

a form of “autoimmunity”: “Community as *com-mon auto-immunity*: no community <is possible> that would not cultivate its own auto-immunity, a principle of sacrificial self-destruction ruining the principle of self-protection (that of maintaining its self-integrity intact), and this in view of some sort of invisible and spectral sur-vival” (87).

I conclude that assumptions about the nature of individuality and inter-subjectivity largely determine one’s ideas about community. Williams’s community is only one possibility within a wide spectrum of recent concepts of community. These concepts are incompatible. They cannot be synthesized or reconciled. Il faut choisir. How do I choose? I wish with all my heart I could believe in Williams’s classless communities, but I fear that real communities are more like the communities of self-destructive autoimmunity Derrida describes. Certainly the United States these days, if you think of it as one immense community, is a better example of Derrida’s self-destructive autoimmune community than of Williams’s community of kindness and mutuality.

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Dialectic

Most accounts of the English word *dialectic* duly report that it enters the English language in the 14th century as a general word for “logic” and more specifically for “the art of dispute by question and answer,” and that it comes via the Old French *dialectique* and the Latin *dialectica* from the Greek expression *dialektike* (*technē*), meaning “(art) of conversation or discourse.” What is not reported, and yet would be worth recalling, is the etymological path by which a matter of “conversation” first becomes a matter of “logic.”

The Greek word *dialektike* is the feminine nominal form of the adjective *dialektikos*, meaning “conversational” or “characteristic of discourse.” *Dialektikos* derives in turn from the feminine noun, *dialektos*, meaning principally “discourse,” “conversation,” “ordinary talk” but also “articulate speech as opposed to mere sound,” “the language of a country,” “a particular dialect,” (*dialektos* being the root of the English word *dialect*), “a specific local word or expression,” and even “a particular style of speaking or enunciating.” The noun *dialektos* derives from the deponent verb, *dialegomai*, meaning “to converse” or “to discuss,” (from whence comes the English *dialogue*), as well as “to associate or hold converse or have dealings with,”

“to speak a particular language or dialect” and euphemistically “to have intercourse with.” *Dialeptomai* is constructed from the prefix *dia*, meaning “between,” “across,” “through,” and the root, *legein*. *Legein* means not only “to say,” “to speak,” “to talk,” “to name,” “to mean” but also (and if Heidegger is to be believed, “just as early and even more originally” cf. *Logos*) “to gather together,” “to lay down or to lay before us,” and so to be able “to pick up,” “to choose,” “to reckon” what has been “let lie together before us.”

This etymology suggests on the one hand that *dialektike* has its basis in ordinary discourse as fundamental to our way of being and being-together, and of ordering, accounting for, and making sense of things; and yet on the other hand that it emerges as distinct from ordinary talk precisely in being the *art of discourse*. Ordinary talk serves a variety of purposes, including the sheer pleasure of talking for its own sake. Its order and intelligibility typically depend on any number of accidental conditions and connections, including factors peculiar to particular languages, idioms, interlocutors and discursive situations. As an “art,” however, *dialektike* would constitute a form of discursive knowledge or competence, distinct from intuitive ability (*physis*) or mere chance (*tyche*), that admits of being systematically ordered and articulated and thereby of being taught and applied. Likewise, it would transcend the vicissitudes, accidents, local variations and changing rules of propriety that variously determine the multiplicity of particular discourses. The order and intelligibility of *dialektike* would not then be contingent or adventitious but a necessary order of reasons in principle accessible to and binding for all possible interlocutors across all possible discourses.

This sense of *dialektike* as the *art of discourse* emerges in a direct juxtaposition with *rhetorike techne* as “the art of oratory or speaking publicly.” Both “arts” have to do in general with discourse that examines and upholds arguments, that defends and accuses. But whereas *rhetorike techne* has to do with knowledge of the discursive forms and stratagems effective for public persuasion, *dialektike techne* has to do with knowledge of the forms of reasoning that by means of logical refutation expose falsehood in order thereby to uphold a supposed truth. The first distinctive meaning of *dialektic* is thus a philosophical meaning, the term signifying a form of refutation that by examining logical consequences reveals contradictions.

This account of the provenance of *dialektic* derives its authority principally from Aristotle, according to whom Empedocles is the inventor of rhetoric, and Zeno of Elea the inventor of dialectic. In attributing dialectic to Zeno, Aristotle doubtless has in mind the form of argument characteristic of Zeno in which for the sake of truth he reduces his opponent’s hypotheses to absurdity by deducing from them contradictory consequences. With

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the Sophists this form of argument is put in the service of eristic (from *eris*, strife), the goal of which is to win debate by “making the worse argument appear better, and the better argument appear worse” (Protagoras). It also appears more reputedly in the hypothetical antinomies of Plato’s *Parmenides*. With Plato, the term *dialectic* comes to mean generally a process of asking and answering questions about the essence of some matter as a way of searching for truth. The most familiar form of this process is the Socratic *elenchus* in which an interlocutor’s thesis on an essential question is examined in order to show by a series of questions and answers in what way the thesis contradicts itself and therefore cannot hold as true, and yet also in what way it may serve as an ambiguous and partial manifestation of truth, which then needs to be incorporated into a more “synoptic” understanding. A second form of this process has to do with the relation of “ideas.” It involves examining an essential matter by means of the “collection” (*synagoge*) of “ideas” that might constitute a genus in order to determine the generic form, and the “division” (*diarisis*) of this generic form into its true specific constituents. Yet for Plato in neither form is *dialectic* simply a matter of conceptual analysis but has ontological force and is meant to map the way things really are.

