Change and Crisis in Dialectical Thinking: On the Need to Think Again When Getting Involved with Change

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Abstract

I explore the concepts of "change" and "crisis" in order to put issues important in the current recession into perspective from the point of view of Western dialecticism, including what we know empirically about adult cognitive development. Specifically, I detail the diffraction of dialectic into three moments and show that they need to be coordinated to grasp change in transformational systems. In conclusion, I briefly relate these thoughts to present organizational problems and leadership development programs. I make a case for teaching especially upper-echelon teams the use of dialectical thought forms. My main source is my recent book on dialectical thinking as an ingredient of achieving requisite organization in companies, entitled **Measuring Hidden Dimensions of Human Systems** (IDM Press, Medford, MA, USA, 2009).

Introduction

Change and crisis are terms much in use these days, for obvious reasons. It is therefore of interest to think a little more about what these concepts entail, organizationally, developmentally, and in terms of "thinking" in general. In my understanding, both of these concepts are dialectical terms in that they refer to negativity, one of the main tenets of dialectical thought.

In this short talk, I outline in what way negativity is an ever-present regular feature of reality rather than an exception. I also make clear that

acknowledging negativity in one's thinking amounts to changing one's frame of reference (FoR) since one has to give up a mono-valent, purely positive, view of reality, thereby making room for contradictions, clashes between opposites, sudden reversals, and breakdowns as an expectable feature of reality.

Most important about negativity is that it is not only a matter of content—this or that event or constellation—but rather a matter of pervasive structure. This holds in the sense that negativity determines the very fiber of reality as I show below. Reality also comprises the way people think. Concretely, if one assesses a person's thinking in terms of its richness in what we can call dialectical thought forms, one becomes able not only to give feedback on the person's frame of reference, one can also largely predict the contents of the person's thinking—why the person formulates problems and makes decisions the way s/he does.

Related to the pervasiveness of negativity in the real world is the ubiquity of change and crisis. The latter simply follow from the logical structure of the real world even before time comes into play (Hegel, Science of Logic). From a dialectical point of view, change is the most ordinary movement of "othering" exhibited by "something" that, since it is inseparable from "something else," constantly "moves over" into its negative or other. In so doing, it becomes a moment of the process in which it is embedded and thus, as Hegel puts it, "ideal," a mere moment. The embedding process in which change occurs makes it evident that change is nothing but an aspect of transformation, and transformations are a direct outflow of negativity as an integral element of the real.

Equally, crisis—always both a risk and an opportunity—signals a transformation that now makes evident that a constellation of things, such as a market, has shown itself to be embedded in changes that put at risk older structures assumed to be forever, and has thus opened up new playgrounds for ingenious people who can think with the flow of events, that is, dialectically. Crisis, too, is logically built into the fabric of the real world but shows itself only at certain crucial junctures where transformations are especially deep. The larger part of crisis is therefore interpretive, in the mind, namely, in the speaking about events as making up a crisis.

What is Dialecticism?

Dialecticism is a frame of reference that becomes accessible to adults only after formal logical thinking is mastered in early or middle adulthood. It remains a closed book for the majority of adults in the Western world, while in Asian cultures nurtured by Buddhism it more easily assumes a common sense form. Dialecticism is based on the experience (stance) that the world (including people) is in itself contradictory and full of crevices.

In this frame of reference, negativity is acknowledged and considered an integral part of reality. Dialectical frames of reference have a long historical tradition, both in Asia and the Western world, and this tradition has important things to say about the nature of change and crisis.

A simple-minded definition of dialecticism would be that contradiction lies in the nature of things, and that wherever reality is thought about holistically, the perception of contradictions enforces a privileging of larger organized wholes over isolated individuals and entities. Felicitously put, Reality is perceived as pervaded by negativity or absence (Bhaskar, 1993), simply because "something" is defined as being both itself and not itself, and this "not itself" stems from its intrinsic relationship to "something else" without which it could not be what it is. To refer to Hegel (1806), being and non-being (nothingness) are inseparable (Sartre, 1943).

