

**The Dialectical Philosophy: Reconsidering the
Hegelian Foundations of Dialectical Behavior Therapy**

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Abstract

Marsha Linehan's dialectical behavior therapy (DBT) rests on a dialectical worldview that practitioners experience as clinically effective. Linehan's own framing locates that worldview in a lineage running through dialectical materialism, the philosophy systematized by Friedrich Engels from Karl Marx's thought. This essay argues that, although the materialist lineage is the one most often cited, the actual philosophical substance of DBT's dialectic is more faithfully Hegelian than Marxian. Drawing on Charles Taylor's interpretation of G. W. F. Hegel, the essay distinguishes the Marxian dialectic—materialist, antagonistic, and historically teleological—from the Hegelian dialectic of sublation (*Aufhebung*) and reconciliation (*Versöhnung*). It then maps DBT's central synthesis of acceptance and change onto the Hegelian model, in which contradiction is resolved not by the victory of one pole but by a higher integration that preserves both. The conclusion considers what this reframing clarifies and what it does not claim.

The Dialectical Philosophy: Reconsidering the Hegelian Foundations of Dialectical Behavior Therapy

I came to the dialectic the way many clinicians do: through the work, not through a seminar. The dialectical stance at the heart of Marsha Linehan's dialectical behavior therapy (DBT)—the insistence that a person can be doing the best they can *and* can do better, that we can fully accept a client *and* press relentlessly for change—struck me first as a clinical instinct that simply works. It dissolves the false choice between validation and correction that wrecks so much helping. Only when I began to trace the idea back to its philosophical roots did a tension surface. Linehan (1993) credits a dialectical worldview whose intellectual pedigree is usually drawn through dialectical materialism, that is, through Marx. Yet the more closely I read the actual *logic* of the DBT dialectic, the less it resembled Marx and the more it resembled Hegel.

This essay defends that intuition as a thesis: although the materialist lineage is the one most often invoked, the philosophical substance of DBT's dialectic is more faithfully Hegelian than Marxian. To make the case I describe the Marxian dialectic on its own terms, then the Hegelian dialectic as reconstructed by Charles Taylor (1975, 1979), and finally argue that DBT's synthesis of acceptance and change is structurally Hegelian—a movement of reconciliation and sublation rather than of antagonistic material struggle. I close with what the reframing clarifies and the modest limits of the claim.

The Marxian Dialectic: Dialectical Materialism

The dialectic that bears Marx's name is, strictly, a posthumous synthesis. Marx himself never used the phrase *dialectical materialism*; the systematic doctrine was articulated chiefly by Friedrich Engels and later codified, often rigidly, in the Marxist–Leninist tradition (Engels, 1878/1947). What Marx supplied was a method and a famous reorientation. In the afterword to

the second German edition of *Capital*, Marx (1867/1976) described his relationship to Hegel as an inversion: the dialectic, he claimed, had been standing on its head, and he meant to set it on its feet. For Hegel the motor of development was the self-movement of thought, of the Idea; for Marx the motor was material life—the forces and relations of production—and ideas were the reflex of those material conditions.

Engels (1878/1947) generalized this into three so-called laws of dialectics: the transformation of quantity into quality, the interpenetration (or unity and conflict) of opposites, and the negation of the negation. The unifying picture is a world of matter in motion whose development is driven by internal contradiction (Maybee, 2020). Crucially, the contradictions that matter most in the Marxian system are *antagonistic* and *social*: the opposition of classes whose interests cannot be jointly satisfied within a given mode of production. Resolution does not preserve both poles in a gentler balance. It comes through struggle, in which the existing order is overthrown and one pole supersedes the other, carrying history toward a determinate endpoint—the classless society.

Three features of this picture are worth holding onto for the comparison ahead. First, the Marxian dialectic is *materialist*: consciousness is explained by material conditions, not the reverse. Second, it is *antagonistic*: contradiction is conflict between incompatible interests, and synthesis tends to mean the defeat and supersession of one side. Third, it is *historically teleological in a collective register*: the dialectic names the law-like motion of societies through epochs toward an end. None of these three features is obviously present in a therapy room, and that is precisely the difficulty for crediting DBT to Marx.

The Hegelian Dialectic: Sublation and Reconciliation

Hegel's dialectic, as Taylor (1975) reconstructs it, begins not from matter but from the structure of consciousness and from a felt problem of modern life: division. Taylor reads Hegel against the backdrop of the oppositions that haunted post-Enlightenment thought—between reason and feeling, freedom and nature, the individual and the community, the finite self and the infinite. Hegel's ambition was not to declare a winner among these poles but to show how their opposition could be overcome without being erased. The German word for that estrangement is *Entzweiung*—a splitting-in-two—and the corresponding achievement is *Versöhnung*, reconciliation (Taylor, 1979).

The engine of this movement is contradiction, but contradiction in a particular sense. For Hegel, a one-sided position, pressed far enough, generates the very opposition it tried to exclude; whatever is internally contradictory cannot rest but must pass over into something else (Taylor, 1975). The decisive concept is *Aufhebung*, usually rendered as sublation, a term Hegel prized precisely because it carries three meanings at once: to cancel, to preserve, and to lift up (Hegel, 1830/1991). When a contradiction is sublated, the opposing moments are not annihilated and they are not merely averaged into a bland midpoint. They are taken up and transformed into a higher unity that retains what was true in each. The thesis–antithesis–synthesis formula that popular accounts attach to Hegel is, as Taylor (1975) and others note, a later schematization; what Hegel actually describes is this preserving-and-transcending motion in which difference is held within a larger whole rather than abolished (Maybee, 2020).