With Aristotle *dialectic* has principally a logical rather than an ontological meaning. It constitutes one of the two forms of “deductive argument” (*syllogistikos logos*), that is to say, argument in which conclusions follow necessarily from premises. The one form of such argument is “demonstration” (*apodeixis*), which proceeds from true and primary premises (or from premises that are known from what is true and primary) to their necessarily consequent and true conclusions. In contrast, *dialectic* proceeds from merely probable premises (i.e., reputable opinions [*endoxai*] that commend themselves to all or most people, or simply to the reputedly wise) to what would follow necessarily from such opinions. Aside from its uses as mental exercise and as training in debate, dialectic in this sense allows a “logical” approach to the principles of sciences through a critical examination of common opinion, and allows for the critique of false opinions in terms of their contradictory consequences. For Aristotle, dialectic does not have the highest value of science. Yet his own investigations most often follow a “dialectical” procedure.

In the post-Aristotelian period, *dialectic* tends to refer in general to matters of rational argument as distinct from rhetoric. With the Stoics, it has to do with the forms of inference and the figures and rules of syllogism. As a matter of argument by question and answer, it is reflected in the *articuli* of the great scholastic *Summae* and likewise in the form

of university degree examinations in which theses and antitheses were maintained by syllogistic argument. In this period, *dialectic* also serves as the ordinary name for logic, as is evident in the medieval *trivium*. The first uses of *dialectic* in English follow these post-Aristotelian, and in particular, these medieval meanings.

Something of the classical sense of *dialectic* reappears in Kant's critical philosophy. Kant argues that in its theoretical use human reason seeks by nature the unconditioned ground of all conditioned things but that unchecked by the test of experience it gets caught inevitably in irresolvable antinomian conflicts. Likewise, human reason necessarily seeks in the practical sphere the unconditioned object of practical reason (i.e., the highest good as the ultimate goal of our conduct) in which virtue and happiness are perfectly combined. But as a worldly reality this object is impossible, since happiness cannot be the ground of virtue, nor virtue the cause of happiness. It is the function of *dialectic* in Kant's sense to identify these conflicts in the use of our reason and to expose the illusions to which they give rise. His critical task is to resolve these conflicts in a way that both satisfies our reason completely yet does not transcend the limits of experience, and thus to show a "third way" between the sceptical/empiricist and dogmatist approaches.

With Hegel's philosophy, dialectic takes centre stage, yet in a way that has been widely misunderstood. According to the most persistent caricature, Hegel champions an abstract dialectical method that feigns to give a complete a priori "deduction" of reality by some mysterious application of a thesis-antithesis-synthesis form. This misrepresents Hegel's actual position in two decisive respects. First, "true" method for Hegel is not imposed externally on a subject-matter but must be essentially one with its content, the dialectical course of the method following essentially the dialectical structure of the reality investigated. Yet, second, Hegel does not make this claim dogmatically in the face of actual experience but undertakes to demonstrate its truth concretely and absolutely in a way that is both open to and yet comprehends essentially all possible forms of experience. Central to Hegel's account of dialectic is his conception of identity itself in terms of negation, mediation and synthesis. In purely formal abstract terms Hegel argues that the principle of identity ($A = A$) can only be thought by means of negation (i.e., the thought of A being determined as such only by the coincident thought of $\neg A$) and hence that the thought of identity as such involves essentially the thought of the negation of negation ($A = \neg\neg A$). But if identity is negation of negation in which then "otherness" is only essentially a negative moment, truth will be the unity of identity and difference

in which “otherness” as such is overcome. Not surprisingly then, it is in the name of irreducible “difference” that post modern thinkers attempt subversively to challenge the Hegelian dialectic.

Under the banner of dialectical materialism, Marx and Engels accuse Hegel of first developing dialectic abstractly only in thought and then imposing it arbitrarily on reality in such a way as to overlook or misrepresent the *real* dialectic at work in the material conditions of life, especially its economic conditions. On this reading, the Hegelian system is not the absolute realization of philosophical truth, as Hegel himself claims, but an ideological product of a particular stage in the development of human thought and history. Likewise, whereas Hegel claims that in principle reason is now actual in the ethical life of the modern bourgeois world, Marx and Engels claim that this world contains an intrinsic dialectical contradiction in virtue of the capitalist economic formation that determines it. As such the modern world is in a situation of *radical* crisis, one in which the proletariat has “nothing to lose but its changes,” the very radicalness of this crisis being what both permits an escape from ideology to achieve a transcendent understanding of the whole historical process and that heralds the realization of the communist world. In venturing this critique, Marx and Engels do not claim to reject Hegelian dialectic but rather to turn it “on its head” for the sake not merely of “interpreting the world but of changing it.”

In their own critique, Marx and Engels retain the Hegelian idea that dialectical contradictions have a resolution in the dialectical “construction” of totality (in the realization, e.g., of communist society as final). But whereas the latter-day heirs of this thinking still regard dialectic as a matter of immanent critique, disclosing inherent contradictions in society and its material conditions, they tend to reject the totalizing conception and instead regard dialectic as a matter of on-going “negative” critique.

In contemporary hermeneutics *dialectic* takes on once again a broader meaning, no longer referring to a determinate method or “logic” or form of critique, but to the very way in which “language” itself mediates “between” the world and us. According to this view, we are essentially finite speaking, interpreting, and questioning beings whose relation to the world and to ourselves is from the ground up a matter of language. This meaning of *dialectic* recalls then its most original etymological sense as *dia-legomai*, which signals not a philosophical doctrine but a matter for thought.

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