While Asian dialecticism is largely part of people's common sense, in Western culture dialecticism has never penetrated culture as a whole but has remained more of a philosophical tradition. Due to this fact, Western dialectical thinking has retained a semblance of "high-brow" thinking (if not leftist ideology), and has set itself apart from understanding (including scientific understanding) as reason. This distinction has been elucidated by 20th century studies in cognitive development that, even when restricted to formal logical thought (Commons, 1981 f.), have shown empirically that adults' thinking increasingly tends to re-fashion logical tools as a means of dialectical (meta-systemic) discourse and dialog.

A not immediately obvious consequence of this is that a purely positive definition of reality—as if no contradictions existed—robs reality of its potential for change since contradiction introduces negativity or "otherness." Change is nothing but an "othering" of things compared to the way they presently are (or are understood), and is not "something" that is external but rather intrinsic to them as finite things.

As Hegel demonstrated in his Logic (1812), when we scrutinize the structure of language, it becomes clear that a sentence like "I am changing" makes sense only if we assume that the "I" that is changing is the pivot of the change since it remains the same because of and through its changes. The changes of the "I" convey its transformative structure. Thus, speaking of "change" makes no sense unless we simultaneously think of the transformative identity of the subject, I. Change is always relative to "something" that remains the same throughout and on account of the change. Transferring this to our notion of language, we can say that when taken in a positivistic sense, language only describes reality, whereas in a dialectical frame of reference speaking a language creates reality before our eyes and ears.

Clarifying Problems Before "Solving" Them

Reflecting on the structure of language used to describe change and crisis will, of course, not solve the problems that change and crisis engender. But it will help clarify problems in conjunction with showing that how problems are posed is determined by the phase of cognitive development the person posing the problem is presently in. Everybody has his/her own Inquiring System whose flexibility is different from that of another person.

As speakers, people are thus co-originators of change and crisis. As consultants, we need to look at the internal cognitive generator that first of all produces the events people describe as changing and critical. Taking this generator—and thus adult development over the life span—into consideration is not simply an epistemological exercise but a cleansing device by which we can teach ourselves and others to "think again".

The Relationship of Thought and Being: A Very Practical Issue

I have proposed that what exists cannot be separated from what we presently language as being in existence. By speaking our thoughts in one way or the other, we are creating a frame of reference that may be difficult to escape as we continue to think about the events we are dealing with. We are here encountering insights most clearly elaborated by Hegel:

> • In language, spoken or written, thought and being are identical;
> • Only as we go on speaking and thinking about what we say, "being" unfolds as "something" increasingly complex, moving away from its initial identity with nothingness (lacking specificity).

Put grammatically, the relationship of subject to predicate in dialectical thinking is not a matter of describing a fixed subject and assigning to it some attribute (like "the rose is red"), but the rose—the subject—remains undetermined until the "is red" is expanded to other attributions that take into account the process by which the rose grows, the context in which it grows, the relationship in which it stands to the soil and other plants it is found near to (or it forms an ecological environment with), and the transformations it undergoes from its first sprouting in the soil to being fully developed in its blossom. In short, the predicate comprises not a single attribute but an entire process of dialectical commentary and dialog, inner and/or outer.

It might seem to you as if the issue of negativity, and of subject and predicate in dialectical commentary is purely a matter of thinking, rather than of reality. (This is indeed Sartre's position.) But—although we can

build a whole philosophy on the dichotomy of consciousness and being as Sartre has done and as the sciences do—this assumption is not cogent because we only know reality on account of expressing our thoughts through language.

Reality as we experience it is our creation, no matter what it might be "absolutely" independently of us. Moreover, reality is every individual's personal creation that differs from other realities seen by other individuals. While this seems to lead to a chaotic world in which many realities clash with each other, it is rather the multiplicity of meanings that reality has for us that we encounter. What is more, these many realities are actually contained within [share common ground in] the social totality in which we produce them, whether we call this totality culture or otherwise. We are thus dealing with a well-structured, languaged totality in which change and crisis are said to occur. Nothing falls outside of this totality, and it is up to us to find our way in and through it by following the thread of language.

You might say this is an impossible task. However, thinking specializes in dealing with impossible tasks. That is its defining nature. The catch word for thinking seen is this way is "dialectical" thinking, and dialectical thinking can be focused around another catch word, namely, negativity.

