

A Brief Note on the History of the Term "Dialectic"

"Dialectic" refers to [1] an argumentative exchange involving contradiction, or [2] a method employing such exchanges.

In Plato's era dialectic meant:

- you begin with your opponent's premises
- you derive conclusions contrary to your opponent's.

In other words, dialectic is the art of refutation.

In Aristotle's era dialectic was distinguished from demonstration.

Demonstration meant "scientific" argument whose premises are "true and primary."

Dialectic meant a kind of argument that doesn't prove "scientifically" (i.e., deductively.)

The premises in dialectic are "apparent" or "reputable" or even simply "accepted."

Still, dialectical arguments must be valid, unlike

sophistical (misleading)

or eristic (aimed at victory rather than at truth) arguments.

Hegel developed dialectic after the pattern of thesis, antithesis, synthesis. Here dialectic moves from being a logical notion (of contradiction) to a metaphysical notion. For Hegel dialectic isn't simply a theory of argument but a theory of historical processes in the development of "Spirit" (or Absolute or Idea or Mind.)

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Marx will insist that dialectic pertains to matter, not Spirit. (History is driven by the dialectical laws of materialism, not by the development of Mind realizing itself as Spirit.)

Kierkegaard, the progenitor of existentialism, will deny dialectic as understood by both Hegel and Marx, speaking instead of "Truth as Subjectivity", which subjectivity must never be confused with subjectivism.