

# DIALECTICS

From *Writing Made Easy: Just the Basics*  
by Timothy Sharkey

Dialectics in philosophy (not to be confused with a *dialect* in language, as in a southern dialect in American English) involves a thesis (*i.e.*, a person's opinion about something), an antithesis (another person's disagreement with that person), and their interaction, which produces a higher synthesis of thought. The basic formulation of dialectics in philosophy is *thesis + antithesis = synthesis*. It involves one person having an opinion. Another person having a disagreement with it. And in the process of their arguing back and forth about it, they can come up with an entirely new idea that they never had before. This is what produces progress in thought.

Some scholars, in fact, have called dialectics the engine of all progress in history. It has been called the way that human history evolves over time. It is a mechanism that delivers new and improved ideas, over old ideas, and creates new perspectives of things. It means that arguing is good in this way, not bad. Arguing is unpleasant at first – it is *disagreeable*; it is a fight – but it allows for the arrival of new and improved ideas to come forward and may help change minds. If everybody agreed with each other, on the other hand, there would be no incentive to come up with any new or improved ideas. There would be no incentive to solve any problems or consider new perspectives. There would be complacency and stagnation instead. Everything would remain the same.

There is an old expression in Buddhism: “Your enemy is your best friend.” This means that your enemy will tell you something that your friend will not. Your enemy will point out your weaknesses or your vulnerabilities, when your friend will keep you safe and secure and make you feel good about yourself. Your friend will spare you to support you but your friend will also prevent you from ever being able to correct your own weaknesses or vulnerabilities.

Economic competition, in the same way, exemplifies dialectics. In economic competition, different companies are incentivized to come up with new and improved products to get more market share and increase their profits. In fact, anti-trust laws in America break-up monopolies to precisely foster economic competition. In the old communist Russia, by contrast, economic competition was replaced with one bank, one source of production, one consumer market, and one ideology. The centralized automobile manufacturing company in

Russia, for the sake of argument, was run by the government and had no incentive to improve its products over time because there was no other automobile manufacturing company to compete with. The government ran everything by itself. But as several decades passed, across the border, European, American, and Japanese automobile manufacturing companies had improved their automobiles to get more market share and increase their profits – because of competition – and the rest is history. The foreign automobile manufacturing companies were incentivized to evolve and improve their products, and they did. The centralized Russian automobile manufacturing company, by contrast, was left behind in stagnation and rust.

In the political arena as well, dialectics can be seen at work. In recent history, there have been three well-known political revolutions: the American revolution (1776), the French revolution (1789), and the Russian revolution (1917). They were all revolutions, it seems, that reacted against the unfair practices of the ruling classes over the masses. But only one of the revolutions succeeded: the American revolution. The French revolution came to an end when Napoleon rose as dictator and crushed all dissent. Napoleon refused to tolerate any competing ideas. The Russian revolution failed when the communist party became dictatorial and refused to tolerate competing ideas. It crushed all dissent. The American revolution was different, however. The American revolution encouraged debate.<sup>1</sup> It accepted disagreement. It knew that people were different from each other and it realized that an environment of competing political ideologies and competing economic ideas could foster growth and prosperity. It benefitted from the differences between people, dialectically speaking. While dictatorships create stagnation from repression, an open society with a free and unlimited flow of competing ideas could create progress and development, with dialectics.

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<sup>1</sup> This information, if my memory is correct, comes from a statement made by Simon Shama on a talk radio program in Boston in c.2000. I cannot locate the actual source.