Critique of Purely Positive Notions of Reality

The beginnings of dialectical thinking are rather inconspicuous. They are actually found in experience, not in abstract thought. Think of desire. In desire, what is absent is of equal if not greater potency than what is present. In fact, both are equivalent—what exists and what is missing or absent from it. Here we are encountering a subjectively highly convincing notion of reality that comprises what is and what is not, and both aspects of the real are in balance. Truly "real" is only that which comprises both the existence of "something" and its negative "other," which is absence, or what is presently missing from "something."

Thus when I say, "the economy has been changing dramatically recently," the subject, "the economy," represents what has remained identical with itself, because the economy is still the economy. Without it remaining the same, we could not speak of it having changed because what is not identical with itself, at least to some extent, also cannot be pronounced, "changed." Doing so would leave the predicate without a subject. So we are speaking about the change, or non-identity, relative to the identity the economy has preserved. It is only that the intrinsic negativity of the economy, which first of all enables change to happen, has now shown itself to us in particular ways which then enables us to rethink what we mean by, and how we can manage what we call, "the economy."

Basically, then, what we need to let go of is any positive, mono-valent concept of reality. If we cannot do so, we are "logically" forced to put "reality" or "economy" to one side, and "change" and "crisis" to the other. But this is not good thinking since the economy (as anything else) is intrinsically filled with negativity and absence, and therefore we are, as dialectical thinkers, not astonished that change is the rule rather the exception in the economy. Change is rather a gift that our thinking bestows on us, although this often is not recognized because our understanding—in contrast to reason—keeps reality and change apart and is unwilling to see change at the core of reality. Rather, understanding wants to "manage" change, and structurally managing change is always too late for the next change that is already on its way.

Diffraction of Dialectic into Four Aspects

Having established negativity—its absence as being at the core of reality—it is helpful to be more specific about negativity. There are actually three aspects of negativity that must come together for anything like change to occur or be understood. While change by itself is mere "othering" that stems from the finite nature of things (and their self-negating constitution), what makes change important is the fact that it is one of three aspects of transformation—not only in thinking but in reality (Bhaskar, 1993).

When, following Basseches (1984), we distinguish three aspects of transformation, namely process, context, and relationship, change is initially just representing the process component of transformation—everything is in unceasing motion. In and by itself, change is not much different from what it has changed. It is simply an Other of what came before although this Other is not a mere substitute. What makes change truly noticeable is that along with it a different Context emerges, and also that relationships that so far have been hidden or denied emerge into full light. Because of this we say in dialectical thinking that the three aspects of negativity—process, context, and relationship—need to be coordinated in our thinking, to enable us to understand change not simply as otherness (by which we hold on to what was previously the case), but as an aspect of transformation. Negativity not only opens up the possibility of change. It also opens the path to grasping transformation both logically and temporally.

Thinking in this way should not be as difficult as it seems! As adults, we are experts in transformation since we are ourselves in constant transformation, undergoing development. From birth to death, we are consistently transforming ourselves while remaining the same and becoming "ourselves" at the same time. This is a fruit of the negativity that inheres our existence as finite beings. In fact, the movement we are

engaged in as humans is that of always again overcoming ourselves, and herein lies the infinity we would in vain seek outside of this movement.

Let us now have a look at the three aspects of negativity that together enable us to grasp transformational systems, and thus aid us in doing something about them that we care about. All that is required is that we not only think about our own development but fully embody it in our life.

Context

It's clear that if nothing existed, if there were no context or form that holds what exists together, there would be no negativity either. There would simply be nothing, and this nothing would be indistinguishable from reality (being). So, context is the totality of things that exist, and humans take a more or less limited perspective on it, depending on their present level of cognitive development. While context, scientifically considered, seems to be a rather static collection of things resting on linear causality, it is actually multidimensional, defined by layers and strata, and is, moreover, to speak with Bhaskar, pervaded by negativity (absences). This is so because something existing in a context has its being only by force of its relationship to "something else," or "other" and is thus constantly "othering" itself into its other, or is changing, in order to remain itself. "Something" is, however, also "something in itself" (per se) rather than only "for other," and in this identity with itself (relationship to itself) it is set apart from "something other," however transitory that identity may be. What exists in a context is thus at least double-sidedness—in itself and for other—and through this double-sidedness what exists is always simultaneously the same and "something" other than itself (or not the same and given over to change).