Two emphases in Taylor's reading bear directly on therapy. The first is that Hegelian reconciliation is *non-eliminative*: the unity of the whole does not absorb or flatten its differences but sustains them in relation (Taylor, 1975). The truth, for Hegel, is the whole, and the whole is the living movement of difference and its reconciliation, not a static identity. The second is

Taylor's stress on *embodiment and expression*: the subject is not a disembodied intellect but a living, situated being whose freedom is realized in and through its finite, embodied life (Taylor, 1975). Spirit must be embodied to be actual. A philosophy built on these emphases is one in which a person's suffering and limitation are not obstacles to be negated on the way to some abstract goal but are the very material that integration must include.

Why DBT's Dialectic Is Hegelian Rather Than Marxian

Set the two models beside DBT's defining move. The central dialectic of DBT is the synthesis of acceptance and change—radical acceptance of the client and of present reality held together with sustained pressure toward a life worth living (Linehan, 1993). The therapeutic task is not to make acceptance defeat change or change defeat acceptance. It is to hold both as true and to find, at each moment, a synthesis that honors what is valid in each pole and yields a fuller, more workable stance. That is, almost to the letter, the structure of Hegelian *Aufhebung*: cancel the one-sidedness, preserve the truth of both poles, lift the client to a higher integration that neither alone could reach.

Now ask whether the Marxian model fits. It does not, on each of the three features isolated above. DBT's contradictions are not *antagonistic* in the Marxian sense; acceptance and change are not incompatible interests locked in a struggle one must win. The synthesis is reconciliatory, not revolutionary—it preserves both poles rather than superseding one. DBT is likewise not *materialist* in the doctrinal sense; it does not explain consciousness as the mere reflex of material production, and its biosocial theory is an interaction of biology and environment, not a thesis about modes of production. And DBT's teleology is not the *collective historical* endpoint of the Marxian system but a personal one: the integration of a divided self

into a life the person experiences as worth living. The shape of that goal—the healing of an inner *Entzweiung* through reconciliation—is Hegel’s, not Marx’s.

The fit becomes more striking when Taylor’s two emphases are reintroduced. Hegelian reconciliation is non-eliminative; so is the DBT synthesis, which refuses to dissolve the client’s emotional reality even as it works to change behavior. Hegel insists that the subject is embodied and that spirit must take up its finite, bodily life rather than escape it (Taylor, 1975); DBT’s practices of mindfulness and distress tolerance are, in effect, disciplines of inhabiting one’s embodied, present experience rather than negating it. The therapy treats the client’s pain not as an enemy to be overthrown but as a moment to be acknowledged and incorporated into a larger, more livable whole. That is reconciliation in Taylor’s precise sense.

Two further observations support the reading rather than merely asserting it. First, Linehan’s own scaffolding points toward the developmental–Hegelian tradition more than the materialist one. Among the sources she draws on for dialectical thinking is Basseches (1984), whose account of dialectical cognition in adult development describes thought maturing through the integration of opposing perspectives into more comprehensive wholes—a movement far closer to Hegelian sublation than to class antagonism. Second, clinicians who have examined the question directly have reached the same conclusion. Reidbord (2019), writing on dialectics in psychotherapy, argues that although the word *dialectical* shifted in meaning with Marx’s materialism, DBT in fact employs the Hegelian sense: the synthesis of a thesis with its own contradiction into a greater truth, a process that then continues. The label gestures at Marx; the working logic is Hegel’s.

What the Reframing Does and Does Not Claim

Intellectual honesty requires marking the limits of the argument. The claim is not that Linehan built DBT by systematically applying Hegel's *Science of Logic*; she did not, and she has been candid that the dialectical worldview entered DBT as a clinical and philosophical sensibility rather than as a worked-out metaphysics. Some commentators go further and argue that DBT is not rigorously dialectical in either the Hegelian or the Marxian technical sense at all, but borrows the term loosely to name its both/and posture. That criticism has force against any overstated reading, and the present essay does not require the strong version. The narrower and defensible claim is comparative: *to the extent that* DBT's dialectic has a philosophical shape, that shape is Hegelian—reconciliation and sublation of preserved opposites—rather than Marxian—materialist, antagonistic, and historically teleological.

This is not a merely antiquarian correction. Naming the right ancestor changes how the stance is taught and practiced. If one imagines DBT on a Marxian template, the temptation is to treat acceptance and change as adversaries and the synthesis as a victory—an outcome the therapy explicitly resists. On the Hegelian template, the therapist's task is reconciliation: to hold the opposition open long enough that a higher integration can emerge which loses nothing true on either side. That is a more accurate description of what skilled DBT practice actually feels like from the inside, and it is why the therapy works without ever asking the client to win a war against part of themselves.

Conclusion

My attraction to the dialectic in DBT was, it turns out, an attraction to something genuinely Hegelian wearing a Marxian name tag. The Marxian dialectic is materialist, driven by antagonistic contradiction, and oriented to a collective historical end reached through the supersession of one pole by another. The Hegelian dialectic, as Charles Taylor reconstructs it, is

a movement of sublation and reconciliation in which contradiction drives a one-sided position into a higher unity that cancels its one-sidedness while preserving and lifting up what was true in each moment. DBT's synthesis of acceptance and change—non-eliminative, embodied, and aimed at the integration of a divided self into a life worth living—answers to the second description, not the first. Crediting the lineage correctly does not diminish Linehan's achievement; it clarifies it, and in doing so it returns us to the quiet reason the dialectic drew me in to begin with: it refuses to make a person choose between being accepted and being changed.

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