

Mastery of Dialectical Thinking

Andy Blunden December 2024

This brief note is in response to Nikolai Veraksa's presentation on "Dialectical Thinking and Creativity: Reconciling Opposing Points of View" and the paper entitled "Dialectical Thinking: A Proposed Foundation for a Post-modern Psychology."

Veraksa takes "dialectical thinking" to embrace everything from a 12-months old infant recognizing that something changed up to Vasily Davydov's learning about the "germ cell" method in Science and Pedagogy.

I support Lev Vygotsky's theory of Psychology which, for example, sees the development of a child's mind passing through crises at birth and age approximately 12 months, 3 years, 7 years, 13 years and 17 years. At somewhere around 17 a person in those times could typically attain the level of true conceptual thinking, though many people never master true concepts. Conceptual thinking has its origins in infancy with syncretic thinking, followed by various forms of thinking in complexes culminating in what Vygotsky calls "pseudoconcepts" and except for the kind of thinking which can arise within forms of play, does not attain true conceptual thinking typically until they are leaving school.

At this early stage of conceptual thinking, the young person would generally have mastered formal logical reasoning at the popular level (not necessarily mathematical logic of course).

It seems reasonable to suppose that "dialectical thinking" is a higher form of thinking than reliance on everyday spontaneous concepts and formal logical thinking.

It depends on what you mean by dialectical thinking. It is one thing to notice that when houses get bigger and bigger at a certain point they are mansions, that although there are mostly boys and girls, sometimes the difference is not so clear and a person can combine features of both masculinity and femininity, that on the whole the world is in continual change and people can have very different opinions on a matter without there being only one valid point of view, and so on. It is quite another thing to be *aware* of the laws of dialectical thinking and consciously apply them to concrete problems.

Veraksa told us about experiments demonstrating "dialectical thinking" in 12 months old infants and offers suggestions about how to *teach* dialectical thinking to infants, toddlers and pre-school children – none of whom have yet mastered conceptual thinking.

Obviously we are talking at cross purposes. In Veraksa's view, "dialectical thinking is evidently a primitive kind of behaviour implicit in the practical intelligence of infants.

It is true, of course, that experiences which are available even to small children will contribute to the development of true dialectical thinking in young adulthood or later. The same experiences could alternatively lead to vagueness of thinking, instability and confusion. So thoughtful guidance of young children's play aimed at helping the child cope with change, movement,

transformation, contradiction and recognition of “spectra” as well as stable and discrete kinds of things. You can call this “dialectical thinking” if you want, but this does mean abandoning any conception of dialectical thinking as a higher development of activity. A person can recognise that all things change without any notion of “dialectical thinking.”

However, the mastery of dialectical thinking (something which is of interest to teachers of any kind) poses a peculiar contradiction. Dialectics demands that the thinker *both* understands the laws of dialectical thinking *and* follows the movement of the subject matter itself, rather than imposing any learned schema on to the subject matter. Just as learning to drive requires knowing the road rules and being able to drive safely on a real road. Overcoming this contradiction demands a rather imposing level of mastery of thinking. Failure to overcome this contradiction can lead to a kind of formalism which is even worse through its vagueness and confusion than the kind of formal thinking which merely says that black is black and white is white.

For this reason, “dialectical logic” cannot be taught by direct instruction, but only by the mastery of some subject matter at the level of dialectical thinking and expanding the breadth of subject matter until the student has sufficient grasp of the material to be able to master dialectical logic by direct instruction.

I think using the term “dialectical thinking” to characterise the kind of consciousness of movement and change which is available to infants and non-human animals is a mistake. Use a different term.