Process

When looking further into the nature of "something" we find that it is constantly othering itself and is thus changing. Without this change that occurs, "something" would not even be "something," since it lies in its nature as a finite determinate being to change into "something else." This is what we mean dialectically when saying that "something" is unceasingly in process, or changing. This entails that we have to account for the presence both of the past and future in "something," both of which negatively relate to its presence. The present unremittingly slides into the past, and the past re-emerges in the presence of the future. It is here that we encounter negativity in its purest form because process demonstrates that "something" is inseparable from what it is not (what is other than it), and has either been, or else is only becoming. This has nothing to do with witchcraft, but with how dialectical thinking conceives of "something" as having an identity with itself (but only for a while and on account of what it is not).

These comments are, of course, absurdities in light of notions such as "change management," "white water," "relentless change," etc., which are trying to convey, first, that we can manage change, and second, that change as it occurs today is somehow faster or different from change 200 or 2000 years ago. But the speed of change (which has to do with time) is a matter quite different from change itself as an intrinsic element of the logical structure of the real world.

Even so, the speed with which Caesar came down from Provence into the boot of Italy in 49 B.C. was structurally as much of a breakthrough and as swift and breathtaking as are the changes contemporary economies engender. Seen dialectically, it is the same negativity that brought Caesar to Brindisi and that brought about the crash of financial markets in 2008. From a dialectical point of view, there is nothing new in this crash that, to a dialectical eye, would have been visible (predictable) at the height of the blunders and failures of the Securities and Exchange Commission (Phillips, 2008).

Relationship

There is a third element that makes negativity powerful, and that is Relationship. In fact, the Other of "something" entails a relationship that feeds the process by which "something" is constantly othering itself (thus changing). It is only when focusing on Relationship (rather than Process), that we penetrate more deeply into the limits of separation of "something" and its "other," and thus also into othering or change. (Process is simply the handmaiden of Relationship, carrying out its mandates.)

The new element we discover in Relationship is the presence of common ground, namely, that no "something" exists in isolation from other "somethings." They are all held together by the sameness they share through which alone their differences become possible and make sense. Thus by reducing "something" to "something else" as a linear (fixed) "cause" we are missing the point that both "something" and its "something else"—are part and parcel of an overarching totality, and thus separate and inseparable at the same time. Moreover, this truth forces our thinking to account for the structure of relationships in a much more complex way than linear causalities permit us to do. We simply cannot isolate "something" from the larger context of other "somethings" with which it shares common ground, and within which it sometimes appears as figure and sometimes as ground, shifting from one to the other.

Transformational Systems

I have shown so far that:

· In its logical structure, social and physical
reality are not uniformly positive.
· Rather, reality is pervaded by what it is not—no
longer or not yet—i.e., negativity.
· Negativity comprises three interrelated and
inseparable aspects: context (existence),
relationship, and process.
· Change is possible only on account of negativity
and is an integral element of the real world, built
into its logical structure.
· To understand change requires the ability to
coordinate the three aspects of negativity
outlined.

We can thus define reality as a movement through forms or contexts that
is naturally powered by "relationship" whose logical mandates are carried
out by process through time. Reality brims over with negativity that opens
contexts to change, unfolding their promises and potentials. On account of
this, what appears to the Understanding as a fixed entity is rather a
moment of a movement in which every entity is simply an element, and
thus ideal. This movement away from fixity "remediates" the absences that
previously existed in the context. Change is a vehicle of remediation of
absences through which they become presences only to give way to further
absences.

Ontologically, there is always an aspect of remediation in what collapses of
its own weight and due to its own natural finitude (negativity). In terms of
human thinking, the world has its own cunning. There is always
"something" "left out," "not considered," "not immediately apparent" that
represents a cunning that brings down even the most imposing thought
edifice. To manage this cunning is impossible outside of dialectical
thinking, and even with such thinking it remains an impossible task. But it
is totally hopeless to manage this cunning of history by using formal
logical thinking as most people and organizations presently do.

Consequences for Working with Organizations

The practical consequences of this view of reality are straightforward.
Without teaching organizations and organization members—especially the
upper-level echelons—the lessons of finitude and negativity detailed above
they will continue to feel "surprised" by the course of events and the
"change" that seems to occur, as well as overwhelmed by trying to
"manage" that change, while what needs to be managed first of all is their
way of thinking about what they call reality. How can we best do this?

