty, dead abstractions we strive for concepts filled with a living content.

Analysis and Synthesis

This ability to hold together opposites in thought is crucial because it allows us to penetrate deeper into a process. It is simultaneously 'analytical' and 'synthetic' – a mental 'union of analysis and synthesis'. It is **analytical** because, when examining a new phenomenon, a new identity, we separate it out from its background. We examine and explore the internal contradictions. This can be described as "determining the concept out of itself".¹

At the same time, we are aware that each part that we negate exists within a totality, an *ensemble* of moments of reality. So, **synthesis** means seeing each contradictory 'part' as *partying* or 'self-moving' within a whole, like a dancer in a corps de ballet, a musician in an orchestra, or a nerve cell within a neural network.

We now create a new whole in thought from the separate, analysed parts.

The development of dialectical concepts is a process of endless discovery and deepening of knowledge. But it is not a smooth, step-by-step evolution. It involves slow **quantitative** accretions and sudden moments of **qualitative** change or leaps.

We have arrived at a new moment in thought, which is a third negation. The reflection of the world within our abstract thought now acquires a concrete life of its own. Our ‘ideal’ mental world becomes increasingly **real** as it fills with living content. The external movement of reality acquires force and power as it is recreated as an inner impulse within our thought.

Getting to the truth

To recap: arriving at truth is a process in three stages:

1: life itself

2: human knowledge which includes practice and technique – bringing together the object with ourselves as subjects

3: checking or proving the truth of our reflections in practice.ⁱⁱ At this point we orientate our thought to what we need **to do** – our practice.

We can reflect and draw on the power, the ‘substance’ of the spontaneous movement of the **real** within our **thought**.

In striving to develop strategies for the challenges of today, constantly re-examining and examining the rapid changes in all aspects of today’s crisis and how they impact masses of people, as well as the way these affect consciousness, is a top priority.

What was true for yesterday may not be true today. That doesn’t mean throwing our earlier understanding out of the window in an opportunist fashion. It does mean being prepared to refresh our analysis instead of being blinded by dogmas of various kinds.

In this way we strive for active and flexible concepts which need developing into theoretical ideals and new possibilities. Realising those is the next step, leading to practical ideas and practice itself. In this way we can overcome the opposition between abstract thought and reality and become freely acting, dynamic agents of change.

Ideal to Real

And now I want to introduce you to Evald Ilyenkov. He was an oppositional Marxist philosopher in the Soviet Union.¹ He forged a creative, active approach, breaking with the dogmatic scholasticism that debased so much of official philosophy in his time.

He showed how abstract entities, or ideals, such as value, democracy, freedom, national identity, are the outcome of human practice and labour. Having ideals is inherent in our desire to realise our very own nature, as individuals and social beings.

For Ilyenkov, the ‘Ideal’ “constitutes a peculiar category of phenomena, which are *independent* of an individual. They are *universal*, commonly held image-patterns, as opposed to the awareness of an individual ‘soul’.”

The Ideal and Ideals, therefore, are not something that exists only in the mind of an individual person. Rather, they are an integral component of human objective social and political realities.

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Ilyenkov's concept of the 'ideal' helps us grasp how Ideals, passing into the real through human activity or practice, become an objective social force. This enhances the development of strategies to make the transition to a true democracy.

Making the transition

The truth content of our cognitive efforts is decisive. But **possibility** needs to be transformed into **necessity** as a driving force. That means discovering and identifying the forces within today's society that can make a transition beyond capitalism possible.

Understanding the logic, the underlying laws which drive the system, and the contradictions that shape people's thoughts and actions is vital if we are to develop possibilities for new practices. No one single person or group of people or movement can have a premium on the truth.

Grasping the revolutionary potential in today's technologies can facilitate a wider and deeper understanding of complex realities than ever before. Let's outwit, outstrip, the dominion of the masters of capital. What matters is making this world into our world. We can and must use it to let loose the inherent creativity of human beings and the mass desire to live unfettered by capitalism and its horrors.

ⁱ "The determination of the concept out of itself [the thing *itself* must be considered in its relations and in its development]" Lenin *Volume 38* p.221

ⁱⁱ "Life gives rise to the brain. Nature is reflected in the human brain. By checking and applying the correctness of these reflections in his practice and technique, man arrives at objective truth... Truth is a process. From the subjective idea, man advances towards objective truth *through* 'practice' (and technique)." Lenin *Volume 38* p.201