We need to address what I have called the "finitude of things" and their
"negativity" in the concrete circumstances of our client's work, not only

their intellectual habitat but the social surround in which their activities are embedded. This entails opening clients' eyes to the fact that they are shaping that surround with every thought they think and formulate. We also have to open their eyes to the fact that the reality they are addressing is highly limited by their inclination to see it in purely positive terms, rather than accounting for what I have called "the constant othering of things" [into other things] that stems from things' finitude. This finitude takes on different forms at different levels of complexity of the real as well as our clients' different levels of accountability.

In terms of requisite organization (to speak of Jaques) delivering work on the lowest three strata of a social accountability hierarchy may be possible by using foremost formal logical thinking—which denies the othering of "something." However, no systemic rethinking of process and value streams [as required at Stratum III] is imaginable without accepting negativity in its process, context, and relationship aspects. It is also impossible for anybody to understand an organization's objectives without seeing them in the broader context of always changing economic and social conditions that exhibit the cunning of man-made history. Finally, it is impossible, outside of dialectical thinking, to anticipate the longer-term impact of objectives both inside and outside of an organization.

On higher levels of accountability, where breakthrough thinking for the sake of developing new products and services and discovering new markets is required as at Stratum IV, an even broader set of dialectical thought forms and a more consistent coordination of thought forms is required. This is so since "new" products, services, and markets are not simply replica of "old" or previously sold products and services, but must be "new" in the sense of a transformation of what previously was seen as acceptable or even going beyond expectations.

At Stratum IV, not only the links between different business units but between different stakeholder agendas need to be considered, and this requires taking multiple perspectives in the sense of relationship and transformational thought forms. "Anticipating priorities" and "developing long-term plans addressing both current and future requirements" (DeVisch, 2009) entails that the client has developed a flexible kind of process thinking, and that his/her long-term plans take into account the finitude of any plan and the constant othering of realities the plan attempts to address.

On higher strata than IV, transformational thinking exercises, whether in creating new business models (V), partaking in worldwide networking (VI), or in developing and pursuing alternative strategic plans (VII) fully demand a coordination of thought forms that comprises all three aspects of negativity outlined above. Process thought forms instill the notion that business models, networks, and strategies are intrinsically finite and thus

are always "in the process" of taking on the color of what so far they excluded or treated as indifferent. Context thought forms instill the notion that any circumstance is accompanied, as if by its shadow, by a "bigger picture" in terms of which what has been thought or decided is quite relative in light of the thoughts and the decisions that have been excluded. Relationship thought forms, finally, draw attention to the common ground shared by different business models, decisions, networks, and strategies, brought about by the totality of the market as a constitutive force field in which they are embedded and which they are, at the same time, attempting to influence.

The art of the dialectically thinking process consultant is thus one of "translating" dialectical thought forms into the concrete circumstances a client is presently conceptualizing as real, for the purpose of opening clients' minds to the negativity inherent in the economic and social reality they are dealing with, and to the cunning of their own thinking that, in fulfilling its own prophecy, subverts their best intentions.

Educational Consequences

Obviously, all this is a challenge to even the best leadership and executive development programs in existence today. These programs teach models of reality that are based on formal logical or integrative thinking. Nevertheless, even integration as a way of thinking (Martin, 2007) is insufficient since it is simply horizontally accumulative rather than vertically negativity-focused. Negativity is a gift of human awareness that, as Hegel showed, only comes to those who are able to practice pre-suppositionless thinking (Houlgate, 2006). Such thinking is unconstrained by ideologies, habitual assumptions, single organizing principles (such as linear causalities), logical hierarchies, or anything that gets in the way of "seeing what is before us," as opened up through dialog and reflection (Hegel, 1812; 1969).

If the nature of the problem space of organizations is pervaded by the cunning of history, and thus dialectical, then anything less than an accomplished use of dialectical thought forms of Context, Process, and Relationship will hinder organization members from dealing with change as a manifestation of transformation. This transformation is neither for the faint-hearted nor the faint-thinking. As Hegel put it:

> This struggle [between the infinite and the finite]
> is a conflict defined not by
> the indifference of the two sides in their
> distinction, but by their being
> bound together in one unity. I am not one of the
> fighters locked in battle, but

both, and I am the struggle itself. I am fire and
water…(Bhaskar, 1993).

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